

Seventh Critical Studies Conference November 2022

Migrant Asias Refugees, Statelessness & Migrant Labour Regimes

17-19 November 2022

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

Call for Proposals

Asia, with its multiple border regimes, colonial histories, contestations and conflicts, development trajectories, and displacement, is a rich and complex terrain where commodities, resources, ideas, and people are always on the move. As a key region of migrant origin, transit, and destination, Asia offers a varied and complex account of multiple mobilities that sometimes unfold simultaneously. What motivates Asians to migrate, how do they organize their move and how are these migrants of differing hues “managed” or “cared for”? Can a migration lens offer us newer insights into what constitutes “Asia” as a region and whether it is more appropriate to study “Asias” instead of as “Asia”?

In recent times there have been renewed attempts to reconceptualize Asia as a dynamic yet historically interconnected geographical and cultural formation. The impulses behind these attempts are varied, ranging from challenging the pervasive epistemic Eurocentricity to the global domination of western markets or even the argument that cultural and philosophical resonances and continuities exist within the region. Some scholars have also argued for adopting the ‘Inter-Asian’ or ‘Asia as a Method’ lens, seeing it as a de-imperialising and decolonising project, while others have critiqued the revivalist and imperialist tendencies inherent in these projects.

Any “Asian” history of migration, like in other regions, is influenced by factors as varied as regional histories of migration, colonial conquests, structural and environmental considerations as well as the politics of statecraft that often force people to move. Thus, ethnic conflicts, clash of religious ideologies, ethnolinguistic representation in electoral democracy, neo-colonialism and the fight for democracy etc. over the last several decades within the larger Asian continent have “made” refugees of various forms and kinds, not all of whom would sit easily within the classic definition of a “refugee” as accepted under international refugee law. The Arab-Israeli conflict rendered Palestinians permanent refugees. The civil war in Syria in 2011 and the consequent displacement of Syrians within the country and outside, the more recent withdrawal of American military from Afghanistan in August 2021, the arrests and detention of several human rights activists in Hong Kong in 2020, and the Rohingyas in Burma who are constantly looking for a safe haven, are just some examples of the conflicts in the region and their fallouts. Partitioning of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to a mass exodus of people across what eventually became India and Pakistan, followed by the Liberation War of 1971 that led to the formation of the Bangladesh state. These histories of displacement have a bearing on citizenship laws, specially through ‘cut off’ timelines about the movement of people across borders to determine citizenship. With securitisation of borders, and stricter border policing arrangements (both formal and informal) between States, reports of for instance, of the Rohingya and Tamil refugees taking to high seas, intercepted and deported from the shores of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, or Australia or Afghan migrants living in transit camps (across the world) shows how existing legal regimes fail to protect forced migrants.

What also makes studies on Asian migration complex is the experience of uneven development across the region and state of the economy. It is well known that uneven development has contributed to the gendered nature of migration – specially, in the “care economy”. “Transnational” domestic workers as caregivers and other forms of commodification of intimate labour (and especially mail-order marriages or participation of poor women in transnational reproductive labour) open up the question of feminisation of labour. If on the one hand therefore, migration is propelled by the “care” economy,

on the other hand, it would be useful to comprehend how “refugees”, for instance, the Afghans in Iran, Tibetans in India, and Bhutanese in resettlement countries, try various methods to negotiate a life of dignity and worth. Their contribution to national and regional economies, often calculated only in terms of remittance, needs to be analyzed substantively.

“Migrant Asias” will remain incomplete without a robust and critical engagement with Asia’s connectedness with other continents – especially Africa. Scholars working in the Indian Ocean region have shown us the significance of this connectedness in terms of the exchange of material objects and ideas. Yet, there needs to be a deeper engagement with politics of racism intertwined with casteism, for instance, in the case of bonded labour from South Asia working in European plantations in Africa or Australasia. How do these experiences of forced labour complicate our reading of caste, race and gender?

In this backdrop of the long and complex history of Asian migration and migration within Asia, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group is organizing its Seventh Critical Studies Conference on “Migrant Asias” to explore what it means to be a “migrant” or a “refugee” in Asia today. Can the story of migrants or refugees or the stateless help better comprehend totalitarian regimes in the making and critically understand the status of democracy in Asia? How have the attempts to reconceptualize Asia as a dynamic yet historically interconnected geographical and cultural formation stretching from the Middle East in the West to East Asia in the East, and incorporating all the regions in between including South Asia, South-East Asia, and Eurasia, added to the scholarship on migration studies?

The Conference, scheduled for 17-19 November, 2022, aims to bring together scholars, academics and activists working on the theme of “Migrant Asias” covering the following illustrative areas of scholarship:

1. "Histories: Refugees, Maritime Migration, Indentureship, Lascars".
2. Asia –African connections: Forced labour and Infrastructure.
3. Education and Skill: Immigration, Remittance and the Asian migration.
4. Cinematic and literary representation of migrant Asia.
5. “Asian Mobilities”: Bodies, Ideas and artifacts on the move.
6. Climate migrants: Asias and sustainability.
7. “Seeing Like the State and Statelessness”: Bordering the postcolonial policing networks, networked borders, and stateless existence.
8. Policing sexualities and intimacies in Migrant Asias.
9. Humanitarian aid politics in Asian migration.

We invite interested individuals to send in their abstracts (within 500 words) to forcedmigrationdesk@mcrgh.ac.in and subhashree@mcrgh.ac.in no later than 30 April 2022. All abstracts should include your name, affiliation, institutional affiliation (if applicable). Please mark your mails as - ‘Abstract Critical Studies Conference 2022’. Selection of abstracts shall be completed by 31 May 2022 and those whose abstracts are selected will be required to send in their full papers (Word limit: 6000 words) no later than 15 July, 2022.

Organising Committee: Dr Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, Dr Ishita Dey, Mr Sabir Ahamed, Adv. Sahana Basavapatna, Dr. Samata Biswas and Dr. Sanam Roohi