Migration Matters in South Asia: Commonalities and Critiques

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Migration within and out of south Asia has been a practice steeped in historical processes. This article identifies commonalities such as the significant macroeconomic role of migration and similar main destinations for south Asia's mobile populations. It critiques popular themes in the discourse on migration, like the focus on economic benefits of moving populations and the nation state as a reference point. The article questions the existing views of what it means for people to move from their homes, many times (but not only) across international borders.

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In the early 20th century, landless peasants from the densely populated regions of deltaic Bengal moved into the relatively thinly inhabited Darrang district in the Brahmaputra valley with a song and a slogan: 'Chal, chal, Darrang chal/jangal bhangia abad kar/patit mati dakhal kar'.[1] This movement of people involved social networks, new power relations involving colonial authorities, settlers, planters and native inhabitants in a manner that profoundly changed the politics and history of one corner of the sub-continent. In an uncanny repetition of this rhythm, modern Pakistanis wanting to find riches in the Gulf countries have their own version of the Darrang song that is acknowledged as the 'Dubai chalo' (Let's go to Dubai) syndrome. The patterns of migrations and their meanings vary across the sub-continent, motivations ranging from aspirations for upward mobility to escape from socio-economic or political distress situations. There are parallels and differences in this narrative of mobility in south Asia that need to be addressed as part of the transformation of migration practices and strategies in modern times. Today, with south Asia being a site of concern for security agencies as well as being the locus of an extensive migration that links cities and villages in the region to diverse places like Kuala Lumpur, Dubai and London, there is a need to retell the stories of migration that cuts through concerns of governments, policymakers and migrants themselves.

Patterns and Politics of Migration

Role of Remittances: Migration has increasingly appeared as an important theme in national politics in south Asian countries for a variety of reasons. It has raised fundamental questions of how societies and states have handled mobility and the political, economic and cultural reactions that they have engendered. On the brighter side, much of the region has benefited from remittances that migrants have sent to the home countries.

Figures 1 to 4 (p 58) highlight remittances as the second-most important source of external funding for the four south Asian countries Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. With remittances of $ 200 billion, India was ahead of all other countries that also receive huge financial transfers from migrants [Figure 2; World Bank 2006; Zachariah and Rajan 2006]. According to World Bank estimates, they have been exponentially growing from $ 0.08 million in 1970 to $ 2.8 billion in 1980, $ 3.4 billion in 1991, about 11.7 billion in 2000 and $ 20 billion in 2004 [World Bank 2006]. Recent studies in Nepal show that there are more than a million migrants out of a total population of some 28

million who live away from their homes and send back remittances to the tune of approximately $ 604 million. This sum nearly doubles the total foreign aid to Nepal [Figure 3; Kollmair et al 2006; CBS et al 2004; Graner and Seddon 2004].[2] These numbers highlight that labour migration and the associated remittances are the mainstay of Nepal's economy. The amount of money annually remitted per person varies according to the migrant's country of destination. Case studies indicate that a Nepali migrant in India remits an average of $ 124 (9,000 NRS) per year, whereas migrants to the western countries are able to send an annual average of $ 6,177 (4,50,000 NRS) [Kollmair et al 2006].

South Asian countries have been perceptive to the role of remittances in the national economies. Countries such as Bangladesh have constituted separate ministries for the welfare of its migrant community overseas. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) is entrusted with protecting the rights and interests of Bangladeshi migrants in the host country; ensuring welfare of remittance senders; facilitating overseas employment for prospective Bangladeshi migrants and increasing their resource capabilities and enhancing the skills of the labour force [IOM 2006: 219]. The country also has other formal recruiting agencies that are regulated by the government. Such an acknowledgement of the role of remittances in the economy of the country is not surprising, given the extent of migration from Bangladesh to destinations as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Europe and the US. These remittances have a significant impact on the national economy and have contributed more than 4 per cent to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and helped bolster a sluggish local economy [IOM ibid].

Within states, regional economies display different degrees of dependence on overseas workers' savings. The highlands of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) as well as the part of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistani administration can plausibly be called remittance economies. Similar to them, the federal unit of Kerala in India is heavily dependent in its worker remittances from the Gulf countries. The significance of the foreign remittances to

the state economy has been evocatively put by Zachariah and Rajan (2006) that it has been seven times of what the state received from the government of India as budget support, 1.6 times the state's annual government expenditure in 2004 and 1.7 times its revenue receipts.

Other Sides of Migration

The linkages between international and internal migrations are clearly manifested in Kerala. Concomitant to the massive outflow of workers from Kerala, mostly to the Gulf, in response to the labour shortage that has emerged in this state, a large inflow of migrant labour from other parts of India to Kerala has occurred, creating different labour circuits. The in-migration to fill the gaps left by migrants to the Gulf has been continuing, motivated by the higher agricultural and non-agricultural wages in Kerala, compared to other states in India. Similarly, factors like agrarian distress have prompted labour migrations from highland districts to other districts of Kerala and to neighbouring states like Karnataka. That distress-induced migrations are mostly to destinations that do not require official paper work and bureaucratic hurdles to be overcome or those involving much waiting period, skills and capabilities or much initial investments is only natural. Whereas 75 per cent of remittances to Nepal come from migrants to the west and Gulf countries, more than three-fourths of the migrants take off to India – a journey which does entail the costly requirement of a visa.

However, an analysis taking different levels into account reveals ambiguities. Whereas remittances undoubtedly contribute to filling the national exchequer with foreign exchange, the economic role of migration at the individual and household level is more blurry. The positive role of remittances for poverty reduction has been highlighted across the region [Siddiqui and Kemal 2003; Gazdar 1999; Bhattacharya and Deb 2006]. In rural communities with little cash income, even small transfers of cash are highly valued as they reduce the risks of harvest failure and food shortages. Aspects other than financial returns – such as sending material goods – have also

Figure 1: Remittances, Foreign Direct Investment, Exports and Official Development Aid Flows to Bangladesh (2000-04, million $)
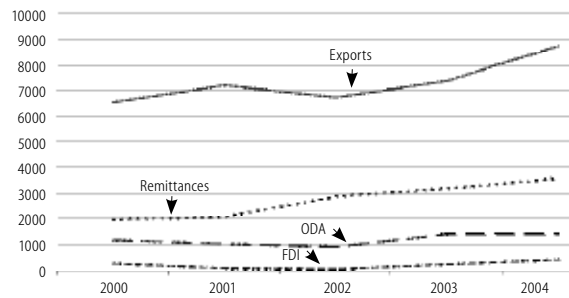

Figure 2: Remittances, FDI, Exports and ODA Flows to India (2000-04, million $)
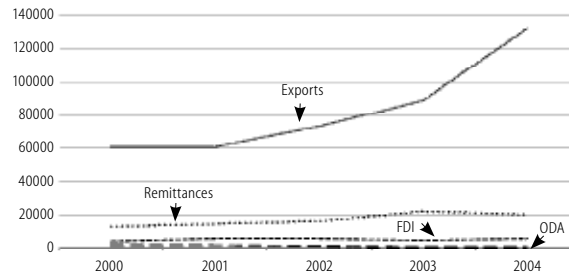

Figure 3: Remittances, FDI, Exports and ODA Flows to Nepal (2000-04, million $)
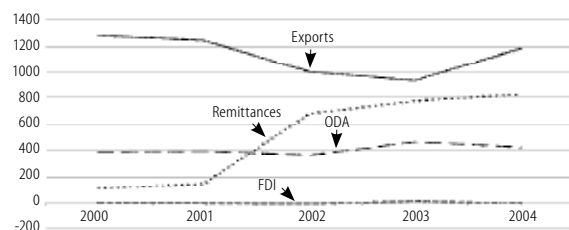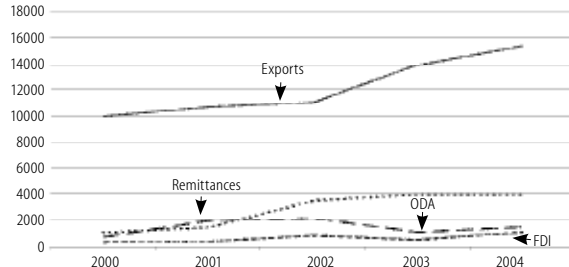

Figure 4: Remittances, FDI, Exports and ODA Flows to Pakistan
(2000-04, million $)

Source: World Bank (2006).

to be considered. For Nepali migrants and their families, having family members in India assures access to medical treatment and education in the host country. Moreover, the absence of a person also means that the food requirements of the household are reduced. On the other hand, it is often the regions where land and employment are scarce and poverty abundant that become major sending regions of labour migration. The mountainous district of Pakistan's NWFP bordering Afghanistan is a case in point. There are attendant problems with Bangladesh's above-mentioned acknowledgement of the positive contribution of remittances. Frequent stories of maltreatment of Bangladeshi migrants in host countries and exploitation during the recruiting process are part of the seamier narrative of the remittance economy in Bangladesh.

Looking into the more dynamic issues of vulnerability, Suleri and Savage (2006) highlight the fact that households' remittances were less vulnerable to the effects of the earthquake catastrophe that hit NWFP as well as Kashmir, on both sides of the India-Pakistan border, in October 2005. Individuals had used the cash remitted by household members to stabilise their houses. The severity of the tremors turned their neighbours' houses (constructed with stone or mud) into rubble, a larger portion of the cement mortar houses in the migrant-sending families withstood the quake. In addition, their ability to cope with the disaster's effects was strengthened by their improved access to cash as compared to others whose livelihoods were dependent on subsistence agriculture. In the same region, however, the remittance economy of rural NWFP has created vulnerabilities of its own. Siegmann and Steimann (2005) find irregular remittances to represent one of the major financial crises for households in rural NWFP.

Distress migrations leading to further distress is also not uncommon. Generally, Nepali migrants going to India possess limited financial means and are not well-educated. The job markets in India are highly organised and there are networks that "sell" jobs. For their financial needs, migrants establish their own informal savings and credit associations. However, they do not learn new skills, incur even greater debts due to poorly run financial self-help groups and gambling and deal with poor working conditions. Low education levels, informal work routines and lack of access to social networks can, at times, conspire against Nepali migrants in India [Thieme 2006]. Many women migrants who move outside their home territories for domestic labour, home nursing or for agricultural or non-agricultural labour have insecure working and living arrangements that threaten their personal safety.

The darker side of this migration is, thus, that it is often fuelled by poverty, political uncertainties and violence. The movement of refugees fleeing from conflicts in Sri Lanka (to India) and Afghanistan (to Pakistan); forced eviction of Nepali-speaking citizens from Bhutan (to Nepal); forced migration of Muslim Rohingiya from Burma (Myanmar) (to Bangladesh); and periodic migrations due to conflict of ethnic minorities like Nagas and Chins from Burma (to north-east India) are part of the international dynamic of conflict-induced migration in south Asia. Figure 3 illustrates that search for employment abroad paralleled the drop in external trade and FDI in Nepal due to the civil war of the past years. There is, of course, the phenomenon of internally

and forced displacement of persons within south Asian countries that needs special mention.

Political Economy of Colonial Frontiers

The roots of this story lie (in great part) in the changes in political and geographical realities brought about by European colonisation of the sub-continent and the subsequent formation of modern states in region. The 20th century has witnessed audacious cartographic exercises that resulted in demarcation of national territories and spaces. However, this exercise was carried out on a terrain that was for most part not easy to map, such as the Bengal and Assam borderlands and the eastern Himalayan region or the mountainous border regions that separate Pakistan from India as well as Afghanistan.

This resulted in the transformation of ambiguous frontiers into national boundaries within which populations were subjected to different policies regulating identities, livelihoods and mobility [van Schendel 2005; Hutt 2003]. Cartographic solutions of postcolonial countries have also transformed the language of citizenship. In a sense, each state in the south Asian region has to regulate the movement of people from territories that are at once contiguous and porous. Such transformations are of immense importance as they help one understand the international, domestic and sub-regional politics that accompany migration issues. Migration thus forces one to reconsider the given categories of space and identity. They form a crucial element in what Roger Rouse calls "a world of crisscrossed economies, intersected systems of meaning and fragmented identities" that challenge the notions of centre and periphery of citizenship and nationality [Rouse 1991: 8-9]. One understands that national borders are seen as zones of control and the need for security is paramount to such a view. Increasingly, non-state actors and civil society organisations have also begun to view cross-border migration as a threat and a security issue.[3]

However, population flows between and within states are as much a result of a lack of human security arising out of armed conflicts and natural disasters, as they are concerns for states who see population movements as a cause for security legislation and regulation. The recent proposal to fence, or even mine, the mountain regions that separate Pakistan and Afghanistan as a part of the so-called "war on terror" by the Pakistani government provides an extreme example of security-driven policy to curb mobility. This securitisation of migration is experienced in Bangladesh and India as well. Studies conducted in Bangladesh show that it is the state that is the main actor in securitising migration [Siddiqui, nd]. These studies claim that in the case of migration from Bangladesh to India, right-wing governments and their non-state agents in India and sections of the media have been pushing for a more security-oriented approach to fence the border between India and Bangladesh. The study also concludes that migrants are not a security threat to the receiving countries and securitising agents' efforts to criminalise migration have a different set of concerns that have more to do with military concerns. Indeed, the overarching narrative of being engulfed by countless numbers of Bangladeshi immigrants has been one of the underlying factors in the frequent

eruptions of violence (by indigenous communities) against settlers in north-east India.

Sanjib Baruah, while speaking in the context of why such cases of internal and forced displacement occur in north-east India, says that they are an outcome of transformation of frontiers that were created in the 19th and 20th centuries [Baruah 2005]. According to him, the process of creating frontiers also meant the sequestering of people and territories within a particular time and space. Modern states and laws have continued to rely on colonial legislation for regulating the flows of people and one of the outcomes of the continuance (of such legislation) has been the hardening of identities in resource-conflicts. A recent news report from the border along India's north-eastern state of Tripura and Bangladesh, quoting security personnel, claimed that the construction of a barbed wire fence along the porous border has increased the sense of security among many Indian citizens because it has stopped theft and smuggling from across the border [Das, P 2007].

The report further complicates the security narrative by quoting villagers who find their farm lands, fishing ponds and common property lodged in a proverbial no-man's-land. The second narrative is muted in the report, as in public discourse. The emphasis, as always, has been on national security and raising divergent views that allude to livelihoods is threatening. It is the dissembling of such issues of identity that make borders the symbols opposed to mobility. Unless those whose lives are threatened by borders begin to internalise the metaphoric fence, they are seen as suspects by those in authority.[4] This is something that resonates with creating and maintaining land borders across the breadth of south Asia. Increasingly, there is a tendency to perceive borders as normal while discounting the perspectives of those whose histories are entwined in the space now referred to as borders.

The phenomenon of internal forced migration has also been subjected to critical inquiry within the south Asian context. Some of this migration is linked to conflict, while much of it is linked to developmental strategies pursued by south Asian states [Banerjee, Ray-Chaudhury and Das 2005: 13-29]. Conflict-induced internal forced migration has taken place in almost all the states in south Asia. This has to do with the manner in which ethnic communities have been forced to negotiate with territorial arrangements in different states. Within the federal units of India's north-eastern states, ethnic communities often vie with one another for territorial reorganisation of the existing federal units. The claims for exclusive homelands have resulted in large-scale conflict and displacement of people [Das, S 2005: 113-43]. To compound the vulnerabilities of a relatively large mass of humanity that are internally displaced is the fact that the areas where such processes take place are also highly militarised. The sustained deployment of government forces, violent activities of armed ethnic militia and lack of constitutional safeguards for indigenous communities have made India's north-east a hub for conflict-induced forced migration within the territorial borders of India [Bhaumik 2005: 144-74].

The other important factor leading to massive internal forced migration is developmental projects. South Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have embarked on a modernising drive towards industrialisation since the 1950s. In the course of this drive, the western, technology driven models, where the GDP was seen as the sole criteria of development, was taken for granted by governments of different countries [Fernandes and Ganguly Thukral 1989: 2-10]. Clearly, the vulnerable sections of society like indigenous peoples and subsistence farmers were at the receiving end of such strategies and their lack of political and social capital allowed for instances of population transfers that are of tragic dimension. The case of the Chakma refugees from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts region illuminates the vicissitudes that continue to impact on their lives today. Forced out of their farms and homesteads by the Pakistan government's decision to build the Kaptai dam on its erstwhile Eastern Sector (now Bangladesh) in the 1960s, the Chakma people were rendered homeless and were forced across the border into north-east India. Many then took refuge, or were allowed to settle, in two districts of India's North Eastern Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh). Several generations later, the descendants of the Chakma migrants from the Kaptai dam area continue to raise the political ante in the state of Arunchal Pradesh every time they ask for the state government to endorse their status as citizens of India.[5]

Spatial and Social Mobility

However, this is not to suggest that migration only leads to conflict in the political and social lives of different societies in south Asia. There are also unintended consequences of this form of mobility that encompasses radical changes in lives of migrants as well as the communities that they support back home. In the flow of remittances and goods creates conditions for a transformation of the areas from where people migrate. In many parts of south Asia, migration changing the social spaces available for individuals – both widening and shrinking – has been experienced. In deeply stratified caste communities, many see migration as a means to move away from constraining traditional occupations. In south India, migrants from the washer people's castes in Tamil Nadu have occupied a social space in Kerala which is very organised and professionalised. They have not inserted themselves into caste-stratified social space, but have moved into urban residential localities as "mobile ironers" who visit homes or stay localised in some specific location with coal and iron in push carts. These kin groups iron clothes for the households in the streets or localities demarcated for them. They escape from the day-to-day caste expectations in their original habitats in Tamil Nadu.

Migration, in the patriarchal settings of south Asia, is a gendered process. Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, until recently, Bangladesh have placed various types of restrictions on its female population's ability to migrate legally [Migration Forum in Asia 2007; IOM 2005; Piper 2005]. A classic example is the current debate around the issue of trafficking of women versus safe migration, especially in Nepal. Those who advocate more stringent laws to curtail trafficking of women point towards exploitation and sexual violence experienced by poor women from rural Nepal. Yet, the issue is not as clearly marked out, as it would

seem. Powerful non-governmental organisations have begun to work together with security agencies – like the local police – in order to trace the movement of women (some of who are admittedly very young) from their homes in Nepal, to border areas and then to cities in India. This process does not accord agency to those who migrate and portrays Nepali women as passive victims. It also severely underscores the need to have a more holistic picture of poverty-induced migration that is somehow linked to certain routes for trafficking of human beings.[6] This debate is all the more contentious because of the different actors involved and the eventual positioning of the migrant woman as the eternal victim, while placing the police and morality arguments of chastity above the realities that lead to the woman's decision to move.

As a result of formal and informal rules that define the appropriateness of mobility on the basis of gender, across the region, it is often male breadwinners who cross international boundaries in search of new livelihood opportunities. This frequently induces a restructuring of the gender division of work in the sending households. A feminisation of agriculture, resulting from male out-migration, is observed in Pakistan [Kazi 1999]. For migrants' wives in the Western Development Region of Nepal, Kaspar (2005) finds a mixed bag of increased workload when men move to India or the Gulf countries on the one hand and more participation in decision-making – even after their husband returns – on the other. Also, for the migrating men, their move has psycho-social costs apart from the economic benefit that motivates their decision to leave home. The "Dubai chalo" slogan noted above has also become the label for a socio-psychological stress syndrome common amongst Pakistani trans-national migrants to the Gulf states. It manifests itself in disorientation, resulting from social isolation, culture shock, harsh working conditions and the sudden acquisition of relative wealth [CIA World Factbook no date]. In contrast to the financial flows in the form of remittances, this downside is largely ignored in the dominant discourse on migration.

Migration and Livelihoods

As the discussion above has illustrated, migration affects multiple aspects of livelihoods and identity rather than financial flows alone. In the international academic discourse, the increasing mobility and attendant multi-locality described in this paper, have been analysed from predominantly two perspectives: First, a livelihoods approach perspective, looking mainly at the impact of migration on people's livelihoods; and the second: through migration studies, focusing mainly on the process of migration represented by the approach of transnational migration and concepts of diasporas.

The livelihoods approach is used to explain the diversity and complexity of the ways in which people make a living. It addresses the living conditions of poor people, their opportunities and capacities for well-being, their resilience and their resource base composed of various assets [Chambers and Conway 1992; de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Köberlein 2003; Rakodi and Lloyed-Jones 2002].

Livelihood strategies are strongly linked to livelihood assets or capitals and these form the heart of the approach. They include social, human, financial, natural and physical capital [DFID 2002]. These assets are an antidote to a vision of poor people as being "passive" or "deprived". The poor may not have cash or savings but they do have other material and non-material assets such as family, health, skills and natural resources. To understand these assets, one can identify the opportunities they might offer or the types of constraints that might exist [Rakodi 2002].

The assets poor people possess or have access to, the livelihoods they desire and the strategies they adopt are all influenced by the context in which they live. This context has, broadly speaking, two dimensions: the first dimension is an overarching structural context, including organisations and institutions such as rules, norms, policies and legislation shaping livelihoods, where three-fourths of the migrants from Nepal still migrate to the visa-free neighbouring India, despite the fact that work in the Gulf is financially much more promising, but requires much more initial investment. The second dimension of people's living context is vulnerability. This means the insecurity of people's well-being in the face of a changing ecological, social, political or economic environment [Rakodi 2002]. Livelihood strategies can be seen as a continuum that covers the range from a struggle to survive, security and growth. Livelihood outcomes are the achievements or outputs of livelihood strategies. They relate to both increased material and non-material well-being such as health, access to services and improved resilience to vulnerability, such as food security or sustainable use of natural resources [DFID 2002].

In recent studies conducted in Bangladesh, the livelihoods approach has been used to show how remittances are integral to the local economy in the country, but also how such economies have their own constraints. These studies show that migration has created a situation where sending regions have benefited from remittances and the increase in production of certain goods, while attracting an inflow of labour from poorer regions. However, within the same narratives, one finds that there are negative outcomes of migration as well. It leads to local inequalities, as shown in Chowdhury's research in Sylhet, where remittances (and by implication, migration) had increased the socio-economic differences between families with migrants and those without [Chowdhury 1992, 1995].

A livelihoods perspective helps to go beyond a simplistic focus on financial flows associated with migration. By integrating non-material assets in the analysis, for example, the role of education and skills as well as social networks for enabling the step outside the home comes to the fore. Within such a framework, those without the adequate networks to operate in the job market, or those without access to legal recourse, are among those powerless sections of society, whose only recourse to a livelihood – somewhat paradoxically – is mobility. Also the dark side of migration sketched above, for instance, in the form of poor working conditions and abuse of those who leave as well as higher workloads of those who stay behind, becomes visible, if a fuller set of livelihood resources is considered.

The explicit inclusion of the role of the structural context in this conceptual framework reflects the crucial role of the nation state and its efforts to regulate and control people's movements richly illustrated by the south Asian examples above. Jointly with

the vulnerability context, this integral component of the livelihoods approach serves as a reminder that migrants' decisions are more than a result of monetary cost-benefit analyses as represented in economistic approaches to migration [Todaro 1969; Katz and Stark 1986]. As indicated above, wider aspects in interpreting migration flows to be considered range from hopes for social mobility to forced moves that follow large-scale infrastructure development or conflict. However, it has been noted that despite the inclusion of structural factors in the conceptual framework of the livelihoods approach, it is often neglected in applied research [De Haan and Zoomers 2005]. The result is a more or less mechanical listing of the capital available to the poor and the politically convenient recommendation that they may employ these capitals to alleviate their poverty themselves [O'Laughlin 2004].

Transnational Migration and Diaspora

When analysing the 19th and 20th centuries, migration theory relied mainly on the emergence of strong nation states and nationalism, viewing a society as a "national container society" [Lee 1966]. From this perspective, a certain physical place corresponds to a social space. Consequently, migration was mainly seen as uni- or bi-directional movement brought about by emigration, immigration or returns migration and caused by isolated factors such as political or economic motivations [Massey et al 1993; Pries 2001]. However, new information technology and a new division of labour are some of the interwoven, yet fundamental "global shifts" at work in today's globalising world [Backhaus 2003]. Transnational migration has been described as a new field emerging at a global level and on a mass scale, mainly due to the intensification and the multiplicity of relations between countries. To grasp the dynamics of cross-border population movement, social anthropologists introduced the concept of transnationalism [Glick-Schiller et al 1992, 1999]. As sadly illustrated by the "Dubai chalo" syndrome, the people involved, live between two worlds: their new migrant communities and their home communities. Moreover, these transnational communities became characterised as deterritorialised and "place-less" [Basch et al 1994].

Pries (1999, 2001, 2004) developed the concept of transnational migration further, pointing out that the intensity and the simultaneity of these cross-border activities led to the emergence of transnational social spaces. These are social spaces that have a multi-local geographical link rather than an exclusive one. Work, housing, life trajectories and time horizons span different localities in different states [Pries 1999; Pries 2001]. While migrants have to adapt to their new environment in their foreign place of work, also family members who remain behind have to adapt to the new family situation. As pointed out in some cases female family members who remained behind challenge patriarchal structures, in other cases they do not gain more independence and even have to take on bigger workloads and responsibilities for house, childcare and land.

Vertovec (1999) identifies three general meanings of the term "diaspora" as it has been used in recent scholarship produced by many disciplines and about many groups. He discusses diasporas

– and especially south Asian religious diasporas – as social forms, as types of consciousness, and as modes of cultural production. He points to changes in the meanings, relationships, and practice of religion and culture as diasporas experiment with disassociating them from each other; the differences between syncretic and hybrid identities, on the one hand, and multicultural competence, on the other; and the shifting relationship between structure and agency in diaspora. Östen Wahlbeck (2002) has added a fourth type "diaspora of politics", which emphasises the political dimensions of contemporary diasporas [Herzig 2006]. However, recently any social group who has also maintained strong collective identities define themselves as a diaspora or a transnational community. Diasporic studies, however, fall short in their ability to explain the complex politics of migration and memory. Speaking of the manner in which the large Sikh diaspora related to the Khalistan movement in the Indian state of Punjab (in the 1980s and later as well), Axel states that given the memory (and images) of violence, the relation between the diaspora and the nation state are intertwined in a special relationship [Axel 2002: 411-28]. In this relationship, the diverse Sikh bodies, religious practices, technologies of communication, state violence, myths of older national identity are all drawn together in order to complicate the manner in which a diasporic community envisions its relationship with to the homeland, or place of origin. While the above-described migration from India and Pakistan to the Gulf is more recent, e g, Herzig (2006) shows that for more than a century a substantial south Asian minority has been living in Kenya. Within a few decades a majority of the Kenyan Asian has managed to transform their living conditions from an impoverished rural background in south Asia to a globalised and economically successful middle class in East Africa. This example of migration as an opportunity of social mobility raises questions for how long south Asian migrants remain remitters only or start to settle in their countries of work.

Both approaches, i e, diaspora and transnational migration do not analyse relations of migrants to their places of origin or relations to their new places of residence and work. They are equally blind towards inequalities and unequal power relations between and within households, communities and beyond. In most studies, migrants are perceived as one united group, imposing an ideal picture of ethnic and familial bonds, and celebrating the importance of social networks. The south Asian reality of people's mobility we have tried to capture above, in contrast, displays enormous heterogeneity of migrants motives. The role of gender and caste-related power differentials in migration processes, for instance, cannot be ignored in the south Asian context.

What is more, the transnational approach stresses the importance of crossing international borders [Vertovec 1999; Conway 2000], whereas migration processes may be internal as well. The focus on the "nation" implies that a "society" or "nation" can be perceived as a single unit. It implies that a society shares the same living conditions and has other things in common and that state borders are firm boundaries that separate very different worlds from each other. What the approach ignores is that social life only accepts administrative borders in a political and administrative sense [Becker 2002; Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002;

van Schendel 2002, 2005]. As shown above, regions like south Asia provide interesting examples of how borders are changing and how different migrants perceive international borders differently. Recent studies in India show that over 98 million people migrated from one place to another within the country in the 1990s [Varma 2007]. Apart for women moving due to marriage, employment is the major reason why people move. The search for jobs, according to the same study, is more likely to be within the same federal state in India, rather than to another state.

Additionally, the focus on transnational border movements within the transnational migration approach does not pay sufficient attention to the range of types of mobility that are available to and necessary for individuals and families to be able to sustain their livelihoods. It ignores internal migration, which is firstly an important way of getting incomeand secondly often interlinked with international migration, as we described for the case of Kerala. Furthermore, many migrants migrate step by step. Either they migrate internally to the capital and later to another country or people migrate internationally and, if they have earned enough money, they will later invest in other parts of their country, both urban and rural. The categories of internal and international migration have become strongly interlinked, suggesting that moving from one country to another is only one dimension of creating new social spaces. We argue that migration approaches are obsessed by the nation state and international migration, and exclude the complexity of migration patterns where internal and international migration are often interlinked [Herzig and Thieme 2007].

Another dimension of mobility is that people are forced to migrate due to conflicts or development projects. Here, official and administrative categories such as forced and voluntary migration are blurred. A case at hand is the recent displacement of more than a thousand people, first displaced from their homes due to ethnic conflicts in western Assam in the 1990s; displaced for a second time from their camps due to development projects in 2007 [Das and Ahmed 2007]. The displaced persons had spent the interim decade in camps from where their only option was to leave to distant places like Lucknow and Delhi in search of work. Every time the migrants got wind of the Assam administration's plans to relocate their camps, they made the arduous journey back to retain their status as displaced persons in Assam [Malkki 1992: 24-44]. Regardless of such changes, people's territorial attachments and ties to "home" remain, or at times are transformed into a sense of longing and powerlessness. The example also illustrates how the two, three or more locales that make up the multi-local network are influenced by the flow of people, information and financial resources, and also by social structures of the past.

Bourdieu's theory of practice, applied to processes of migration, may address several of these shortcomings. Here, migrants do not receive a theoretical preferential treatment [Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992]. Their situation is analysed with the same concepts as the situation of all other members of society. It sheds light on explanations of how and why migrants and their non-migrating family members can benefit from migration, and what sometimes also prevents them from doing so and at the same time shows the interlinkages between places of origin and places of residence and work [Thieme 2006].

Following Bourdieu, the social practice of migration can be seen as a result of interrelation between habitus and social field, where habitus is a system of lasting positions and an internalised behaviour, a product of history and a social field is something that is constituted by positions of actors and the relationship between them. Relevant actors in the field of migrant labour may be indigenous people and new settlers, wife and husband in a household, employee and employer in the job market. The relations between these positions constitute a social topography in which some of these actors are more powerful than others. The position of an actor in a social field is based on the possession and amount of various capitals. Their significance varies depending on the respective field [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992]. This forces to include the structural context in the analysis and does not allow to stop the investigation once an actor's capital endowment is listed, as often done in livelihoods approaches. For instance, rather than education, access to the "job-selling" migrant networks in Delhi may be a crucial resource for newly arriving Nepalis. Opportunities and constraints related to migration are thus socially embedded and reflect power imbalances and roles ascribed to gender, age, ethnicity, caste and wealth. In Bourdieu's terms, these roles become symbolic capital predetermining access to and use of certain resources, capacities and strategies of peoples' ability to negotiate and decide who gets to migrate. The capitals actors are endowed with are used to produce and reproduce power structures as illustrated by the discourse regarding female migration/trafficking from Nepal.

Clearly, networks between non-governmental organisations and security forces are utilised in the field of labour migration to defend a conservative gender order that denies women's agency. Whereas Bourdieu's main focus of attention is on the reproduction of power hierarchies, the theory of practice, also allows us to look at changing power relations among migrating and non-migrating household members or the individual and its community. People who are affected by migration, be it in the receiving regions, or migrants and non-migrating family members in a multi-local household, need to renegotiate their positions and needs in the new social field, opening up new opportunities and also reinforcing or creating new power imbalances and conflicts. Leaving the caste stratified field of Tamil Nadu for mobile ironing in Kerala, for instance, has helped migrants to escape caste-based domination. The establishment of informal savings and credit associations through Nepali migrants can be seen as an act of capitalising on social networks to empower themselves financially.

Conclusions

Remittances are welcomed by national governments, while remitters are often ignored in interventions, or – worse – their moves are restricted, their livelihoods unprotected, and they themselves harassed by authorities. At the international level, the standstill in the negotiations regarding the so-called mode 4 of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) indicate that free movement of

labour(ers) represents a blind spot in global market liberalisation.[7] South Asian governments have pushed for more and better commitments of WTO members for the movement of service providing persons but face fierce resistance of industrial countries.

The dignity of migrants and their contribution to the economy have to be appreciated by societies and national governments in south Asia. However, that is easier said that done, since following the formation of modern states in the 20th century, mobile people and communities have been subjected to all forms of indignity and injustice by governments and receiving societies. Search for livelihoods has been a common thread in south Asian history. It has created hybrid cultures, led to flourishing trade and commerce and created empires. Search for livelihoods have also led to innumerable stories of loss, violence and tragedies. However, the effort to quantify the economic contributions of migrants to south Asian societies is a more recent phenomenon. Such efforts need to be calibrated by nuanced grasp of what constitutes the lives of migrants and where they look towards for support.

We critiqued a missing migration and livelihoods approaches as a link to other existing social theory and a missing consideration of the importance of place and identity. The reasons behind migration, as well as the opportunities for and restrictions on it, are socially embedded and reflect power imbalances and roles related to gender, age, ethnicity and caste. These roles and power imbalances that stratify households, communities as well as national and global societies determine how much access and use of certain resources people have, the capacities and strategies of negotiation and decision-making they have, as well as who migrates and who does not. Migration and the resulting multi-locality of livelihoods are driving forces to challenge power imbalances. However, migration and multi-locality do not always generate greater equality but can also produce inequality and exclusion and do not therefore necessarily provide human security. To achieve this goal, interventions at national and international levels are required. On the one hand, they should aim at reducing threats to human security, such as poverty, marginalisation and conflict that trigger migration flows. On the other hand, migration processes should be transparent and non-discriminatory and national and international law should protect migrants living and working conditions.

NOTES

1 Translated: "Let us march to Darrang, clear the jungle, make it rich and occupy the fallow land". Darrang was a popular district for settlers in early 20th century Assam. Cf Alaka Sarmah, 1999, *Immigration and Assam Politics,* Ajanta Books International, Delhi, p 8.

2 In 2004, this figure was $ 325 million (23.7 billion NRs).

3 This concern is widespread among non-state actors in south Asia. We wish to cite two examples of such concerns in the region. The National Human Rights Commission in Nepal mentions in its report of 2005 that trafficking of women and children along its long and porous border of India is a cause for concern. It also states that non-governmental organisations have been asked to help with detection and interception of supposed victims of trafficking along select border points. Migration rights activists argue that such measures go against notions of agency and curbs livelihood options of mobile populations. In another example, the All Assam Students Union has been in the forefront in the demand to seal the border between India and Bangladesh as it claims that there are daily incursions of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into India's northeastern states like Assam. In response to such demands, the government of India often rounded up "suspected" Bangladeshi migrants and in contravention to domestic and international laws, forced them into the no-man's-land between the two countries.

4 A journalist visiting the border of India and Bangladesh in Tripura spoke of how the security forces pitied the tribal people who did not "know what the border meant". A Border Security Force (BSF) official told the journalist that earlier, tribal women would argue with the Indian officials when they were stopped from crossing over to Bangladesh to see their families. "Now, with the fence", the official said, "they have a sense of where their country ends and the other country begins". The official obviously ignored to fact that the border had surgically divided the tribal hamlets, territory and peoples (personal correspondence with Sanjay Barbora, Guwahati, April 30, 2007).

5 In the late 1990s, the Supreme Court of India issued an order asking the government of India to confer citizenship rights to the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh. This created a furore among the indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who claimed that according citizenship status to the Chakmas would dilute the protective discrimination regime of the indigenous peoples of the federal unit.

6 Sanjay Barbora's personal interview with Renu Rajbhandari (chairperson, WOREC, Nepal) and Padma Mathema (National Rapporteur on Trafficking, Nepal); January 18-19, 2007, New Delhi. The latter insisted that there was nothing to substantiate notions of "safe migration" for women who are trapped in the trafficking routes, while the former highlighted the fact that anti-trafficking laws have restricted the movement of women and as such were discriminatory.

7 "Mode 4" denotes the movement of individual service providers.

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