



International Symposium

Africa and Asia Entanglements in Past and Present : Bridging History and Development Studies

Labour Migrations Interlocking Africa and Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Indentured Labour and the Exodus of Ethiopian Domestic Workers to Arab and Middle East Countries

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Abstract

Migrations, especially those with economic underpinnings, are very old forms of human interactions. There is a corpus of scholarly literature dealing with the movement of people to alien places seeking employment. On several occasions, Asia and Africa had, and still have, experiences of bilateral exchange of their respective work force to toil in one another's continent. In addition to the mutual economic benefits drawn from the various engagements of the labour exchange, it is not to be disputed that the whole exercise bolstered Afro- Asian ties and interdependence. The Indentured system that brought Indian and Chinese labor to Africa in the 19th and 20th century, and the more recent trans- Red Sea labour migrations from Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf countries are selected for analysis in this essay. The earlier is already defunct living behind some of its legacies; where as the latter is still active but not sufficiently reported and documented.

The 1990s was the decade when large- scale movements of Ethiopian female domestic workers (EFDW) to the Middle East and countries of the Arabian Peninsula reached its peak. According to an estimate in 2013, some 30, 000 women traveled every year to countries such as Lebanon Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain and other Gulf States, to name just a few destinations, through officially recognized channels. This figure does not include a no less sizable number of female domestic workers who made their exit from Ethiopia to those destinations using unofficial routes without registration and record. This study attempts to explore some of the striking similarities and differences in the way the two systems functioned. A critical investigation into some of the defining features of the two respective practices such as; the "contract," the age preference, the role of intermediaries (recruiters and/ or agents) wage, the coercion involved and the sufferings those workers made to endure in the process will be used to unravel the changes and continuities in the labour trade that kept the two continents interlinked. By way of a comparative analysis of some distinct operational principles of and practices of the two systems, this essay seeks to enrich our understanding of labour migrations as an historical phenomenon not only with immediate economic bearings, but with more enduring social, demographic and



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political implications.