

## Rural - Urban Linkages in South Asia: Contemporary Themes and Policy Directions<sup>1</sup>

Shelley Feldman  
Department of Rural Sociology  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853

### 1. Framing the changing context

Prior to the 1970s, urban immigrants represented an insignificant proportion of the total population of South Asia. They accounted for less than 20 percent of each country's total population with permanent migrants comprising only a small proportion of this total. Moreover, until this time, migration was primarily seasonal and comprised of individual males from extended, agriculturally-based, rural families who sought non-agricultural, temporary urban employment to sustain family subsistence. Today, by contrast, dramatic increases in permanent migration accompany sustained overall urban population growth rates across the region. An analysis of a panel of migrant households in Bangladesh, for example, reveals that urban migration is a post 1990 phenomenon, with fully 72% of all migrant households having moved since that time and 90% having migrated since 1985. Divisional headquarters, including Dhaka City, account for more than half of the internal migrants, and the remainder have moved to the nearest thana or district headquarters (Zillur Rahman 1996). Lipton's analysis of Indian data notes a similar dispersion of migrants among different state capitals.

Compared to the period prior to the 1970s, today's urban migrants are more demographically diverse and engage in a wider array of urban activities, social networks, and institutional forms of urban community than their earlier counterparts. Most comprise nuclear, rather than extended, families, and they are both more educated and more affluent than the poorest in their home areas. Finally, many have prior social ties or kin connections in their new urban residences and they possess sufficient resources to enable them to incur the costs and risks of migration.

These changes in migration patterns suggest new ways to theorize population mobility and to conceptualize empirical studies that will enable us to understand why people move, the choices migrants make regarding employment, habitat, and community, the processes that shape rural and urban social relations, and the ways in which these spatial locations and forms of community shape lives and livelihoods. Such changes challenge assumptions about the relatively homogeneous categorization of what are conventionally referred to as rural and urban spaces and to households as male or female headed nucleated units, to migration as a solitary act to be examined once migrants arrive at their new place of residence, and to migration as a response to primarily proximate, locally based economic realignments. These challenges call upon us to 1) recognize the complex relationships between rural and urban spaces and between different household forms, 2) explore the social and relational processes of migration and migration decision-making that engage both households and communities, and 3) situate the migration experience within a global context of labor market and industrial restructuring that reallocates resources out of agriculture and into urban development, assumes social mobility is enhanced with more urbane social experiences, and generally equates urban population movements with modernity and modernization. Taking on these challenges requires that we recast how we interpret and plan for processes of both internal and international patterns and relations of migration and the issues raised by the processes of labor

market restructuring, urbanization, industrialization, and environmental change that accompany such population movements.

## 2. **Prior analytic frameworks**

Much of the early literature on migration focused on seasonal or temporary, rather than on permanent migrants. Focused as well on individuals rather than households, these analyses examined the relationship between migration and rural or urban change. In general they viewed migration as an outcome or effect, giving only limited attention to the processes by which migration is enabled, to the specific ways in which the loss of rural labor affects agricultural capacity and rural infrastructural needs, and to the effects of increases in household incomes for consumption or investment. In this literature, rural households are understood to be comprised primarily of extended, inter-generational families with agriculture, coupled with off-farm rural employment, a predominant feature of the income-earning opportunities of these temporary or circular migrants. Moreover, the significance of non-farm employment receives only scant attention, as does the complex array of rural industries and micro-enterprises, since the rural economy is generally equated with the agricultural sector. Thus, “push factors” focused on landholding comprise the primary impetus for migration out of rural areas. Policy discussions based on such assumptions addressed issues associated with changes brought about by shifting land holding patterns and agricultural opportunities rather than on a complex understanding of rural productive activities.

The early literature on migrant urban communities emphasized the conditions and employment patterns of squatter residents who have emerged on the urban landscape. Only recently has attention shifted to the relations that enable or constrain patterns of migration (particularly in the area of social capital) or to the varied demographic profiles of migrants and their decision-making processes. In South Asia, the early profile of migrants was primarily of males who leave temporarily or seasonally in search of work for subsistence. Movement was portrayed either as from one rural area to another for agricultural employment, or as temporary migration to a town or urban area to secure wages during the slack season. Few individual women were assumed to migrate, and few families were found to seek permanent settlement in an urban community. While the emerging literature has indeed addressed a broader set of issues, I suggest that there is still some usefulness in critically reexamining this early literature with a concern for the following broad questions:

A. What can we learn from the “urban bias thesis” which highlights urban infrastructural investments over rural development expenditures as a key determinant or “pull factor” of urban migration? How does this investment profile help to explain declining agricultural productivity for small, family farms that are assumed to contribute to individual and family decisions to migration?

B. What can we learn from viewing migration as both an income and an employment diversification strategy as well as a hedge against poverty?

C. How might an appreciation of the failure of initiatives for rural industrialization contribute to understanding the conditions under which people chose to migrate and the investment strategies that characterize rural diversification and growth?

D. What assumptions underlie interpretations of rural employment and the configuration of a gender and generational mix of economic activities in the formal and informal economies, as wage or in-kind exchanges, and as production for consumption as well as exchange? How have these assumptions limited our analyses of the factors shaping migration decisions and the profile of those who chose to migrate?

E. How have patterns of urbanization and our understanding of urban places shifted over time to appreciate the intersections of peri-urban and urban agriculture as well as a complex mix of

industrial and service sector employment, formal and informal activities, and a wide variety of infrastructural needs and constraints to production, consumption and everyday subsistence? How, in short, do redefinitions of rural and urban spaces alter the distinctions previously used to constitute rural and urban differences?

F. How have populations from different spatial locations and labor pools constituted as well as responded to processes of economic liberalization that have been accompanied by dramatic policy realignments in agriculture, industry and labor markets? How have they shaped patterns of urbanization and industrialization and provided a link between migration and development and between urbanization and development?

An exploration of these questions opens to scrutiny the question of whether or not rural to urban migration is the most significant population movement in the region and help to identify its variation across the SAARC countries. Such an exploration would also help to identify other types of population movements and suggest policy initiatives that can better reflect the needs of individuals, families, communities, and a national agenda for employment generation and industrial growth.

### III. **Methodological traditions**

What sources of data exist on internal migration, what are its limitations, and how can we direct attention to unanswered questions?

As many demographers have recently noted, analyses of migration are far less developed and sophisticated than those exploring fertility and mortality in all regions of the Third World. Thus, population redistribution and the kinds of research strategies that are required to explore and interpret population movements remain rather ill-formed. As we seek documentation of and/or answers to the questions we raise today, we need to attend to our methods of data collection, the information available on comparative groups, especially non-migrant households, and the assumptions we use to link contemporary population movements with economic policy initiatives and urban/industrial growth and rural development strategies.

#### A. Macro-analyses

Macro-studies of migration usually focus on broad processes of population change based on aggregate census data. Gross indicators suggest that rural-rural migration is predominant in India; urban to urban migration predominates in Pakistan, and there is growing rural to urban migration in much of the region. Todaro has argued that income disparities between the two sectors determine rural-urban migration with expected gains in income explaining the propensity of males to migrate. The argument underlying much of the macro-level research is that rural to rural migration shifts to rural - urban and then urban - urban movement as a country modernizes - the "hypothesis of the mobility transition."

But, these broad findings generally fail to explain circulatory and temporary migration processes, and they leave unexplored the relationship between the rural communities left and the receiving urban migrant communities. Such studies also give only scant attention to the expanded role of informal economic activities in both rural and urban areas that are likely to limit wage differentials between spatial domains. They also challenge the assumption that differential wage rates are a primary factor encouraging individuals to migrate.

#### B. Micro-studies

Most micro-studies are of individuals at the place of migration with no significant attention paid to the processes which led to migration or the comparisons to be drawn between migrants and

non-migrants. The absence of comparative data makes it difficult to interpret the bipolar results that often characterize profiles of migrants - those with few resources who use migration as a last resort to earn subsistence wages, and those able to diversify income sources and build opportunities for upward mobility. Data exists on the following characteristics:

### 1. Profile of individual migrants

What different types of people migrant [focus attention on gender, generation, and economic or household status differences that constitute the migrant community]? Why do they migrate and what are the consequences of their change in residence for them as individuals, members of households, their place of origin and their new urban location, as well as for the country as a whole? What specifically might it suggest for emergent relationships between agricultural productive capacity, industrial/ and/or service sector employment, and micro-enterprise and informal sector policies?

#### a. Demographic indicators

To the extent that gender has been taken into account, much of the research makes broad generalizations about the differences between male and female migrants, with marriage assumed to be the primary inducement for women while men move to increase incomes. Only recently have women been seen as independent actors but this literature often remains tied to discussions of export garment manufacturing and the demand for cheap, female labor. Gender differences in movement and decision-making need to be better understood as they are linked to an increasing demand for wage employment, the changing configuration of the labor market, credit opportunities, and other resource endowments, and the reconfiguration of employment as spatially located across each country in the region.

#### b. Employment

With the increase in informal employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas, the assumption that wage differentials induce migration needs more detailed attention, especially the assumption that urban migrants depress urban wage rates. Also important to explore is the relationship between rural expansion and the growth of informal work and micro-enterprise development which, some argue, can mediate the rapid increase in urban populations and contribute to the increased demand for services among rural dwellers. This is particularly likely as infrastructural capacities between regions become more similar.

#### c. Landholding

Evidence about the importance of rural infrastructural development as impeding or enhancing migration decisions is mixed; in some cases, those with access to irrigation and other agricultural resources have the capacity to move but choose to remain in agriculture, or they may choose to diversify their income earning opportunities through migration. Others, particularly those without such resources may choose to migrate in order to secure alternative, more profitable sources of livelihood or to take advantage of increased rural credit opportunities to develop new income earning alternatives. How and why do these differences emerge? With the changing opportunity structure of rural communities, we need to better explain the range of conditions that enable or impede migration for particular clienteles as these conditions characterize agricultural production per se and its attendant labor and income earning opportunities. As well, it is important to understand how the shift to increasingly export oriented agriculture and/or the changing profitability of agriculture, as distinguished from family farming or land-holding alters migration decisions? Explanations of the relationship between agricultural productive capacity and migration decisions are critical in order to establish appropriate and sustainable rural development policies with regard to questions about land reform, infrastructural development, and employment generation.

## 2. Descriptions of urban slum and squatter communities

Studies of urban slum communities are increasingly focused on migration as a poverty reducing strategy that has been successful, at least in the case of Dhaka. Findings, however, remain mixed, particularly regarding studies of urban nutrition, the number of working household members required to sustain an urban family, and the difficulty of children remaining in school and securing either academic or vocational training. While there is some indication that school attendance is higher among urban dwellers than it is among their rural counterparts, findings are inconclusive about the reasons for this increase and its relationship to future urban employment.

In general, micro-level data on migrants has been critical for recognizing the heterogeneity of migrant populations and challenging the use of overgeneralized assumptions about the profile of those who migrate. This has led to a shift in the view of urban migrants as predominantly poor to an appreciation of a more bipolar distribution of migrant populations. This, in turn, has led to an understanding of migration not only as a poverty reducing strategy but one of economic diversification, upward mobility efforts, and the desire among migrants for personal growth, autonomy, and a more urbane social life. Recognizing a more complex decision-making process has been especially critical in the contributions made by gender studies that recognize that women, even in Muslim societies, do not only migrate in response to marriage and it is useful for rethinking the significance of individualism as this reshapes how migrants as well as researcher understand households and communities..

## IV. **Contemporary conceptual practices**

In the fields of economics and political science as well as in anthropology, sociology, and geography during the 1980s and 1990s, new and imaginative ways of conceptualizing and interpreting social phenomenon and social processes have emerged with post-modern, feminist, and postcolonial theory. These academic challenges recognize the need to pay greater attention to the interface between micro and macro analyses which can view migration as a social practice that is created and constituted by particular institutional reforms. Below I identify a series of insights that are important to include in research on changing patterns of migration and in the development of imaginative policy alternatives that contribute to sustaining both urban and rural lives and livelihoods, inform new institutional initiatives, and link broad questions about infrastructural reorganization to new relations of global exchange.

### A. Spatial notions and the geographical frame as a tool of analyses

Research by social geographers has opened up questions about community making, networks and associational ties and the ways in which migrants reproduce communities from the rural to the urban context. Relay migration between communities of kin and the role of social networks or social capital in facilitating housing, employment and other connections to urban resources has been an important area of research that helps to decompose the neat rural - urban dichotomy. This, in turn, provides a more complex and heterogeneous image of migration that can contribute to the development of policy guidelines that address the institutional needs of a diverse set of recent migrants. Questions related to sanitation, water, housing, educational, and other infrastructural needs addressed by urban planners are additional areas of focus for mediating the costs of rapid urban growth and require greater attention at the level of policy planning and implementation. Careful documentation of the needs and interests of recent as well as long-term migrants can contribute to this urban planning agenda.

### B. Informal sector research

Research on informal work and networks led to a view of migrants as essentially poor and un-or under-educated and thus unable to secure long-term, secure employment. This has begun to change as informal sector research has become a centerpiece of economic mobility studies or a panacea for job creation. But, there is still a tendency to equate informal work with low-wage, insecure income earning opportunities that fill the spaces between a rapidly growing and infrastructurally weak urban sector (garbage pickers in Cairo), and the dramatic increases in the demands for services -- water, sanitation, transport, bazaars -- of a rapidly increasing urban population. How can these emergent constituencies shape new forms of collective action is an important area for further analyses.

#### C. Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches.

The WID approach to economic change ushered in a focus on adding women into the development paradigm and led to greater awareness of the increasing numbers of women either already employed or in income producing or income conserving economic activities. The shift to a GAD approach built on the notion that women were part of the development process and that the activities in which they engaged were central to forms of economic growth and/or structural changes in the political economy. Both forms of analyses led to greater awareness that an increasing demand for household income meant a growing and more diversified set of actors engaged in wage activities that includes both women and children. Further, opening up the "black-box" of the household has led to an appreciation of intra-household bargaining over decisions and resources, recognition that a diverse number of household members contribute to the household resource base through wages, non-wage income, and in-kind production, and identified the decline in the number of households typified by a male family wage. Such research has led as well to recognizing the intersection of micro- and macro analyses which sought to draw linkages between the increased demand for women workers -- the feminization of the global labor force -- and the declining wages of individual income earners -- the feminization of wage employment. These concerns are essential for understanding the growing number of women migrants as well as the role of women in migration decisions and in the construction of the new urban labor force.

#### D. Network analyses/Social Capital

Network analyses, perhaps the newest framework in migration literature, draws attention to the associational ties and recruitment opportunities that enable people to move, the social and human capital resources that characterize individuals and their communities and which likely enhance access to housing and employment as well as connections in both the leaving and receiving communities. Both the extensiveness and the density of networks and urban relations have become crucial indicators of the process of migration across site and people. How do people and resources flow between migratory sites? What kinds of continuity and discontinuity shape information and resource flows between sites? What kinds kin and familial networks facilitate or hinder mobility? What are the social costs of such exchanges, and how are these borne in creating communities and informing local politics.

#### E. Research on remittances and other financial flows across national or regional borders

A rapidly growing area of research within the field of migration is that on remittances. Initially focused on international migration and the role of foreign exchange earnings for individual households, it is clear that migration decisions are characterized primarily by the desire to increase family or individual incomes. As families make decisions to send a member to an urban center for employment, there are expectations that both the costs of initiating the migration and the benefits to be garnered will accrue to the family, whether initially or over a longer duration. At this juncture, little information exists on remittance income for internal migrants with regard to: How is remittance income used? Does it contribute to sustaining or expanding agricultural and other rural productive activities? Do remittance incomes sustain rural levels of survival or create increased opportunities

consumption, or savings and investment? What new expenditure patterns emerge with the availability of remittance income, and how does this facilitate or disrupt patterns of economic growth, access to institutional resources such as education and health care, or opportunities for individual autonomy?

Is the flow of resources always from the new migrant to the home of origin? Or, given the size of initial wages for some low-skilled workers, how do remittance patterns change over the course of an individual's migration history and across generations of migrants? What new patterns of social obligation and exchange relations emerge between the family in the leaving and receiving migration site? How, for example, do first generation low wage migrants without familial and kin resources to provide sources of housing or other amenities secure these resources upon entry into the new urban space?

#### F. Other resource flows

With the movement of people across borders, capital and labor flows are accompanied by new sources of information and ideas. These ideas include new valuations of family and population size which affect fertility decisions, as well as demands for health care, a view of education as a tool for upward mobility, and perhaps less well addressed in the literature, the flow of new political alliances and obligations generated by particular kin exchanges. The demand for increasing resources with exposure to new opportunity structures also needs to be explored as the tension between new interests and limited opportunity expand the numbers of people migrating while simultaneously yielding greater disaffection for rural life and/or dissatisfaction with the costs of migration in the new location. This, in turn, may increase social tensions and competition for scarce resources as well as generate new social and political alliances among new migrants and between migrant communities. For instance, what is the relationship between new political alliances and new values - both progressive and more traditional - among recent and long-term migrants? How does this recast relations within civil society and for forms of governance and participation among migrants and between migrant and long-term dwellers? How might this affect struggles over resources for urban investment and institution-building? What new ideas shape the interests and political and social alliances formed in new urban settings? At present there is far too little data on these themes and it is clear that these kinds of issues raise difficult questions for those developing research design strategies as answers may depend on expensive, micro-studies that require researchers to gather data for both the leaving and receiving communities and from migrants and non-migrants over time.

### 5. **The household as a theoretical and empirical category**

Significant achievements in the study of families, households and other productive units have also contributed to how we understand and interpret processes of migration. In economics and sociology, in particular, research challenging the universality of the family as a nuclear productive unit characterized by the male wage earner, with the male household head as the sole decision-maker, has been a major turning point in theorizations and empirical analyses of both individual and family/household behavior. There is much to be applauded in this area of research and policy formation which can be viewed broadly among the following three thematic interventions:

- A. Bargaining households
- B. Intra-household labor relations
- C. Family/household decision-making

### 6. **The migrant - poverty interface**

This important interface is characterized by a number of compelling hypotheses which may be useful for further study:

- A. Migration increases household economic survival - a poverty reduction strategy,
- B. Migration expands a household's resource base -- an income and employment diversification strategy,
- C. The poorest households do not have the resources to facilitate migration. Thus, while migration can mediate the costs of poverty, it is a strategy usually more accessible to those with sufficient resources to purchase access/recruitment, create and sustain social networks, and have education and other skills to secure "formal sector" employment (here parallels might be drawn with research on informal credit and other rural infrastructural programs which suggest that the poorest still do not have access to new rural resources).
- D. Selectivity bias - the poorest of the poor cannot afford to migrate

What is absolutely essential in order to address many of these questions is a comparative data base of migrant and non-migrant households. In communities with similar amenities, why do some households send members to find urban employment or leave as a complete family in search of more lucrative employment or for better access to particular resources, such as education? Why do other families choose to stay in their home of origin? What kinds of resources do they mobilize? How are these families differently integrated into rural employment and production networks? How do they differentially depend on the availability of institutional resources and facilities in the place of origin and how are their collective interests organized? What kinds of rural, including but not limited to agriculture, policies shape these patterned differences, and what changes would sustain rural communities or enhance patterns of exit? What perceptions of economic growth and modernity contribute to how families negotiate migration as a vehicle for employment and mobility as well as for individual autonomy, political participation, and new relations in civil society?