Editorial

This inaugural issue of the Journal for Sociology and Social Anthropology is mindful of the most challenging contemporary circumstances we are currently facing globally. The recent housing crisis in the USA and subsequent bankruptcy of several of the major financial institutions in Wall Street brought about a ripple effect that is effectively reshaping the world economy and international relations at the end of the first decade in the 21st century. Against the background of a global recession that is due to questionable practices among financial institutions in western democracies and the support that they receive/d from their governments, the rest of the developing world experienced shock waves in their financial, import and export markets that forced them to withdraw and reassess in ways that brought about high levels of unemployment and underemployment. While this situation heralded open announcements by western governments - that they were officially in economic recession, they cannot however be solely blamed for the woes of unfavorable market dynamics and high unemployment rates in the developing countries.

The situations in the developing world are characterized by a range of factors that are reflections of varying historical and contemporary factors which defies any simplistic generalizations about them. The quality of political leadership, population sizes, natural resources, infrastructural development and the availability of an educated and motivated workforce, among other issues, are crucial to determining what push and pull factors prevail for a country’s population to feel inspired to either remain and contribute towards their development or to migrate. When they migrate, what factors inspire or compel migrants to remit to their families back home? The papers’ that make up this edition, restricted to migration to and from various countries, refer both explicitly and implicitly to the issues that are mentioned here. We need to bear in mind that while migration is often about relocating to another part of one’s country for the sake of social and economic mobility, that migrants reasons and long term intentions vary substantially from one country to another.

In the cases of China and Zimbabwe, migration to other parts of the world is on a relatively large scale. But there are significant differences in both countries with respect to population sizes, quality of leadership and the motivations for and mediums through which money is channeled to their countries. China’s population size is in the region of 1.4 billion people while Zimbabwe’s is less than 15 million with a de facto population of 50 percent or less. In a 4-day meeting for non-resident Indians in New Delhi in January 2010 Indian government officials estimated remittances by Chinese migrants living outside their country for the 2008-2009 financial year amount to about US$145 billion, while the amount for Zimbabwe amounted to US$1 billion. Indeed while a greater contribution by Chinese citizens is not unexpected because of the sheer size of its migrant population overseas, it is the political conditions and relative trust in the state that they have in remitting through official channels into China. The same cannot be said for Zimbabwans living outside their country, not only as a result of mismanagement of their economy, but also because its currency has lost value against all other international currencies. People within Zimbabwe feel safer to trade with South African rands or US dollars rather than in their own currency. When such currencies are traded within Zimbabwe it is carried out under conditions of extreme secrecy for fear of retribution by the state against individuals, families or companies. In the period 2008-2009 while the remittances to China constituted less than 2 per cent of its the GDP, remittances to Zimbabwe have helped save the country from ruin. It is estimated that up to 1.5 million US dollars per day enter Zimbabwe through the “parallel market” – which offers better rates of exchange than the Zimbabwean Reserve Bank, whose rates of exchange are 50 percent of the “parallel market”. The sheer act or remitting is loaded with symbolisms – especially in terms of the roles and responsibilities that migrants have towards their kin and communities in their countries of origin. Often, remittances are sent through unofficial channels that are formed through localized associations that represent migrants’ interests in their foreign settings. These associations are frequently attempts to recreate social conditions that help them in maintaining their identities and linkages to their places of birth and upbringing.

Each of the papers in this edition makes a contribution about how people adapt to foreign conditions, how they demonstrate continued association with their people in their countries of birth, and how they maintain their identities in
order to keep valued practices and norms alive. Feng Zhang’s paper on “Overseas remittances and household economy in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdon Province, China, 1986-2008” is an attempt to fill in the lacuna that has been created through non-coverage of the developmental impact of remittances in this region. Having worked in five areas in the Pearl River Delta from 1986 to 2008, Zhang has been able to demonstrate the profound effects on the recipients’ household income, economic strategy and their consumption patterns. Referring to remittances as an integral part of the “Chinese transnational mentality”, he asserts that there is strong mix of Chinese and western factors that have in many ways reshaped migrants sense of belonging through their renegotiated values and associations.

The paper by Marilyn Porter and Kristi Poerwandari on “Moving women and family concerns: reflections from a cross-cultural study”, is about Indonesian women’s reproductive lives and their associated commuting within Indonesia and within Canada. Data on the inter-generational aspects of the women’s lives provide an insight into the dynamics of their lifestyles and decisions that stretch across a longer time frame than is usually depicted in qualitative studies. Their focus is three-fold: where women originally came from, why they migrate and what this meant for themselves and their families. Some of their case studies are on women who have moved back to their original home towns, which provide the writers with information on why such movements actually contribute towards heterogeneity in their societies after their return, even though they have been a part of them previously.

The two papers that follow Marilyn Porter’s are about people of Indian origin living in very different socio-political contexts. One is about Indians living in relatively acceptable conditions of democracy while the other is about survival in a patrimonial autocratic state. Rajasree Chandra’s paper on “Indian professional and skilled migration to Australia and Singapore – A comparative study”, is about providing comparative data on Indian professional and skilled migration to Australia and Singapore. Both are successful democracies which has attracted thousands of Asian knowledge and skilled workers as well as artisans to ensure the proper and sustained functioning of their infrastructural developments. At least two issues of contemporary relevance have a fair measure of attention here viz. the administration of migration in both countries, especially in respect of adherence to the liberal egalitarian principles of meritocracy and the quality and meaning of their contribution to these economies. On the contrary, MC Arunkumar’s work on the “Meitei Diaspora and their identity politics” in Buddhist dominated Myanmar and Muslim dominated Bangladesh is about Hindus maintaining a religious identity as minority populations in conditions that are generally hostile towards them. In Myanmar, the Meiteis, whose existence there predates colonialism, are treated more favorably than other Hindus who are mainly unskilled workers and later arrivals since the post-colonial period. In Bangladesh, Meiteis consider themselves to be Indian at heart but are legally bound to the country by virtue of their birth and residence. Although the Meiteis from Myanmar do not have an established bilateral set of relationships with their Bangladeshi counterparts, their version of Manipuri Hinduism sets them apart from other Hindus, contributing towards an identity that is essentially and distinctly regional.

Away from the near and far east, migration patterns in Southern Africa, particularly with South Africa being an economic power house in the continent, has much to offer to discerning students and scholars engaged in the study of migration. South Africa’s relative economic successes and contemporary stability has acted as a focal point for many Africans in search of employment that is more rewarding than in the countries of their birth. In the remaining five of the papers that make up this special edition, three are about migrants from Zimbabwe, and the remaining two are about migrants from Somalia and Nigeria respectively. Octavia Sibanda’s research on “Social ties and the dynamics of integration in the city of Johannesburg among Zimbabwe migrants” argues that South Africa is a destination of preference for potential migrants from most of its neighbouring countries. Her paper however focuses upon Zimbabweans in Johannesburg and the new trends that appear to emerge in their attempts to forge and maintain their Zimbabwean identities. Her ideas are amply supported by hanging onto to an identity through their adoption of “Double rootedness and networking among urban migrants in Zimbabwe”. Interestingly, the nostalgia of maintain-
ing their identities remain in tact despite the near collapse of their country and its almost accomplished status of a failed state. Much of this has to do with the misdirection of development policies in Zimbabwe and the falsity of job creation through which Southern Africa has to offer in great abundance – land for conservation. Manasa Sibanda’s paper on the “...the case of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area: The Zimbabwe Sector” provides ample insight into the serious lack of innovativeness and creativity in finding solutions to empower people through transboundary conservation programs, forcing people to migrate in directions that really leaves them with “pie-in-the-sky” expectations. The failure of development projects in the developing of eco-systems as job-creating initiatives after the Second World War has clearly extended itself to post-industrial initiatives under the rubric of sustainable development. The promises and expectations of job creations still loom large against the persuasiveness of intellectual and academic justifications for a holistic approach towards nature conservation.

Like Zimbabwe, equally disruptive politics in states such as Somalia and Nigeria has sent people scuttling to leave for South Africa. Zaheera Jinnah’s paper on “Understanding Somali identity, integration, livelihoods and risks in Johannesburg” attempts to provide an insight into the lives of Somali migrants who live and work in the city. Through qualitative research methods, Jinnah has explored the ways and means through which Somali migrants reinvent and sustain their identities. Her findings reveal that national and religious identity has an important function in their settlement and integration into the Johannesburg metropolis, supported by established social networks that serve as a buffer as well as a base for continued association with ‘home’ for those of Somali origin. The last paper by Koombi Sausi and I are about Nigerian migrants who live in Durban but remain connected to their natal areas in Nigeria through remittances. Their connection to voluntary associations and broader based religious organizations such as churches and mosques play an important role not only in maintaining a Nigerian identity but also in reminding them about their roles and responsibilities towards their families and communities in Nigeria. Such association is fundamental to their sense of being Nigerian and to the obligations that they have to meet with family members who facilitated their movement to South Africa.

There is an interlocking connection among concepts such as migration-remittances-identities-and voluntary associations. The latter two are issues that are not as measurable as the former two, but are crucial in social science and humanities research about migration patterns and its attendant links to emotional ties, roles and responsibilities that people have towards their families. This edition is an attempt to elaborate on them.

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Anand Singh
Professor, Anthropology
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Howard College,
Durban, South Africa