

**Middle-Class Transnational Migration and Its Margins in *The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program***

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*The Opportunity Trap* by Pallavi Banerjee takes us into the life worlds of two groups of skilled Indian migrants in the United States, nurses and IT workers, and of their spouses who join them on residence dependent visas. From the outset, Banerjee makes clear that although a middle-class background and a good education may determine access to labor markets, a sense of marginalization permeates the lived experiences of workers and is deeply embedded within the mechanisms of the migration regime and its associated bureaucracies. The nurses (who are mostly women) experience substantial limitations in career progression, are often overlooked for promotion, and complain of being treated as second-class workers by their US counterparts. IT workers (who are mostly men) find themselves having to embody a racialized stereotype of the passive, uncomplaining South Asian worker who is content to pull long hours and deal with the more mundane aspects of IT labor. Both groups are issued visas that provide temporary worker status. This temporary status plays into a disciplining sense of precarity, as nurses and IT workers are wary of raising complaints regarding treatment, working conditions, or pay, as losing a post can lead to expulsion back to India.

These kinds of narratives are not unusual. They have been detailed by others regarding transnational aspects of the Indian labor market and various migration regimes. Banerjee's book focuses on another group of actors—those on the even more precarious and highly constraining H-4 dependent visa that is provided to the spouses of workers. Banerjee introduces this aspect of the visa regime from her own experience of obtaining an H-4 dependent visa. From the moment of issuance to entry at the border, she describes how she was referred to in the third person by immigration officials who addressed only her partner.

Although Banerjee's own experience was relatively brief, it clearly opened a window for her research into a little-explored area of the US migration regime. For many of Banerjee's interlocutors,

however, H-4 dependent status could last far longer and become a defining feature of everyday life. Indeed, it was not only stark impacts of treatment at the border or limited access to the labor market (some part-time work is allowed) that inhibited them. Spouses were constantly reminded of their status in all sorts of small ways. Everyday bureaucratic materialities, such as the issuance of driving licenses that were not usable as ID (hence limiting even the ability to buy a drink in a bar without carrying a full passport) acted as constant reminders of their status.

Many of the women married to the IT workers featured in the book had successful careers in India prior to accompanying their spouses to the United States. Most now described a life on hold, a limbo state in which the trappings of middle-class legitimacy could no longer be forged in the workplace but were instead confined to domestic space, homemaking, and motherhood. Banerjee details how the migration regime played into the reproduction of racialized and gendered stereotypes regarding the status of South Asian women; women who remained confined within the American imagination as passive, domestically oriented, and largely withdrawn from public space. And while many navigated these conditions, or threw themselves into voluntary work, others found it too much to bear and returned to India, in some cases resulting in divorce. For those who returned after a protracted period away, re-entering the Indian labor market proved challenging. CV-gaps often resulted in having to take posts at lower levels than they might have expected previously.

Many interpersonal aspects of the US migration regime are featured in the book (including race, class, and caste), but it is gender to which Banerjee gives prominence. For dependent visa holders, it is the wives of IT workers who are most discussed, but Banerjee does not ignore the experiences of male spouses. Here, though, she describes methodological challenges as many were not keen to discuss a status they often saw as shameful and degrading. For those with whom Banerjee did manage to open a discourse, life was often shaped within a framework of failed masculinity. No longer a breadwinner, and unable to access many of the identity markers of a middle-class Indian manhood (beyond informal, off-the-books work), many male spouses struggled with their mental health or, in some cases, turned to alcohol as one of the few easily accessible "male" pursuits. Others

simply refused to permanently join their wives in the United States and instead made occasional trips from India.

To mitigate, to a degree, the sense of lost masculinity experienced by their husbands, and to meet feminized social expectations many nurses took on a double burden. Hence, nurses often juggled unpaid domestic labor and child care with jobs requiring long hours of work. Although husbands did, to degrees, take on some domestic-care duties, these were often kept quiet. Men expressed concern that exposing their redefined roles to friends and kin at home would result in mockery. Simultaneously, families retained a patriarchal household structure through male control of familial decision-making. This approach allowed a degree of reclamation of accepted masculine norms by dependent male spouses.

Taken together, the focus on gender and its intersections with other intersectional aspects of Indian migrant life in the United States—along with the emphasis on the experiences of dependent visa-holding spouses—makes *The Opportunity Trap* a valuable contribution to the field of migration studies. Perhaps, though, the author could have given a little more detail around a greater number of agency considerations. While dependent spouses were undoubtedly constrained, there were hints of options that could be construed as making claims to citizenship, even in a context in which this was not officially recognized. Such possibilities are, of course, class bound and rarely accessible to lower class labor migrants working in areas such as construction. (See Chambers, Thomas. *Networks, Labour and Migration among Indian Muslim Migrants*, 2020, reviewed within this Forum). Yet, examples from elsewhere emphasize degrees of capacity, even within the most marginalizing of migration frameworks. In the United Kingdom's highly restrictive asylum system, for example, the country's strict citizenship regime is challenged even from the most marginalized of populations.

Indeed, Banerjee details how campaigns among dependent visa holders, and her own advocacy efforts, resulted in President Obama's executive decision in 2014 to end the dependent visa system. Yet, even prior to the emergence of the campaign to bring about this change, engagement in voluntary work and community organizing was (particularly among the dependents of IT workers)

saw active participation in civil society and, although still constrained, had echoes of the types of agency enacted by middle-class migrants in the Gulf. Also connected to the Gulf, and relevant for other contexts, the literature around “trailing spouses” offers useful comparison. As this term is most often applied to white European spouses, it allows similarities and differences to be drawn out between Banerjee’s context, other geographical spaces, and differently racialized migration interests.

Global care chains (GCCs) are a central area of concern that provides useful comparison. Nursing, and more intimate aspects of migration experiences, fit into the global migration literature, but are only hinted at in the book. “Care” and the layering of public and domestic spaces, within the lives of Banerjee’s interlocutors, is a continuous presence. Care is one of the commodities that the US migration regime is explicitly designed to extract through the labor of transnational migrants in fields such as nursing. It is also a constant area of negotiation, tension, friction, and hope in the lives of the migrant workers that she details. Perhaps more extensive ethnographic description could have taken us deeper into lives of workers to detail how embodied and emotional aspects of their everyday experiences play out.

As with any text, possibilities for further avenues of enquiry or development of methodological frameworks are evident. Regardless, this is a book I strongly recommend to scholars working on migration South Asian diasporas, and related fields. Given the focus of this set of reviews, it is also a reminder that class (although powerful) is not the only interest in shaping migration experiences at the subjective level.

Final manuscript of a review of:

*The opportunity trap : high-skilled workers, Indian families, and the failures of the Dependent Visa Program* [ISBN: 9781479852918] / by Pallavi Banerjee (NYU Press, 2022).