

SHRAM

Strengthen and Harmonize Research and Action on Migration

April 2016

Towards a Contextualised and Intersectional Understanding of Migration in India

SHRAMIC Lecture by Priya Deshingkar



Indira Gandhi Institute
of Development Research



CENTRE FOR
POLICY
RESEARCH



IRIS Knowledge Foundation



National Institute of
Urban Affairs

An Initiative supported by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Allied Trusts

Towards a Contextualised and Intersectional Understanding of Migration in India

SHRAMIC Lecture

by

Priya Deshingkar

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.

Prof. Deshingkar's lecture, 'Towards a Contextualised and Intersectional Understanding of Migration in India'. She began with an overview of the talk providing two basic points- a) the structure of migration in India is changing and there is a need to empirically examine the geographical scales that exert an influence on migration ('scalar politics of migration') in research and policy. The theory on migration needs to be informed by empirical, contextualised findings; b) there is a need to move away from a purely material analysis of migration towards emphasis on non-material aspects like cultural, psychological and political aspects.

Prof. Deshingkar noted how the poor migrants, when they are counted, are lumped into a single undifferentiated category. Policy in relation to migrants is thus based on a lot of assumptions. Some progress may have been achieved like in the instance where research showed that internal remittances in India (>\$ 7 billion) are at least twice the international remittance (\$ 3.6 billion) in India. However, academics have still characterised rural-urban migration in negative terms. Theories like Harris-Todaro model or Lipton's theory have become old and unsuitable in the contemporary context as they don't take a serious account of the informal economy. Even those migrating from rural areas and taking up informal jobs can be seen to improve health and other living standards. Also, informal activity is diverse and not all of it is bad.

Here, Prof. Deshingkar mentioned Dharavi in Mumbai (famous as Asia's largest slum) which hosts a number of different micro to medium scale production activities. What is lacking in theory is the incorporation of these counter-narratives. The implication of this is that policy sees such temporary settlements as aberrations to development and thus, informal settlements are routinely bull-dozed.

Therefore, there is a need to accept migration and try to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities attached. Prof. Deshingkar went on to discuss two instances where policy is not informed by contextualised, empirical findings as in the case of migration in brick kiln work and migration in Domestic Workers (DW). Research on migration in brick kiln workers has focused on the poor living and working conditions of the migrants at the work site. Prof. Deshingkar pointed out the need to analyse these conditions in relation to the conditions at the source of migration and whether migration hasn't in fact improved certain living aspects of these workers. With respect to Domestic Workers, it is international policy which is based on the experiences on Philippian and Indonesian migrant domestic workers that has influenced the Indian bill for protection of Domestic Workers. However, domestic work in India is largely part-time with no holidays or benefits. Thus Indian reality is not informing policy.

Prof. Deshingkar then concluded the lecture by reiterating the gaps in research and the need to fill them through a nuanced understanding on inter-loping aspects that shape Indian reality with regard to internal migration in order to inform policy debates.

Post-lecture Q & A moderated by Prof. RB Bhagat of Indian Institute of Population Studies (IIPS):

Questions mainly revolved around the basis for regarding migration as emancipatory as students brought out various insights from their own studies in informal work sites or rural, impoverished areas. On these issues, Prof. Deshingkar reiterated the need to examine conditions of migrants at source as well as destination of migration in order to understand how the livelihood strategy has worked for them.

Prof. RB Bhagat supported Prof Deshingkar in concluding that it is important to understand migration as a spatial event where freedom and bondage may both occur.