

Mobility and Self-Making of Middle-Class Dalit Women | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar “Mobility and Self-Making of Middle-Class Dalit Women,” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on July 7, 2021 and was moderated by Dr. Elizabeth Finnis. The guest speaker was Dr. Sugandha Nagpal.

Transcript:

Elizabeth Finnis:

Okay. Good morning or afternoon or evening wherever you may be joining us from. My name is Elizabeth Finnis and I'm an anthropologist and an associate professor at the department of sociology and anthropology here at the University of Guelph, and I'm pleased to be able to share the seminar today for the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph.

The Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement also known as CIRCLE, aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and the Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze and foster an equitable respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex emerging and unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

I'll put the CIRCLE website address in the chat in a moment [canadaindiaresearch.ca]. Today's speaker Dr. Sugandha Nagpal explores the mobility, education and self-making of middle-class Dalit women in the Doaba region of the Punjab. Dr. Nagpal is an assistant professor at O.P. Jindal Global University in India. She completed her PhD in international development at the University of East Anglia in Norwich in the UK. Her PhD research explored the gender dynamics of class formation and mobility in a Dalit community in Punjab.

Currently, Dr. Nagpal is involved in applied and interdisciplinary research on migration, mobility, and aspirations. She's also working on a project on family resilience and mental well-being across low-income communities in India, Kenya and the UK. She's also the co-applicant on a Shirk funded project on COVID-19 and Punjabi migration, being conducted across Canada and Punjab.

So, I welcome you, Dr. Nagpal and thank you so much for being here today. Before I do turn the event over to our speaker, just a reminder that we will have time for questions at the end of Dr. Nagpal's talk. And while she's speaking, please ensure that you are on mute and turn off your video.

During the question period, if you have a question, please raise your hand on zoom or type in the chat that you have a question you'd like to ask. If you'd prefer you can also type your question directly into the chat and I'll read it out to Dr. Nagpal and just to note that this event is being recorded and will be made available on the CIRCLE website. Again welcome Dr. Nagpal and I turn the webinar over to you.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Thank you so much for that really kind introduction and for the warm welcome. I'm really happy to be here and thank you CIRCLE for inviting me. So, I'll just start with my talk. So, you guys should be able to see a PowerPoint presentation. The research I'm presenting on today which is on the mobility education and self-making of middle-class Dalit women, derives from my field work, which was my PhD field work which was base in the Doaba region of Punjab, close to the city of Phagwara and I'll get into a second where that's located.

For those of you that might be unfamiliar the term Dalit, references lower caste populations. Caste here is a form of social stratification that exists in India that's tied to one's type of work that they do. Typically, although those kinds of connections between caste identity and work are now seen to be diluting but it's seen as a form of disadvantage and discrimination and in recognition of that the Indian government has affirmative policies to ensure the inclusion of lower caste as well as scheduled tribes.

And the term, so you know, the lower caste group is seen as you know the bottom of the hierarchy and at the top you have the upper caste and then you have the OBCs or what are also called the middle caste. So, I'm talking about the lower caste and the term Dalit refers to a more politicized lower caste identity which I'm going to be using in this case and derives from the sort of ways of with my participant self-identified.

I'm talking about young women, specifically within this community that I will again sort of get into a little bit more in terms of details. This is a rural community located near Phagwara city and the young Dalit women that I'm speaking about are either in the process of pursuing higher education or had completed the undergraduate and postgraduate education. These women were a minority in the community.

They belonged to upwardly mobile families and they were the families that were able to sort of pursue a higher education for their children. But most families only pursued higher education for their children specifically for their daughters up till grade 12. And these women often pursued this higher education with the aim of migration as well as among certain middle upwardly mobile families where education was valued.

It was also seen as a pathway to government employment and the kind of work that women sort of looked for largely after pursuing education was you know respectable job. And these respectable jobs were defined mostly as teaching jobs or government jobs. So, education here then was a pathway to some very defined mobility outcomes. So, this is just a table that will give you a sense of the kind of women I'm speaking about. So, these women were aged

between 18 and 35. Most of them were unmarried, two of them were married and they, you know, as you can see, a number of them have completed their MA.

Most of them pursued their education from a local college which was the Ramgarhia College and this again we'll talk about this a little bit later has to do with restrictions around physical mobility where most women were allowed to sort of go to this nearby college. It had to do with both restrictions around physical mobility but also financial considerations.

There were some women that were allowed to go a little bit further to their adjoining city of Jalandhar to pursue their education. So you know despite sort of pursuing education with these dreams of migration and you know respectable employment. Very few women were able to migrate as a result of marriage migration or secure government employment.

And here I mean marriage migration became the main pathway to migration even though young women often talked about independent trajectories to migration, it was well recognized that marriage was again the most respectable way to migrate oneself. And the difficulties in sort of attaining these outcomes whether it's migration or secure government employment reflects continuities and historical disadvantages that lower caste have been subject to.

And for example here and still point out the mobility of Dalits in the neoliberal economy is not dependent merely on acquiring certain qualifications, it's also about demonstrating one's educatedness, one's modernity, and one's credentials as belonging within that space, so it often has to do with mobilizing one social network and cultural capital and that's something that often leads to the kind of results we see where a number of Dalits are pursuing a higher education and then even though it's lower than the rest of the population it doesn't often translate into commensurate employment and mobility outcomes.

So, most of these young women while they were located within the village space waiting for either migration or some sort of respectable employment to come about, were giving tuitions or doing stitching work. As they wait these young women often engaged with the idea of mobility at an imaginative level at a discursive level they talked about mobility as the physical and cultural movement away from the village space.

So here I'm construing their waiting as an active exercise and this again aligns with a lot of work that's been done on immobility which points out that just because one is immobile doesn't mean that there's lack of agency, and so young women in this in between stage are actively reworking their resources and social identities to attain status within the community even in the absence of real mobility or mobility outcomes.

So, the question that I want to discuss today is how do women access mobility in the absence of mobility outcomes in a context with a strong culture of migration? And I argue that while education is an important pathway to migration and employment opportunities it serves as an important way to carve modern middle-class identities while remaining in the village space and that's exactly what I want to discuss today. So, the first part of this presentation is laying the groundwork and the context, and the second part I go into the empirical data and speak about

the two young women from very different middle-class families and their navigations around this.

So, the existing work that has looked at the links between education and migration especially in context with strong cultures of migration talk about how educational choices become defined by the desire to migrate. So people, for example, in Hyderabad in Ali study—pursue the kinds of educational opportunities that will directly lead to migration. And we see that happening in the context of the village that I will be talking about as well. However, what happens when there is a long or uncertain gap between the pursuit of education and the act of migration.

Right, so what happens in that in between stage where education has not necessarily led to migration? Is education then being mobilized towards other ends? And that's sort of where I locate my work. I'm also interested in thinking about as Rao points out, "The social processes through which migration education interact to shape people's life identities and status in society." And I argue that young women's interactions with education are not simply relegated to the act of migration or to the seeking of employment opportunities but also entail aspirations for mobility status and processes of self-making.

So, in terms of you know the link between education and middle classness, previous anthropological research has talked about that even in the absence of development outcomes or tangible development outcomes education allows young men and women to gain status in the communities and the most sort of prominent of this work is of course those done by Jeffries. For example, Franco, whose work is based on Bangladeshi girls and their families, talks about how young women are able to effectively use education to develop "awareness of their wishes and needs and increase their capacity to negotiate different ways of being part of the society."

So, in terms of my field site, my field site is as I mentioned in Punjab. Punjab is a northern state in India. Let me see if I can use a pointer here. So, you can see Punjab right here. Punjab has been associated with a strong agricultural economy, low levels of poverty. Of course, it's a declining agricultural economy and in fact, those of you that follow Indian news, you would have heard the farmers protests that have been happening within that belt including in Haryana, being supported in Haryana. Sorry, one second.

So, within Punjab I'm focusing on the Doaba region of Punjab. The Doaba region of Punjab is one that has very high levels of out migration and many parts of Doaba region are known for sort of being NRI hubs. So, the Doaba region consists of the districts of Kapurthala, Jalandhar, Nawanshahr, and Hoshiarpur, and the part of Kapurthala that you see here, is where my work is located near the city of Phagwara.

Punjab has the highest proportion of the population and was pegged at 31.94 percent in 2011. The Doaba region of Punjab has the highest proportion of the population within Punjab and also more pronounced forms of Dalit mobility. Currently less than 10 percent of Dalits in Punjab work in agriculture and Dalits often seek to consolidate their economic position through non-farm work government jobs and immigration abroad.

So, the migration story is very intertwined with the mobility of Dalits within this region as well. And amongst the various Dalit groups are in Punjab the Ad-Dharmis are the most numerous and have fared better in terms of education employment and other indicators of development. The economic mobility of Punjabi Ad-Dharmis is complemented by religious and social assertions of the Chamar identity. So, there's a very prominent contemporary movement called the Ravidassia movement which sort of entails in stating a distinctive religious and political identity for the Ad-Dharmis or what they call themselves also Ravidassias.

Now the Ad-Dharmis are also called Chamars and they've been associated with work on leather. So, the skinning and processing of leather hides is their hereditary occupation. And this particular group is the Dalit group that I'm looking at. So, they you know refer to themselves as Ad-Dharmis or Chamars or Dalits depending on who one is speaking to, and also people who associate with the Ravidassia movement also call themselves Ravidassias.

So, the village that my work is located in is Chaheru. This is a predominantly rural settlement located for five kilometres from Phagwara City, so it's very close to a city which also will explain how ideas of urban modernity become so prominent here. It has 275 households and a total population of a 1529. There's a strong culture of migration dating back to the 1970s when the first labor migrants left for Gulf countries. Villagers often see the advent of this labor migration to the gulf as having brought 'sudhar' or development to the village.

This is in fact when they sort of through oral histories when they were telling the history of the village and the history of the development of the village the point of 1970s when the sort of migration started was seen as a turning point And the contemporary trend of migration from Chaheru is of continued migration to of course gulf countries and this is labor migration, as well as traditional migrant destinations like the US, UK, Canada and Australia along with migration to a large number of countries in southern and eastern Europe.

Right and so, there is a distinction for instance between Gulf migration and migration to other countries. Often gulf migration is one engaged by single men, and it is a form of labor migration whereas migration to other countries is seen as a way of acquiring movement to a big country or 'badi jagah' and over there it's often associated with a permanent form of migration and entails family unification as well.

And although at the level of discourse about 70 percent of the people would claim that we have family members abroad and through an informal tally I found that you know it's only 31 households or 11.27 percent of households have family members living abroad. Okay. I'm trying to see if I can maybe get rid of this pointer now. So, this is a picture from the village. This is the main road that leads into the village, and you can see that it's a proper road it's not a kutchra or temporary kind of road.

You can see that the how they're on one side they're these shops with the shutters. On the other side you see a migrant house so these migrant houses and in fact you can see another one in this picture here, they sort of dot the local landscape and become prominent markers of status, of aspirations.

They're often seen to re-entrench the divisions between those who've been able to make it and those that are left behind and so a lot of these households are very luxurious, they resemble houses that one would see in Canada. They have multiple rooms, the kind of furnishing, and often these houses are marked as being migrant houses through the water tank that is placed at the top.

So here you can see that there's the shape of the bird and so usually these kinds of houses would have either the tank in the shape of a bird or in the shape of a plane and that's the way to denote that it's a migrant house. So, these were very interesting in the way that people negotiated this kind of space and the way that they related to these migrant households. They often became you know a site for envy, resentment as well as you know aspiration.

So, in terms of how ideas of moving away from the village were conceptualized by young women. So, ideas of urbanity and migration were very prominent within the village space and compared to employment migration, signalled a more permanent move away from the village. So of course, migration was the sort of main pathway to mobility but a lot of young women especially those that belong to families where for example their fathers were pursuing government employment also gave a lot of importance to being able to access government employment.

And young women's imaginaries of mobility often relied on specific constructions of the local urban space, the urban space in the west and the village. And often these spaces were denoted through the term 'baher.' And 'baher' here meant basically any space that was outside the village that was seen as aspirational.

The west was created as a utopian space where one was not bound by the rules of reality, it was free to wear western clothes, roam around freely, work outside the home, and earn good money. These images of the west derive from the way in which visiting migrants carried themselves, were often they engaged in forms of western consumption, explicitly the ways that young women interacted with the visiting migrants and images of the male and female migrant that is perpetuated through Punjabi popular culture.

And Punjabi popular culture for those of you that might be familiar, really romanticizes the idea of migration as well as a particular image of the male and the female migrant. And women often saw you know the west as a space where they could be independent, not just financially, in terms of their physical mobility and was often constructed in a very stereotypical way often that one would presume.

The urban space was often constructed through women's own interactions with education and employment and the local urban space was associated with urban leisure activities such as going to the mall, shopping, watching movies, wearing fashionable and stylish clothes and engaging in more open interactions with members of the opposite sex.

So often wearing certain kinds of clothes was denoted with being more urban, and I will discuss this a lot more when I talk about the two women, but there was a sense that wearing jeans for

instance or wearing a top was seen as urban whereas wearing uh you know a kind of long tunic with a salwar which is the traditional clothing in Punjab would be seen as more rural.

So, these kinds of distinctions were constantly made by women and also something that they navigated in their fashion choices, right? How they wanted to position themselves vis-a-vis the rural and the urban. An essential aspect of course also of crafting these mobility imaginaries which became a huge part of how young women identified as middle class was looking down upon the village space as an immoral space rife with drugs and violence.

And I will come to this looking down aspect again. So, when we talk about this idea of middle-classness in this context middle-classness emerged as the enterprise of young women and they were sort of involved in this cultural production work. And very much the middle-class identity was constructed in terms of a movement away from the village and the enhancement in status and a distinction away from the lower-class other that existed within the village.

And Liechty for example in his work on the Nepali middle class talks about middle class space "as being separated from the 'vulgar' lives of the elite as well as the low class that is trapped in equally vulgar lifestyles of tradition and poverty" and these kinds of distinctions were also made by young women who would often talk about this respectable in-between space.

And this constructing this respectable in-between space was inextricably linked discourses of caste, class and gender that allowed young women to physically and culturally distinguish themselves from the lower-class vernacular young women who was bound by rural tradition and norms.

So, the middle class then in Chaheru in turn in addition to this kind of discursive construction was also constructed in terms of levels of consumption access to educational facilities and type of household structure. And I talk about the middle class in terms of three different families. So there were migrant families with family members in the Gulf or Europe, professionally employed families where one or more members were employing government jobs and well to do business families.

And these families I refer to as migrant educated and self-employed families respectively, and these families in terms of how they navigated the requirements of middle classness can be seen to imbibe two distinctive cultural ethos, that of migrant and educated. And I understand this in terms of how they spoke about the education of young women and how they engaged in the requirements of middle classness.

So for all these families as soon as it was affordable they would invest in the up higher education of young women and here I'm specifically talking about college education so undergraduate, postgraduate but they construed this very differently so for you know migrant families there was a much greater emphasis on explicit demonstrations of wealth for example through building larger houses hosting large weddings or celebrating any event with a lot of gung-ho and a lot of sort of celebration around it and education of women were seen as important but it was not seen as a form of distinction.

In contrast educated families where the members were employed in government jobs would see education of women as being a form of cultural distinction. They associated it with this idea of 'jankari' or awareness and form of cultural sophistication. So, for them the education of women was tied to a much larger discourse about their distinctiveness and modernity within that local context.

The other metric on which middle class families also deferred was with was the level of security with which they could perform middle class consumption, right so the level of economic security. And I'll be discussing the two girls that I will be talking about, and their sort of navigations is one of them belongs to an educated secure middle class family and the other one belongs to a less secure migrant family. So, I'm going to now sort of end this.

All right so now I'm just going to go into a discussion of these young women and their experiences and how they were using the ideas of education to access mobility and construct these middle-class identities. So Somika is 24 years old belongs to an educated and secure middle-class family. She's the daughter of Balveer, a government bank clerk and a well-respected member of the community. The house that she resides in Chaheru belongs to her maternal grandmother. The family moved to Chaheru when Somika was in school to take care of her ailing grandmother.

The environment in Somika's house is relatively open and egalitarian. In other households, young women often have a formal relationship with their fathers and are careful to conduct themselves in a demure way. In contrast Somika talks freely in the presence of her father and even feels comfortable enough to interject when her father is talking with me. Somika has completed her MA from a college in Jalandhar which is a nearby city, located 23 kilometers from Phagwara and she's preparing to take competitive exams for government posts. She also teaches tuitions to children in the evenings.

Many of our discussions centre on the lack of female education in the village. Like many educated young women in the village who are waiting for opportunities for high status employment to materialize, she often complains about the lack of mobility in her career trajectory and expresses that it's difficult to sit at home for so long and not do anything.

And during my field work period she was preparing for the life insurance corporation of India and government bank exams. Unlike other young women who face greater restrictions around their mobility, Somika has the support from her parents to pursue opportunities that may require her to travel further distances from the village.

Towards the end of my field work Somika began classes for competitive government exams at the Ambedkar Institute in Phagwara. When representatives from the institute came to talk to people in the village about the coaching that they offer, they held a meeting at Somika's house. Somika laments that while many girls showed up to find out about the classes no one is coming to the classes because they think that is too far.

The classes were being held maybe 15 minutes drive from the village. She says “the girls here don't know their special coaching for competitive exams like the bank exams. Even the other girl that went with me and she's from a poorer family in the village didn't know. Even I have been raised here and have the same education, yet I know these things. If you have to do something you have to do it regardless of how hard it is. I have a banking exam for the position of a clerk I've been trying for the last five to six years but I'm confident I will get it.”

In this excerpt, Somika presents herself as a girl, who despite growing up in the village, is well informed, confident and determined. She distinguishes herself from other young women in the village who are characterized as restricted, unaware, and unmotivated.

Somika locates the other young women here in the village space while specifying that even though she has grown up in the village she does not imbibe other young women's concerns and restrictions. This desire to mark oneself as distinct from the village both culturally and physically underlines the narrative of young women, especially from secure middle-class families.

In addition, middle class families often describe the village space as one beset with backwardness, immorality, violence, and drugs and seek to distinguish themselves from the space. For instance, Somika's parents concerned about the social interactions of the village translate to Somika's brothers only spending time with sons of one other family in the village.

And by way of explanation Somika says they're from a good family like ours. This categorization of some people as belonging to a good family while others seen as belonging to an immoral whole reflects valuations about class. The category of good families is reserved for similarly placed secure middle-class families and the site of pollution and immorality is moved to lower class villages. This illustrates the efforts of secure middle-class families to carve a middle-class identity that is dissociated from the stigma attached to lower castes.

In order to better understand Somika's middle class identity and contrast it with Kavita's, it's important to place the narratives about education in the context of their family's social and economic positionings. In contrast to migrant or self-employed families, secure educated families had better links with their urban space.

Many of Somika's relatives lived in Jalandhar and she regularly visited them as well as urban leisure sites like movie theatres and malls. Moreover, Somika's father's employment in a government bank translated to a secure pathway to middle-class consumption.

In contrast, Kavita belongs to a less secure migrant middle-class family with limited and unreliable access to economic resources. Kavita is 23 years old and has completed a MA in history from the nearby Ramgarhia College and she harbours ambitions to move away from the village space through international migration. She has also obtained educational qualifications of a petition and caregiver with this objective in mind.

While she waits to migrate, Kavita is also applying for teaching jobs in the vicinity of the village and says that in the event that migration does not work out, she wants to pursue a PhD.

She belongs to a migrant middle-class family and many of the members of her immediate family reside abroad. She has three older sisters one of them resides in the UK, the other in Italy and another older sister who lives in Chandigarh. Her younger brother, Suresh, was unemployed and waiting to migrate, at the time of my field work.

And while Kavita and her mother often claim her older brother, Ramesh, worked in Bangalore, the gossip in the village was that he was in jail for drug related crimes. The family's insecure economic and moral positioning translated into weaker links to urban modernity.

While Somika's family was able to use their access and exposure to urban modernity as social capital and demonstrate openness to urban western fashions and food habits, in contrast, while Kavita's mother Kanta lacked the economic resources of a more so secure migrant family, she displays a preference for claiming proximity to western migrant lifestyles and her grooming and upkeep of the house.

Kanta's house was one of the only houses in the village that I visited to have a toilet paper and mosquito repellent, which she explained was the consequence of frequent interactions with migrant relatives. But in her interactions the village space, Kavita appeared detached from such projections of urban modernity.

In contrast to other educated young women in the community, who showcased their exposure to urban culture in their clothing, demeanour and movement, Kavita appears to embrace rural styles with greater ease and willingness. Typically, young women from middle class families limit their movement within the village and look forward to planning trips to the city, engaging in urban leisure activities and adorning more urban clothes.

In contrast, Kavita is more comfortable walking around in a village and her visits outside this village space were limited to when her sisters were visiting. The only time Kavita slips into an urban style is when she goes shopping to the local market with her sisters or with me. On these occasions she dresses herself in a pair of jeans and a top. This is contrasted with Somika who would often don jeans and a sleeveless top, even while at home.

In the village these activities position Kavita in different ways, in the community often other educated young women in the community express surprise over Kavita's educational qualifications and do not evaluate her as having the same social positioning as them.

In addition, Kavita's conversations around education and mobility also reveal different concerns from Somika. While Somika is able to use her educatedness to mark her distinction from lower class women in the village, Kavita points to the difficulties she is encountering in negotiating access to education and employment opportunities.

Kavita's ability to pursue these are closely defined by her migrant relatives. For instance, towards the end of my field where Kavita recounts that a few months earlier she received an offer to work in a bank in Chandigarh, but she was not allowed to work there because her maternal grandmother who lives in Canada said that she either wants her to come to Canada

through the nanny visa, which is the caregiver visa and be independent, or get married. She refuses to sponsor/support Kavita's PhD studies in India. On another day Kavita tells me her sister who lives in Italy is pressurizing her to get married.

In explaining the power that is exercised by these migrant relatives, Kavita says, "You don't get it. Over here, people who live abroad and who make more money make the decisions in the family. In our house, the Italy sister makes the decisions." In addition, Kavita has to manage the concerns raised and presented by a non-migrant family member.

Kavita frequently refers to getting permission from Ramesh to pursue an employment opportunity that involves traveling to another city. She's also responsible for a lot of household work because her mother suffers from polio. So, she also wonders that if she leaves who will take care of the house and take care of her mother.

Thus, unlike Somika, who has better access to opportunities and greater permissibility to travel long distances for education and employment, Kavita's conversations pertain to the obstacles she has to encounter. She often expresses a sense of helplessness and says "haan pichhe rahi gae," translating to "we have been left behind." This statement captures the sense of immobility and stuckness Kavita feels as she navigates and accommodates to the preferences of her family.

While both Somika and Kavita draw upon their educatedness to claim a middle class positioning in Chaheru, they occupy this middle classness very differently. While Kavita references movement to spaces outside the village, her everyday discourse pertains to negotiating access to education and further employment rather than using her educational status to carve a distinctive identity.

In contrast, Somika and similarly placed women were more engaged in using education as a site of distinction by emphasizing young women's ability to travel independently and pursue opportunities for education and employment, Somika is able to claim proximity to an urbanized or modern idea of female mobility.

In her work with Manipur Chamars, Ciotti also asserts that upwardly mobile Chamar women are attempting to appropriate the modern that is linked to the city space while distancing themselves from the village. So through these sort of interactions of both Kavita and Somika with education we see how both of them are using education as an important tool for developing cultural knowledge and status.

And as Franco points out, young women's plans and aspirations around education are significant because it reveals that the girls are saying that they can imagine their lives and themselves not only as mothers and wives whose interests and needs are embedded in those of their families but also as active participants in wider networks of social relations.

While Kavita limited by economic resources at her disposal, makes less strong claims to educational mobility, the discourse presented by Somika operates as an ideal that is referenced

and selectively emulated by differently located young women in Chaheru. Thus, in looking at sort of the non-tangible aspects of educational mobility, it is possible to see young women as invested in a complex process of social change and identity formation while they wait for certain mobility outcomes to materialize.

Despite its inability to guarantee these mobility outcomes, education allows young women in Chaheru to access urban spaces, develop familiarity with urban cultural moves, emulate aspects of the urban middle class and position themselves as the cultural middle class within the village space. Thank you.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Thank you so much for that really interesting talk. We'll move into the question-and-answer period now. So just a reminder, feel free to raise your hand on zoom or type into the chat, if you have a question you'd like to ask yourself, you can turn on your microphone and video to ask your questions. But if you're more comfortable typing it into the chat then I am happy to read out a question. Okay... and yes, I see your hand, so please go ahead.

Tahsin Aakhter:

Thank you very much. Hi, I'm sorry Sugandha that I joined your discussion three minutes later, so I might have missed some of the introductory portion but thank you very much for allowing me to join this program. This is very interesting for me because I'm also a PhD student at Memorial University of Newfoundland and I'm also doing research—I'm in my first year, just moving to second year, and comprehensive exams preparation—doing similar kind of research, that what is the precarious employment condition of South Asian women in Canada?

So, it kind of connects me with your research very closely I believe. Thank you very much for your nice presentation. I understand that's a very complicated research. So yeah, Chaheru you said I had initially I had some questions, like what was the theoretical framework you had been using and what were the methodological tools you were using?

And, mobility, at first I didn't understand whether it is inside the country mobility you were talking about or, now I understand, it is more about international, but if I'm not correct, please correct me, Sugandha, that is it that you are talking you said about three groups of people, that is the migrant and the self-employed, and the other one I forgot, so you were talking about both of the people that were doing immigration in the country or outside of the country, like you said gulf country and other countries and is it like that were also inside the country, residing in India?

So, there I had some confusion. And I know India and especially because it's a Hindu dominating country and the caste is a very important social indicator that represents any of the class in middle, upper, lower, so with this migration do you think like you told gave us two examples of Somika and Kavita and so do you think or what is your findings, do you have so from which

caste group, Dalit, you said lower caste, so is there any change when they do migration, they have some economic benefits or economic transformation?

Is there any social change because I still know Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudras, they all remain in their specific castes but with this economic mobility, does their caste position also I mean I understand it will not change but the social position, it is a very difficult context, so how it moves or takes space the social status of the woman?

Already women, lower caste people are in a very lower position in the society in India, but when their family members or they themselves move to another country, is there a very viable or very dominant change that is one thing? Another thing was about a citizenship.

So, because India does not allow, as far as I know, still now it doesn't promise dual citizenship, so how they manage this space between a foreign country and their own home country while they are not allowed for the citizenship, was keeping world citizenship? So, there are lots of questions I think I have already placed. Yeah, that's it for now, thank you.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Do you want me to respond to that or should we take some more?

Elizabeth Finnis:

I think it's up to you. I do see a question that's possibly related to some of the questions just asked. A question from Raj: "does economic security bring social acceptance and social respect as well?" So maybe you could bunch some of those questions together and then I have a couple other questions that are coming up too.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Okay, great, thank you so much for those very interesting questions. So just to clarify a few of the earlier points that Tahsin, did I say your name right, okay?

Tahsin Aakhtar:

Yes, thanks.

Sugandha Nagpal:

So, in terms of methodology and I really should have mentioned this, it's an ethnographic study. So, I was located in the village for 11 months and I was living in the village and it's so based on my interactions with the young women within the space of the village and specifically in their home.

My theoretical construct, so I draw on this idea, of course I looked at the idea, the interactions between caste and class but the concept that I was using for this particular presentation was the idea of middle classness. And I use mobility in terms of the imaginary of mobility in young women imagining the physical and cultural movement away from the village.

And so how it operates at the level of imaginary but also mobility in terms of certain mobility outcomes that then allow for that movement or represent that movement. So, things like government employment and migration were always international migration. So, I don't talk about there are internal migrants that live within this village, but I don't talk about that, I'm talking about young women who are local to that village and who are planning to migrate internationally.

I mean the question of does caste position change with economic mobility and I think that links to the second question as well about economic security leading to social acceptance, I think that's a million-dollar question, I think there's a lot of debate on this and there's varying views on what does caste mobility look like under conditions of neoliberalism, does it mean passing caste, moving beyond caste and class becoming more important.

And I think in terms of, I'll try to answer this in terms of what I found in my work. So, in interactions with these young women, they often used caste to talk about the projects of class mobility.

So in contrast to sort of the older men in the community who were often politically involved with various parties, as well as certain kinds of caste based movements, for them caste identity continued to have a very strong role in their everyday lives but young women rarely talked about caste and it was really for them this class formation that was and which is why I use the construct of middle classness because for them it was very much trying to distinguish themselves from the lower class other. And caste was mobilized so as a way to move the site of pollution from oneself to the lower class other.

And so caste emerged in that way in terms of the discursive interactions of these young women but of course caste was playing out in terms of the outcomes right so of course there's historical continuities in the fact that these young women were not able to access respectable employment, migration was much more difficult for them, they were not studying in very elite institutions which meant that their cultural capital was compromised right, so all of those and networks not having strong networks to rely on so all of those things were of course influenced by caste but there was a discursive kind of dissociation and a lot of people have talked about how Dalits and lower caste attain class mobility, often there is a movement to dissociate from their caste identity and relate much more strongly with their class identity.

And in terms of the question about does this lead to what kind of development outcomes or social acceptance does it lead to. So in terms of their own telling of the history of the village that it led to some very strong indicators in terms of economic mobility and development, whether or not it leads to social acceptance is it had actually a lot of people have argued that

increasing economic mobility of Dalits in Punjab have actually led to greater clashes between the upper caste Jats and the Dalits.

So it has actually had the contrary, it's basically led to contesting politically and socially for same piece of the pie and so that has not necessarily led to positive outcomes in terms of social acceptance but there has been the context of Dalit mobility in Punjab is quite strong, especially with the Ravidassia movement which is a very strong religious and political movement which talks about a distinctive Dalit identity, so it's almost like this particular community and this links again to this particular community in the Doaba region of Punjab, other regions of Punjab don't have the same kind of same level of Dalit mobility and also other Dalit communities are not as well positioned as the Ad-Dharmis who've also done well politically and this religious movement has also been quite important and they've also appropriated a lot of the language of Jat dominance.

For example, a lot of cars you will see in Punjab in fact even abroad where there's this is the Ravidassia diaspora for instance you will see that they will have terms like "putara chamara" which basically translates to "I'm the son of a Chamar" which is reclaiming and conferring their lower caste identity with positive attributes.

So, there's all these interesting assertions of Dalit mobility but whether it is translated into positive outcomes is contested and I think that's what we also find when speaking to these young women, that there is this negotiation that's very palpable that's happening and trying to create spaces for mobility but it doesn't necessarily translate into outcomes at that level. I hope that answered the questions.

Tahsin Aakhtar:

Yeah, and what about the citizenship negotiations like you said, some of the families, they migrate totally from India to some other places outside of the country and some of the people, they have their members moved to other countries but some of the family members like Kavita's belongs to a migrant family.

Her sisters are abroad but Somika's family is in the country but she's planning to do migration, so I believe you have some other cases who might have some other forms of migration experiences, so how do they manage that I mean if they're taking citizenship outside of the country so what their status so if they are totally migrating from the country so do they have any space in the country anymore or in Doaba region or how the compromise or how they I mean they negotiate the spaces between these two spaces as migrant community. If you can shed some light on that.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Yeah so, my work was focused on young women when this in between awaiting stage so they were not migrants yet and they're waiting to be migrants so I can't say much about how the young women would negotiate citizenship, but I do know for example from interactions with

some of the visiting migrants who were permanently staying in the US for instance and would be visiting the village.

So, I mean those houses are an indicator of their continuing linkages with the rural community and they do visit, they come every year for a couple of months, especially the older migrants and I'm not sure about the negotiation with citizenship but there is something called OCI, which is a status, was something that I have because I'm also Canadian.

So, I do have OCI status which allows you kind of lifelong visa to be in India so I'm presuming a lot of them have OCI status. So, in terms of legally that's probably how they would negotiate. Of course, there were many cases of illegal migration as well.

So I do think in terms of the linkages with the rural, I think a lot of the benefits of migration is premised on maintaining those linkages that those linkages allow them to continually assert their status as the migrant so without those linkages to the rural where will they assert their status as the migrant, so that's very important to continuing migration and continuing the aspirations of migration from Punjab, So those linkages are actually very important to that migration story.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Thank you so much for responding to those questions. There's one in the chat that I'm gonna read out and then I see that someone has their hand up and I see another one has just come up in the chat. So, I think I will ask from Disha: "what were the main challenges you faced in your work?" And then I'll move to Varun, who has his hand up.

Sugandha Nagpal:

All right, thank you for your question Disha. The main challenges I faced in my work were accessing the field site. So, I'm an upper-caste Hindu woman, just kind of waltzed into this village. My project was initially supposed to be more linked to the Ravidassia movement and a particular sort of development project that they have, and I sort of was locating a village close by to that and I happened upon this particular village, and I faced a very long period of rejection, of people being very suspicious of my presence, thinking I'm some kind of a spy.

So, you know it was very difficult to navigate access to the field site because I didn't go through an in between some kind of organization or NGO I just sort of went by myself um but it was also very interesting I mean I think that that also gave me particular insights and the focus on women from upwardly mobile families or middle class families derived from that kind of interaction as well because of my own positionality.

I sort of represented certain aspirational aspects for that particular you know subset within the community, so they were much more willing to talk to me to discuss their plans for the future and especially the young women that were closer to me in age. So, it was I think the hardest thing was the access to the field site but then once that was it, I think it took a few months and

then after that it was very, very fruitful I formed very you know friendships with a number of these young women, I'm still in touch with them. So, I think it was very, very rewarding, so usually the most challenging things over the long term if they pan out tend to also be very rewarding.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Wonderful, thank you so much. Varun, I see you have your hand up so if you would like to unmute yourself and or put your video on feel free to ask your question.

Varun Joshi:

Thank you so much, Elizabeth. Thank you so much for the presentations, Sugandha. It was very, very interesting. I had a couple questions, first being just trying to clarify in regards to constructions of the west in amongst the individuals you were around. You mentioned how different Punjabi culture and the arts contributes towards romanticization of a different phenomenon. I was wondering, is this more so an appropriation of Punjabi culture by more dominant, more powerful artistic institutions that, think about Bollywood instantly, or is this something that's happening more at the ground level?

Sugandha Nagpal:

Thank you, Varun, for that question. So, I was referring specifically to Punjabi movies and songs, so I wasn't talking about Bollywood at all so of course that's a larger conversation about the appropriation of Punjabi culture in Bollywood. But I was talking about Punjabi songs and movies that are consumed and produced, well not produced locally, but are consumed locally.

A number of these songs will show men, migrant men and sort of acquiring some of these credentials of modern, urban consumption and try and that becoming a huge sort of selling point or something that increases their marketability with the young women and young women sort of also showing their modernity and as well as their appropriation of urban, western fashions and their way of sort of straddling the rural and the urban. So I mean there's a number of movies that come to mind and songs as well recently.

I can't remember the songs but the movies, this number of movies that were premised on this migration trajectory where you see that the man is, the male protagonist is always the one that's more rustic so even though he's a migrant, he's still very much in touch with his rural roots whereas the woman is seen as emulating more urban modernity and being more sophisticated and it's interesting that these sort of parallels were also playing out in the way which young women and men talked about migration in Chaheru so would often not be, so the education it was primarily pursued, higher education was primarily being pursued by these young women, men would usually try and migrate after they've completed high school or even before.

So, a lot of those trajectories actually played out in in the ways that migration was conceptualized.

Varun Joshi:

Thank you so much for that clarification. The second thing I wanted to ask was in regards to specifically conceptions of the middle class and how not conceptually middle class but I loved how you discussed that a lot of the women you talked to, the notions of caste didn't come up as much so you kind of talked about middle class and I was wondering, in regards to class mobility, did you happen to notice if diet as, just a way to examine the relationship between individuals and animals, if that played anything into it because of different restrictions, different what's considered appropriate for certain castes to eat or whatnot, like did more consumption of meat influence how one was able to have, a particular woman was able to participate in class mobility or rejection of it. I'm just wondering if relationships of animals, I just use diet as an example but if that had any influence on class mobility.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Yeah no that's a really interesting question and that was, so I looked at consumption and in that food and fashion were the major things that I looked at and diet was an interesting area because it was both tied to ideas of caste and trying to override and trying to create a kind of respectability so a lot of people even if they were not following the Ravidassia movement, they were following some other movement, religious movement and a lot of it required being vegetarian. So most young women were vegetarian and the young men would often be the ones that consume meat or eggs.

And so there was a kind of larger context of trying to establish respectability through consumption choices and diet was the major, it was a huge part of that and sort of religious practices as well linkedly but this you know also diet came into play interestingly in the way that young women negotiated the urban and rural identities or parts of themselves where there were certain families that for example I talk about the educated and secure middle class families that made an explicit effort to incorporate food from other sort of more urban parts of you know India so maybe things that people would eat in Chandigarh, would eat in Delhi.

So they would have sort of cuisine that was more representative of different parts of India and something that one would more associate with an urban cuisine whereas there were other families that were more oriented towards the rural, so less secure middle class families that had a more simple and rustic way of cooking.

So their cooking usually was very basic involved very few spices and they did not incorporate all these various kinds of dishes and so there was and so consumption of food became a very way important way of denoting both your cultural orientation and the ways that you identify with this idea of urban modernity as and your particular middle class identity that you're trying to claim as well as you know conferring a certain kind of respectability.

So a lot of the lower class families for instance were okay with consuming meat. So with this kind of respectability and trying to sort of not consume meat was something that way you know happening more with middle-class families. So yeah, that's a very important point that emerged.

Varun Joshi:

Thank you so much.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Thanks Varun, and yeah, I also had a little question to myself about if clothing and house styles are markers of these changes, are there other visual or representative markers that people are demonstrating. So, you just answered my question without me even having to ask it, that's great. Now there's a question in the chat from Harshita.

So, she says "you mentioned the Ravidassia networks in the diaspora, were women in Chaheru able to contact or access them and secondly, what reason was there behind mobility being defined internationally rather than intra-nationally into urban spaces? Did this impact the imaginary of middle classness? My sense is that caste plays a role here but would love to hear more about it."

Sugandha Nagpal:

Okay so I'm gonna I feel like I forgot the first part of that question. Hold on let me try and find it. Oh yes caste networks in the diaspora. So that happened interpersonally so based on people's family linkages or if they were part of these certain kinds of religious movements, but my sense was that it happened, yeah it happened interpersonally, it happened through family members so I mean I can't recall people talking about these networks and you know as a kind of larger thing it was more that my sister might know someone or it was more very, very personal.

And I don't think beyond these kinds of very personal linkages, I don't think while remaining in the village they felt some huge access to the diaspora, I don't think they did, I think there was a lot of I mean even the process of negotiating your migration journey was very complicated because they didn't have all the information, they were often misinformed by agents, by even family members so there wasn't a lot of clarity on what is required, am I actually fulfilling requirements.

There was a lot of suspicion that family members are not making the full effort, family members who are abroad are not making the full effort to ensure it's. I think it's only so I mean the sense that I get because I didn't follow their post-migration journey, in fact most of them are still there but their post once if one follows their post-migration journey some of the ways in which those networks become important might become more clear, but within the context of village it didn't really seem to play a role it was more through family members if at that.

And mobility being defined internationally rather than inter-nationally and here I mean largely because we're talking about a context with a very strong culture of migration, so the Doaba region of Punjab it's sort of associated with NRI city. Phagwara is known for instance as an NRI city so of course there is that very strong imperative to engage in international migration but having said that there was intra-national mobility as well where people did talk about, especially some of the young women did talk about going to a certain place for education and employment opportunities but even while these opportunities were being pursued, migration was always playing out in the background so it was seen as okay, I might pursue this form of urban employment where I go and maybe live in another city for some time, although again this was very rare.

Most women were not able to sort of convince their families that I'm going to be, should be allowed to move to another city to work or to pursue my education. So I think there were three women that were able to do that, for most women they were, they had to make those negotiations with their family and for them it was being within the vicinity but even when this kind of international mobility was pursued, migration was always playing out in the background so this was seen as almost a stepping stone for migration for most of the young women.

There were cases of in these sort of educated middle class families, some of the men contesting this idea of migration as mobility and saying that these people migrate and then what's the benefit of it and trying to assert education and employment within the urban space as being you know a legitimate alternative or for being a better alternative but again this was a very and at some point I do want to probably write something about that but I think that was very it was not the predominant narrative, it was still a very sort of minority voice within this context where the caste plays a role here.

I mean I don't think caste plays a role in terms of people wanting to migrate, I think that very, I mean if anything upper-caste want to, are able to and also want to migrate just as much, I think that caste plays a role in terms of your ability to migrate especially to countries where you get citizenship as opposed to the gulf and to move beyond labor migration, so of course it impedes that ability and also migration becomes part of the story of caste mobility but I don't think it's necessarily shaping aspirations for migration, for international migration.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Great, thank you so much and there are a few more questions coming up. We are running close to our time but I think we have a few minutes left to answer, so there's a question from Bharat, who says "you spoke about the role culturally-shaped mental models (narratives, identities, categories, expectations, judgements, world-views) through which people process information and make choices may or may not foreground caste. But you also spoke in terms of actual outcomes for these two women where their caste status plays a role. How do you maintain a methodological balance in your work? Also, 'place and space' plays a role in shaping caste and class identities. Does the specific geography of the Punjab also influence outcomes?"

Sugandha Nagpal:

All right thank you so much, that's a very loaded question. I'm not sure how to answer the second part but I'll take the first one.

In terms of this method, the methodological balance, I think what happened as a result of my positioning in the village in the homes of these young women, a lot of my data is on the imaginaries and discursive representations or ideas of mobility because I wasn't really able so I mean ideally and in the long run I'd be able to, we want to design a study where I can study mobility outcomes over a period of time so I don't think I can speak much to the outcomes based on the way that my study went except say that they were not able to attain the outcomes that they wanted to, that they aspired to within that time frame that I was there and also when I followed up later.

So, I think that it is much more so in terms of I think it's much more towards the first part where I'm talking about these imaginaries and I think it would be interesting to see how these outcomes pan out over a period of time.

Your second part about place and space playing an important role in shaping caste and class identities and yeah, I mean the geography of... I'm not sure what you mean by the geography of Punjab but Punjab being a place where migration has become a very dominant discourse and has been for a while, that does shape the ways in which class and caste are understood, so class specifically that class mobilities understood very much through migration through particular forms of consumption that have become more mainstream or become you know part of the dominant narrative through migrants right, so a lot of times migrants come back and they evoke a lot of these representations because the kind of you know consumption that they engage in and they are very explicitly involved in you know showing and marking themselves as migrants through processes of consumption.

So I mean the context of Punjab and migration as being a very important metric of success and aspiration within that context is very important in terms of how class mobility is conceptualized and I think relatedly it then also allowed for a lot of the story of Dalit mobility especially in the Doaba region of Punjab and with this particular group of Dalits is linked to migration so they will in their own telling of their story will often talk about migration as being very important. I don't know if you want to ask something else but that's the way I interpret it. I don't know if you want to unmute and if you want to clarify if I didn't get some part of your question.

Bharat Punjabi:

No, no. Thank you, no that was a very good answer, very informative, very insightful presentation. Thank you very much, I mean I think you answered my questions. Thanks, thank you.

Elizabeth Finnis:

Well, I think we are at 12:14 so I am going to say thank you so much Dr. Nagpal for this talk and the really excellent discussion that emerged from it. It's been wonderful to host you and hear about your work. I also want to thank everybody in the audience for joining us today and I invite you to visit the CIRCLE website for recordings of any webinars that you might have missed.

You can also join the CIRCLE email list by sending an email to the address that I'm just about to enter into the chat [indiaresearch-L@uoguelph.ca]. There, I've done it, if you would like to learn more about future webinars. This actually concludes our seminar– our summer webinar series. What a great way to finish the summer series.

So please do check out the website for fall events and again thank you, Dr. Nagpal. This was wonderful and I hope that you all have a great day or evening and take care.

Sugandha Nagpal:

Thank you so much for this opportunity and for all the lovely questions and thank you so much Elizabeth.

[End of transcript]