

Gender, Migration and Caste: Interrogation of Statist Representation of Care-workers in the Context of HIV/AIDS Discourse

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Abstract

This paper captures how the emigration of Dalit women for domestic work was represented as sexual slavery and deemed to be the leading cause of the spread of HIV in the Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. The anti-trafficking bandwagon was orchestrated at a juncture when the HIV infection rate was increasing among Dalits, providing legitimacy to regulative policies. The paper argues that the healthcare narrative ignores the complex pathways of HIV transmission and unnecessarily implicates migrant Dalit women even though their labour is unrelated to prostitution and HIV infection. Centring the study on the processes of migration and the actual experiences of Dalit women in the care economy, this paper contests the statist representation; it argues why the cause of HIV infection cannot be attributed to Dalit women's migration and how it is the unsafe practices of their men that is the likely cause. It also throws light on the harmful effects of the anti-trafficking rhetoric on subaltern women.

Introduction

In the mainstream writings on labour and market, the concentration is mainly on paid production. They largely ignore the contribution of the unpaid and underpaid work carried out, primarily by women, for the maintenance and reproduction of households. Feminist scholars offer various explanations for this invisibility of domestic labour. First, since household work is erroneously conceived as part and parcel of a woman's social (rather than economic) responsibility as a wife and mother, and hence categorised as "free work", this work is devalued (Kothari 1997 and Vishwanath 2020). The fundamental issue lies with the idea of the labouring female body. Sabala and Gopal (2010) argue that the labouring female body has never gained importance because women's labour has been persistently devalued, be it domestic labour within the home or outside, productive or agricultural labour within the household or outside, and other types of formal and informal labour. Secondly, women's paid

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domestic work receives neglect as it does not fit neatly into the conceptual categories of 'economic productivity', while also being exceptionally poorly paid (Kothari 1997). Thirdly, a bulk of care-related work is misrepresented as "*Seva*" (service or charity), "altruism" and "help". This moral tone and voluntarism allow room to curtail the rights of workers even as care work itself has been commoditised. This answers the questions of underpayment, job insecurity, uncertainties and the degraded status of the care-giver (Palriwala and Neetha 2011; Vishwanath 2020) precisely. Palriwala and Neetha (2011) assert that the idea of "altruism" actually sits comfortably with the notion of graded inequality and caste hierarchy where physical/polluted labour is perennially assigned to lower-caste groups by controlling the means of labour through a system of servitude. In contrast, mental/pure work becomes the domain of upper castes as mandated by the mythology of caste and Hinduism. So, care work and serving in upper-caste households ostensibly become the "duty" of lower castes, and having a domestic maid becomes a marker of status (Kaur 2006; Palriwala and Neetha 2011).

Indian feminists have insistently identified the household as an important site of production and reproduction, spatially defined as the place where identifiable concrete transactions take place between its members across sex and age divisions, and capturing the diverse work of women (Geetha 2007). Also in the realm of the care economy are activities carried out for the maintenance and reproduction of households other than one's own, which is paid for in cash or kind or a combination of the two (Kothari 1997). Simultaneously, feminist activism also revolves around advocating for comprehensive legislation to ensure their rights as workers, ranging from entitlement to holidays to setting minimum wage rates (Vishwanath 2020). The feminist intervention has also brought household labour under academic scrutiny, spurring studies on the care economy that point to the requirement of a different set of conceptual and methodological tools, and also question the dichotomy of productive and reproductive work, private as well as public, that prevails in scholarly discussions (Kothari 1997; Gopal 2013). Another critical discussion that has emerged in this domain is regarding the intersection of caste and gender. For instance, the sexual division of labour operates very insidiously for women of the lower castes. The relative absence of upper-caste women in paid labour establishes the power of caste status, maintaining the boundaries of compulsory heteronormativity and condemning lower-caste women to caste-defined domestic service in upper-caste households. The abject, exploitative domestic labour performed by women from the marginalised sections of the society has been described eloquently as both lying outside the realm of the market but also influenced by familial and patriarchal ideologies. Dalit women specifically attain the role of public labourers whose labour is devalued despite often being necessary for social reproduction (Gopal 2012).

Migration, both international and internal (Neetha 2004; Kaur 2006; Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2012), has gained prominence in studies on the care economy. One significant theme in discussions on internal migration traces changes in the social composition of the

caregiver – from predominantly male domestic workers in the middle and upper-middle classes of urban colonial India to female domestic labourers in the informal economy in neo-liberal India. Other studies located paid domestic service in rural set-ups, linking it to changes in the agrarian economy such as the shift from cotton to cash crops like sugarcane, and the emergence of a subtle caste-bondage system (Kothari 1997). Sen (2006) attributes the growing scholarly attention to domestic work to concerns regarding over-reportage of the extreme sexual and physical abuse of young emigrant women from impoverished backgrounds working as domestic service providers in countries of the West and the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Rajan and Varghese (2012), in their provocative essay, described how the institution for emigration governance in India is discriminatory against low-skilled women emigrants, particularly domestic workers. It poignantly discerned how, in the context of Kerala, discourses on indecency and loose morality underlay the local rumours about them, specifically when they emigrated as single women. Significantly, domestic work was configured as the “outlier” by the passport regime in contemporary times, conforming to prevalent patriarchal norms. This discourse persisted right from the colonial regime to present times, precipitating the growth of a parallel illegal passport economy. Restrictive interventions by the Indian State, with measures like fixing thirty years as the minimum age of Indian citizens to work as housemaids in the Gulf countries from early 2002 onwards, further disabled the mobility options available to women. However, the puzzle here is, what provided legitimacy to this discriminatory passport regime? Can a passport regime sustain its exclusionary measures without popular support, only through its moralistic agenda?

In order to answer this question, the current paper adds another dimension to it, i.e., the way the HIV/AIDS discourse solidified this already patriarchal passport regime, by foregrounding the emigration experience of care workers from the Konaseema region (a reserved constituency for Dalits) of the East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. Thus, the focus of the paper is to map out the debilitating impact of the HIV/AIDS discourse on subaltern women, mainly Dalit women working in the “care economy”. It argues that even though the labour of housemaids is entirely unassociated with erotic performances and sex-work, female emigrants from Dalit communities working as domestic workers have to bear the brunt of the punitive measures related to trafficking that are in place. The paper also sheds light on how the State gains its legitimacy when the moralistic agenda meets health concerns.

This paper, by making a significant departure from the conventional migration scholarship that indicates coercion of lower-class women into sexual slavery and vulnerability in the care economy, particularly domestic work, analyses the advantages that women’s migration brought into Dalit households despite the disadvantages. Dominant narratives on the issue of the transnational migration of women assert that women become victims of international trafficking due to poverty and migration. This literature portrays women from Third World countries as suffering sexual exploitation at the hands of men in the developed countries and the Persian Gulf, and ultimately succumbing to HIV/AIDS (Cusick 2002, Pateman 1983,

Sangera 1998, Troung 2003). Such simplistic analysis positively correlates the lower socio-economic status of women with trafficking and HIV risk. By challenging these kinds of narratives, this paper outlines an alternative account via an ethnographic study that complicates uniform interpretations. Thus, it questions the formulation of State policy wherein migration is viewed exclusively through the lens of exploitation and fused with the language of HIV prevention. Effectively, this policy translates into restricting and regulating women's labour and mobility rather than offering care and protection.

The paper emphasises on “practices or materiality that underlies globalisation” and “the influence of ethnic and community networks” on subaltern people making decisions on international migration (Sassen 2002). Alejandro Portes (2000) underlines this latter aspect in his paradigm of “globalisation from below”. He points that instead of isolated workers chasing capital at home and abroad, we have a more complex situation in which social networks are mobilised to cope with the new constraints and opportunities created by the neo-liberal model. Given this analytical purchase, this study concentrates on two themes. First, it throws light on the factors/processes involved in migration, i.e., the existence of support systems or relatives already working abroad, the arrangement of finance for travel, conjugal relationships at home and care deficiency of their children, leaving behind their own small children to receive care from their grandparents, while taking care of the children of the rich. Secondly, it underscores the patriarchal and casteist face of the State which curtails Dalit women's migration, interrogating the State's linear narrative of a co-relationship between poverty, gender, anti-trafficking and the HIV discourse. In the first section, the paper discusses the methodology and theoretical framework, while the second section presents the socio-economic context of the region, the social position of the Dalits and their discontentment with the region's developmental trajectories. The third section focuses on the practices that underlie the transnationalisation of labour in the care economy, while the final section comprises a critical assessment of the State's representation of Dalit women in the care economy, followed by a discussion.

I

The present paper is carved out from my doctoral work on the politics inherent in the risk discourse and largely explores the variegated effects of the HIV/AIDS discourse on subaltern communities in East Godavari. A substantial part of the research draws from fieldwork conducted in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh from 2005 to 2007, with revisits to the field between May and June 2011, in June 2019 and recently in December 2019, to map the continuity and social change in the region. The techniques of primary data collection included case studies, observations and in-depth interviews with key informants and various communities. Ten case studies of female emigrants were used in the analysis of patterns and processes of female emigration. The study altogether covered fifty-five respondents, including four key informants, relatives and close acquaintances of female emigrants, local domestic

workers, women working as vegetable vendors and bangle sellers, workers in construction, agriculture, fisheries and tobacco and cashew nut plantations, business people, moneylenders, NGO workers and activists from heterogeneous fields, health officers/experts, journalists, two Telugu writers and personnel from Women Development and Child Welfare Department, Amalapuram. More importantly, when I was stationed in Rajahmundry (a business hub of East and West Godavari districts) for twenty months, my immediate neighbours belonged to Dalit communities and had family members who worked as maids in Muscat and Kuwait. In my first field residence, one of my neighbours originally belonged to Bhimavaram of West Godavari and another neighbour belonged to Amalapuram of East Godavari. This helped me make intimate observations regarding the family members' reception of women emigrants upon their arrival and how they lived in their absence. Another neighbour helped arrange meetings with respondents in and around the Konaseema region. Besides, in order to compare the job prospects and risks related to domestic work, I interviewed women workers from different sectors. As part of secondary data, I scrutinised census reports, district gazette reports (including those that were drafted during the colonial era), historical accounts as well as journalistic, literary and scholarly works on the development of the district. Reviews of unpublished documents of various public health programmes and social welfare programmes (including reports of the local NGOs and APSACS (Andhra Pradesh State AIDS Control Society) contributed to my understanding of the HIV/AIDS discourses.

It is imperative here to underline what entails the HIV/AIDS discourse. The term discourse refers to the sum of an area of knowledge that constitutes a language or a way of talking or a worldview that develops in a given historical time that, through a series of conventions, becomes institutionalised and seems natural. At the same time, a discourse always leaves out experiences and points of view that do not align with it, silences differences of opinion and produces unease in those who do not see themselves included (Agustin 1988; Kregan 2006). The HIV/AIDS discourse denotes the kind of knowledge/perception that anti-trafficking approaches have produced about subaltern groups, its connotative meanings (as termed by Ronald Barthes) and its debilitating implications on the lives of marginalised communities¹. In brief, connotative meanings refer to negative meanings and myths that are produced by dominant groups through their representation of subjugated communities: the Dalits. In the dominant language, subaltern groups are represented as “carriers of infection” “immoral” and so on, which culminates in the controlling of outmigration among Dalit women, which in turn affects entire Dalit households. The paper underscores how emigration policies have been appropriated by the HIV/AIDS discourse, particularly its connotative meanings, in lieu of maintaining public order. More significantly, it focuses on what I call “the lie of the State”.

How did the State project the migration of Dalit women as care workers to the Persian Gulf and what modes did it employ to regulate their migration or to impose restrictions on their labour? The paper attempts to expose the complicity of the State in the myth-making process,

projecting consensual care work by family and individual women as sexual slavery and circulating the image of victimhood and involuntariness through the trope of health. It encapsulates how the enforcement of punitive measures and curtailment of the mobility of women, instead of offering protection to migrant women in case they were being harassed, affects the lives of Dalit women. The deconstruction and interrogation of this representation of female care workers is a feminist political act and assumes significance on three counts. First, it enriches the debate on the anti-caste feminist standpoint; second, it engages with the recent debate on the decline in workforce participation of women, and third, it throws light on the recent introduction of ITPA (Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act) Bill of 2018.

II

Konaseema Region: Unequal Development Across Castes

Many scholars have conceived the Konaseema region as not merely a geographical territory but a cultural and historical one formed by capital and resistance. It is from this vantage point that the socio-economic and cultural backdrop of the region is discussed. Secondly, the pattern of women's emigration to the Gulf countries should be understood against the backdrop of the impact of developmental activities in the region, such as the construction of irrigation canals and the Green Revolution, which benefited the land-owning or propertied classes but pauperised the backward or landless communities.

The Konaseema region falls under the jurisdiction of East Godavari and West Godavari districts. Initially, these formed a single district which, over time, got divided into two; however, as a region, they continue to share most of their social, economic and political features. Migration of Dalit women to the Gulf is a common phenomenon, for instance, in many administrative units in both districts. The Konaseema region is economically prosperous, being a well-known tourist location because of the beach at Antharveedi and the Lakshmi Narsimhaswami temple, and also because of its agriculture. The Lakshmi Narsimhaswami temple is a very old temple built by the Chalukya kingdoms, with its architecture resembling that of the temples in Madurai. In the medieval epoch, the *Devadasi* system was prevalent in various small towns of the East Godavari District such as Ramchandrapuram, Draksharamam, Peddapuram, Korukonda, Kadium, Annavaram, Dwarapudi, Samarlakota and Antharveedi (Prasad 1990, 68). To some extent, this temple culture gets embedded into the present-day context, even though 'the *Devadasi* Prevention of Dedication Act' was passed by the Union Government in 1947 and later amended by Andhra Pradesh legislature in 1988 (Jordan 2003, 8; Nair 1996). However, to this date, the devadasi women (lower castes) continue to perform nude during the Narsimhaswami *panduga* (festivals) that occurs in March for seven days. The structural violence of caste and its inextricable linkage with the sexuality and labour of lower-caste women can be observed in this context.

Economic development in the region commenced via agricultural production due to the relentless efforts of the British Civil Engineer Sir Arthur Cotton who constructed anicut, canals and barrage over the river Godavari despite the lackadaisical approach of the British state. He is therefore actually revered and remembered by all caste groups of this district even today, the reverence vividly reflected in his numerous statues dotting prominent localities and villages. Right from the early 20th century, the Godavari districts became the rice bowl of the state and an exporter of coconut second only to Kerala. Post-independence, agricultural development was sustained through land reform measures, accompanied by the Green Revolution and commercialisation of agriculture and fisheries, and resulting in the creation of propertied classes (the Kamma, Kapu, Settybalija and Reddy communities). These series of modernisation initiatives did not bring equal development across castes and among men and women; they only produced propertied classes. For instance, a member of Praja Natya Mandali (People's Theatre group—a communist group based in Rajahmundry) succinctly explained the predicament of landless labourers (the Dalits) and landed peasants (the Kammas and Kapus) due to corporatisation of fisheries:

“See, earlier, landed peasants used to do fisheries while the production scale was small in paddy fields. So, they would alternatively use their land, switch from fisheries to agriculture (recruit two-three labourers, mostly Dalits). They were lured by the corporates who recruited intermediaries to pursue them to lease their land for aquaculture. So obviously they became rent-seekers while thinking that they do not have to bother about labour cost and get some percentage from the profits of aquaculture (done by the corporate groups). But, slowly after a few years, aquaculture leads to deterioration of land quality as soil lost its productivity due to the use of chemical items for aquaculture in order to augment the scale of production. It is again these corporate brokers who suggest, actually influence these landed peasants to sell these lands to real-estate market so that they can get the value of these lands, wastelands, at a better price. These same brokers purchase these wastelands from the peasants at a little lower price whereas they make the landed peasants feel that they sold it at a competitive price. Big real-estate groups then acquire it from these agents. So the landed peasants are forced to sell their land to big corporates. So it is a vicious circle”.

While the difficulties of the landed peasants were considerable (even though they received monetary benefits by selling land), the economic losses suffered by the landless peasants were quite severe, as their livelihood was entirely dependent on land. Even before the ascension of the real-estate boom due to the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and formation of Telangana, the economic surplus accumulated in the course of the Green Revolution was not productively invested into agriculture. Instead of providing adequate employment and earnings to peasants who had lost their land, the capital was directed outside the rural areas and invested in other productive activities such as the construction of cinema halls and hotels,

money lending, the apparel industry, real estate, the film industry and the lace trade. Provincial propertied classes, who had derived benefits from the developmental initiatives of the past, perpetuated and institutionalised the entertainment culture in the region when they acquired the dominant-caste status. The circulation of capital in the movie industry – a phenomenon that kicked off during the initial decades of the twentieth century – occurred due to a confluence of factors. Owing to the presence of some scenic/picturesque locations such as the river barrage in Rajahmundry, nurseries in Kadium, striking temple architectures, beaches and the sea in Antharveedi and Kakinada, film studios were established that enabled filmmakers from this region to demarcate it for cinema shootings. There was a concerted effort to turn East Godavari (particularly Rajahmundry) into the cultural capital of Andhra Pradesh. Caste wars are rampant in Telugu cinema, and so is the battle for occupying space in this region. For instance, if N Balakrishna, the filmstar son of late Telugu Desam Party (TDP) founder N T Rama Rao, who belonged to the Kamma community, visits the temple at Antarveedhi every year on his birthday; then Pavan Kalyan, belonging to the Kapu community and founder of the Janasena, too regularly visits temple at Draksharamam on his birthday. Fan clubs of respective heroes-turned-politicians create diktats for the general public by congesting the road.

It is a paradoxical feature of the Konaseema region, and particularly of Amalapuram, that the very word ‘reserved constituency’ of SCs gives hope that the social and economic position of Dalits will improve. This expectation emanates from the constitutional safeguards, i.e., political reservation for Dalits in the Parliament, state legislature and local bodies, enshrined under Articles 330 and 332. The numerical proportion of the Scheduled Caste community is higher (5, 17, 791 or 16.77%) in East Godavari and particularly in the Konaseema region compared to other regions of the district (Venkatswaralu 1990, 38).

Ironically, in reality, caste and religious oppression continue even now despite the Constitutional commitment to substantial justice and the policy of affirmative action. It is most starkly reflected in Dalits being denied their right to have a space for a burial ground. The Secretary of Praja Natya Mandali offered a piece of interesting information. Unlike other parts of East Godavari where the Reddys and the Kammas are dominant, in the Konaseema region, it is the other backward communities such as the Settybalijas and the Kapus that are politically and economically dominant. Another traditionally dominant community, the Rajus (Kshatriyas), are dominant in Amalapuram Mandal along with the Kapus and the Settybalijas. Secondly, the Konaseema region frequently witnesses caste conflict and violence between the two dominant groups: the Kapus (who are dominant in poultry business) and the Settybalijas (associated with coconut, toddy and palm). In terms of landholding, the share of the Settybalijas and Kapus is higher than that of the Dalits. Though some Dalits own land at present, other Dalits work as tillers in agricultural fields owned by big landlords. Moreover, wage rates in agriculture have not increased substantially due to the constant influx of wage labourers from Bihar, Bengal and Odisha. Therefore, even though it is a constituency reserved for Dalits, upper castes continue to have a hold over the economy and politics. During elections,

Dalit candidates are put up by these two dominant caste groups –by the Rajus in Amalapuram and by the Kapus and the Settybalijas in the rest of Konaseema. More strikingly, Dalits continue to be denied land for burial grounds for their kin. So it suffices to say at this juncture that while positional mobility in the caste structure has undoubtedly occurred through agricultural development, which is mainly seen in the case of backward castes, from the Kammas to the Kapus and the Settybalijas, it is not visible prominently among the Dalits except in some cases where their upward mobility happened through education and employment due to affirmative action.

The above socio-economic and political status of Dalits needs to be seen in the background while discussing the mobility of Dalit women. The economic prosperity of the region helped certain social groups to consolidate their economic gains and confirm their social and political power. However, it did not trickle down as much to the lower social groups, even though consumption, aspirations and new values have increased tremendously. This is illustrated in the way female international migration takes place in the region. Female migration to the Gulf countries took place not because of lack of employment opportunities in the district² but because of better employment opportunity being available in the Gulf countries. For instance, women reported that their earnings abroad as domestic workers were incomparably higher – five times their income from their work at home in agriculture or domestic work.³ Families encourage female emigration since it is now consciously regarded as a privileged opportunity to increase social mobility (Percot 2006).

III

Savings and Economic Prosperity Vs. Being Bereft of Marital and Kinship Relationships

The emigration of Dalit women happened at a critical juncture wherein the economic prospects of the Dalits had dwindled in the Konaseema region while the demand for female labour in the care market surged in the Gulf countries, triggered by the global oil economy boom of the 1970s (MacMurray 1999, Shah 2000, Asis 2007, Halabi 2007). The oil price hike made the Middle East countries extremely rich, and they utilised their suddenly-acquired wealth to develop their economies (Manhappulan 2008,1). There is an ongoing demand for immigrant workers, as is evident by the steady availability of old and new low-wage jobs that require little education. As succinctly explained by Varghese and Rajan (2011),

“the increasing commoditisation of domestic work, reproductive labour, is seen as part of a new global economy in which women have to work outside home, which was necessitated by the decline in men’s wages and resultant need for dual income in most families, apart from performing the traditionally assigned work inside the home (ibid:225).”

The study-respondents spoke about the huge labour demand in the informal service, i.e., as baby sitters or domestic servants or helpers. Most of the Gulf countries have a considerable population of domestic workers. In the UAE alone, there are 6, 00, 000 female domestic workers, most of them employed in individual households (Aneja 2007). This demand is precipitated by the fact that native women do not prefer to earn through domestic work as it is not considered productive. Hence, there is a huge demand for cheap labourers from outside as domestic help. Given the troubled nature of the economy and the precarious earnings of Dalits in the Konaseema region, the transnational migration of young (below the age of twenty-five) Dalit women, married or single, is a strategic decision. It is a calculated move as the economic returns outweigh the cost of not performing motherhood and conjugal duties for five to six years – a relatively short period. These women are mostly married women who leave behind their children back home. The characteristic feature of female migration from this region to the Gulf is that they migrate as ‘single women’, whether married or not.

Emigrating alone (without their spouse) becomes a conducive option as it helps the women save most of the money earned. One of the respondents said,

“If they earn Rs 10,000 – Rs 12,000 from work per month, they can save Rs 8,000 as they require to spend very little in the Gulf. It is so because they are provided with accommodation in the employer’s house and provided meals three times. Additionally, during festivals like Eid, when the employers’ relatives visit, they provide gifts as a custom. Employers too provide them with clothes during the festivals. So they do not have to spend on their own maintenance from their salary in the Gulf. But their job demands long hours of work- it starts from early morning till the late night. Although in their houses, machines are used, still it is a mammoth task. They wash clothes, cook and sometimes are abused by their employers’ family members if there is a delay in work. Sometimes these women are sexually oppressed in the absence of the females.”

Thus the savings are what motivated them to migrate, although the boundary between work and leisure is regularly transgressed with many domestic workers reporting long working hours. The secretary of Praja Natya Mandali crudely expressed that it is the economic incentives that make the Dalit families send away their women even though the everyday living conditions are very harsh and challenging, *“they treat them like slaves. For instance, they are not allowed to sit for even a few minutes.”* A shop keeper from Razole echoed this strict work policy, *“Working conditions and nature of work is as per the paper/ contract, they (owners and sponsors) make it clear from the beginning while signing the contract that they have to work in such and such manner; accordingly, they expect women to work all the time, cannot take a break except holidays.”*

Bose (2003) too discusses the utter helplessness of female migrant workers, especially in the domestic and informal sector in the Gulf countries. Domestic workers cannot keep their family members with them as the nature of the work does not permit it, and they cannot afford the maintenance of their family in the Gulf. In the case of nurses from Kerala, narratives of living alone have been cited as advantages in the sense that accommodation in the hospital hostel is provided free of charge to the emigrant nurse, generally for three years, allowing her to save as much as possible for her own dowry (Percot and Rajan 2007). Field informants, particularly relatives of the care workers, also narrated the presence of other kinds of insecurities, particularly sexual violence. One respondent narrated an account of one of his distant relatives in her thirties who had passed away recently,

“Five years back, I got exposed to the woman’s sordid episode when she intended to work in Dubai with the help of an agent through her family members. When I saw her, her family members expressed with sorrow that she lost her mind after agents duped her in the promise of getting work in Dubai. She hoped that she would get work in Dubai and therefore, she went to Mumbai along with the agent and gave him money with trust. But the agent left her in Mumbai without taking her to Dubai. So, being helpless, she was put into bars to dance. She was in Mumbai for some time, then someone brought her back to the village, from that time she lost her mind. When she returned from Mumbai, she was barely twenty-six years old but looked as if in her forties.”

Processes of Migration: Existence of Support Systems

Working abroad alone has its disadvantages, such as the workers have to leave behind their minor children in the care of relatives and the possibility of being duped by agents. However, the benefits in terms of savings outweigh all other concerns. In the initial period of female emigration in the 1990s, the emigrant population from the East Godavari district barely touched 5,000; this number had increased substantially by 2006.⁴ According to one of the key informants (an NGO worker in the HIV/AIDS project), the Konassema region alone (which includes the administrative units of Saketnatpally, Malkipuram, Antharveedi, Amalapuram and Razole) accounted for more than 30,000 female emigrants, whereas the other administrative units of the district – Rajahmundry, Kakinada, Ravulapalem and Tuni – accounted for 10,000⁵. The increase in numbers was also stimulated by the recent provision of direct air service from Hyderabad to the Gulf countries – earlier they had to take the route from Rajahmundry to Hyderabad, Hyderabad to Mumbai and Mumbai to the Gulf. This direct air service minimised the travel cost of the emigrants. The geographical position of Hyderabad located it within a four-hour radius from all major cities in West Asia (Rajeev 2008, 92).

Another crucial facet that needs elaboration here is that despite stories of exploitation, particularly of being misled by agents, there are accounts of Dalit women who could reach and work successfully in the Gulf countries, sent remittances and returned home safely. This was made possible through kin-networks. In many cases, it is the family/community members who were already working in the Gulf countries that invited or motivated other family members to migrate when they found an opportunity to work, which assured the new migrants. During the initial period of Gulf migration, it was the men who migrated for service-sector jobs such as painting, carpentry, plumbing, helpers in the automobile services, masonry, tailoring and construction⁶. This first generation of workers provided information to the women in their villages about the demand for domestic work. Through this social networking, women could migrate. This first generation of migrants, mostly men from a similar class and caste background, helped women in obtaining visas, provided initial shelter in their houses, informed the women in advance about the job requirements and helped them in getting it. A shop-keeper from Razole described this as a common scenario in Amalapuram, Saketnampally, Antharveedi and Razole, particularly in Dalit settlements, where every household had at least one or two people working in *Quetta* (implying Kuwait but actually meaning any of the Gulf countries). Another fascinating aspect is the experience of travelling to new/foreign/exotic cities/places like Dubai and Sharjah and seeing the lavish/intricate architecture of buildings and monuments, as some of the women reported. A divorcee in her thirties after returning to Rajahmundry from Dubai shared her experience of how she spent quality time on Sundays,

“I was working with a Punjabi family who was involved in the export and import business of garments. Sunday was generally a holiday for me in an absolute sense, and I caught up with my relatives and we visited new places. We planned, and sometimes I carried food or else we ate outside. Sometimes I made trips to various places with my employers’ family too.”

Significantly, the stigma associated with domestic work preempted savarna women from migration. So, it was mostly women from Dalit communities and a few backward communities that emigrated to the Gulf.⁷

Transnational migration among Dalit communities, Dalit women in particular, is not a new phenomenon in East Godavari – it can be traced back to colonial times, although the patterns of migration and countries of destination were different. Omvedt (2014) noted that economic conditions of the Malas improved in the early part of the twentieth century due more to their migration to Burma, than their market-oriented cultivation practices which mostly benefited Zamindari *ryots*. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Dalits, particularly the Malas, migrated as indentured labourers, working as landless labourers and being the actual physical producers on sugarcane plantations and rice fields, (Satyanarayana 2001; Kannabiran 1998, WS 53). During this period, migration took place to the plantation areas of Malaya,

Burma and Mauritius, whereas in recent times, the emigration pattern is heavily inclined towards the Middle East countries as domestic servants. Under colonialism, when a large number of male populations were uprooted and transported across land and sea to raise vast brigades of the workforce, their sexual and physical needs were provided for by the colonial state and masters. Thus women from the Indian subcontinent were transported to Fiji, Malaysia, South Africa and Surinam, West Indies and the Caribbean to sexually service the indentured male workforce from the subcontinent (Sangera 1997). Kannabiran (1998) mentions the migration of dancing girls and women already practising sex work to Trinidad during the British period. According to some historical accounts, the ships sailing from the mouths of the Godavari and the Krishna rivers were calling at the seaports of Kakinada and Koringa on their way to and from Burma and the Malay Peninsula (Ramsen 1979). Another factor that led to emigration from the region was the great famine of 1876 (Kumar 1992). Satyanarayana (2001) too discusses the migration of Dalit women's migration, including its caste and gender linkages:

“The coastal Andhra women in domestic service and prostitution invited other women from their villages and neighbouring areas to migration and offered to help find jobs in Burma. The port-towns like Cocanada (Kakinada) had also played a significant role in this type of migration.”

Additionally, legal policies of the destination countries were conducive for female emigrants. One such policy allowed guest workers for a limited period, with employers generally making short-term contracts. Discussions with female emigrant households indicated that this was suitable for them, keeping in mind their family responsibilities. Many women emigrants reported that they wanted to remain in the Gulf countries only for short periods in order to earn money and return as soon as they have made it.

Numerous other such factors worked in favour of women's emigration, like cheaper travel costs, better savings made by women and so on. Respondents reported that the travel cost for women was comparatively less than that for men.⁸ Hence women were able to arrange for the travel amount by pawning with individual money lenders and repaid the amount easily within a year. Another factor that reflects the gendered nature of the migration is that the men's chances of emigration to the Gulf are limited to skilled occupations, whereas for women, it is not. The following testimony of a respondent points to another aspect of the gender dimension:

“Women mostly migrate because they can easily adjust to the situation and can work in other people's houses. For men, it is a problem.”

Another reason is the cultural conception among families that women are known to save more money from their earnings than their male counterparts. This conception favoured

women members to be allowed to emigrate, work, save and send home money regularly. One of the respondents informed that the general trend among male emigrants who work in the construction industry is that they send less money and that too not regularly, as some of them maintain a second family in the Gulf while the others spend their salary in consuming alcohol. This becomes an important consideration when women and their family members weigh the pros and cons of their decision to emigrate.

IV

Economic and Social Mobility in Dalit Households Alongside Increase in HIV Incidence Rate

Economic citizenship of women⁹ has been underlined by feminists not only as crucial for their own emancipation but also serving as critical support for running the household and care for children, thereby reducing the household's risk to poverty and destitution (Agarwal 2008). In this case, too, Dalit women emigrated to get better earnings and spend productively for the household, particularly for the education of children and the construction of a house for the family. By analysing the patterns in Dalit women's migration, I intend to show how it brought them economic security and enhanced the social status of their household – construction of houses, purchase of vehicles and gold, owning of property, education of children, purchase of electronic gadgets, and spending on fancy clothing. Simultaneously, it remained fraught with other problems such as marital/conjugal discords at home. Deprived of conjugal relationships, the Dalit men started spending the remittances on entertainment activities – visiting sex workers and indulging in unsafe sex. Field observations indicated that in the absence of women in the households, husbands of many Dalit women visited sex workers and invested their migrant wives' remittances in gambling and consumption of alcohol, resulting in inadequate care of children in the families. It has also been reported that if women did not send their earnings in time, their husbands mortgaged household belongings in order to keep spending on entertainment activities uninterrupted. In this process, this region emerged as the new clientele base for sex workers from other parts of the region. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002) too pointed to this,

“This is the female underside of globalisation, whereby millions of Josephines from poor countries in the south migrate to do the “women’s work” of the north—work that affluent women are no longer able or willing to do. Many female migrants tell of unemployed husbands who drink or gamble their remittances away.” [ibid: 2]

According to one account of an NGO that focused on the prevention of HIV/AIDS in the region, the HIV prevalence rate in the Konaseema region among the Malas and the Madigas is 5%, well above the prevalence rate for the district which is 3%. Consequently, when the prevalence rate of HIV increased among the Dalits, the state, especially the APSACs (Andhra

Pradesh State AIDS control society) attributed it to women's migration to the Gulf under the pretext of working in the care economy. Concomitantly, the Department of Women's Development and Child Welfare too subscribed to this viewpoint.

Deconstruction of Statist Representation of Care-workers

It is through the trope of HIV/AIDS that the work of Dalit women in the care economy is brought under scrutiny by the state. However, if we deeply examine the everyday lifeworld of the Dalits, the reason for HIV infection is not women's migration but their men visiting sex workers and practising unsafe sex. It is through the narrative of HIV/AIDS (which is often linked to sexual relations) that the outmigration of single Dalit women, which is not necessarily connected with prostitution/trafficking and HIV infection, is implicated, ignoring the complicated pathway to HIV risk. , The Andhra Pradesh Department of Women Development and Child Welfare considers young Dalit women choosing to migrate for care-related work as instances of trafficking and a risk factor for spreading infection among the general public upon their return. An official from this Department reported that they organised sensitisation programmes and put up banners and posters in villages in order to create awareness about the possible risks associated with sending women to the Gulf countries.

A confluence of factors propelled Andhra Pradesh to castigate domestic servants working overseas as trafficked victims and the leading carriers of infection. In the Konaseema region, due to the non-existence of rights-based and community-led HIV prevention programmes (rights-based HIV programmes only cover the region from Kakinada to Kothapeta to Rajahmundry), target-based HIV prevention programmes became the dominant model. Target-based HIV prevention programmes uncritically accept anti-trafficking initiatives. Secondly, the persistence of the devadasi system and migration of the Kalavanthulus (performing communities) to West Asia was again seen by the state as a significant circuit of the trafficking of women. At this juncture, they messed it up with stories of Dalit women being sold to wealthy merchants in the Gulf by their recruiting agents who had lured them with promises of domestic-service jobs. Pattadath and Moors (2012) eloquently pointed out the dissonance between the academic and the public debates on gender and illegality on the one hand and the narratives of emigrant domestic workers from Kerala about their fears, problems and aspirations on the other. They lamented that academia projects women as unwilling, powerless victims of unscrupulous traffickers who intend to exploit them in the sex trade, whereas the narratives of domestic workers point out a diverse trajectory that blurs the boundaries between illegality and legality. Secondly, these images of migrant domestic workers as sexual victims are actively employed to push for state regulation of migration of poor women.

So, in the anti-trafficking discourse of HIV/AIDS, the association of female migration is extended from a violation of women's bodies to their being infecting agents. By blurring the

boundary between voluntary female migration and coercive forms of migration, it connoted (refer to Barthes' conceptual distinction between denotation and connotation) Dalit women's performance in the care economy as sexual oppression and vulnerability to sexual epidemics. Importation of HIV infection implied the spread of HIV/AIDS infection by Dalit women via international migration – purportedly, Dalit women being infected by their 'customers' as they worked in the Gulf countries, and later, upon their return, infecting their innocent husbands. Another crucial aspect that needs reiteration here is that the migration of single women for work has always been seen – even historically under indenture – through suspicious eyes, with morality crusaders trying to control it. Varghese and Rajan (2011), citing the work of Mohapatra (1995), noted that the stigma associated with individual women migrants as opposed to women migrating as part of families was shared by the nationalist discourse too; it viewed the indenture system as something that enslaved men, made women prostitutes and destroyed the family, a system that brought national shame to India. The state's curbing of the migration of Dalit women to the Gulf countries is evident when we analyse changes in the social profile of people who have migrated to the Gulf countries in recent times. My recent trip to this region revealed that unlike 2000-2006 (which was a peak period) when emigrating women outnumbered emigrating men in this region, by 2010 men emigrating for tailoring, carpentry, construction and car driving) outnumbered emigrating women. Also, it was mainly middle-aged women with grown-up children who were migrating for domestic work in the latter period.

In precise terms, the state functioned in the following manner. Instead of handling the HIV crisis sensitively – undertaking actual field study, controlling men's behaviour, broadcasting messages promoting safe sex – without trampling on the economic rights of Dalits women, the state invested/directed its energy in taking punitive measures meant to domesticate women. A worker-centric policy framework by the state based on micro-studies holds significance here on two counts. First, field insights indicated that long working hours without a break in the host countries is what comprised their main hassles, to handle which the women informally maintained their social interactions with their village networks in the host countries. From this angle, emigration regulation would be genuinely substantial if it attempted to bring reform in the women's working conditions in the host countries. In the absence of this, restricting single Dalit women from emigration not only becomes a hollow premise but also makes emigration governance merely a purificatory measure. Secondly, restriction on the emigration of Dalit women needs to be read in the context of the broader socio-economic order of the region where the dominant caste groups have a major share in properties, and where the female emigrants in Dalit households were gradually channelising their earnings into productive things like children's education and construction of houses. Restricting Dalit women from international migration – through moralistic agenda – means the state is complicit in maintaining caste status-quo. Thus the modes of HIV/AIDS discourse, particularly anti-trafficking initiatives, tried to impose restrictions on the labour of Dalit women under the guise of protecting and rehabilitating them. An analysis of the discourse and the micro-functioning of anti-

trafficking initiatives underlines its dissonance with the everyday realities and interests of subaltern women. In parallel, it deconstructs the official account of HIV/AIDS which portrayed the migration of Dalit women pejoratively in terms of globalising HIV/AIDS.

Discussion

Recent feminist scholarship indicates that care work needs to be located in stratified familialism, where the stigma of caste and devaluation of women's labour intersperse (Palriwala and Neetha 2011; Pattadath and Moors 2012). Studies on transnational migration of Dalit women brought forth how domestic work is seen as an "outlier", and how the migration of single women is casted as "indecent" – and a topic of local rumours – in the passport regime. Extending this argument, the present study attempted to capture how Dalit women's emigration was represented as trafficking and deemed to be the leading cause of the spread of HIV in the Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. An increase in the HIV infection rate amongst Dalits led the Andhra Pradesh state to declare emigration of Dalit women for domestic work as trafficking, citing it as the main source of spread of HIV infection among the general public. The study argues that the narrative of HIV/AIDS disregarded the complex pathways of HIV infection and wrongly implicated Dalit women in the spread of HIV, even though their labour was unrelated to prostitution/trafficking and HIV infection.

The paper contested the statist representation of emigration of Dalit women and not only provided an alternative account of a non-linear pathway of the spike in HIV infections in Konaseema but also threw light on the harmful effects of anti-trafficking rhetoric on subaltern women. By focusing on the processes of migration and the actual experiences of Dalit women, in terms of benefits as well as hardships and insecurities in the care economy, it substantiated that the cause of HIV infection cannot be attributed to the migration of Dalit women; in fact it is the unsafe practices of their men that led to the spike in infection. Instead of promoting safe-sex activities and commissioning a research study to trace the leading cause of infection and devising worker-centric policies, the statist discourse shifted to trafficking and policy frameworks geared towards restricting the mobility of Dalit women. I term this as the "lie of the state" and explicate the entanglement of the state in myth-making processes, misrepresenting consensual care work by family and individual woman as sexual slavery, and circulating the image of victimhood and involuntariness through the trope of health. This captures the point that the anti-trafficking ideology prevailing in the state narrative makes female migration the subject of suspicion and scrutiny. Moralistic and conservative ideologies were catapulted through the narrative of sexual health. This precisely explains the regulations brought in against the mobility of Dalit women using the language of controlling HIV/AIDS. As Shah (2006) rightly pointed out, transnationalisation means mobility of capital and labour, and while the phenomenon of relaxing regulations for international mobility of capital takes place easily, greater restrictions have come into effect over the migration of labour, particularly

women. This moralistic discourse has had a wide impact: it has trampled on the employment rights of Dalit women and inverted the economic and educational mobility of Dalit households.

Notes

1. Ronald Barthes explains that cultural signs, symbols and images have both denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meanings serve direct/apparent functions whereas connotative meanings create other hidden and wider fields of meaning. At times, these wider fields of meaning can act like myths, creating hidden meanings behind the apparent. Thus, systems of connotation can link ideological messages to more primary, denotative meanings (cited in Allan 2013).
2. In fact, the district attracts a large number of people from the poor regions of Andhra and Telengana who migrate for a few months because of the vast agricultural-production-related opportunities available. Added to this is the industry surrounding the shooting of Hindi, Tamil and Telugu movies and the growth of real estate projects which open up large scale construction works.
3. In East Godavari, a woman earns Rs. 800 per month from each individual house for domestic work. Generally domestic servants work in three-four households totalling Rs. 2400-Rs. 3200 per month. Similarly, in agriculture, women are paid a daily wage between Rs. 500 in agriculture and Rs. 700 for the construction work (in 2019). This wage rate was comparatively lower in the year 2006, i.e. Rs 150-Rs 170 for agriculture. But, there is no surety that they can get work throughout the year. In contrast, women are paid Rs. 15,000-Rs. 17,000 per month in the Gulf to work as a domestic help.
4. However, in the year 2007, there were reports about the large-scale return of female emigrants from the Gulf countries. This is primarily because most of them were deported since they entered these countries via the tourist visa using fake passports obtained through trafficking agents (Deccan Chronicle, 11 January 2007).
5. A group of Non- Resident Indians (NRIs) from United Arab Emirates estimated the number of immigrants from the state who overstayed across the Gulf as two to three lakhs (The Hindu 2008:7).
6. Informants report, in the year 2005, helpers were paid DHs 550 per month, whereas skilled workers like painters, carpenters, mason and tradesman were paid DHs 700 (Rs. 7,000) per month.
7. In the Konaseema region, the majority of the population belongs to the Scheduled Caste community. Among them Malas dominate numerically over the Madigas. That is why

one does not notice conflict among the two communities in East Godavari district whereas it is prevalent in other districts. Even some of the sub-divisions of the Konaseema region i.e. P. Gannavaram, Razole and Amalapuram, Mumidavaram, Allavram, Nagaram are always known to be SC reserved constituencies (Bhaskar 2008, 4; Rao 1980, 174)

8. The travel cost for men was approximately Rs. 70,000 whereas for women it was only Rs. 30,000. Since this travel cost is less, it becomes easier for women to repay the money borrowed from money lenders.
9. Economic citizenship brings up the question of gender parity in the economic domain which is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. This is implicit in Article 16 (1) which lays down that all citizens shall have equality of opportunity in matters relating to appointment under the State. Conceptually, this entails ensuring women's rights to gainful employment, to adequate rewards for their labour, to a share of resources benefits/ - rights in land resources, and decisions regarding development to which they are entitled as citizens of a country which guarantees to them equality in all spheres of life. These points were invoked by the Committee on the Status of Women in India that articulated women's employment in a comprehensive manner, stating that it is not only a social and economic issue, but an issue with very deep political and cultural dimensions.

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