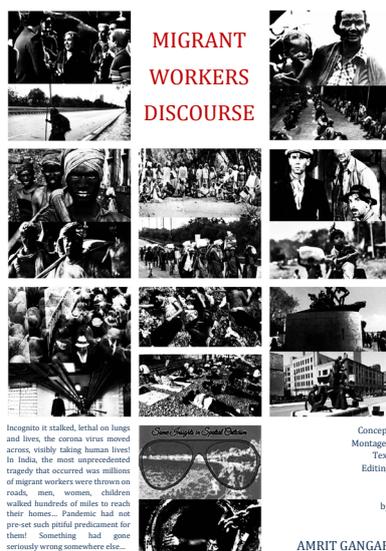


E-Book Review
Meenakshi Shedde

Migrant Workers' Discourse by Amrit Gangar: Facebook to E-Book



Did you know that even in India of 2020, you can casually buy a whole Adivasi family—couple, children, others—for merely Rs. 50,000, as slaves working at your farm and house, for a whole year?

This and many other revelations, and rich learnings, have emerged from Amrit Gangar's new e-book, *Migrant Workers Discourse* (MWD), provoked by the horrific exodus of millions of migrants within India, a humanitarian crisis following the government's appalling lame response to the outbreak of the Covid19 virus in India. It is probably unprecedented that posts on *facebook* have turned into an e-book. However, this is an exciting development where, contrary to the expectations of knee-jerk comments and emojis, the e-book has turned out to be a rich multimedia resource, with links and hyperlinks that marry hard core issues like migrant labour, with cultural resources—film, music, song, literature and more, greatly enhancing our understanding of these issues and how people experience them. This *facebook*-inspired e-book is also

significant, given that youth constitute about one third of India's population, and millions of them are active on social media.

Soon after the national lockdown was announced in India on 24 March 2020, we saw images of millions of migrants, who had lost their jobs and had nothing to eat, walking hundreds of kilometres, desperate to reach their home in their villages, many carrying babies and meagre bundles of belongings on their heads; some died on the way home. Anguished, Gangar commented on the tragedy and the reverse migration on *facebook*. He also recalled Shambhu, the protagonist of Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Acres of Land, 1953), on the plight of migrant workers in the city. So, he launched the Migrant Workers Discourse series on his *facebook* page on 17 April 2020, which has since grown organically into a great banyan tree of discourse with roots, shoots and branches, a multi-author, multi-media discourse. As others responded to his posts—experts from various fields as well as lay people, the discourse encompassed

issues of labour and migration both contemporary and historic, Indian and worldwide, as well as sociology, human rights, politics, economics, philosophy, and the arts--films, music, painting, sculpture, photography, poetry, literature, anthropology, mainstream and subaltern cultural traditions, and more. This was also partly Gangar's deep knowledge of and interest in diverse issues and arts, that drew such a response. Equally, the impact of the humanitarian crisis was so great because India has 139 million internal migrants, according to the 2011 Census. Above all, the virus exposed the deep rot in Indian society that was previously largely invisible.

Amrit Gangar has had a distinguished career in various aspects of film. He is a Mumbai-based author, film theorist, curator and historian, and poet. He was Consultant Curator for the National Museum of Indian Cinema, Mumbai. He has curated film programmes in India and overseas, including for the Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films (MIFF). For over a decade, he has presented his theory of Cinema of Prayoga (experiment/austerity) worldwide, including at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Tate Modern, London; the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen; Santiniketan, India, etc. His books on cinema, in English and Gujarati, include *Cinema. Culture. Capital Context: India*, and *Cinema Vimarsh*, which won the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi award. He headed the Mumbai-based film club Screen Unit for over two decades. The Federation International des Cine Clubs (FICC) awarded him in Berlin in 1989 for his work in the film society movement in India. He has been a creative and production consultant to several international film and installation productions by international artists and has also made a few digital documentaries. Last year, he also led the Gandhian Panj Tirath yatra, taking young students on a pilgrimage to five historic places where Gandhi's spirit is actively honoured, to acquaint them with India's freedom struggle and encourage what he calls Gandhiness

(Gandhipanā); last year

Megha Sriram Dalton, well-known singer from Jharkhand, joined the yatra, singing the song 'Gandhi Baba kanoon se lade' at the Dharsana salt pans.

Disclaimer: Amrit Gangar is my guru and mentor, whose selfless commitment to Screen Unit first inculcated in me a lifelong passion for cinema when I was in college. I owe him a debt of deep gratitude, along with film critics Maithili Rao and Iqbal Masud, and cultural commentator Shanta Gokhale. Gangar's editorial assistant on the book is Jay Kholia, a filmmaker and student of Amrit Gangar.

The discourse, which encompasses feature films, documentaries, shorts and music videos, opens with Gangar revisiting his articles on the plight of migrants workers in the city, specially Shambhu, the protagonist of Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, in *Café Dissensus* (2014) and *Asian Signature* (2018). In Gangar's poem 'Kanhaiya Back in Kolkata: 1953-2017,' he reflects on Kanhaiya, the young son of Shambhu the rickshawpuller and Parvati, of *Do Bigha Zamin*. He imagines that if Kanhaiya was a 10-year-old in the film, he would be 74 in 2017, and have returned to Kolkata, hoping to eke an existence somehow. A verse reads:

*Old Dhangu Mahatokilled himself under a wheel
Harnam Singh's son has 2+200 bigha zamin now
and a factory, and a school
to his name, a temple too
Kanhaiya has returned to you Kolkata, now
74!*

<https://asiansignature.com/contemporary-poets/amrit-gangar-3>

Continuing his discourse on migrant workers, Gangar discusses Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* (1955), when "Raju had walked all the way from Allahabad to Bombay" and contrasts it with an image of reverse migration of 90-year-old Kajodi Devi, walking back to her

village, in 2020. He discusses Ritwik Ghatak's trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-capped Star, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (E Flat, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line, 1962), that explored the trauma of the Partition of Bengal, and of India in 1947, and of refugees. "Who is not a refugee? the films seem to be asking," Gangar writes, referencing Ghatak's famous question, and connecting the films with today's post-covid19 migrant refugees in our own land. He also expands the discussion to Indian migrants overseas, and discusses Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Uthan da Vela* (A Time to Rise), on Indian immigrant farm workers trying to unionise in North America, as well as Ali Kazimi's documentary *Continuous Journey*, on the journey of the Indian migrants, mainly Sikhs, aboard the ship the *Komagata Maru*, that reached Canada in 1914, hoping to migrate there, but were refused, leading to a historic stand-off. He writes of Patwardhan's *Hamara Shahar* (Bombay Our City, 1985), see http://patwardhan.com/?page_id=205 and contrasts images of its migrants with today's migrants squatting in socially-distant white chalk circles drawn on the street, waiting to go home. He explores workers' conditions over 80 years from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) to Rahul Jain's magnificent, compelling documentary *Machines* (2016). We also relish an anecdote with Gangar recalling that Ghatak had made a 20 min documentary on Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, that was banned in India, yet when he headed Screen Unit and had curated a major Ghatak retrospective, he managed to get a 35mm print of the film from Moscow in 1987 for a 'private screening.'

The issue of reverse migration is extensively discussed both in the Indian and international contexts, contemporary and historic. Evoking the horrific incident of the 16 migrant workers who died on the railway tracks while walking home, with photographs of their saved-up rotis. We see photographs of workers who kiss the soil in gratitude on reaching their hometowns. The discourse observes how in

Gujarat, the media called migrant workers 'parprantiya' (workers from other provinces), whereas in Kerala they are called guest workers, not migrant workers. And how the Karnataka government cancelled trains at the behest of the real estate lobby, to prevent migrants going home.

The history of Indian overseas migrants through the 'girmitya' system is also explored. Gangar writes, "The name derived from the term 'gimit,' a corruption of the English word 'agreement'. This indentured emigration began in the 19th century to meet the shortage of labour supply caused by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. In the 37 years spanning 1879-1916, nearly 60,500 labourers from various religions and castes would be transported to Fiji Islands on 42 ships making nearly 87 trips. These migrants were themselves a part of more than one million Indians who travelled to the colonies in the Indian and Atlantic oceans." Indian workers were taken to Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa and the Caribbean, to work mainly on the sugarcane plantations of the European settlers. In response to this post, filmmaker/cinematographer Parasher Baruah posted a link to the superb BBC documentary *Coolies: How Britain Re-Invented Slavery*, taken from the Caribbean Hindustani website. The film reveals how, after slavery was abolished, primarily affecting African slaves, the devious British invented the 'agreement' contract system to instead create Indian slaves to fuel the growing trade in sugar and other goods. As the film explains, the 'agreement' makes it appear as if the labourer has a choice, signing it of his own free will, when in fact, most labourers could not read or understand the document, did not know where they were being sent, and many never returned home. See

BBC documentary *Coolies: How Britain Re-Invented Slavery*,

<https://www.facebook.com/caribbeanhindustani/videos/831432203940969/>

Most of these slaves were from UP and Bihar, the same states that have seen a massive exodus of internal migrants this year. Journalist, author and human rights activist/advisor Salil Tripathi refers to the book *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur, who narrates the odyssey of her great-grandmother Sheojari from Bihar to the Caribbean. Mamta Mantri posts a link of a Bhojpuri girmitiya song by Chandravati Kanhai from Surinam.

Gangar also invents the term ‘bahuspora,’ a variation on diaspora, referring to the different narratives of bahu (daughter-in-law) who migrated with their husbands to distant lands in India and overseas. Parasher Baruah also reminds us we have overlooked “girmitiya” workers, working in tea estates in Assam for centuries, and posts a video of one of their songs, “We left our native land to this eastern province.” See Parasher Baruah’s link [The Exiled Tongue/Adivasi/Bhadra Rajwar/ArtEast2020](#)

<https://youtu.be/IHGm1-YwBfo>

Ranjana Raghunath writes of similar experiences of Tamilians in Singapore. Jayshree Soni writes of how something similar is used in the US as often, priority is given to couples for jobs in motels, so husband and wife can work together.

Amit Samrat, bank manager of a rural bank branch in Madhya Pradesh, posts that in Nimandad village in Burhanpur district, MP, feudal landlords buy entire tribal families, eg Bhilala and Korku tribal,—for, say, Rs 50,000 for a family of five or more-- to work for a year. They work on their farms, tend the cattle, do any other work, all days of the year, and the women are sexually exploited. So modern-day slavery is alive and kicking in India of 2020. Samrat adds men there also fix the price for kidnapping girls and marrying them. ‘A man with more money would often kidnap 3-4 girls,’ he writes. Gangar asks why this cannot be stopped and tags his friend Kiran

Desai who is associated with the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, Gujarat. So, the series has been very interactive, making new connections across strata and subjects.

There are very insightful detours, as these complex and nuanced issues are also explored through the other arts, including art, music, and literature. For instance, the e-book includes the work of distinguished artists including Sudhir Patwardhan (Migrants: Leaving the City, painted in 2020), Chittooprasad’s staggering woodcut poster for *Do Bigha Zamin*, and Atul Dodiya’s ‘Sabari,’ as well as sculptor Ramkinkar Baij’s Mill Call, a tremendously kinetic, powerful sculpture at Santiniketan. Gangar had also invited Megha Sriram Dalton, a well-known singer from Jharkhand and a Gandhian, who is working to revive tribal music, to join the Panj Tirath in 2019, when she sings *Gandhi Baba kanoon se lade*, at the salt pans in Dharasana, where a satyagraha was held earlier. You can find Megha Sriram Dalton song *Gandhi Baba kanoon se lade* here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHag8X-BwWpQ&t=119s>

As for literature, Gangar discusses the work of Dalit writers and poets including Narayan Surve and Daya Pawar’s *Baluta* (Surve, Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal were also Screen Unit members when Gangar headed it), and how untouchability and crimes in the villages often drives Dalits to the cities. He also discusses Amrita Shah’s book *Ahmedabad: A City in the World*. The contribution of poets Kaifi Azmi and Gaddar are mentioned as well.

Crucially, the discourse brings urban, social mediawallahs in direct contact with people from rural and tribal areas, who are also active on social media, and highlights subaltern voices, histories and cultures. For instance, Gangar discusses Jharkhand-based filmmaker Sriram Dalton’s *Spring Thunder*, on the exploited workers of the mineral-rich state. Gangar juxtaposes two images, one of coal miners

in Dhanbad from world famous photographer Sebastião Salgado's book 'Workers,' with a screenshot of workers from Sriram Dalton's film Spring Thunder. He also showcases photographer Sudhakar Olwe's image of a sewage cleaner working inside a manhole, from his book In Search of Dignity and Justice.

Finally, dancer-choreographer Daksha Sheth asks, "Is there a way out?" of all this, Gangar

replies he has been thinking of an integrated '8M' theory, "combining Mahavira, Maitreya, Mohammed, Moses, Mahadeva, Mazda, Mahatma and Marx," so that all together they may show us a 'way out' towards greater happiness for all living beings.

Brief biographies of the contributors to the *facebook* discourse has also been thoughtfully included.

Ms. Meenakshi Shedde is India and South Asia Delegate to the Berlin Film Festival, and independent film curator, a Member of Fipresci-India, based in Mumbai.