Abstract

The turn of the 21st century has seen a rising trend of migration from the African continent to India. Key to these trajectories are the opportunities for small scale trade and entrepreneurial ventures that India offers through which it emerges as a mobility destination for a wide range of people from Africa. While the actual numbers of migrants remain inconspicuous, relative to the population of India, Africans constitute a hyper-visible entry on India’s social landscape. Fractious exchanges and racial tensions have accompanied this migration and the figure of the ‘African migrant’ has largely come to be constructed as ‘illegal’ in the imagination of India. Nigerian migrants, in particular, stand vilified in public discourse as ‘visa overstayers’ and as allegedly involved in a plethora of nefarious activities. In a context where the shadow of illegality permeates everyday life in both subtle and explicit way, how do Nigerian migrants locate and position their work in India as traders and business people? What are the negotiations with illegality that their migrant status and livelihood practices so necessitate? What are the kinds of opportunities and frictions emerging from such entanglements?

This thesis engages critically with the notion of illegality and explores the nebulous grounds upon which it rests, the imaginaries it concocts and the everyday negotiations it necessitates. Empirically, the study draws upon 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with migrants from West Africa, particularly from Nigeria, as well as with Indian neighbours, landlords, property brokers, traders and vendors, police officers and lawyers located across Delhi. This work argues that illegality as a charge levelled against Nigerian migrants draws on more than and other than the law. Illegality, in this conceptualization, is more than a static charge related to legal transgression; rather, it carries with it a fluidity that casts a large net over a multitude of behaviours, practices and beings deemed deviant. At the same time, the study contends that illegality, as a discursive terrain and set of practices and relations, entails a dynamism that both precludes and generates opportunity in a multitude of ways. For the indeterminacy of illegality also allows for migrants’ creative self-fashioning as entrepreneurial subjects, through which livelihoods are materialized and negotiations with political and social authority rendered tangible.

Situated at the intersection of Migration Studies, South Asia Studies and Anthropology, In The Shadow of Illegality is an interdisciplinary inquiry that explores the fault lines in ‘illegality’ that work to produce variegated hues of uncertainty in the everyday of migrants from Africa. Moving beyond a focus on illegality as a singular status of criminality or legal dispossession, this study highlights the frictions and contradictions through which entrepreneurial opportunities, notions of illegality and racialization processes intersect and mediate the everyday lives of migrants from the African continent in Delhi.