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Infiltrators, Illegals and Undesirables: 
Gender and forced migration in South Asia

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Abstract
It will be argued within this paper, that women’s experiences of displacement and exclusion need to be situated in the relationship between globalisation and neoliberalism. I argue that forced and economic migrations are closely related and are often interchangeable expressions of global inequality. Neo liberal globalisation diminishes all human pursuits into buying and selling. It is elites in the North who have implemented neo-liberal policies into both the North and South over the past twenty five years. These policies have resulted in the eradication of social safeguards which have led to massive gendered displacement. While globalisation may conjure up a vision of a borderless world, as a result of the free flow of goods, it is increasingly about borders which are both permeable and exclusionary. Under neo liberal globalisation borders are either enforced or ignored, according to the needs of neo liberalism. Within this paper I will argue that while women and children make up the majority of refugees and displaced people, women as refugees, are rendered invisible in many national policies which focus on asylum seekers as male. My paper will highlight the relationship between forced migrations and the concerns that nation-states have with their national security and border control.

Introduction
In this paper I draw attention to the weakness of the concept of refugee in contemporary post-colonial contexts by highlighting the gendered complexities of cross-border forced migration and internal displacement. The persistent dichotomy of internal and external displacement and the failure to classify as refugees those who have not crossed an international border despite the escalation of their numbers in developing countries exemplifies the Eurocentric nature of refugee discourse. The complex processes of decolonisation and increased integration of the world economy have set in motion large-scale population movements that render meaningless distinct categories of dislocations. Based on ongoing and recent fieldwork in South Asia, I show that the boundaries of poverty induced internal migration and forced international displacements often intersect and are blurred. By examining women’s shared spaces as refugees and economic migrants, I explore the extent to which the
data can challenge the effectiveness of maintaining the distinction between ‘genuine’ refugees and economic migrants, the so-called ‘infiltrators’ of the Hindu nationalist discourse, prevalent in India today.

In the era of globalisation diverse forms of displacement are intrinsically connected: the same forces that cause impoverished displacement can also cause other forms of dislocation. Economic policies driven by global market forces have resulted in poverty induced displacement and subsequent civil unrest. Therefore, forced migration, as a fundamental part of globalisation cannot be studied in isolation. Local studies need to be placed within a global context and global theorisation needs to be informed by local studies (Castles 2003: 21).

Despite their overrepresentation in the statistics women have often been relegated to the periphery in both mainstream debates on the internal and external displacement (Boyd 1999; Macklin 1995; Cohen 2000). The stereotype of an individual person fleeing from the persecution of a political system is no longer relevant. On the one hand, the process of decolonisation and the birth of newly independent nation states gave rise to artificial borders arbitrarily drawn through ethnic, religious, cultural and economic communities (Samaddar 1999; 2003). On the other hand, feminist analyses point to the predominance of a male stereotype ‘refugee’, which overlooks persecution on the grounds of gender (Cohen 2000; Pittaway and Bartolomei 2002).

**Background**

Historically, the conceptualisation of the displaced person can be traced to the inception of the UN Convention of 1951 within the context of post war reconstruction. Here, the definition of a refugee was characterised as a person who

> …owing to a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwillingly to avail himself of the protection of that country (Loescher 1999).

This definition is both antiquated and insufficient in the 21st century (Surhke and Newland 2001:284). With its focus on individual persecution and sovereignty, this
notion is Eurocentric and reductionist (Malkki 1995; Loesher 2001). ‘Economic migrants’ are not recognised as bona fide refugees because they are assumed not to suffer from ‘persecution’ but are said to have an element of choice in their movements. The global community eschews responsibility for the internally displaced, under the guise of observing state sovereignty. Forced displacement has been perceived only recently as a human rights problem (Stravropoulou 1998: 519). Although the internally displaced suffer the same material deprivations as the externally displaced, they are largely denied access to international assistance (Toole & Begikhani 2000). However, the onus for this crisis must be borne by the international community, given that in some parts of the developing world ‘proxy wars’ waged by the superpowers of the Cold War (Cohen and Deng 1998) precipitated vast internal displacements. Conventional demarcation between displacement due to coercive measures (war, direct persecution, famine) and displacement due to economic reasons (poverty) glosses over the fact that both categories of displaced persons often suffer under the same abject conditions after relocation (Hein 1993: 47). These aforementioned mass persecutions and displacements exemplify the limitations of conventional refugee discourses that are predicated on individual persecution. Arguably, the refugee paradigm also excludes the experiences of women in forced internal and international migrations.

**Gendered Displacement**

The UNHCR definition of the “refugee” is simultaneously individualistic and presumptuous in its intimation that violations must be specifically committed by the state (Boyd 1999:8). This emphasis privileges the public dimension of the public/private divide by focusing on the actions of the state and

…fails to acknowledge forms of persecution that occur in private settings (Boyd 1999:8).

As women are more likely to be persecuted in the private sphere, they are less likely to be officially regarded as refugees.

Female persecution eventuating in displacement (Haines 2003) can be conceptualised in two ways:

1. Gender-specific persecution such as rape
2. Gender-related persecution – when a woman has broken social mores pertaining to her gender such as stoning

Haines also describes persecution by sexual violence as a weapon of war, when the

...violation of women’s bodies acts as a symbol of the violation of the country (2003: 336).

Similarly, as Boyd’s (1999:12) study demonstrates, since women generally lack bargaining power in their respective communities, gender inequity and stratification can be reproduced in places of relocation. Another important aspect of this analysis is the way in which women’s bodies often become sites of contestation in relocated communities. The degree to which women are controlled is often a symbol of reconstructed patriarchal authority in many displaced communities (Ganguly-Scrase and Julian 1997: 435).

Research method: The importance of ethnography

My research is based on an ethnographic approach. A number of scholars have highlighted the significance of this method for understanding forced migrations (Colson 2003; Malkki 1995; Sorensen 2003). Long-term intensive fieldwork, the hallmark of this method and participation in the everyday lives of the displaced enabled me to interpret their lived experiences that are embedded in a web of complex social relations and historical processes. The findings for this paper are derived from six weeks of fieldwork among forced women migrants in December 2004-January 2005 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the Indian state of West Bengal and its border regions, including in-depth interviews with thirteen women. Their ages ranged from sixteen to 75 and included single, widowed, married women and deserted wives. My observations and analysis are informed by intensive and intermittent fieldwork carried out in this region over a 16 year period. The first period of intensive fieldwork was carried out for 18 months in Nadia, a district bordering Bangladesh, where the second largest settlement of refugees has taken place.

A number of my current key informants are those with whom I have maintained a close and continuing relationship since 1988. I have conducted fieldwork in this region for nearly two decades among various communities and classes on
globalisation and labour mobility (Ganguly-Scrase 2001), comparative gendered migratory journeys (Ganguly-Scrase and Julian 1996; 1997) and the social consequences of economic liberalisation (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2001; Ganguly-Scrase 2003). Throughout this period I formed close links with a number of displaced Bangladeshi women. Such contacts allowed me entry into networks of dislocated communities. This access was critical since emerging hostilities towards alien others stemming from changes in the political climate in recent years has made refugees and newly arrived undocumented migrants fearful and reluctant to talk to outsiders. Gaining their trust was vital in uncovering the detailed accounts that were presented to me.

The Setting

Bangladeshi respondents are both documented and undocumented immigrants. Their experiences are contrasted with women who are internally displaced within the state of West Bengal due to poverty. The boundaries between these two nations are arbitrary, and have been shaped by colonial legacies. The experiences of women in my study are part of a larger, on-going, cross-border fluid movement of populations into northeast India.

In order to fully understand the unique experiences of displaced women in this study, it is important to note the shared cultural histories of Bengali people. In colonial and pre-colonial India, a syncretic ‘common’ Bengali culture, largely founded on language and customary practice existed. In 1947 following the Partition of India along religious lines, large waves of Hindu Bengalis arrived as refugees in West Bengal. However, a significant proportion of Hindus remained in East Pakistan as their identification was along local cultures rather than the nationalist identities constructed by the emerging nation states of India and Pakistan, or the artificial and exclusive religious identities manufactured by Islamists. Although Bangladesh was founded on the reaffirmation of commonalities of Bengali people, growing instability, poverty and militarisation has given rise to Islamic fundamentalism (Lintner 2002) progressively pushing out Bangladeshi Hindus (see Amnesty International Report 2001) as well as the Muslim poor.
In West Bengal in the past half century while cultural politics and public culture has been shaped largely by secular and democratic principles, often spearheaded by the East Bengali refugees, fractures are also appearing as a consequence of assaults on two fronts: Islamic fundamentalism of Bangladesh and growing Hindu nationalism of greater India. Since the 1970’s West Bengal’s ruling Left Front government and especially the Communist Party [CPI (M)] has consistently maintained an anti-sectarian stance and enjoyed popular support due to its pro-poor policies. At the same however, its pragmatic approach of expanding its support base by incorporating immigrant Bangladeshis (including Muslims), into to the electoral list and thereby indirectly engineering citizenship rights is a source of intense hostility. While discourses of ‘foreign infiltration’, initiated primarily by Hindu nationalists have dominated public debate in West Bengal in recent years, in the surrounding States, the resentment is far more violent (Gillan 2002; Ramachandran 2002).

**Findings**

In narrating their experiences of forced migrations, refugee women attributed the fear of religious persecution as the most compelling reason for leaving their homeland. They expressed the constant fears concerning their young daughters. They had heard of incidents whereby Muslims had abducted Hindu girls or even raped them. While they recounted details of Muslim atrocities happening elsewhere, in case of their own safety, they were grateful to the Muslim neighbours who had protected them. This was remarkably similar to the sentiments of post-partition refugees who arrived in 1947 and throughout the 1950’s.

Few recent (1990s-2001) refugees attributed poverty as a reason for migration. These views were typified by comments such as

… after the trouble, we came here because of persecution by the miyas (Muslims)… It is because of persecution and poverty that we had to leave, I mean if we could not gather grains, then how can we bring up our children? (40 year old married woman)

From the evidence gathered so far, reasons for migration of Bangladeshi women indicate political and religious persecution and economic dislocation. Internally displaced women recounted the poor economic conditions compelling them to migrate.
from their villages. Most poverty induced, internally displaced women in West Bengal emphasised the absence of tension between communities along religious lines in their native villages. It is difficult to say whether their emphatic claims about the unity of all communities, of class alliance, especially of the poor, across ethnic and religious divide is a genuine reflection of their belief in the CPI(M) ideology or simply a successful reproduction of CPI(M) rhetoric. Yet, we may wonder why the need to incorporate these issues in routine conversations?

Growing class inequalities and mobilisation by the Communist party has facilitated a shared degree of identification between West Bengali and Bangladeshi displaced women. Both groups provide essential urban services to the middle classes, but are frequently labelled as ‘undesirables’. As Kaviraj’s (2000: 241) account of India’s Toquevillain revolution suggests, elites are compelled to share public spaces with their ‘habitual inferiors’ which often includes crowded and filthy pavements, middle class neighbourhoods being run over by shanties, standing or sitting next to a shirtless fellow citizen on a public bus and so on. Additionally, Bangladeshi women were further demonised as ‘illegals’ and ‘infiltrators.’

Women faced number of hardships in resettlement. All refugees had to struggle to find a place to stay and look for employment. Some mentioned being harassed by local hoodlums and some said that there was a constant fear of eviction for which they had to bribe the local police.

While in Bangladesh, most women stayed within the confines of their homes, whereas in India, they were forced to take up wage work so as to be able to support themselves as well as their families. Many had to assume the role of the breadwinner in their families. However, they seemed to enjoy the freedom of mobility in their place of settlement and generally felt safe and secure. While the internally displaced women shared similar experiences, the startling contrast was the views towards the police. They regarded the presence of police as assuring their security. By contrast, refugee women while emphasising the accommodative atmosphere among the local population, held the police responsible for threatening their security. This is a radical departure from earlier decades. West Bengal government traditionally supportive of refugees, regardless of their legal status, has enacted draconian laws under pressure.
from both the Central government and localised reactionary forces. The West Bengal police now have a special cell for the detection of illegal migrants. Further, official discourses of producing ‘documentation’ of all kinds amounts to targeting vulnerable immigrants since vast majority of non-literate Indian citizens do not possess many of these documents. The internally displaced are a case in point. Indeed, accusations of illegal infiltration and ill treatment of Bengali rural poor who have travelled to major cities elsewhere in India, in search of work highlight the impossibility of distinguishing between internal and cross border migrants.

**Conclusion**

My overall findings suggest that women are expected, even under the conditions of forced displacement, to take care of the family and to uphold cultural traditions. This expectation holds even when women are abandoned by their husbands and thus denied traditional protection, left without a home, possessions or work, and without any family or community support.

By comparing a number of areas in their everyday lives, such as nature of home village and childhood, reasons for flight, settlement processes, subsistence and survival, safety and security in areas of settlement and most significantly personal, and national identities, attitudes towards locals, and the desire to return, I found that there are close similarities between female refugees and poverty induced displaced women. Not only are these findings consistent with research carried out elsewhere (Segura-Escobar, 2000), they also raise the problematic that in post-colonial states giving different definitions to displaced populations becomes a futile exercise.

While women are exposed to many vulnerabilities, confront threats of violence and reinforced patriarchal authority, my research thus far also reveals that there are possibilities of empowerment. Most women valued their freedom of mobility and enhanced sense of self-confidence that the new environment presents them. However, women who have arrived as undocumented migrants, their awareness of being non-citizens is acute. They compare their situation with earlier migrants (who are fellow villagers, caste fellows or relatives) who have now established themselves in economic, social and political arenas.
My findings suggest that women’s narratives of displacement can redress the problems of exclusion in forced migration debates. They challenge the normative and functionalist accounts of displacement debates that construct the forced migrants’ identities as static. Finally, ethnography as a methodology operates to dispel the precise narratives of citizenship, nationhood and territorial contiguity that the existence of displaced persons threatens to disrupt.

References


Footnotes

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