

Preface

Patterns of migration and settlement among Indian women are as diverse as that of the overall Indian diaspora. They have shared space with men in most of the groups and streams of people moving beyond Indian borders. However, the initial theoretical and empirical models either omitted or undermined their experiences under homogenised perceptions. As a result, women's voices, experiences and their critical role in the success story of the Indian diaspora remain to be unnoticed and unmapped. Feminist epistemological interventions in diaspora and migration studies made gender fundamental to the critical understanding of migration and settlement processes and the ongoing course of identity formation in a foreign setting. However, the centrality of gender still revolved around the 'victimhood' or 'passive agents' paradigm, particularly with regard to women from the Third World. The feminist and subaltern scholarship did take note of this stereotypical representation and started articulating the voice of the 'other' woman in the receiving societies. The increasing feminisation of international migration from and among the developing societies further made the incorporation of the sociocultural moorings of the women from these societies an imperative. As the diasporas are embedded in both host and homelands simultaneously, the natural corollary is that factors from both the host land and the homeland—including gender relations and gender hierarchies—have an impact on diasporic women. Feminist inquiries suggest that migration and diasporic conditions, on the one hand, can be liberating, bringing more egalitarianism in the family and opening avenues for women to strengthen their agency and create new opportunities for themselves. However, on the other hand, it is also sometimes evident that gender hierarchy gets reinforced and becomes more rigid and traditional than in the homeland. Although standing 'in-between' the two worlds—with complex realities of unequal power dynamics of the homeland and stereotypical spaces of the host land—Indian women tend to experience conflicting subjectivities of freedom and subjugation, yet they do find a freedom for self-exploration and deliberation to conceive new identities and move beyond the fixed definitions of femininity.

This volume is an attempt to capture the processes of migration and settlement of women in the Indian diaspora during the colonial as well as contemporary period

and map their struggles, challenges and agency. The principal aim motivating the present volume is to look beyond the stereotypical representation of Indian women as the 'victim', the 'passive agents' or mere 'custodians of Indian culture', and bring into focus the agency and space women have shown in redefining roles and transforming the lives of their own and those of their families in process of migration and settlement. I am not a scholar of gender studies but during my work on Indian diaspora and transnational migration I came across various issues related to women and developed an understanding of their problems, challenges and their agency in addressing and redressing the complex issues faced by them; structuring and restructuring the cultural formats of patriarchy and gender relations; managing the emerging conflicts over what is to be transmitted to the following generations, and how social history is to be interpreted; renegotiating their domestic roles and embracing new professional and educational successes; and adjusting with the institutional structures of the host state. The essays included in the volume discuss women in the Indian diaspora from a multidisciplinary perspective eschewing the essentialising tendencies and acknowledging the intersectionality of the gender with race, class, religion, national and several other categories. Overall, this volume resists the portrayal of women in the Indian diaspora only as victims by emphasising their agency. Such an effort will privilege women's experiences and perspectives by raising consciousness and developing a deeper understanding about their issues in academia and among policymakers.

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