


CORONA CRISIS

Gems from Debris

A Spectrum of Fresh Reflections

edited by
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Migrant Workers: Where is the Woman's Story?


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The term 'Migrant workers' is worryingly gender neutral. Thirty babies are born on the Shramik Special trains between 1st to 24th May (PTI 24 May), one toddler on a railway platform in Bihar is seen to be pulling at the shroud of his dead mother (27th May. *Indian Express*), wayside camps show huddles of women at cooking fires made of twigs. Elsewhere, a few weary women are visible in overwhelmingly male queues of people trudging along the highways of India. Surely there's a story here of the woman that is different from the male narrative. Does the woman not have her own tragic tale of being homeless, of being an appendage to a male head-of-household, of being a womb carrying the next generation—a nowhere person who follows the man who decides when and where to move?

As an academic with a special interest in women and gender issues, I want to probe the backstory to the searing images across the country, across caste and religion and other affiliations that we are seeing on media screens and newsprint. It's the long march home, an epical journey that I try to relate to the larger context of what we understand as "home". Some years ago, poet and academic Sukrita Paul Kumar and I had co-edited a book titled *Interpreting Home in South Asian Literature* (Pearson Longman, 2007) in which we had said, "Home is one word that holds meaning for everybody, albeit a changing one forever in search of a new vocabulary" (xvii), and almost presciently we had said,

“home may also, ironically, stand for homelessness” (xii). Each person in the crowd at bus stops and railway stations, each man or woman in the steady stream of people trudging along railway lines has a personal understanding of “home” and is headed in the direction of fulfilling an amorphous definition.

What is home for a migrant woman, I ask. According to a recent report, “Women moving after they get married form the bulk of Indian migrants (*Live Mint*, 28 May, 2020). For a majority of women in India, home is an illusion. When she is born, the girl child is considered to be under the guardianship of her parents until she is given away in marriage (*kanya daan*) to become a member of another household. The Hindu marriage ceremony has a custom by which the departing bride throws a fistful of rice over her left shoulder indicating that she is giving up the food and protection of her father’s home. At the same time, some rice is tied into her sari *pallav* indicating that her food and protection is expected from her husband’s home. Today, in seeing the women among the migrant workers carrying bundles on their head and children in their arms, we witness the real-life implications of such rituals of being beholden to decisions made by men. I wonder if the migrant women were ever asked if they wished to leave their place in Bihar or Jharkhand or UP in the first instance and to settle for a crowded shanti in a sprawling, heartless metropolis such as Mumbai or Delhi. I further wonder whether such women were asked in the last three months of lockdown if they and the young ones were ready to trudge home 300 kms, or many more in order to reach what the male migrants conceived as “home”. The poignant refrain of wanting to return to one’s village, larger family and community is entirely understandable but how the actual reception of the returnees will pan out remains to be seen. For the woman, let us remember, this is her spousal home and not her natal one, but can she even make these distinctions when customarily the young woman never belonged anywhere. In the city she probably had an income as a labourer, a semi-skilled worker or a domestic help; in the village she returns as a dependent.

The only home for a woman seems to be her body. Not that she is in complete control of its sexual and reproductive functions. Nevertheless, it is her flesh and blood that nurtures the foetus and the birthing process is entirely contained within her body. In the period of pregnancy the transaction between the mother and her unborn child is both secret and sacred. However, the moment the child is born and its gender is known, patriarchy imposes desirability on the son and likely neglect of the daughter. The age-old cycle of parents being custodians of a girl child to be given away in marriage starts all over again.

When a woman gives birth on a Shramik special train or on the street, this mystic moment, this private terrain is rudely violated by the public eye. Here are some vignettes: "A migrant worker Shakuntala risked walking a distance of 1,000 kms—from Nashik to Satna, in the ninth month of her pregnancy. The woman gave birth to the baby on the roadside, rested for an hour and continued the journey with her new-born." (May 13, 2020 (<https://www.shethepeople.tv/>)). "Pooja Devi, who was with her husband and family, complained of labour pain after which a co-passenger tweeted to the Railways of her condition, seeking help. The train was then halted at Ratlam railway station and railway doctor Ankita Mehta attended to her at the railway station and helped her deliver the baby. (*Mumbai Mirror*, Jun 4, 2020). These accounts reflect conditions of homelessness and helplessness and one is glad that institutional help is available. But let us realise that Shakuntala or Pooja had no choice in this matter and were compelled by circumstances to deliver in public. This is not the story of a gender neutral experience, it is intensely feminine.

Theoretically we have many formulations about home and migrancy. Among others, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has formulated that home refers to "familiar, safe, protected boundaries" whereas "not being home" is the realization that home is an "illusion" (*Interpreting Home*, ix), and Salman Rushdie has written about "*Imaginary Homelands*." For the migrant workers attempting to reconnect to many parts of India, compelled by the Covid-19 conditions, will the return bring a sense of belonging or un-belonging, fulfilment or disillusionment?

Already, there are stories about migrants being disallowed to enter villages for fear of contamination, others about penurious conditions making larger households unviable in a village. The Government of India says, "When a person is enumerated in census at a different place than his/her place of birth, she/he is considered a migrant. This may be due to marriage, which is the most common reason for migration among females—or for work, what is the case as generally among males, etc." (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India). The married, migrant woman has already made several journeys. How many more miles to go before she finds her "home", her identity?



*What do we live for if not to make life less difficult
for one another?*

—George Eliot

*The self-same sun that shines upon his court,
Hides not his visage from our cottage,
But Looks on alike.*

—Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*
(4.4.436-38)

*Some one asked Leander Paes, the legendary Indian Tennis ace,
what he did not have. Paes said, "a magic wand to eradicate
poverty."*

—*The Hindu*, June 9, p.14

No woman is anybody's wife, every woman is a woman.

—Osho

