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Migration in the Asian Region: Retrospect and Prospects*

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"Human history is always a story of somebody's *diaspora*": I believe this aphorism by Romesh Gunesekera finds a lot of credence and verity in the experience of migration in Asia. The repercussions of the historical outflow of refugees from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Iraq and Afghanistan attest to this. Massive labor migration from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka all the more reinforce this. As such, migration as a phenomenon is a significant dimension not only of the history but also the social transformations in the Asian region. But owing to its vastness, diversity, and complexity of migration issues, my presentation will mainly focus on certain parts of Asia and on external migration.

Asia has a long history of permanent, temporary and cyclical migration due to trade, work, religion or cultural interchange. In pre-colonial times the Malay *peninsula* and the Indonesian and Philippine archipelago is an area marked by mobility of people of various ethnicity especially via the sea. Arab and Chinese traders are key players in this period of history of people mobility in Asia. Colonization intensified the movement and brought in a new dimension, that is, labor migration. For example, Filipino labor migration history goes back to the year 1610 when there was compulsory conscription into the Spanish *Guardia* Civil and the Galleon Trade during the Spanish colonization. Moreover, prior to the Americans' systematic recruitment of Filipinos to work in their fruit plantations, Chinese and Japanese workers were already being brought or recruited to the U.S. Around this period, there are also external migrations by other Asians, notably Indians, Indonesians, Sri Lankans and Koreans to various parts of Europe like the U.K. the Netherlands, and Germany.

Harsh times in the home country and stories of better life in the host countries encouraged many Asians to migrate in search of work legally and illegally. Europe and North America's more accommodating immigration laws then, like the granting of asylum and policies favoring family reunions, fueled subsequent migrations especially to Canada, U.S.A., the U.K., and Italy. Today, despite these countries' stricter policies and border control, Asian migration goes on and is even undergoing rapid expansion and radical transformation due to globalization.

Globalization, which has uplifted some Asian economies and further marginalized the rest, is indeed drastically changing the volume, nature, face, and direction of Asian migration. As a matter of fact, there is a highly significant increase both in internal and external migration. The latter, however, is notable since it has shifted from Europe and North America to countries in Asia and with greater density and velocity. This large-scale and multi-directional migration within the Asian region is attributed to two developments: the oil boom of the mid 1970's which induced the immense investment in infrastructures by the Middle Eastern countries, and the emergence of the so-called Asian tiger economies namely South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. These countries' increased economic development coupled with industrialized Japan's needs created a massive demand for foreign or cheap labor which people from the many poor Asian countries readily filled, out of dire need.

Until the last decades of the 20th century, labor migration was somehow minimal in the Asian region. Prior to this, political instability primarily accounted for people's mobility. In fact, close to one-third of the world's 27 million "refugees and other persons of concern" are of Asian origin. For example, over a million fled from the Japanese occupation and the Cultural Revolution in mainland China and poured into Hong Kong from the 50's to the 70's. The Vietnam War forced over two million people to leave their homes in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia also in the 70's. The Soviet military intervention in 1979 also led to the mass exodus of Afghans. Up to a third of Afghanistan's population of 18 million at that time fled the country. The Martial Law years in the Philippines, the continuing political strife in Myanmar, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, some parts of the former USSR, and the wars on terror waged by the US in Afghan and Iraqi soil added to the massive outflow of refugees. Today, although there are still many who leave for political reasons as well as for socio-cultural reasons like tourism, studies, and family reunions, much of contemporary Asian migration is due to labor migration.

This is rooted and intensified by the emergence of a "migration industry" whereby you have a culture of migration reinforced by a well-oiled government machinery for a pro-labor export policy. Aside from this, there is also a proliferation of national and trans-national recruitment agencies and networks even among the migrants. All these account not only for the growing chain of migration but also the rise in undocumented Asian migrants. Unscrupulous recruitment agencies and employers do not only facilitate the migrants' illegal entry. They also make sure that the migrants especially women are at their mercy by keeping their passports and holding them in virtual slavery even in their workplaces. When I went to a shelter for women migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, for instance, stories of not being allowed to have a day-off, of having their passports taken and kept by their employers, of having personal letters opened, of being prohibited to talk to their countrywomen, and of outright deceit, forgery and collusion between the recruiter and the employer, is not strange to the women there.

Another significant trend in Asian migration is its increasing feminization. Most of the women, however, land in gender-specific jobs like nursing, domestic work, and entertainment. This discrimination born out of a gendered labor market is exacerbated by their marginalization in the host countries. Take the case of the domestic workers. Hong Kong, which has around three hundred thousand domestic workers from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, India,

Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and even a handful from Malaysia and Singapore, have repeatedly subjected them to wage cuts purportedly because of economic slowdown. These were done even if domestic workers are already its lowest-paid foreign worker. Malaysia and Singapore have mandatory pregnancy test every six months for them. Australia, in the meantime, has a high salary discrepancy among local and foreign domestic workers. Locals receive A$ 15,000 while foreign domestic workers receive A$5,000. On top of this they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse. As such their case mirrors the plight of most Asian women migrants who not only have to contend with a gendered economy, hence gendered migration, but also gendered transitions and gendered violence.

Marginalization, however, is a shared experience of Asian migrants regardless of gender, race, and religion. That is why many of them engage in a re-creation of the faraway or lost "home". They form family or social networks and ethnic communities. They cling to anything that reminds them of home like language as well as socio-cultural and religious traditions. "Chinatowns" which can be found in a lot of countries all over the world points to this. In the U.S., Jung Young Lee traces the retreat of the Chinese immigrants, which created the U.S. "Chinatowns" in the early 19th century, to the adverse psychological effects of the two Chinese Exclusion Acts and the inhuman treatment of Chinese immigrants. The Sunday gatherings of Filipina domestic workers in Chater Road and Statue Square in Hong Kong also illustrates this. The Filipinas literally gather according to their region in the Philippines and eat and sell Filipino food, play Filipino games, go to a Filipino Mass with a Filipino priest, etc. as a response to the discrimination and marginalization they experience in the hands of the local people. But all these actually point to the problem of the sense of belonging inherent in migration.

For Asian migrants, this is not only true for those outside of Asia. It is also very much the case within Asia where religio-ethnic value systems, along with patriarchy, serve as the cultural bases for racism and discrimination against foreigners. Japan's propagation of the myth of "Japan as one ethnic nation", for example, continues to highly discriminate and segregate its migrants of Korean origin. These migrants in Japan still find it hard to obtain Japanese citizenship even after three or four generations of settlement. Sometime in the 80's, Japan even closed its door to foreign workers but offered free admission to the Nikkeis – descendants of Japanese emigrants to Brazil and Peru. And yet the Nikkeis were not even allowed to become citizens. Not surprisingly, Japan is still a highly monocultural immigration country. The affirmative action for the dominant Malays in the highly multicultural Muslim state of Malaysia, on the other hand, takes place to the detriment of the ethnic migrant minorities especially the Chinese. Malaysia also became not only strict but also highly selective with migrants. On the one hand, it has a pro-Indonesian and Muslim Filipino migrants' policy. On the other hand, it restricted Thai and Burmese immigrants who are less similar to the Malaysians in terms of culture and religion. In 1996, Malaysia even started to build a 500 kilometer long wall at its northern border with Thailand to stop illegal migrants. Yet, like other receiving countries, both in Asia and the other parts of the world, Malaysia and Japan weren't able to stop the tide of Asian migrants especially illegal migrants from China, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, Iran, Indonesia and the rest of Asia.

Like other migrants, Asian migrants are also easy targets of socio-political and economic restructuring as well as violence. Often seen as a burden and threat economically and culturally, migrants are turned into perfect victims and scapegoats. The Chinese suffered a lot from looting and violence during the adverse political and economic crisis in Indonesia a few years ago. The generally Asian foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong were not only made to shoulder Hong Kong's economic slowdown through successive wage cuts. Policies are also being systematically implemented to slowly ease them out of Hong Kong to give way to local and mainland women who would like to work as domestic workers. Like other receiving countries today, the host countries in Asia have three dominant attitudes with regard to migrants according to Stephen Castles: 1) immigrants should not be allowed to settle; 2) foreign residents should not be offered citizenship except in exceptional cases and; 3) national culture and identity should not be modified in response to external influences.

This actually points to one of the most serious challenges in humanizing contemporary Asian migration: the re-nationalization of politics in the midst of the trans-nationalization of the economy. Seen as a mutation of racism, or more explicitly, racism in the guise of nationalism, this re-nationalization of politics is on the rise in a number of countries all over the world which plays host to millions of Asian migrants. The resulting migrant marginalization on top of the loneliness and isolation that comes with migration has given birth to chain migration and transnational Asian migrant communities. In the case of the Philippines a study done by the Balikbayani Foundation found out that hundreds of women OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers] working in Rome come from one and the same village [Barangay Solo in Mabini, Batangas] in the Philippines. Some of them come from one clan. One even has up to seventy relatives working in Rome. In another village [Barangay Sta. Rosa Alaminos, Laguna], the same study says that there are clans that have 300 members working in Padova, Italy. San Pablo, a city in the southern part of Luzon has 1,000 women working in Hong Kong, while Pangasinan a northern province has about 10,000. But still, poverty plagues these communities. As Balikbayani's research attests, although overseas work has somehow raised the standard of living of families, this has not contributed substantially to the economic development of their communities. Moreover, dependency on migrant earnings and the diminishing value placed on hard work and education were observed especially among the migrants' families. Crass materialism and a culture of migration where working abroad has become a "be all and end all" is also on the rise. These are potent factors that are expected to continue to push Asians to migrate despite increasing anti-migrant sentiments. What are the implications of all these?

There are many issues spawned by contemporary Asian migration. One of these is the problem of commodification. It is there not only in how the migrants are exploited by their recruiters and employers but in the way their governments systematically make "national exports" out of them. It is there in the concentration of migrants in the 3D

jobs or the dirty, dangerous, and difficult or disdained jobs. It is there in how women become easy victims of the so-called irregular migration through trafficking where migrants are kept in bondage or forced into prostitution. According to UNIFEM [United Nations Development Fund for Women], the number of women and children trafficked in Southeast Asia alone could be around 225,000 out of a global figure of over 700,000 annually. There is also a surge in human trafficking in Central Asia especially from Uzbekistan. Up to 10,000 people, mainly young women, are forced into the sex trade by international crime syndicates. This multi-billion dollar industry also accounts for the trafficking of Filipinas and Russian women in US military bases in Korea; the illegal movement of 400 Bangladeshi women monthly to Pakistan; and the undocumented entry of 300 Thai women annually to Australia.

How does one deal with forced, gendered and racialized migration fraught with unjust situations? What do these mean to Asian society and to humanity as a whole? What should one opt for: assimilation, differential exclusion or multiculturalism? How does one talk about the family and community when most of its women are away? How does one deal with a local politics and a supposedly transnational community which only serves to valorize nationality or ethnicity? How does one talk about an age supposedly of global wealth and plenty when global poverty and ethnicization of poverty is the real reality? Lastly, how does one even talk about human dignity and social responsibility when these are sacrificed in the altar of global capital daily? These, I believe, are some of the questions that can be culled from the experience of migration in the Asian region that must be subjected to further philosophical and theological reflections.

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