

Women Workers on the Move in South Asia: Shifting Identities in Segmented Labour Markets

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Abstract

Global evidence has shown that the incomes and working conditions of immigrant populations in general, and migrant women in particular, are different from those of local male workers due to discrimination based on ethnicity and gender. Against this background, this paper explores the segmented nature of the labour market for migrant women in the informal sector within South Asia. The paper finds that migrant women from India, Nepal and Bangladesh face discrimination based on their regional, ethnic, geographical, linguistic and religious identities as they seek to enter the highly segmented informal labour market in India. By comparing the labour market experiences of forty-five migrant women across four Indian states, this paper shows that the historical, social and cultural proximity among countries in the South Asian region leads to different types of segmentation and integration in the informal labour market in India. The fluidity of identities in the South Asian region is marked by ethno-linguistic, social and religious commonalities that lead to complexities in determining labour-market positions. It is observed that migrant women within the region have to navigate through a triple-layered segmentation emerging from their identities as migrants and women, and due to contestations about their national identity.

Introduction

Between 1990 and 2015, the total number of migrants from South Asian countries¹ increased from 24.5 million to 37.9 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017). Although a significant proportion of the migrants emigrated outside the region in 2015, about 31 per cent (12 million) moved within South Asia. Curiously, although the share of women among the total migrants from South Asia has declined from 43.4 per cent in 1990 to 37.7 per cent in 2015, women continued to comprise almost half of the total migrants moving

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within the South Asian region during this period². However, country-level data indicate that while 58 per cent of the recent migrants to rural areas and 56 per cent to the urban areas were female in 2011, overall women comprised almost 70 per cent of the total migrants in India that year (Jones et al. 2016).

Despite the larger representation of women in migration, Barkat and Ahsan (2014) argue that South Asian countries have never officially experienced ‘feminisation of migration’ or women’s migration for economic purposes (Chammartin 2002, Piper 2008). Gioli et al. (2017, 3) observe that the depiction of migrant women in South Asia vacillates between their portrayal either as ‘victims of global economic restructuring ... to heroines accountable for development processes in their countries of origin’, although much of this discussion pertains to female migrants emigrating out of the South Asian region, particularly to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Instead, women’s migration within the South Asian region is more likely to be examined as a social phenomenon, such as a marriage-led migration or associational migration (Skeldon 1985; Boyd and Grieco 2003) where migration is not an active choice but is assigned to her by her position within the household. Further, women’s migration within South Asian countries has been discussed through the lens of trafficking for forced labour and sex work (Blanchet 2010; Frederick 2005, 127), mail-order brides or forced marriages (Mehta 2017).

Although much of the focus on the economic conditions of migrant women from South Asia is on emigration from the region (Khatri 2010; Afsar 2011; Gioli et al. 2017), most scholars agree that migrant women’s experiences differ from those of migrant men. Kabeer (2007) indicates that migrant women are more likely to get placed in informal, low-paying jobs requiring greater flexibility as they get channelled into gender-stratified labour markets (Kabeer 2007, 36–37). In addition to gender-based stratification, global evidence also points to existing segmentation of the labour market based on their other identities, whereby people with similar backgrounds get clustered in specific activities (de Haan 1995). Migrants are often segregated into the lower-remunerative jobs in the labour market, or the so-called ‘secondary labour market’, based on their ethnicities, race and gender, creating niches in the labour market which are hard to overcome (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). Piper (2008) observes that the gender-stratified and segmented nature of the labour market affects the ability of women migrants to access entitlements and rights within the labour market. This necessitates a deeper engagement with social factors such as class, gender and ethnicity as it moulds the experience of migration and development.

Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to a small but growing literature on the labour-market conditions for migrant women within the South Asian region. It seeks to explore how informal labour markets are organised and how they operate for female migrants from different nationalities within South Asia. Does the evidence point to segmentations or

integrations in the labour market? How migrant women navigate through the labour market, and what are the coping strategies used by them? Using in-depth interviews from forty-five women migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal and India engaged in various forms of work in the informal sector across four Indian states³, this paper seeks to answer the above questions.

In section two, the segmented nature of labour markets is discussed with a specific focus on gender and migration. The third section gives details of the methodology of the paper. In Section four, the profile and background of the research participants are elaborated. The fifth section draws on the empirical evidence from the field regarding commonalities and differences in the labour market experiences of migrants based on their identities and articulates the process of a new identity formation for themselves. The sixth and concluding section seeks to provide insights about the nature of the labour market for female migrant workers and to delineate policy implications from the study.

Gender and Migrant Identities in the Segmented Labour Markets of South Asia

Challenging the idea of a homogenous labour market where the human capital achievements of the individual determined their ability to command wages (Saajstad 1962; Becker 1964), the initial ‘segmented labour market’ theories showed that there were observable differences in the job market situations of minority communities based on gender and race (Doeringer and Piore 1970). The differences in accessing labour markets not only manifested in terms of inequality in wages but also affected the overall conditions of work for different sets of workers (Cain 1976).

With the rise of globalisation, labour markets worldwide have become increasingly *diversified*, meaning that there are different working conditions for people from the same nationality as well as across nationality groups, while also being *polarised* based on the diverse skill-sets even among people belonging to the same nationality (Piper 2008, 1287–1288). Therefore, as migrants with relatively lower educational levels and skill-sets increasingly seek to migrate, they are more likely to take up informal positions in specific niches in the labour market: jobs that are segmented according to their subgroup characteristics like race, ethnicity, religion or gender profiles (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006).

In the context of South Asia, typical markers of language, ethnicity and religion give rise to a distinct process of segmentation of the labour market within the region that is not strictly comparable to the experiences of segmentation in developed countries. The multiplicity of religions, cultures and languages present a fascinating milieu within which migrants from the same ethnic, religious or linguistic community but different nationalities compete for similar jobs. Since these identities cannot be ascertained at the destination, there might emerge significant confusions as to who is an internal migrant and who is an international migrant. In view of such a unique positioning of the South Asian labour market, with its intersections,

interconnections and contradictions, it is interesting to uncover how migrant identities impact labour market participation in the region.

The South Asian region has the second-largest workforce in the world and is supposed to add over 166 million new workers by 2030 (Likhi 2013). However, a significant proportion of the labour force is likely to experience poor working conditions. International Labour Organisation (ILO) data revealed that in 2019, 72 per cent of the total workers in the region were likely to be concentrated in vulnerable employment, mostly within the mammoth informal sector that employed over 90 per cent of the labour force in countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal (ILO 2018a). Another poignant challenge for the South Asian labour market is the declining share of labour force participation for women. The *World Economic Social Outlook* data on the gender gap in labour force participation rates indicate that there is an astounding 51 per cent gap between men (79 per cent) and women (27.6 per cent) in the region (ILO 2018a).

The South Asia Women Fund (SAWF) observes that women's mobility within and across South Asian countries has increased several times with the rise of Special Economic Zones (SEZs): these have made it easier for migrant women to find employment as domestic workers, in brick kilns, in the entertainment sector and several other low-skilled positions in garment manufacturing, and as low-waged workers in the global value chains (SAWF 2016, 10).

Despite the increase in the volume of migration, access to paid employment opportunities within the region remains limited for women. Huq (1979, 144) suggests that it is only 'destitute women (who) have shed their social inhibitions and seek employment ... outdoors ... with men...'. Social practices like '*purdah*' or covering oneself with a veil to maintain modesty (Papanek 1979), and popular social constructs like the '*lokki bou*' or the obedient wife, lauded for her sacrifices and devotion towards her marital family (Blanchet 2010), assert the symbolic capital of honour and respectability while seeking to maintain patriarchal control over all aspects of women's being, including the accessing of opportunities for migration and mobility (Giolo et al. 2016). As states and policymakers often draw their moralities and subjectivities from such constructs of the ideal migrant woman, socio-cultural biases against the mobility of women also spill over into the realms of policymaking, further restricting women's economic agency. This is observed in the discriminatory policies regarding women's migration, such as restrictions on age and skills, higher premium for accessing legal pathways of migration, and the requirement of male guardians accompanying women migrating abroad for work (Siddiqui 2001; Wright 2018).

Although data is limited, women in the South Asian countries take up a higher burden of unpaid work such as cooking, cleaning, washing, mending and taking care of children and the elderly within the home. At the same time, men are more likely to be located in paid

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employment (Hirway 2015). Even when women want to enter the labour market, they have to strike a balance between accessing paid employment versus continuing to perform the socially and traditionally assigned unpaid roles at home. This is reflected in many women, including a significant proportion of migrant women, getting concentrated in ‘lower paid, irregular, own account and informal work, working fewer hours and earning lower incomes’ (Gammage and Stevanovic 2016, 4). Such jobs provide little or no social protection.

The literature on gender and labour migration in the South Asian region points out that women migrant workers within the region get segregated at multiple levels in the labour market.

The *first* level of segmentation occurs due to their gender identity in the labour market. This holds for all female migrants, both internal and international, as they find it more challenging to access paid employment opportunities within the region. Gender-wise unemployment ratio in the region indicates that women are 1.4 per cent more likely to be unemployed as compared to men (ILO 2018b).

The *second* level of segmentation occurs due to women across South Asia being more likely to get placed in vulnerable⁴ and informal employment in comparison to their male counterparts. For instance, 99.7 per cent of the population in Nepal is engaged in informal employment, with over 99.9 per cent of women engaged in informal employment. It is believed that the informal nature of employment increases workers’ risk of limited access to employment and social protection. This makes them more susceptible to the shocks and fluctuations in the labour market as compared to workers who have open-ended, formal employment contracts. Almost 46 per cent of women in South Asian are located in ‘own account’ work, while 31.9 per cent are engaged in family labour. The chances of women settling for unpaid family labour are almost 22.8 times higher than men in the region (ILO 2018b). Studies indicate that South Asian labour markets have been characterised by high rates of informality (Chen and Doane 2008). International Labour Organisation (2018b) data also points to there being high levels of informality in the countries under consideration.

The *third* level of segmentation encountered by migrant women occurs due to their status as migrants. There is significant ethnographic evidence that migrants, particularly the women, are more likely to be placed in low-skilled and low-remunerated jobs in the destinations. As high levels of informality and vulnerability characterise the destinations themselves, female migrant workers often get located at the bottom of the informal economy. Even within the informal economy, women are more likely to be located in agricultural employment, both as paid workers and as family labour.

In view of this triple-layered segmentation, it is valuable to understand the labour market experiences of the migrant women from Nepal and Bangladesh employed in the informal

sectors in India, as compared to those of the internal migrant women in India. The geographical and population size of India has made it the country of origin, transit and destination for migration in the region. However, the Indian labour market itself is highly segmented based on gender, ethnicity, language, region, social origin, modes of recruitment, age, etc. (Srivastava 2019). As cross-border female migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh enter the polarised and fragmented Indian labour market, their socio-cultural, ethnic, linguistic and geographic proximity to certain Indian groups leads to their having a complex positioning within the informal labour market in India. The subsequent sections of the paper examine how such similarities in identities shape the position of migrant women from Nepal, Bangladesh and India within the Indian labour market.

The Field and Fieldwork

The South Asian region has been a hotspot of regional migration. Behera (2011) observes that due to the contiguity of territories and a shared historical and colonial past, there are ethnic and cultural similarities among the people within the South Asian region. However, the ethnocultural, religious and linguistic continuum has impinged upon the statist conceptualisation of the political boundaries of nation-states in the South Asian region. Consequently, population groups sharing similar cultural and religious identities are divided into Indian, Nepalese and Bangladeshi territories. This makes migration of people within the region a complex phenomenon. Das (2010) comments that the eastern borders of India have always represented an unstoppable flow of people, services and goods aided by the porous nature of the boundary lines. This is manifested in the forms of border trade, both legal and undocumented, the substituting of one currency with another, the free mobility of people and their access to social, cultural and religious institutions across the borders. The etching of a boundary line across the place has arguably produced a newer form of the political subject along the border. According to Jones (2018), people living close to the border challenge the imposition of state control in minor ways like crossing across the border to visit relatives for a couple of days or so.

In light of the historical underpinnings of cross-border migration, it is observed that most of the Bangladeshi migration to India is of an undocumented nature. The absence of travel documents like passports or visa renders such acts of international migration 'illegal' in nature (Shamshad 2017). On the other hand, although Nepalese migration to India operates through an open-border policy determined by the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 between the two countries, much of the migration between Nepal and India is also undocumented (Sharma and Thapa 2013). Therefore, there are limited sources of secondary quantitative data on cross-border migrants in India, particularly about their position within the labour market.

To overcome this challenge, primary data were collected through in-depth interviews of forty-five migrant women from Nepal, Bangladesh and India located in four Indian states – Delhi, Maharashtra, Kerala and West Bengal – between November 2017 and July 2018. Each of the sites within these states was identified based on content analysis of regional and national-level newspapers and other sources of secondary literature published between 2016–2018 and mentioning the presence of Bangladeshi or Nepalese migrants in these places. After being broadly identified, attempts were made to locate key informants in each site within the four states who were then briefed about the purpose and the nature of the research. The key informants included members of civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, local worker union leaders, social activists, professors and teachers at local schools and colleges, and labour contractors. The key informants helped in providing local-level knowledge and information about possible sites where Bangladeshi or Nepalese migrant women might be located. At each of these sites, Nepalese and Bangladeshi migrant women were identified through purposive sampling using the information provided by the key informants. Snowballing was used at individual sites to identify cross-border migrant women. Consequent upon the interview of the cross-border migrant, Indian migrant women in a similar occupation at the same site were purposively identified. The sampling followed a 1:2 or 1:3 cross-border to internal-migrant ratio.

The sensitive nature of the research, particularly due to the interviews with Bangladeshi migrant women, necessitated meticulously following the ethical guidelines of research. The data from the field notes and in-depth interviews have, therefore, been transcribed and anonymised. This paper identifies the broad locations of the migrant women, but the real names and locations of the participants have been withheld.

Profile of Migrant Women in South Asia

Among the forty-five participants of the study, twenty-seven (60 per cent) women were internal migrants. Cross-border migrant women of Bangladeshi origin comprised 22 per cent (sample size: ten) of the participant sample, and 18 per cent (sample size: eight) were from Nepal.

The data shows that the Indian migrant women were slightly older than the cross-border ones. While most migrant women from Nepal and Bangladesh were 25–35 years old, most of the Indian migrant women were 35–45 years old. Several of the cross-border migrant women had emigrated before achieving 25 years of age. This coincides with the age bracket of women emigrating for domestic work to the Middle Eastern countries in both Nepal and Bangladesh (Chakraborty 2020). The thinning out of cross-border migrants beyond a certain age might reflect that many women migrants do not consider it to be a life-long movement and intend to return to their origins.

Over 84 per cent of the migrant women were first-generation migrants and held strong ties with their destinations. Among the cross-border migrant women, only some participants in West Bengal were second-generation migrants. Long-distance migration of women, to places far away from their areas of origin, is a relatively new phenomenon. The strong ties of family are visible even among the current sample, as over 87 per cent (sample size: thirty-nine) of the women had migrated with their families.

The occupational profile of the migrants indicates that self-employment, including domestic work, was the main occupation practised by women migrants from India and Nepal. Over 33 per cent (sample size: fifteen) of the total sample was self-employed in activities such as domestic work and operating small stores. About 22.2 per cent (sample size: ten) were engaged in unpaid domestic work. The data points out that the Bangladeshi migrant women were rarely engaged only in unpaid domestic work. About 27 per cent of the sample (sample size: twelve) were engaged in casual manual work. It was observed that while most female Bangladeshi migrants in India were employed in construction or other causal jobs with a single employer, Indian migrant women were more likely to work for multiple employers. About 4 per cent (sample size: two) of the migrant women were engaged in service-sector occupations, while another 9 per cent (sample size: four) worked in small and medium enterprises as salaried employees.

The profile of the participants indicates that migrant women in South Asia engage in a wide range of occupations that are both paid and unpaid. However, notably, even when women's economic contribution within the household improves through access to paid employment, it does not necessarily imply that women contribute any less to unpaid aspects of work within the household as well. This indicates that women are forced to undertake the double and sometimes triple burden of paid-work responsibilities as well as unpaid work, along with their task of social and reproductive labour (Moser 1989)

Shifting Identities in the South Asian Labour Market

The current literature on cross-border migrants in South Asia has pointed to the existence of niches in the labour market. For instance, Blanchet (2010) finds that several of the Bangladeshi women migrating to Mumbai, India, get located in occupations such as bar-dancing. Similarly, literature abounds on the high representation of Nepalese and Bangladeshi women among sex-workers across various sites of India (Fredrick 2012). Similarly, Nepalese men have historically migrated to India as a part of the British Gurkha regiment and later as private security guards. Nepalese women engage in domestic work, and as manual labourers in tea plantations, dairy farms and mines in the North and Northeastern parts of India (Sharma and Thapa 2013).

‘If you want to find Bangladeshi maids, create a network among the bhadralok Bengalis in Delhi. Their maids are all Bangladeshis’, ‘Most Bengali speaking Muslims from North 24 Parganas, Malda and Murshidabad districts of Bengal are actually Bangladeshis trying to hide their true national identity’, ‘Nepali people sell Chinese food in Mumbai’, ‘Many Nepali girls are working in beauty-parlours and massage parlours in Mumbai and Bengaluru’— these were some of the statements encountered by the author in her search for cross-border female migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh in India.

These statements indicate the commonly held beliefs and understandings about cross-border migrant women and how their perception by the local population varies across various destination states in India. They echo the social relationships between the migrant and the local population where ascribed characteristics and historical assumptions of group-based identity determine whether or not an individual will get access to certain types of jobs at the destination (Castles 1987). In the Indian context, earmarking cross-border migrants based on their occupational or religious profiles allows the construction of an ‘immigrant identity’ among the local population that in turn allows the typecasting of migrants into the various niches in the labour market. Such typecasting holds not only economic significance in terms of allowing or denying access to different types of jobs in the labour market for certain subgroups of the population but also holds sociological implications as identity-based politics gets tied to questions of defining insiders versus alien populations, securing jobs and controlling resources, (Shamshad 2017).

Of Changing Names and Applying Sindoor: Fluidities in Identity Construction Among Bangladeshi Migrant Women in India

The Bangladeshi migrant identity has been a hotly debated topic in independent India. The rise of the nationalist discourse in India has intermeshed several political and economic issues in the diatribe against Bangladeshi immigrants such as demographic aggression, ethnic marginalisation, aggravating an economic crisis by snatching away precious resources like jobs and being involved in unscrupulous activities like terrorism (Jeevan Reddy et al. 2000; Ramachandran 2002).

It is often difficult to distinguish between a Bengali and a Bangladeshi migrant as one moves away from the border areas. A commonly held misconception among the local population in destination states like Delhi, Maharashtra and Kerala resonated the view that every Bengali speaking migrant is a suspected Bangladeshi. The xenophobia against Bangladeshis is often coupled with communal undertones as Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims are misidentified as Bangladeshis.

When employing Bengali-speaking migrant women for domestic work, many employers look for physical verification of their religious identities. Hindu migrant women from West Bengal often try to make themselves distinctive by adorning physical markers of their identity. They believe that applying red vermillion, *sindoor*, in the parting of their hair and wearing red and white bangles, *shaka and pola*, would distinguish them from their Muslim Bengali-speaking counterparts. However, Chakraborty (2018) contests that it is difficult to distinguish between the Muslim migrant women from West Bengal and Bangladeshi solely through the physical markers of identities. Some of the Bengali-speaking Muslim women, both Indian and Bangladeshi, also adopt similar practices such as applying round vermillion mark on the forehead and wearing bangles, indicating to the society their status as married women.

Another strategy commonly used by Bangladeshi women to hide their identity in the labour market is to adopt Hindu-sounding nicknames or change their names to hide their Muslim identity. Chaabi⁵, a 28-year-old live-in domestic worker in a Hindu middle-class family in Kolkata, West Bengal changed her name from ‘Khatibunnisha’ when she moved to West Bengal as a young girl. She did this at the insistence of her employer. Chaabi recounts,

“Having a Muslim sounding name might sometimes go against you if you are working in a Hindu family. This is especially important when there are older people in the house where you work. They have issues in eating the food cooked by a Muslim or using dishes cleaned by us. Sometimes the employers would not even give you access to certain portions of the house like the puja (worship) room. My employer did not want to face these issues with her mother-in-law. She started calling me Chaabi, a picture.”

The ideas of purity and pollution remain firmly entrenched within the fabric of most societies, and names serve as the primary basis for discrimination and othering. Evidence to this effect has been found elsewhere in housing markets, job application processing and accessing several other opportunities. Thorat and Attewell (2007) found that job applicants were screened at the first stage of the job application process based on their names alone. They observed that even with similar qualifications, Muslims and lower-caste applicants were more likely to be rejected than Hindus, purely based on their names. Caste-favouritism and the social exclusion of marginalised communities are often linked to names. Although similar studies in understanding the impact of names in the informal labour market remain few and far between, it is well-known that adopting Hinduised names remains a popular strategy to hide identities among Muslim migrant women, particularly those from Bangladesh.

A widely accepted belief among the elite Bengali-speaking community in the destination states reflected the importance of dialects (Swamy 2019). Bengalis coming from Bangladesh are supposed to speak a different dialect from their Indian counterparts. However, employing dialects to distinguish between Bengali and Bangladeshi migrants is deeply problematic,

given the history of the movement of refugees from Bangladesh to India in several waves in the past. The Bengali language has several dialects, used mainly by the less educated and rural populations; Grierson (1903) noted in the *Linguistic Survey of India* that there are several dialects of the Bengali language that are used by the less educated ordinary people. This author also observed that during the initial interviews with some Bangladeshi migrants working at a construction site, the women purposefully avoided making references to Islamic terms or using Islamic salutations in their attempt to hide their Bangladeshi identity.

Labour contractors who facilitate movement across the India-Bangladesh border are knowledgeable about these assumed differences and exploit these to their advantage. Shyamal, who had been facilitating the movement of people from Bangladesh to Maharashtra for jobs as construction workers for a fee, informs:

“I often advise people I am bringing for the first time to be aware of the differences in the two cultures. I make them memorise fake names of their village and district in West Bengal. I also throw in additional general knowledge about names of local, state and national politicians in India. Not knowing answers to general knowledge questions like ‘Who is the Prime Minister of India?’ and ‘Who is the Chief Minister of West Bengal?’ is one of the main ways through which the police in Sealdah railway station⁶ distinguish and identify illegal Bangladeshis trying to migrate into India”.

The fluidity in identities allows Bangladeshi migrant women to adapt and assimilate within the Indian labour market by passing off as a Bengali migrant. On the other hand, there is often confusion among the local populations at the destinations that wrongly assume that Muslims from West Bengal are Bangladeshi.

Several cases have been reported in newspapers where Bengali-speaking people were discriminated against or even arrested by the police or targeted by local mobs on suspicion of being illegal Bangladeshi immigrants only because they speak the Bengali language (Rashid 2020). Several employers, particularly those engaging domestic workers, require migrants to furnish documents of their identity like Aadhar, ration or voter cards. Not having these causes immediate suspicion among the employers about the national identity of the migrant worker. Babita, a 42-year-old migrant from West Bengal working as a domestic help in Delhi, argues the case for having identity documents:

“My husband and I left our village soon after a flood. We were completely devastated, even our house was not spared. At that time, no one in our village had Aadhar. Last year, I had to spend over Rs 5000 to make a special trip to the village to get my Aadhar and voter card. My employer informed me that I would not be allowed to enter their apartment complex if I failed to furnish my documents. What to do, I had to go!”

One of the ways through which Bangladeshi migrant women seek to protect themselves is by acquiring Indian documents. Bangladeshi migrants acquire most of these identity documents like voter card and Aadhar card in India for a very hefty fee from intermediaries on the Indian side of the border. Kusum, a 21-year-old widowed Bangladeshi working in the construction sector in Kerala informed that she has been trying to save up money to get an Aadhar card which would cost her about Rs 7000, almost a month's salary. She is aware that Aadhar is not a citizenship document, but she is unable to afford a voter card as they cost almost double of an Aadhar.

Misconstructing the Nepalese Identity in the Labour Market of India

The open border between Nepal and India under the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 allowed an unfettered exchange of Nepalese and Indian populations. Despite Nepal not being colonised by the British, their presence was encouraged in the British army under the Gurkha regiment (Thieme 2006). Many pastoralists from Nepal also migrated to today's Northeastern states of India and thus facilitated strong mobility across the border. Despite the facilitation of movement between the two countries, there has been a certain degree of inequality in the relationship between the two countries as Nepalese populations get concentrated in jobs like domestic work, cook, security guards, and coolies (Sharma and Thapa 2013; Thieme 2006). Studies show that there has been a shift in the labour-market positioning of the Nepalese diaspora in India. Bashyal (2016) shows that at present, the Nepalese diaspora in India has moved away from their traditional niches in the labour market to newer sectors like operating small food businesses and working as entrepreneurs or in the hotel industry.

Despite the free mobility between Nepal and India, the Nepalese diaspora in India is viewed from a narrow-angle. Bashyal (2016) notes that although it is relatively easier to travel from Nepal to India in recent times, it applies only to the portion of the Nepalese population with Mongoloid features as they are perceived to be the 'real Nepali', distinguishing them from the North-Indian-looking features of other Nepalese people.

During fieldwork, it was observed that female migrants with Mongoloid features (McDuierra 2012) were in high demand in the service and care industry due to the fetishisation of their looks in sites in Maharashtra and Kerala. Karlsson and Kikon (2017) also report similar evidence where young migrants from the Northeastern Indian states get located in the emerging service sector in Indian metropolises, working in high-end restaurants, spas, shopping malls and beauty parlours due to their un-Indian, 'exotic', 'Asian' appearance.

In Kerala, the author's search for Nepalese migrant women turned out to be a false chase and a case of mistaken identity by the key informant. The young migrant women in the shopping mall turned out to be from the Northeastern state of Sikkim and not Nepal. The key

informant, in this case, was a lawyer in the city and had often shopped at this shopping mall, interacting with these young ‘Nepalese’ girls several times over the past few years. Bandana, a 24-year-old retail salesperson in a shopping mall in Kerala, contextualises the role of her looks in furthering her income opportunities. She discusses,

“I came to Kerala with other friends from my village who work as servers in a posh restaurant in the shopping mall. My work in the shop largely involves talking to customers and showing them different items that they would like to purchase. People in Kerala know a lot about job opportunities abroad. I have been offered a job in Malaysia to take care of children for a working couple by a customer who frequents our store. She believes that with my looks, I would fit right in Malaysia. I would earn almost three times what I make here when I go there.”

The migrant women with ‘exotic’ Asian features have a reputation for being hardworking, loyal and polite. They also speak some English. This stereotyping of migrant women hailing from Northeast India and Nepal makes it easy for them to find work in the service industry—it has led to several young women with higher secondary levels of school education leaving behind the traditional jobs in the agricultural sector and working as salesgirls, waitresses and in spas and massage parlours. These forms of work, however, requires not only physical labour but also involves immense emotional labour on the part of these women who are often targets of racist slurs from the local communities or are fetishised for their looks and skin colour.

On the other hand, in Delhi and Maharashtra, migrant women from Nepal typically get placed in domestic and care work. They are often able to leverage the social networks established by their husband, who work as security guards and watchmen. Pushpa, a Nepalese woman in Maharashtra, is engaged as a domestic worker. She lives with her husband and two small children in a one-room building. While reflecting on her Nepalese identity, she tells,

“The other (Maharashtrian) women who work as domestic workers always refer to me as ‘Nepali’. They do not like it that I am working here for lower wages. Some have even threatened to beat me if I do not increase the amount I charge. How can I? My husband is a watchman in the same building where I work, I cannot charge anything more than this, or his job will be at stake. We are not equals here.”

Apart from placing the Bangladeshi and Bengali migrants, as well as the Nepalese migrants and those from the Northeastern states of India, in different niches in the labour market as hypothesised by the segmented labour market theorists, it is observed that the overlapping identities often create confusion among the native population at the destination states in India.

Conclusion

The complexities in the relationship between the local populations and the migrant workers give rise to multiple layers of segmentation in their labour-market positioning. The different trajectories of the formal and the informal, the male and the female, the insider and the cross-border migrant, give rise to multiple segmentation in the labour market, which need further examination.

This paper explores the intercountry mobility of women for economic purposes within the South Asian region which has garnered limited attention in the migration and gender literature. The evidence presented in the paper sheds light on a small but important aspect of women's migration by studying how identities shape access to labour markets.

Firstly, it is observed that identities in the region are the result of a long and complicated history of shared ethnicities, languages, religions and culture. Socio-cultural identities of migrant workers moving within the region are often fluid and cannot be separated into water-tight compartments based on national identities.

Secondly, it is essential to recognise that the fluidity of identities among different population groups within the Indian subcontinent has important implications for their positioning within the labour market. It is often difficult for the employers at the destination states in India to determine the nationality or the place of origin of the migrants. On the other hand, gender identity gains prominence in determining the labour-market position of migrant women as female migrants from different South Asian countries compete for similar low-paying jobs within the informal labour market. Labour market niches are also determined on the basis of regional, religious and linguistic identities of the migrant population.

Finally, it is observed that in the absence of specific markers of national identities, treating any subgroup either preferentially or with suspicion has an impact on the labour-market conditions for the other. For instance, the tightening of labour-market opportunities for Bangladeshi migrants is reflected in limiting economic opportunities for the Bengali-speaking internal migrants in India.

Notes

1. South Asian countries under consideration are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
2. The share of women migrants within South Asia marginally increased from 47.1 per cent in 1990 to 48.9 per cent in 2015 (Author's estimates from UNDESA data, 2017).

3. The data for the paper is taken from a cross-section of forty-five in-depth interviews among the 160 South Asian women migrants who participated in the doctoral research of the author.
4. Vulnerable employment is defined by the ILO as the sum of own-account workers and contributing-to-family workers. Such workers are less likely to have access to decent working conditions, adequate social security or representation in the labour market (ILO 2010).
5. Names of all the participants have been changed to protect their identity.
6. Sealdah is a major railway station in Kolkata.

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