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Retaining, Changing, and Surrendering Hegemonic Masculinities

South Asian Migrant Men and the Impacts of Migration on Masculinities

Transatlantic migration from South Asia is a long, arduous, and expensive journey but each year many South Asians risk their lives to reach the supposed dreamland of the United States. A large majority of the South Asians that I met during our research in 2018 in Costa Rica were men, prompting a focus on how men experienced long-distance migration.

The migrants, hailing from Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, were interviewed right after they had crossed the Darién Gap and arrived in the military camps in Panama. Most had just overcome the most physically demanding part of the journey and had been subjected to punishing conditions for a matter of weeks (months for some people).

Before getting into the main subject matter I will shed some light on the kind of masculinity I intend to analyze. I will then explain why South Asian migrants have been grouped together and will finally discuss the impact of transnational migration on their sense of masculinity.

Defining Masculinity

Matthew Gutmann explains that, “there are four distinct ways that anthropologists define and use the concept of masculinity and the related notions of male-identity, manhood, manliness and men’s roles.”¹ Many academicians have replaced the sex-role theory and categorical models of patriarchy with a concept known as “hegemonic masculinity” in order to analyze multiple masculinities in men. Connell

¹ M. C. Gutmann, 1996, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 386.

and Messerschmidt define hegemonic masculinity as things done by men as opposed to a set of role expectations or an identity that perpetuates men's dominance over women.² A considerable body of research shows that such masculinities are not simply different but also subject to change. In this essay I refer to hegemonic masculinity when I use the term "masculinity."

South Asian Masculinity

South Asia comprises a wide panorama of religions, languages, races, castes, ethnicities, and a multitude of other distinct identity lines. However, for purposes of studies of migration, the region has been treated as a bloc because of similar lifestyle ethics and a common colonial history.³ Transatlantic journeys of South Asian migrants tend to have many commonalities. They share smugglers who group them together during various legs of the journey, and they bond over an affinity for South Asian food, music, and culture while communicating through similar languages.

Even though South Asian masculinity is largely shaped by common social norms and structures, the enormous multiplicities of religion, caste, tribe and ethnicity results in vastly diverse ideas of masculinity. The men I interviewed belonged to different castes, ethnicities, and religions for whom the aspects of masculinities might have varied significantly. For this essay, I have grouped them into a collective that represents a regional notion of masculinity.

Masculinity in Migration

In response to the difficult journeys of forced migration, men exhibit diverse masculine characteristics. In the case of Mexican men, Chad Broughton describes three fluid masculine traits — traditionalist, adventurer, and breadwinner. To Broughton's three traits, I have added a fourth to better describe South Asian men: traditionalist, adventurer, breadwinner, and emotional-inexpressive. I then examine the forms of masculinities these migrants have

retained, which ones they altered to adjust to their changing surroundings, and which they eliminated. Migrant men display a hybrid of masculine traits. My aim is not to bracket the thirteen respondents we interviewed into a single idea of masculinity but to study the fluidity and resilience observed in certain aspects of their identity.

Traditionalist

Traditionalist masculine views prioritize commitment to family, hometown, and country over other allegiances.⁴ Traditionalists hold on to their native identity and resist any change that may run contrary to their longstanding beliefs and moral values.

Based on my interviews with thirteen South Asian migrant men and the observations I made in the CATEMs (temporary migrant shelters overseen by the Costa Rican government) and the hotels that they stayed in, I did not find many exhibiting resilient traditional masculine identities. On the contrary, in the south CATEM, I found Nepali men deeply engaged in cooking⁵ for fellow migrants (most from South Asia but some from Africa as well) where the sole Nepali woman in the group was not cooking but conversing with other migrants. However, though pleased to prepare food for all, some did express their disdain for Indians. They were proud of their own traits that ran toward self-discipline and obedience and expressed this as their "Nepaliness."

In the northern part of Costa Rica close to the Nicaraguan border, I visited a hotel where Nepali migrants had been stuck for a few days because of problems in receiving money transfers from relatives. During one of these visits, men and women were hand-washing their clothes. In an informal conversation, the two women vehemently voiced their displeasure towards the Nepali men who had left behind accompanying Nepali women in the Darién Gap, a 66 mile stretch of mountains, swamp, and forest that divides Central and South America. When the women slowed, the men walked past

2 R. W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, 2005, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19 (6): 829–59, 832.

3 See P. Bannerjee, 2014, "Forced Migration in South Asia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. E. Fiddian-Qasmieh, G. Loescher, K. Long, and N. Sigona (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); see also M. Kelkar, 2011–12. "South Asian Immigration in the United States," *Harvard Journal of Asian American Policy Review* 22: 55–61.

4 C. Broughton, 2008. "Migration as Engendered Practice: Mexican Men, Masculinity, and Northward Migration," *Gender and Society* 22 (5): 568–89, 577.

5 In Nepal, men do not do much domestic household work and perform very few child caring activities compared to women. See UNDP, 2014, "Nepali Masculinities and Gender-Based Violence," 2.

without waiting for them. While the women at the hotel expressed discontentment towards the men, other surrounding Nepali men quickly jumped into the conversation to silence them. It was evident that the men made the rules for the group and dominated the narrative communicated to researchers like me.

Adventurer

The adventurer aims to achieve the gendered objectives of advancing social status, displaying an act of courage and strength, and also escaping the supposedly “boring” life of his native land. I have expanded the scope of an adventurer to include competing male egos and belief in men’s superior physical strength as an extension of the adventurer trait.

Migrants spoke extensively about their traumatic experiences in the Darién Gap. Some elaborated on near-death incidents and the violence they suffered from “the mafias,” various collections of gangsters, paramilitaries, and local guides. Though experiences with smugglers and security forces differed, all agreed that crossing the Darién Gap was the most dangerous thing that they had ever done and that it required immense physical strength. Their admiration was unmistakable when they spoke about one Nepali woman who had made it through the jungle. Most men seemed to agree that the journey is more suited to men. Three Nepali men (Amar, Ramesh, and Gopal) voiced amazement at the woman who, according to them, had “miraculously” survived the jungle and lived to tell the tale. Vikramjeet, a Punjabi Indian man, sought inspiration from this woman and said, “if the Nepali woman has made it thus far and is still going strong, I shouldn’t be crying over my worries.”

In a group interview of four Nepali migrants (Himal, Naren, Subhash, and Shiva), all in their early twenties, respondents bragged about their struggles, repeatedly comparing themselves favorably to other migrants. A genuine sense of empathy for the journeys of others was lacking.

Gopal, a Nepali, spoke proudly of slapping an Indian migrant as the Indian hurled abusive language at Nepalis as they proceeded through the Darién Gap. During visits to the CATEM, I saw two fights break

out among migrants. The first was over dish-washing duties between Indian and Somali migrants. The heated verbal altercation quickly turned physical when one of the Somalis swore at an Indian who was barking orders at him. The two had to be separated by security officers with the help of other migrants. The second fight was over food. Though physical force was not used, the fight revealed a proclivity to incite conflict for what outsiders might deem to be trivial reasons.

Attaining or securing social status was another expression of masculinity. Ramesh, who had worked as a practicing lawyer in Nepal, explained his reasons for choosing the United States over other countries.

He said, “I have done my Bachelor’s in law and hopefully I will get a job in the US. All of us have at least some status so we will not settle for nations like Nicaragua or Panama. We made this journey to go to the US and we will get there.”

A show of fearlessness was also part of being an adventurer. Vikramjeet, believing in his abilities and showing no fear, had attempted to cross the Darién Gap alone. However, after the crossing, he shed his fearless attitude to reveal a vulnerable and fearful person. While describing the horrors of the jungle he said, “I was completely alone for the first five nights in the Darién jungle where I was still haunted by the howl of wild animals. I was especially scared by what seemed to be the constant roar of the ‘tiger.’ I also saw a long red snake ahead of me as I walked. I could not sleep for five nights. I just followed the plastic wrappers and the footprints of others who had walked before me. On the sixth day, I met a group of Indians who were also trying to cross the jungle. I decided to join them and continued the journey with them. They were really nice and immediately offered food to me when they saw me. After five lonely nights, I could finally fall asleep.”

Breadwinner

The breadwinner prioritizes the needs of the family, concerns himself with the sustenance of family members, and finds himself in a situation devoid of any other choice than leaving the homeland.⁶

⁶ Broughton, “Migration as Engendered Practice.”

Nine of the thirteen migrants I interviewed were their family's sole breadwinner. Vikramjeet was the sole breadwinner for a family of 22 members. Ghanshyam, a man in his forties from Sindhupalchok, a hilly district in Nepal, was the sole breadwinner for a family that included his widowed mother, his homemaker wife, and their two sons. Migrating to the Gulf region to earn money is common for South Asians and is less expensive than taking the South Asia–South America route. Given the option to find work in the Middle East and Malaysia, many South Asian migrants, remarkably, still decide to pursue a journey that is far longer and harsher. Ghanshyam mentioned that everyone around him was leaving for the US, and finding agents to manage his journey was fairly easy. Gorkha's story was similar, yet more chilling. He said that he was shot in the Nicaraguan jungle, detained by the Nicaraguan government, and after a stint of hospitalization, forcibly returned to Costa Rica.

Upon being forcibly returned to Costa Rica, he confided, he wanted to return home to Nepal. But, he said, his wife and other family members continued to pressure him to resume the journey to the US. "I want to go home. I am extremely scared that someone might kill me. I feel people are conspiring to kill me. My wife tells me that I should be stronger since I am a man and must learn to overcome the odds," he said. When I asked him why he chose the US over the Gulf states he replied, "I worked for two years in Saudi Arabia but I just could not work there anymore. They took my passport and I had to work in the heat all day."

Imran from Pakistan, who was fleeing religious persecution, had initially found work in Brazil. At first, he was content but later felt the need to migrate to the US as his Brazilian work visa was not renewed. For him, finding work to sustain himself and his family back home was more important than living in a specific country.

Emotional-Inexpressive

Migration offers men the opportunity to vent their emotions in a way that offsets some of the negative traits associated with masculinity such as being un-

emotional, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate.⁷

Vikramjeet claimed that his brutal ordeal in the Darién Gap made him a different person and there were moments when he would cry all night along with the other Indian migrants. Gorkha is a different story altogether as his days in Costa Rica after having returned from Nicaragua were filled with anguish, trauma, and a perpetual fear for his life. He had no qualms in expressing his vulnerability to me or the CATEM officers. Apart from these two, the others seemed to be proud of their achievements — the journey they had made thus far. Despite this pride, when I asked whether they would advise others to make the same journey, all answered in the negative.

The Journey's Impact on Masculinity

All thirteen migrants had their own individual experiences that affected their ideas of masculinity. The effects seemed to correlate with the magnitude of the journey's difficulty. Vikramjeet and Gorkha faced more tribulations compared to the other eleven migrants I interviewed. While Vikramjeet's spirit was intact and Gorkha's was not, both had let go of most previously held masculine traits. The others still pretty much held on to their masculine identity despite the harrowing experiences of the jungle and the camps in Panama.

Not surprisingly, during the course of the long journey the migrants had bonded with each other, irrespective of nationality and despite the fights mentioned. Since most South Asians understand the Hindi language, they could easily converse among themselves. However, all the migrants I spoke to were not worried about retaining their native social and cultural values. They were in fact confident they would retain them under any circumstance but were also willing to go to any length to adapt and survive. The traditional notions of masculinity had in many ways faded.

All interviewed believed that the journey was more suited to men as it required immense physical strength. The migrants clung to this belief even though women had successfully made it through the jungle. Family members, too, migrants Ghan-

7 V. Montes, 2013, "The Role of Emotions in the Construction of Masculinity: Guatemalan Migrant Men, Transitional Migration, and Family Relations," *Gender and Society* 27 (4): 469-90.

shyam and Gorkha said, felt that this journey was to be made by males, not just because of their physical strength but also due to their breadwinning role. The social pressure for men to leave their home country to go to the US is immense. For many young men in certain villages of Nepal, this is their first option after completing their higher secondary education.⁸ Vikramjeet, along with the young Nepali men (Himal, Naren, Subhash, and Shiva), exhibited the adventurer trait of wanting to explore other regions of the world to fulfill their material ambitions.

For some migrants, living in the US also meant an elevation of their social status. Their choice of continuing to the United States versus seeking asylum or work in Latin American countries fit their conceptions of hailing from dignified families back home. Also, the physical strenuousness required of the journey had become a source of pride, the completion of a quest to get to the US. There they would parade their physical and emotional tenacity, which would, in their minds, uplift their social position. Given the option of trying to find work in the Gulf region, many South Asians made the tough decision to go to the US in the belief that they would find opportunities that would eventually elevate their social rank.

South Asian migrants travelled in large groups that comprised many young men. Though they shared numerous instances of extreme compassion and kindness in the jungle, they were indeed surviving on scarce resources. They relayed the close male camaraderie that materialized as they travelled together, forming a strong collective masculine identity. They looked out for each other and “had each other’s backs.” This might be why competing male egos were prevalent largely between groups rather than between individuals. In the two fights that I witnessed, other group members quickly jumped in to support “their group member.” Non-group members, even though they belonged to the same nationalities, seemed indifferent or in some cases tried to stop the scuffle. Despite difficult living conditions under which migrant men felt extremely vulnerable, most seemed to preserve their emotional inexpressiveness.

Conclusion

Masculinities are plural and subject to change in strenuous circumstances, and transnational migration is definitely one such circumstance. South Asians, despite their diversity, have a shared colonial history and value similar lifestyles. The idea of masculinity does not vary widely across countries in the region. Nepalis, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis traveled together to the US and in the process expressed a collective regional identity. Their love for Bollywood films, their ability to communicate through their bespoke versions of various Sanskrit-based languages, and their similar aspirational lifestyles often overshadowed national identity.

Based on other masculinity and migration studies, I expanded a typology of three masculine traits into a migration typology containing four, adding the emotional-expressive to the traditionalist, adventurer, and breadwinner. As expected, respondents revealed a mix of masculine behaviors. I did not find many men who strongly preserved their traditionalist values. They had no qualms in engaging in work traditionally undertaken by women in their countries of origin. However, it was also apparent that the decision-making role was reserved for men even if a good number of women were in the group.

The adventurer persona was most widespread among the migrant men. From bragging about their physical strength to fighting, South Asian men did not hesitate to assert their dominance. Some who had a relatively more treacherous experience did undergo a process of accepting their vulnerability. But migration was more than the journey. As they spoke of the job opportunities they would soon enjoy, migration presented the chance to raise their social status upon settling in the US.

The breadwinning expectation featured two parts. First and unsurprisingly, most respondents were the sole breadwinners of their families, a fact that pushed them into embarking on their journeys. Second, the reason for choosing the US as opposed to more easily reached destinations derived from social pressures. Respondents were reacting to a trend that had developed in their localities to venture toward the US. Nothing less would do.

⁸ I conducted more interviews with Nepali migrants in the United States and some Nepalis on the verge of leaving Nepal, which is a part of another research. This finding is based on that research.

Emotional inexpressiveness was linked to the onerousness of the journey. But, as I described, not all were emotionally inexpressive. Two who had endured somewhat harrowing experiences had appeared to have eliminated emotional apprehensions to expose their vulnerabilities.

It can be said that the South Asian men I interviewed held on to most of their masculine traits. This probably has more to do with love for their homeland and wanting to retain their South Asian identity, demonstrating the cultural-pluralism assimilation model (holding on to the native identity as much as possible) similar to South Asian migrants already residing in the US.⁹ Even though migrants shed Broughton's typical traditionalist ideas of masculinity along the journey (if they had any), I conclude that the feature that reinforces their migrant identities is their unrelenting attachment to their identities formed long ago in their countries and localities of origin. Necessities or choices shaped in the course of migration had altered their expressions of masculinity and identity.

9 P. Bohra-Mishra, 2011. "Nepalese Migrants in the United States of America: Perspectives on Their Exodus, Assimilation Pattern and Commitment to Nepal," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (9): 1527-37.

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