

SHRAM

Strengthen and Harmonize Research and Action on Migration

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Migration

An Agenda for Research and Policy

An interview with Priya Deshingkar



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An Agenda for Research and Policy

An Interview with Priya Deshingkar¹

Dr Priya Deshingkar is Research Director of the Migrating out of Poverty Research Consortium and Senior Research Fellow in the School of Global Studies. Her research focuses on internal migration and poverty with a focus on precarious occupations, debt-migration, labour rights and agency.

In this interview, Dr Deshingkar discusses the way forward for migration research and policy, and highlights lacunae in contemporary understandings of migration and mobility.

International migration has been thrust into the spotlight recently, with the influx of migrants and refugees into Europe. What are your thoughts on how the coverage and conversation around the ‘migrant crisis’ is affecting the discourse on refugees, economic migrants across the world; and what are potential outcomes of this, in terms of policy and research?

Due to growing public pressure, the discourse around the influx of refugees into Europe has changed from them being referred to as an undifferentiated mass of “migrants” to recognition that a large proportion of them are refugees in urgent need of asylum. But there is still insufficient understanding of exactly what the circumstances are of the people who reach the shores of Europe—we hear that they have paid a lot of money to get there so they are unlikely to be the poorest and most vulnerable who will not have the resources to make those journeys. There is a need to understand the composition of the population flows into Europe in terms of their nationality, gender, class and ethnicity. There is also a need to better understand how the migration process works in terms of recruiters, costs, flows of money and networks. We have a lot of media reporting but not much research.

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You recently published a study on migration into urban construction work in Nepal, in which you suggested that lack of education and organisation are two major challenges faced by migrants. Does this seem to hold true across sectors, and other regions as well?

What I would say is that a lack of education means that there are fewer job opportunities in well-paid work. That is not to say that qualified people always get good jobs; there are many examples of educated people working as manual workers. But being uneducated means that you are more likely to be unaware of labour legislations and your rights. It also means that you are more likely to belong to a social group that is discriminated against. Not being part of a union means that you do not have the support to demand your rights but it may make you more employable where employers are looking for workers who do not belong to unions. And, finally, yes it does apply to other sectors and regions—the same holds true for India and plagues nearly all industries that employ low-skilled and low-paid workers without formal contracts.

There has been a lot of work on the ‘global chains of care’ and international migration from the South to the North for care work and domestic work. But how are the ‘chains of care’ configured in the case of South-South migration and internal migration?

It is difficult to provide an answer that fits all contexts and types of work. So for example in Indonesia, there is a highly organised system of agents and sub-agents that recruit and place care workers. The employers pay the recruiters and deduct the cost from the workers’ salary. On the other hand in Ghana it is mainly through friends and relatives that migrants from rural areas find domestic work in the cities. In India, a large number of placement agencies have come up in cities and these recruit domestic workers from poor regions and lower caste of tribal households. For example there is a huge industry of recruiting and placing girls from Jharkhand into domestic service in Delhi. The agencies take a heavy cut of the workers’ earnings initially.

What is the state of migrant workers’ organising in India, and has mobilisation had an impact on their status? How has policy translated at the ground level both in terms of actual impact, and awareness amongst migrant workers themselves?

I think efforts to mobilise and organise workers do raise their awareness of their rights but the impacts are localised to the particular area and group that the NGO or agency is working with. There is no ripple effect or spreading of such awareness because they cannot counter the huge power of employers who benefit from keeping workers where they are. Likewise the ground level impact of the changes in the policy discourse is very limited. Hardly surprising when a lot of that discourse is in English, and inside air-conditioned offices or conference rooms. For example I doubt that any poor migrant would be reading this interview ...there is a need to make information more accessible.

In one of your publications ‘Migration and Human Development in India’ you have discussed how data sets like the Census and NSSO does not take fully into account the work-related aspects of migration. And because of this migration policies are lacking. How can migration be incorporated into data collection, and what are the key factors that should be taken into consideration?

There are two things that need to be done—one is to collect better data on short-term migration and include even the very short kinds of migrations as they are important. For example I have come across people in my fieldwork who travel to a nearby town for two weeks every now and then to pull a rickshaw and earn some supplementary cash or those who migrate for two weeks to harvest a crop. The second is to collect detailed data on the different kinds of occupations. I know that some rounds of the NSS such as the 64th have collected incredibly detailed information and this ought to be done consistently to capture how occupations are changing and how people are making a living. There may be a need to list new occupations such as those linked to information technology and mobile phones and small surveys to do this should precede the larger surveys.

Remittances are often seen as a key factor in the decision to migrate; and in helping families move out of poverty. But beyond financial impact, how do remittances and migration for work affect social dynamics, specifically gender dynamics?

This is an important question but again a single answer cannot fit all cultural and geographical contexts. Recent research in Indonesia shows that families will temporarily reorganise roles and responsibilities within the household to take advantage of opportunities for women’s migration. But roles may revert back to the original when the woman returns. In other studies it has been seen that there is a backlash against women who migrate because they are perceived as women with loose morals and their economic independence is resented. Yet in other contexts, the economic independence of women has brought them more bargaining power in the household and more respect in the community. So no “one size fits all” I’m afraid.

Could you tell us a little about your project ‘Migrating Out of Poverty’?

Migrating out of Poverty is a six-year DFID funded research consortium with partners in the UK (University of Sussex), Singapore (Asia Research Institute), Bangladesh (Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit), Kenya (Africa Migration and Development Policy Centre), South Africa (African Centre for Migration and Society) and Ghana (Centre for Migration Studies). We have so far commissioned quantitative and qualitative research projects on internal and regional migration in Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia and Singapore. We have published the results of some studies through our working paper series and are in the process of writing up journal articles. The programme will end in 2017.

What do you feel should define and direct the research and policy agenda for internal labour migration in the coming years?

A better understanding of why people migrate—there are a lot of opinions on migration into low-paid work but these seem to be at odds with how the poor see their lives and where they are going. We need more evidence to inform policy and there is an urgent need to commission research that will rigorously examine the counterfactual, drivers and impacts of migration. The current discourse tends to classify many occupations that are hugely important for the social and economic progress of the poor as trafficking or forced labour – for example domestic work, without examining what options these people had before migrating and what the impacts are. I would really like to see more research on these aspects in India. Unfortunately our consortium has not had the opportunity to do that.

What can a portal like SHRAM do to bring researchers in the field together?

Organise online debates, publicise reports, perhaps organise events?