The Epidemic, Migrants & the Media: A Workshop

A Report

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The idea and concept of migration and migrant workers do not need any further introduction to media persons, thanks to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallouts that played havoc with the life of migrant workers in India. While it is true that the sudden appearance of migrant workers in the public domain from their otherwise invisible existence was initially received by the mainstream media with dismay, fear and hatred keeping in line with the established narrative of the State, gradually, the travail of the migrants captured the public imagination and media persons started to voice concern about their fate and the peril in which they had been thrown by the State's sudden imposition of indefinite lockdown.

However, a lot remains to be understood about the life and livelihood issues related to migrant workers. In the prevailing debate in the mainstream media, it was found that the migrant workers remained not only invisible to the media gaze till the epidemic-induced lockdown destroyed their life and livelihood, even the basic data about migrant workers in India was absent. Even the State was not in a position to offer a clear picture on the subject. For example, when the union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a food assistance programme for eight crore migrant workers, she affirmed that the government did not know if that covered the entire community of migrant workers. She admitted that the union government had arrived at the figure after collating all the data given by various state governments. Some researchers and trade union leaders gave different figures, varying from 10 to 12 crore of the population. In other words, the absence of real data about migrant workers indicates the administration's apathy to face the grave situation and formulate a proper policy to resolve that.

Talking of policies for the migrant workers, one was shocked to note that the existing aw for the protection of migrants, the Inter- State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, was already in place wherein it was made mandatory for both the state of origin and the host state to maintain a proper record of the arrival and departure of the migrant workers, with their terms of employment, job conditions including wage, working hours, condition of housing, etc. However, it is an established fact that no state has maintained such a record. The fault lies with the mainstream trade unions too, as they did not pay any attention to the migrant workers and never came forward to protect their basic labour rights.

It is also imperative to study the role of social media during the pandemic. The Quarantine Student Youth Network, Gana Tadaraki Udyog and Migrant Workers Solidarity Network actively used WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to track the needs of migrant workers, to crowd-fund ration and transfer money directly into their accounts and to book tickets for their return. Gana Tadaraki Udyog itself has done a direct cash transfer of 3,73,643/- to 1826 migrant workers across India. Their incessant highlighting of the distress of the migrant workers has also been taken up by mainstream media houses, both print and web-based. CRG's media workshop will address the pivotal role played by social media users in this juncture.

The uproar caused by some of the reporting in mainstream media (print, TV and digital) and social media forced the hand of the government, both union and the states. The government formed a committee to look into the conditions of the migrant workers and recommend some measures to alleviate their distress. The industry and the State have at last admitted that migrant workers play a crucial role in the industry and are integral to the economic activities in the country. In such a backdrop, one would like to raise some questions:

a) What sorts of measures / initiatives are needed at the government's level to offer protection to the migrant workers?
b) Is the existing law for the migrant workers (1979 Act) sufficient to protect their interests? If not, what is required to be done?
c) How much of the media reports influenced the government's present policies towards the migrants?
d) With the present initiative of One Nation, One Ration Card, should we not have One Nation, One Voter Card to empower the migrant workers to cast their votes while staying away from home in host states?

The workshop on the theme of 'The Epidemic, Migrants and the Media' was a two-day programme held in Kolkata on 4-5 December, 2020. It is a part of CRG's programme on migration and forced migration studies supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS), the IWM, Vienna, and several other institutes and universities in India. The workshop was based on six themes:

Session One: Covering Migrants in the Time of an Epidemic: Reports from Different States
The opening session focusses on the experiences of journalists in covering the diverse problems faced by migrant workers returning to their home states after lockdown. How have media narratives during the pandemic drawn attention to already existing faultlines in the state's treatment of migrant workers?

Session Two: Borders and Statelessness
After lockdown, migrants have often been barred from entering their home state where they can claim their full rights. They come to occupy a no-man's land in this transition. What are the different forms the border takes during the migrant crisis and how has this been documented by media persons and researchers?

Session Three: Media, Images & the Migrant Crisis
It was media images that first grabbed the nation's attention and became a definitive aspect of the migrant crisis. This session will look at the representation of migrants through different mediums, primarily visual media, and discuss their impact. How have images been mobilised in different ways and to what end?

Session Four: Presentation by CRG Media Fellows
The issues discussed are the caste question among migrants in Delhi, Noida and Western UP; interviews with returning migrants from West Bengal on the impetus to migrate; an overview of the implementation of labour law compliance rules; and an in-depth study of the dwelling conditions of migrant workers in Kolkata.

Session Five: Media, State and the Migrants
How have migrants been depicted in the media as rights-bearing subjects during their long march? How has the media covered workers' rights and narratives of resistance during the pandemic? Through such questions, this session will aim to uncover the relation between media, state and the migrants.

Closing Panel: Media, Migrants and the Pandemic in Europe

Inaugural Session: Day One
The welcome address of the Workshop was delivered by the President of CRG, Byasdeb Dasgupta. He ruminated on the uniqueness of it to this city as, to his knowledge, no workshop on the migrant question particularly in the context of the media had taken place in Kolkata so far. He hoped the discussions would be fruitful and all the participants would have opportunities to engage in dialogue. The inaugural session was chaired by Arup Kumar Sen, Serampore College and Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata.

Keynote Address by A.S. Panneerselvan, *The Hindu* and Panos South Asia, Chennai
The Keynote address was delivered by Mr. Panneerselvan, an eminent journalist from *The Hindu* and Panos South Asia, based in Chennai. He reflected on a few key points: the steady decline of the media and its responsibility in addressing the twin issues of bearing witness and making sense; the question of falling newspaper revenue and its link to news representation across the socio-economic spectrum, and the question of prolificity versus plurality. The speaker provided the comparative example of reportage on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy which had a multiplicity of news sources with the staticity of representation in news media today, where one item of news ran across sixteen news channels.

An important point raised was the question of newspaper revenue that came from Classified advertisements, which had now become a digital Craigslist situation where advertisements shifting to digital media interfered with revenue generation for traditional media. While newspaper circulation in India started rising after 1991 liberalization, the media was able to get different advertisements catering to the socio-economic classifications A and B, which represented the major groups being written about. He asked rhetorically what incentive was there to write about Dalits, migrants and Adivasis when there was no hope of gaining any advertisement, and therefore revenue, in the process. All the big newspapers of India spoke of wasteful expenditure when it came to subsidies but their own newspapers were subsidized. The question that the media ended up asking was what the subsidies one must deduct were. It transpired that people falling outside the 200-300 million strong middle class and their issues were reduced to irrelevance. This again became a representation of prolificity, not plurality.

Another issue was the pretense of diversity. The representation of the same, privileged, anglicized middle class is the accepted norm. Despite a Constitutional guarantee to Right of Expression, it did not matter what one said if there was no one to hear it. There could be no dialogue if there was no audience. With the advent of digital media, everybody was guaranteed a voice but this never came with the guarantee of being heard. The preference for monologues by big leaders like Modi and Trump had left its mark on the media, leaving in its wake not digital empowerment but digital disruption. Three -four Silicon Valley conglomerates like Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, or Google now dominated the scene. Till 2010, there was digital incentive by the idea of absolute decentralization. By 2015, there was an increasing centralization of information with a concentration of attention and voices in three or four operations, leading to the negation of the personal and of

privacy. The trend of data sharing was revealed by *The Guardian*'s report on Cambridge Analytica and Facebook's outright invasion of user privacy. It was shown that over fifty million Facebook profiles were subjected to data harvesting for building personalised political advertisements using their personal preferences. This signalled the power of the nation-states to do anything without respect for the data privacy of their people.

He recalled how while the media remained unsuccessful in reporting the worldwide financial crisis, Indian journalism in 2008/09 had a catchy quote: "Indian journalism is like the sun- it rises in the East and sets in the West." After 2015, nearly 85,000 crores of rupees have come to India's media sector not as a support mechanism but as media takeover money. He illustrated how the corporate sector had established control over the media, including the ownership of media houses. To this end, there had been a shift from bearing witness and making sense to the sole focus of delivering the required products to the required audience. The scope of meaningful media got lost in this context with the corporate sector's reliance on the media to carry its messages across. The main concern again became proliferation and not perpetuation. This created a dependence on a new kind of property: media property, referring to distribution channels. Till 2010, the main focus was 65 percent public interest news and 35 percent news that the public was interested in. Panneerselvan asks if the recent obsession of the media with the suicide of a Bollywood star is news within the domains of public interest. He ends with a notification by the Press Council of India, which states that any news publication which is reproducing news must verify all facts, failing which they would be subject to penalization. The concluding statement questioned the general trend of news in India catering to the same infographic again and again. There was a general sense of lament on how independent journalists could no longer produce information as they would want.

A few questions were raised, with one emphasizing troll culture and how mediapersons have had to adjust to trolling. It was stressed that the issue lay with three or four big social media agencies and their arbitrary control over data. The lack of economic models and fall in revenue was discussed. The final question pondered on the structuralization of media models to the end of all old ones, or alternatively, a resurrection. The big question over which one must pause and contemplate is whether the media is to play the role of the informant, the ombudsman, or the agent of public distraction.

The session Chair, Dr Arup Kumar Sen, in his closing note remarked on the criticality of the topic discussed and important points raised. The discussion helped in identifying turning points in the metamorphosis of the media and its increasing role in catering to an anglicized middle class.

Introduction to CRG's Previous Media Readers and Events
The introduction to CRG's discussion on Media Readers was delivered by the CRG chair, Prof. Ranabir Samaddar who laid out the context of CRG's previous media readers. The World Assembly for Christian Churches (WAC) supported CRG in its work with media and displacement. CRG's association with WAC began back in 2003/04 in the context of CRG's engagement with South

Bhutanese refugees. In one such scenario, a meeting with interested functionaries translated into a dialogue involving media and displacement. In 2003, for the first and last time, CRG brought out a document on refugees where there were writings, poems, stories, and sketches. There was also a collection of writings by South Bhutanese refugees. There was also an interesting debate in the Darjeeling meeting between an important writers on women refugees in 1947 and a journalist regarding the naming of victims of rape. The journalist challenged the stigma against naming and said the whole notion of the norm did not instil confidence in rape victims to stand against systems. The debate was a bitter one.

In the second media program in Bhubaneshwar in 2004, two things came up: firstly, a photography exhibition showcasing a large number of pictures of the displaced that was visited by many people. Secondly, there was a lecture at the end of the media workshop attended by about 150 people. A debate arose when someone questioned the role of the media in traumatising victims, in this question, victims of rape. There was one commenter, presumably a Maoist, who maintained that the notion of trauma was, if in part, a creation of the media. As an example, she spoke of a rape victim in a village who went to the police station to complain. She was associated with the ABPI. The police arrived, but by the time they got there, the South 24-Parganas ABPI team had reached the village and the centre of the occurrence. Apparently one journalist tried to act as a deterrent to which the woman maintained she would still advocate for her justice. This caused a rift in the workshop, which had to be fixed. Eventually, two fascinating reports were produced, one on the media reports on displacement, and another on the public sphere's response to such situations of conflict in Madhya Pradesh. There was yet another report on media and public health, and it was questioned as to why during the monsoon period, newspapers always reported on child death in endemic diseases and stopped as soon as the monsoons would cease in September. While this was by no means subject to such demographic limitations, she questioned the limitation of this news to only the three -four months of monsoon all across Bengal.

The next media workshop took place in 2012 in Gangtok in January. Owing to climatic incompatibilities, this came with its own problems. However, there was a back-and-forth dialogue of an hour and an interesting report on the media accounts of internally displaced people in South Asia, featuring reports from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and India. Among displacements in India, it had accounts of displacement in Bodoland. After publication, the report was circulated and it reached the Assam Assembly. A point was raised on the lines of *if people from Kolkata can do so much on Bodoland, why are the Assamese silent?* The government was moved to action, assessed the documentation by CRG, and after a dialogue, a fund was issued for the victims of displacement. Next, a group of journalists were sent to Europe with EU money to study how the European media covered minority representation and if the latter were represented in European newspapers at all. European journalists also came to India to evaluate the condition of minorities and report on the scene. A book called *Counter-Gze: Media, Migrants, Minorities* was released. With this, Professor Samaddar concluded his introduction to the media events and reports that CRG has engaged with and produced in the past.

Discussion on Media Reader by Bharat Bhushan and Rajat Roy

Eminent journalist Bharat Bhushan who compiled and edited CRG's publication "media on Migrants in the time of an Epidemic: a Reader" offered introductory comments on the planning of the media reader. The conceptions for the reader began in January, before the pandemic. It was more of a handbook for journalists and the manner of their reporting on migrants. The initial idea was to produce a document to understand how journalists could change their reporting to help migrants counter political intolerance and look for means of conceptualizing migration and categorising it, taking into account various aspects of their existence such as detention centres and migration camps.

The pandemic changed everything, and the media reader took a new direction. It focussed more on developing as a collection of articles via which the work of media practitioners on reporting the mass exodus of refugees and migrants during the pandemic could be made visible. The idea was to also see how this coincided and interacted with state policy and the consequences of this interaction. What one must remember is that the exodus did not comprise migrants moving back to their homes voluntarily, so was this to be considered as an act of defiance? The media reader also became a means to engage and encourage people to think about the mass exodus. It was tinted with two main ideas: how one was thinking about what had happened and how one should think about the same. It became a collection of articles and reports on the Long March of the migrants, the sufferings they endured, the shift in the position of the Supreme Court and its change in attitude towards the migrants post the exodus. It was also a means to look into how different state Governments used the pandemic to change labour laws, and the consequences arising from that. Lastly, it established an attempt at understanding how the media's whole attitude changed towards migrants, before and during COVID.

During the compilation of the media reader, several significant points were uncovered. Firstly, there was absolute lack of official data on the migrants. There were different accounts on all channels regarding how many migrants were there, what was their contribution to the economy, and how many of them had actually left for their homes during the pandemic. Secondly, there was a whole shift in the guarantee of lockdown wages to the migrants and in the attitude of the Court in guaranteeing these wages. Workers were treated brutally, lathi-charged by the police, and there was an incident when the latter also sprayed insecticide on a group of migrants. Another important dimension of the reader was the gender aspect of the whole situation: what happened to the women workers? Not one authority can clearly state as to what happened with the domestic helps, the maids, sex workers and the like. Whether they received their wages, whether they left for home, whether they stayed back: all of these things are sketchy. Mr. Bhushan mentions the focus of the chapter on Media and the Migrants, particularly with regard to the fact that there are no comparative studies on the situations of the migrants before and after the pandemic. A fascinating aspect of all of this was the production of a genre of hybrid reporters by digital media platforms, who not only shared information via various forms but also compiled articles by subject experts on dominant issues and made reports based on gathered public response. It was seen that digital sites like *The*

Leaflet were deeply involved in reporting the state of affairs. Legal experts would come to these platforms to engage, criticise the Supreme Court, and praise the High Courts. Subject expertise was sought. Social media also played a role in sharing pictures and videos, and some of these even got responses from the State.

While this was not part of the reader, Mr. Bhushan also commented on how social media had played a role in reporting the strengthening of kinship and family ties among the migrants. Innovative campaigns came up such as a bus ticket back home in exchange for a message on a social media platform, the creation of collective mazdoor kitchens, and more. To this end, social media actually mitigated some of the misery of the migrants. However, there is a lack of documentation about how social media has helped, in its own ways, to mitigate the migrant crisis. He ended his talk by elucidating some of the shortcomings of the media reader, such as a lack of representation of videos, problems with accommodating reports of different languages and compiling essays. He ended expressing the hope that everyone would read it and form their own opinions. Rajat Roy summed up the session by commenting on Mr. Bhushan's observations, stating that the role of Indian migrants in shaping the economy, both via formal and informal structures, needs to be paid more attention to and to be given more coverage.

Book Release- Situating Social Media: Gender, Caste, Protest and Solidarity
Shoaib Daniyal released the book "Situating Social Media: Gender, Caste, Protest and Solidarity". As an introduction to the issues discussed in the book, he commented on the time when he was in a small Rajasthani town and a day before, there had been a Bharat Bandh against the Supreme Court's directive on the SC STs Atrocities Act. Bhimraud had no history of Ambedkar in their local politics. Yet, there was an incredible mobilization on this issue and what was more remarkable was that this happened only via social media. This included making posters via simple apps, changing their profile pictures on WhatsApp, sharing news via Facebook and WhatsApp, and more. The introduction of social media had created a new sort of politics in the town. This unfortunately also led to violence because this reaction over Dalit issues was new to the town people.
Half a century back, there was a Canadian communication theorist who theorized the interesting concept of the medium being the message. One often saw mediums as passive things and believed that it was the content which was doing the heavy lifting. Contrary to this, he said that in the long run, the medium would have more influence on what we think and how we act. This was exactly what happened in Bhimraud. Ideas of Ambedkar and his politics were not new to the people; it was the medium, the proliferation of the content via WhatsApp, which made all the difference.

Mr. Daniyal went back to how the invention of cable TV changed the scenario of news reporting. From something that was available only at particular points of time, it became far more universal, and not limited to a time slot.The next book he referred to was *Amusing ourselves to Death*. He says that with the invention of television, everything had become entertainment. So, even when one was reporting on something serious, it would hold more ground if presented as infotainment. He pointed to the case of a White House figure in the States. The trend seemed to be that with his

popularity all over Reality Television, the people were comfortable seeing him in the White House. He referred to his coverage of the Bengal elections in 2019. Prime Minister Modi had come to the Brigade ground, and in Bengal politics, a lot was determined by one's performance in a Brigade Ground rally. While it wasn't overflowing, BJP still did very well, particularly considering how small a party they were a few years back. This was made possible because BJP built groups ground up in WhatsApp, and to surpass mobilization on the ground, they mobilized over these social media groups.

In spite of the incredible distress caused by the harsh lockdown, and especially in the case of India, Modi managed the political fallout. One way he did this was his constant political propaganda over WhatsApp and television, and whether one liked it or not, it dissuaded political discontent. The CAA protests in Kanpur was another remarkable example of what social media had done. There was an instance of a young woman who insulted a prominent Qazi, calling him a sellout. Kanpur politics was always dominated by old generation powerful figures, and this was a remarkable example of what Whatsapp mobilization had achieved.

Mr. Daniyal commented that the social media politics which we saw now hardly existed five years back. The farmers protest, for example, got so much coverage out of the battle on social media between two Bollywood personalities. There was a constant interface, therefore, between social media and contemporary politics. This is why this book was so important. He concluded by referring to an essay in the book on Dalit Camera, where there was a study of how people were taking up tools of social media to get their mesages across. The session ended with the release of the book by Shoaib Daniyal and its coeditors Ms. Samata Biswas and Atig Ghosh.

Situating Social Media: Gender, Caste, Protest and Solidarity being released by Shoaib Daniyal, *scroll.in, Delhi*; with coeditors Atig Ghosh and Samata Biswas

Documentary Screening: Calcutta: A Migrant City II
The screening of the documentary ended with some comments by Atig Ghosh. Atig commented on the two registers shown in the documentary, the political economy, city planning and the planning

of rehabilitation at the grassroots level. He commented on the lack of mention of lower castes in the cultural register and how writings missed out on the displacement of the genteel classes. With regard to the political aspect, he commented on the huge defense by Uditi Sen of Prafulla Chakraborty's original thesis, which raised divisions between colony and camp refugees. This distinction often tended to flatten out and form a monolithic discourse. He ended by questioning the means by which one picked out the unique threads of the refugee rehabilitation program and how the massive and mixed flows of people were understood. What made this moment special? Bengali partition history started very late, and its consolidated etymology needed to be revisited.

Day Two: Workshop Sessions
Covering Migrants in the Time of an Epidemic: Reports from Different States
The first session of the day was moderated by Mr. Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, a freelance senior journalist. The presenters were Sudipta Sengupta from 4th Pillars and Farhana Ahmed from *The Assam Tribune*. The discussion began with introductory comments from Mr. Bhattacharya . He noted how the migrant issue had been thrown into the limelight a few weeks after the declaration of lockdown. He mentioned the internal and cross-border nature of Indian migration, for instance, the flow of workers to West Bengal from states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and from West Bengal to parts of South India. The living conditions of these people grew more and more miserable as the lockdown advanced. In West Bengal, labour contractors from Murshidabad disappeared from the scene. When work situations became dire and migrant workers decided to return home, on beginning their march, they found that they were unwelcome even in their homes. There was an undercurrent of fear regarding the spread of the virus by the travelling migrants and in their hometowns too, this fear was no stranger. The role of the media also extended to covering and looking for answers to these larger questions.

In her paper, Farhana Ahmed explored the consequences of the pandemic and lockdown in her native place situated to the North of Lakhimpur, Assam. She spoke on how the global pandemic had affected every nook and corner of the world, with her small homeland being no exception. Lakhimpur district has been one of the worst flood and riverbank erosion-affected districts in Assam. The floods that occur on a yearly basis affect thousands of acres of agricultural land, hurting both people and their means of living. This forces many people to travel outside the state in search of better opportunities. Lakhimpur is also notorious as one of the districts most affected by human trafficking all over the country. The police reported an exodus and return of over 12,000 people, of whom many were forced to return because they got no response from any established legal channels or helpline numbers in their host states. She mentions a case where migrants were thrown out of their rental homes in Pune by their landlords on the simple suspicion of being COVID-positive. On calling the helpline 104, they allegedly got no response.

Even worse was the situation of the displaced migrants, who were forced to leave their homes owing to floods and climate-induced disasters and had to return home because they had lost their jobs,

although there was a statutory guarantee that this would not happen. The situation was so bad that the families of the returnees were forced to forage in the wild for food, leading to further casualties. It also happened that the foragers, owing to lack of knowledge on edible mushrooms, consumed inedible ones.

On May 17, Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal declared job cards for migrant returnees to Assam. He also ordered skill development training and job training. But the matter was not pursued any further. Another initiative known as SAMPARKA (Software Application for Migrated people to Assam for Rejuvenating Karma Abhiyan) was launched to systematically capture data of migrant workers who returned to Assam due to the pandemic-induced lockdown. This was also meant to help with employment opportunities, with emphasis on day-to-day collection of status reports. However, this initiative has not been effective thus far. Ms. Ahmed concluded with the hope that these latent problems that had not been covered by the vernacular media would be brought to light.

In his presentation, Mr. Sudipta Sengupta talked about the fact that before the migrants came out onto the streets and the roads, media persons were not aware of them as they should have been. He began with a simple question regarding the long-term purpose of the media, particularly viewed from a societal perspective. He elucidated the first purpose of the media as the ability to draw the attention of people to issues that mattered to them. The second was to act as an advocate and suggest measures for authorities to act upon, so that things could change for the better. While the politics of better and worse could be debated, it was universally accepted that being well-fed was better than going hungry. Similarly, it was better to not have COVID than be infected. The third purpose, particularly in contemporary times, was to act as a forensic expert and to fight misinformation and disinformation. While both of these could arise either out of pure ignorance or malicious intent, the role of contemporary media as a fact checker for society was also very important.

Mr. Sengupta went on to examine all the above roles and how the media had performed in each of them. In the first case, when the migrants hit the roads, they drew the attention of the media and therefore, the attention of the nation. The discourse was essentially anecdotal in nature. In terms of media as forensic expert, he recalled the spread of misinformation via social media in the month of March along the lines of malaria being a far more prolific killer than COVID-19. The conclusion drawn from this was that the Coronavirus was not something to worry about, but a simple fact-check would reveal that this was absolutely not true. According to WHO's statistics, malaria killed about 39,000 people a year and in two month, that came to 6,500 people. This data was misrepresented as being 1,40,000 in terms of people dead. Mr Sengupta warned the audience against this kind of news and said the media should have played a role in fact-checking. He mentioned that while the media had not completely failed in this regard, it could have done better.

Citing another instance towards the end of March, he talked about a group of researchers from the

Singapore Institute of Technology and Design who conducted a study on the basis of the Susceptible Infected Recovered model. In this study, they predicted that COVID-19 cases in India would see 97 percent remission by end May. Some newspapers and media channels ran this news and some state governments also based their decisions on this. Certain state governments were also about to open educational institutions in September based on this information. Thankfully, damage control was done before it was too late.

The media's third and final role, according to Mr Sengupta, was in terms of advocacy. He said the media had had the least success here in that, even during the declaration of economic packages, emphasis was on the organized sectors, which did not cover migrants or refugees. Many were bonded labourers belonging to small and micro-enterprises. The media should have made this discrepancy known and reported on how people were in dire situations due to lack of food, sanitation and water. The FCRA had enough stock to help every citizen with food but there was no media advocacy in this regard. He concluded saying that while the media had had partial success as forensic experts and watchdogs, they had performed poorly as advocates of the common people.

Sudipta Sengupta, *4th Pillars,* Kolkata and Farhana Ahmed, *The Assam Tribune,* Lakhimpur

Session Two: Borders and Statelessness

The second session was moderated by Prof. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury of Calcutta Research Group. The presenters were Vaishali Barua, a Ph.D. student of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and Manjira Saha, an independent researcher and journalist from Shyamagar, West Bengal.

Vaishali unpacked the ways in which various border formations were at play during the lockdown and to locate migrant/immigrant bodies within the national call for "war against corona". "Stay home stay safe", "social distancing", "clean and sanitize" were the mantras governments across the world used for fighting the Coronavirus. These advisories came with an exclusionary privilege starting from the junta curfew declared by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from March 19 - 24 where

Indian citizens were informed "to maintain physical distance with others and stay within the confines of one's home." "Home" in people's imagination became a space that would provide the necessary protection from this alien virus. But as the lockdown kept extending, the language used by PM Modi marked a shift from health to a language of war against the coronavirus, with every household, neighborhood, district, becoming an impenetrable fortress, with empty roads, police surveillance at its peak, and exhausted medical and health workers. Those who had the means to follow "Covid protocols" did so willingly, confining themselves in their homes, given the message that this was the only way to stay safe. The nationwide lockdown created panic and fear emerging from the presence of the 'alien virus' that also created suspicious bodies. The presentation interrogated the ways in which this "fight against coronavirus" actually defeated the people living in this country, especially those on the margins. The migrants' long march home was made part of every breaking news coverage by almost all media houses. Vaishali's question was what it was about this particular struggle that caught the media's attention. It was the Indian government's lockdown in response to Covid-19 that left migrant workers stranded and vulnerable. But the state and media's response to this migrant crisis had only been through the lens of poverty rather than a comprehensive view of the migrant workers' social, economic, cultural and political lives. So for the immediate responses to the swarms of migrants trying to make their way home, the knee-jerk reaction was to provide them food, money and shelter. States were seen providing "relief packages" for those migrants who were in that predicament.

Vaishali suggested it was useful to look at two kinds of migrants in that situation. Hamsa Vijayaraghavan wrote about "internal economic migrants" and "humanitarian" migrants. With no legally recognized categories under which 'humanitarian' migrants lived in India and were denied access to government-issued documentation, they were often excluded from formal systems for socioeconomic inclusion… and remained at the discretion of individual authorities like schools, health-care facilities and other such to provide aid. While asylum seekers from Tibet and Sri Lanka were managed directly by the government, those arriving from all non-neighboring countries were required to approach UNHCR for determination of refugee status and associated documentation. Most asylum seekers under UNHCR's jurisdiction were from Myanmar or Afghanistan, with about 21,049 refugees from Myanmar and most of them being Rohingya Muslims. But the struggles of the Rohingya refugees, who have also been in no-man's land after having crossed international borders, did not feature in the mainstream media stories about their situation during the lockdown and the epidemic (barring a few media houses like *The Wire*, *Scroll*, *The Hindu*, *The Print*). But the Rohingya made it into national news because of their religion and socio-economic position in this host country. In April 2020, a report by the Print said "The Ministry of Home Affairs has written to all states and union territories to test Rohingya Muslims in the country after it was found that many of them attended Tablighi Jamaat events in Delhi and Haryana." The Rohingya refugees in India, as the *The Wire* writes, battled Islamophobia and starvation. There was a kind of national rhetoric addressing this pandemic where a language of protection from a threat was used to urge people to stay in their homes, making the idea of home the first border that emerged.

The creation of suspicion and fear of anything outside that protected space of home -- one's own people, neighborhood, etc -- as a potential threat to life created the second border. The language of "war" such as "corona warriors" and citizens "fighting" this virus created another aspect of safety/non-safety, of protection from the unknown. These narratives worked towards creation of a national home (the protected fortresses) and national body (all bodies that were Indian citizens) and the other (those who did not fall in the above categories).

The important question was that in the pandemic, what happened to those who remained confined within the borders of their homes in their cities of refuge after crossing international borders? While legal citizen migrant workers were only somewhat known bodies, they were also part of the national body who could hope to claim their rights from the governments. Then there were unknown other bodies like the Rohingya Muslim, who are perceived as a national "threat" especially after the Myanmar army's crackdown on the Rohingya Muslims in Arakan in 2017 that saw them crossing borders into Bangladesh and India. In India this event was met with criticism, calling the migrating populations a threat to national security. As one news headline in *Economic Times* stated "Rohingya refugees illegal, pose security threat: Centre to SC". They become targets of suspicion based on their status as "illegal immigrants", as potential threats to the security of India, and their religious and social status in India. The role of the media in disseminating the knowledge that comes from the state cannot be undermined. Tablighi Jamaat Markas was a prime example during the lockdown that marked all Muslims as threats, potential carriers of the virus, deepening suspicions and breeding Islamophobia towards those others who must be suspected because they didn't fall within the nationalist narrative of the "war against Corona". Vaishali contended that the idea of an entire nation coming together to fight the war against the Coronavirus and its effects was the language that had been used consistently by the State while addressing its citizens. But what happened when they were not citizens of a country and were dependent on humanitarian aid for their existence in a country like India? In reality, the Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdowns exposed pre-existing social inequalities that lay embedded within the structures on which boundaries were drawn. She concluded by pointing to larger questions of creating the kind of borders that would maintain the safety and security of all citizens of India:

> If home was the first border created for protection from the virus, how could one address questions about a "safe and secure home"? Were all homes safe, keeping the gendered impacts of the pandemic in mind? What happened when the migrant worker reached home? What happened to those illegal immigrants who were in their homes during the pandemic?
> Due to the creation of physical distance, socially proximities also got hampered. There was a loss of traditional methods of being present in the same vicinity as the communities. But there was a boom in the use of digital tools to bridge this gap. However, the use of social media not only worked as an agent for action and tool for communities to connect but was used to make appeals to receive help and resources.

What were the possibilities of collaborative journalism, having voices from communities tell stories of their struggles, which was not breaking news?

Finally, Vaishali spoke about covering a "crisis": what parameters did the media follow in paying attention and choosing which "crisis" was more or less important?

The next presentation was made by Ms. Manjira Saha, an independent researcher and practitioner from West Bengal. Her presentation, which was made in Bengali, was interpreted and shared with the audience by Dr. Samata Biswas. As an interpreter, she remarked on the felicity of Ms Saha's language and the evocative images which made the translation to English difficult. She spoke of Ms. Saha's work as a reflection of her time, beginning as a teacher for three years in a school near the borders, where she witnessed students dropping out in huge numbers from classes seven, eight, nine and further on. She started her research project based on her continued interactions with women and children in the border area. She kept track of the policies that were declared during the pandemic and in the period when she was traveling, the lockdown was declared. There were visual images of migrant workers walking back and their sufferings. Using her experiences both as a teacher and as someone who witnessed the return of the migrants, she published a book called *Labour Train* and her presentation drew from this book.

Ms. Biswas commented on the evocative nature of Ms. Saha's presentation, talking about the latter's experience of encountering people traveling on buses near the border, carrying people, particularly women and children, not just based in West Bengal, but also Bangladesh. There were people who had crossed the border to come and study, and there were those who were trying to return home to visit their families. The movement of people was so constant that it appeared that the border was being crossed everyday.

Ms Saha commented on the stark contrast of livelihoods: young boys who wore jeans and attended school also worked as labourers cutting clay to make ponds and roads. Throughout their lives, the work had not changed. The only thing that had changed was the easy availability of mobile phones and their access to blue films. The nature of their work, be it cutting soil or selling fish or working in plantations, remained the same. All the while they keep hoping for some change. It was this hope that led so many of the young crowd to leave and go to cities in other states for better livelihoods. What was marked was that throughout this period, nobody had been thinking about them. Yet, now that people were noticing them, they were more of a threat. They were being noticed because they were returning home, and there was a constant fear that they were returning as carriers of the virus.

Next, she shifted her focus to the tsunami of 2004. She talked about her conversation with a group of people from the Sunderbans, who recounted the experience of living in the islands at that point of time. They talked about the hardships of survival, what little food they had, and how many did not survive. Many managed to return, but this was not final. Following the tsunami, demand for labour in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was extremely high, and all across the Sunderbans,

labour contractors were trying to get more and more people. The requirement was so high that they did not even check the documents that were necessary to land in Port Blair. Saha narrated how many young men were sent there during this time. The conditions in the island were dire. Even the water was no longer consumable. They only somehow sustained themselves.But even these people who had traveled so far and endured such hardship, all for the hopes of a better life, started returning.

From North and South Dinajpur, many young men went to the stone mills in Haryana to work in stone cutting. Many of them died bleeding from their throats from the hazards of the job. The fields were awash with their widows who worked as daily wage earners. Their children Were equally clueless. Where would they go? They would go across borders alone or with their families, living in shanties and overcrowded confinements. Ms Saha spoke about situations where many people didn't even remember where their family members had gone. In one such case, a father actually asked a neighbour about the state where his son had gone. He could remember his son's name or how he had died. In another instance, a contractor had to come back and tell a mother that the very son he had taken away from her with the promise of work had run away, hiding the news of death. The dead son's brother worked in another place. The father lamented as to how he would ever know of his welfare.

The last part of her presentation covered men who went to work under a contractor in the oil fields at ONGC. When the lockdown was declared, they could not return home. They tried to seek shelter in the villages nearby but were shooed away. So for seven months, they had to live in the jungle, foraging for food. This cycle of people coming and going, coming and going, went on and on. The stories of the constant ebb and flow of these downtrodden migrants and refugees would get buried under other mainstream events and breaking news. Ms. Saha ended her lecture with a short video of her interviewing a labourer who spoke about the dead from the tsunami being buried in a well and the stench and upheaval of survival that kept going on and on.

Manjira Saha speaking on migrants, translated by Dr. Samata Biswas, *CRG.*

Session Three: Media, Images and the Migrant Crisis

The third session of the media workshop was chaired by Dr. Gopal Krishna of Toxic Watch, Patna. The speakers for this session were Ria De from Dalit Camera, Panini Anand from AajTak Digital, and Valay Singh, an independent journalist. Panini Anand and Valay Singh joined the discussions virtually. Dr Krishna introduced the theme and the presenters, also highlighting the importance of images as a medium of communication and the ability they had to convey things not simply in a linguistic but also a non-linguistic manner. He drew up imagery from the Mahabharata, evoking the narrative that had been used by Prime Minister Modi and how there was an urgent need to deconstruct that comparison. Situations had also arisen where the Prime Minister had taken reporters into confidence in order to appease public opinion and to keep such mythological and anecdotal narratives alive. The implication was that the media had allowed itself to be openly manipulated by political leaders. It was especially disappointing to see how they dealt with migrants and the marginalised sections of society.

Panini Anand began his presentation by screening a video of a Bhojpuri song he himself had composed on the plight of the migrants and their long march home, comprising evocative imagery of how they suffered during the lockdown imposed by the government after the pandemic. He then elaborated on the role of the media during the long march and subsequently. Towards the beginning of the pandemic, the migrants were not represented in any substantive way by the media. There was much more emphasis on the theatrics of it all and also on topics of mainstream interest. Coverage migrants took far more time because they comprised a category of people who were predominantly from the unorganized sector, and therefore, unrepresented. Anand commented on the coverage of the migrant crisis by social and digital platforms, the sharing of pictures, and other ways in which information gradually spread. Another problematic issue was the increased focus upon the alleged suicide of a Bollywood movie star and how the media suddenly shifted focus in such a way that there was a considerable amount of harm done to the coverage of migrant issues. This also happened in part because the government was looking to deflect the attention of the people from such sensitive issues. Anand repeatedly drew the audience's focus on the importance of the imagery produced on social media and how big a role it played in shaping public thought. Many citizens shared live updates, images, and information via Facebook, which caught the imagination of others and propelled them to do the same. So, while mainstream media was not as successful in its coverage of migrant issues, social media took the reins and captured the nation's attention.

Valay Singh began his presentation with the aid of visual tools, depicting migrant workers and labourers in their host environments. He mentioned the importance of images in reinforcing certain ideas, helping one to contextualise events and give meaning to them. He also spoke of the manner in which the repeated typecasting of hungry, naked African children was no longer serving the means it was geared to, simply because people were tired of viewing this imagery over and over again. It in fact reinforced a kind of insensitivity. So, if images were sometimes as evocative as they were made out to be, why was it that the images of scavengers and labourers which had been around for years

not outraged the nation before the pandemic and the lockdown? He said that perhaps we were oblivious because of our own troubles. At the same time, there is a latent role played by caste. When people in cities saw the migrant multitudes that made up the crux of their support systems, an element of fear also seeped in. During the lockdown, when migrants started leaving, the media also played a role in a snide way: using headers like "Government pleads with workers to stay". While subtle, the question was clear: who was the subject of blame here? The political aspect of the migrant crisis was often overlooked, and while mainstream media had its occasional moments of epiphany as during the initial phase of the pandemic, Valay felt that one should not expect too much from it. As an audience, one had to understand the political nature of image-making, its interpretation and contextualization. With this, Valay ended his presentation on the nature of imagery in the media in the context of the contemporary social situation.

In her presentation, Ria De of Dalit Camera spoke of her organization and how it had evolved over the years. A space that has been active only on social media, in 2012, Dalit Camera took up a YouTube challenge where they did long interviews to uncover the question of caste through the eyes of the untouchables. The work Dalit Camera did during the lockdown was also representative of the images that came up in the same phase. With this, there was an unprecedented takeover of Ambedkari politics and Dalit voices in social media. Dalit Camera represented the only platform apart from Roundtable which was refracting these voices. In the early phases, they were working with a handycam, and Youtube Live events had still not started.

In 2020, they finally registered as a media organization. Social media became integrated with smartphone technologies and everyone was able to cover events live. So it transpired that the quality of reporters came to be judged by live coverage. The competition, therefore, became individual people who could cover events live. Dalit Camera had to diversify platforms and moved to broadcasting over Telegram, Whatsapp, Facebook, and other social media platforms. Ria then lamented over the collapse of journalism, stating that there were increasing expectations to multitask, and as hierarchies were dissolving, everyone in organisations was doing everything including funding managing campaigns. Multitasking was very tough but it also has a role in redefining the work of the journalist and a lot of it also has to do with the aestheticization of content, trying to get by with troll language, and more.

Next, she questioned the whereabouts of the Dalit migrant workers, who seem to strangely have escaped media attention. Where were they situated during and after the lockdown? She spoke of the farmers' protests, the campaign for the release of political prisoners who were arrested during lockdown and showed a video for fundraising because organizations such as Dalit Camera depended on individual contributions. This was necessary to keep independent media alive and apart from the antics of dominant mainstream media channels like Republic TV.

After the lockdown, Dalit Camera took a hit in funding and because of their limitations, they were

compelled to step back and do reflective work. They did more interviews, revived and relaunched their website, organized their huge banks of knowledge and remodelled themselves. They also accumulated funds and redistributed them to.civil and student organisations working on the field.

Ria then spoke of Anwesha Sarkar with an emphasis on the gastronimics of dalit culture and access to food for migrant workers. The neighborhoods of Park Circus, Prince Anwar Shah Road, Nonadanga, all comprised urban migrant settlements of 100 sq. ft flats for workers from all over the city. The people who lived there worked as domestic help, cooks, drivers, hawkers, rickshaw pullers, etc. The original constitution of this place had changed a lot and many spaces had been rented out to Bihari families   .

Finally, she screened a video of women working as domestic help and where she had asked one such lady how they were managing food. She was told that the lady was married at 13 and learnt cooking much later. She used to earn three thousand rupees from three homes before the lockdown. Whatever cash flow they had had completely stopped. How were they managing food without money? Hunger, starvation, misery, running out of fuel: these were all common issues plaguing them. On top of this, Nonadanga was surrounded by marshlands and many people were surviving by foraging. Many had no ration cards. Many employers were not paying them. One had traveled ten kilometres to be met with closed gates.

On the other end, the lockdown accompanied food hashtags all over social media, with celebrities coming up with recipes and displaying an image of excess and consumption. Ria concluded with a brief discussion on the aspirations, memories and a sense of identity and history related to food. The lockdown had caused community networks to break down. When it came to dignity and humiliation, the main question became how to retain the first and not succumb to the second. The lockdown reduced the worker to bare life. While the media showed hundreds of images, these images came with a kind of politics. Migrant workers as a political constituency had no presence in the politics of the country. Most of them did not vote and they had no political articulation. They were not an electoral constituency. She concluded by commenting that the figure of the migrant worker existed mainly in our imagination as a function of the market. It was important that we were acquainted with their aspirations as an agent of consumption, going beyond this trajectory. The session ended with comments from the audience, after which Dr. Krishna offered the closing note and an overview of the presentations.

Panini Anand, *Aaj Taak Digital, Delhi*   Ria De, *Dalit Camera, Kolkata*

Session 4: Presentations by CRG Media Fellows

The post-lunch session on the second day featured four CRG media fellows. They presented their work submitted to CRG as part of a three months fellowship on migrants and the media. Suvojit Bagchi, a senior journalist, previously associated with *The Hindu*, moderated the session.

The session started with Amit Sengupta of *Hardnews*, Delhi, talking about lower caste and/or dalit migrant workers in Delhi's outskirts and UP and how the recent crisis along with political upheaval in the centre created a double burden for them. The Delhi government, led by Aam Aadmi Party and the BJP-led NDA at the Centre, refused to move in with measures in what seemed a perfect emergency situation. There was no transport arranged, no barricades to stop the people, no assurances or reassurances of providing a safety and support system, not even food, water, medical help or shelter, even while almost 80 million tonnes of foodgrain were rotting in the godowns of the public distribution system. There was no call or appeal or order to stop the mass exodus as people streamed in thousands on the highways under a scorching sun, even while good Samaritans, Sikh gurudwaras, students of Jamia Millia Islamia and residents in the neighbourhood, and voluntary organizations rushed in to provide food, water and relief to the workers in their long and difficult march to their homes in miscellaneous villages and small towns, especially in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

Debashis Aich from *GroundXero,* Kolkata, spoke about the return of the migrant workers. He interviewed 26 returned migrant workers from three districts of West Bengal. His research showed that the return home or the mass exodus of epidemic-panicked jobless workers to reach their native homes began at least seven to ten days before the formal announcement of the country wide lockdown by the Prime Minister. However, the workers want to go back again, the primary reason being disparities in wages. Whether it is construction workers or zari workers, wages are at least double in other states. But due to the continued recession in construction, manufacturing and hotel industry, a large number of migrant workers are still unable to return to their earlier jobs. The fears

of the state government in bringing back millions of workers were not unfounded. But invaluable time has been lost in preparing the infrastructure and overall planning. This 'go slow' policy resulted in a young man from Murshidabad, who was working in Kerala, committing suicide when his train was cancelled. The chief minister of West Bengal claimed that 10.5 lakh workers had returned by the first week of June. But this number does not include all the workers who arrived on various other modes, mostly through their own initiatives. Consequently, the total number of workers who returned home is far more than the official figure.

Abhijnan Sarkar, a documentary filmmaker, presented a paper co-authored by him and Swati Bhattacharya of *Anandabazar Patrika*, Kolkata. The paper answered the following questions: what are the predominant types of accommodations for migrant workers living in Kolkata? What kind of access do migrant workers have to basic amenities like drinking water, electricity and toilet? What cost do they have to bear for accommodation and basic amenities? How did the migrant workers cope during lockdown? Their research revealed that accommodation is often based on caste, religion, occupation, etc. For example, Coolies sleep on the pavement. Even during the COVID19 lockdown, no night shelters were offered to them. Some Major accommodations are: Legal slums which are often ghettos marked according to caste-based occupation (leather/scavenger/rag picking) & Illegal ownership/ sub-renting within legal slums.

The fourth presenter Geetika Misra could not present due to COVID related complications. An engaging discussion ensued after the presentations where participants and panellists discussed the lack of data on migrant workers, something scholars, activists, policy practitioners and media persons alike were criticizing since the migrant crisis started. The moderator Suvojit Bagchi pointed out that there is no dearth of data but there is no data on how many migrants are going out or coming in the states. The discussion also featured objectivity while writing a news report and how it is different when a journalist writes an opinion piece and the whole concept of "neutrality" in journalism is fluid.

Session 5: Media, State and the Migrants

This was a very engaging session with presentations made by young and intrepid journalists and activists, moderated by Shoaib Daniyal of the web news portal *Scroll.in* . Shoaib introduced the session, providing an overview of the media's relationship with the state. Commenting on *The Caravan*'s recent feature story of how the media had become an organ of the state and the Union government, he said this was exemplified by the migrant crisis. The announcement of lockdown using the emergency provision of the Disaster Management Act gave the Home Ministry a lot of power to exercise one of the harshest lockdowns in the world. The media response to the migrant exodus and long march home was to report it as a natural calamity, an act of God, using words like "tragedy" and "shame". This form of framing of the migrant crisis as a tragic accident took away government accountability in causing this large-scale crisis. The inability or diffidence of migrant

workers from channelizing and expressing their grievances on national media while being interviewed by reporters also let this media discourse to be perpetuated further. The lack of political agency given to the migrants by the media framed a large part of the reportage on the crisis.

The first presentation was by Sudarshana Chakraborty of *GroundXero,* Kolkata who spoke on the misleading nature of representation and lack of in-depth reports of the migrant crisis by the mainstream media. Should the media be applauded or criticized or should one address the balancing act by the media in reporting the migrant crisis and subsequent issues? She acknowledged the role of the media in bringing migrant issues to public notice and awareness. At the same time, she highlighted the difficulty of portraying the role of the media in the issue of migrants as there was a clear divide between media houses, with those that had taken the sides of the State and tried to ignore the migrant question, and then those who were independent, neutral and tried to present the issue as the reality was. When the State declared that there was no data on migrant deaths, the only source to counter this were the news reports and video clips produced by these independent media houses.

The focus of her presentation was highlighting those aspects about the migrant crisis which could have been dealt with in a more nuanced manner by the media: (a) migrants were seen as a whole unit, and the role of women migrants or their predicaments were not elaborated, (b) there were many disabled migrants, but their issues didn't come up, (c) media coverage was of depicting migrants walking mile after mile, their indescribable condition made headlines and photo features but there weren't many follow-up stories. (d) once migrants were back in their home states, there was not much detailed coverage of their problems, (d) now as migration has started again, the wave of stories have died down.

Sudarshana emphasized how the State had tried to ignore the migrant issue depending on the non-coverage by the 'Godi Media'. But this shameful activity was rejected by the nation, which wanted to know the actual picture of the migrants. The various initiatives to support migrant workers were not covered much by the media as well since the State wanted to suppress data about these initiatives. Did the migrants care? They walked, they died, they made it home, they survived, they again became migrants. This circle will never end. That they made it to the headlines at least proved that they exist. Only in-depth research and reports threw light on how they have been surviving once they were back and what they had gone through. This pandemic finally brought up the issue of migrant workers to the forefront.

The next presentation was by Shreya Ghosh, a JNU scholar and member of the Migrant Workers' Solidarity Network. While hundreds of protests by migrant workers were happening across the country during the lockdown in India, these protests were hardly shown by the media as 'resistances'. Reporting in the media mostly described them either as disturbances, chaos, or

outburst, rather than as some form of resistance. As part of Migrant Workers Solidarity Network, a Resistance Map was collated to bring together various instances of migrants' protests that were happening through the lockdown, which revealed that hundreds of protests were staged across the country, with lakhs of migrant workers participating. Yet the migrant-worker was never shown or seen as 'resisting subjects' and their protests as part of a movement or a potential one. While there was a great amount of attention on migrant workers during the lockdown, the discourse around them was made to be one of 'distress', which then needs humanitarian intervention from civil society or 'Garib Kalyan' from the state.

The presentation argued this discourse setting was an important intervention of the media(-state) to foreclose the possibility of emergence of any rights-based framework for migrant workers in the public sphere of the country. The nature of the media depiction is closely tied with the fact that there is an actual lack of a 'rights' discourse in society and our polity, which then leads media also to depict migrant protests as reflections of distress or disturbance, and not resistance or potential movements. In case of migrant workers, this 'rights' based understanding was already lacking and the empty streets, the war-rhetoric (even in PM's announcement of lockdown) and consequent discourse produced around the epidemic was reflected in the kind of coverage migrants got.

The last presentation of the session was by Ronak Chhabra of *Newsclick.in* . The trope of recent times had been the migrating labour. Of course, the largest migrant 'crisis' since India's Partition, inflicted by the pandemic- triggered countrywide lock down, found a commendable space within the media coverage. However, lest the nuances of the figure of the 'migrant' were blurred, the style of reporting the 'migrating question', as was witnessed recently, must be investigated with thoroughness. To do so, what was left out by the media narrative in depicting the crisis required equal focus. The silences in the chronicles remain as important as the vocal points in defining its contours. Ronak drew upon the memory of meeting an app-based cab driver in New Delhi in August. The tricenarian, having lost his salaried job due to the shutdown before entering into the gig universe, lamented having no leisure time available to him in the period he ruefully described as "post corona". Likewise, in the nearby industrial town namely, Manesar (Haryana), an automobile parts manufacturing worker described the crisis as weighing down upon him: a contract worker since three years that he had been, was now called back to work only as a trainee under a state-backed scheme. Both of the experiences of the dispersed workers highlight the production of a desirable labour figure by the unregulated capital regime, with the state facilitating the same. The Indian media, on the other hand, by subscribing to a language of reporting the 'spectacle' failed in capturing the process. In all this, thus the political invisibility of the migrant worker, as a subject with certain rights, was only furthered.

The ensuing discussion was rich and varied. There was a question on the gendered nature of reporting on migrants by the mainstream media. While there were images of women in the media, it was proposed that other kinds of questions needed to be asked like whether there were women reporters on the field, following the trend of layoffs in the media. The gender discourse is also

accompanied by the question of commodification of the issues, of these images. For instance, the questioner raised the case of *India Today* being accused of selling images of migrant workers during the crisis for Rs 20000. She asserted that gender had not been left out of the logic of commodification and that the relationship between the state and mainstream media was not seamless in that the patriarchal state represented a patriarchal media. She also questioned whether the speaker's example of a BBC journalist covering the migrant crisis who took off his shoes and offered them to a migrant worker on the road was a selfless act or a self-serving form of tokenism. The speaker responded by asserting that her point was not about gender representation per se but whether women migrants were represented as migrant workers or simply as the family -- wives and mothers -- of male migrant workers. On Mothers' day there were many pictures of migrant mothers in the media where the representation of women as mothers subsumed the crisis that they were facing. They were not seen as workers but mothers. She also asserted that there were many women journalists other than Barkha Dutt -- there were many grassroots-level women journalists in UP and Bihar who were not working for mainstream media or big media houses but they were very much present. She lastly challenged the questioner's assumption that the BBC journalist's gesture was for the sake of grabbing eyeballs, stating that BBC surely had plenty of breaking news stories and need not resort to gimmickry.

Another audience member pointed out about one of the presentations that while the migrant protests did not have an explicit charter of demands, they had an implicit one. The difficulty of articulating injustice in the middle of a protest where the actor was trying to make sense of the injustice done to them and this should not be misconstrued as lack of articulation. He also pointed out how the state drove its own truths through the media. that journalists were often prisoners of their own language. They were often in a hurry to report but when some crisis occurs, there should be a lesson learnt and they cannot pretend to be surprised. For instance, when journalists were covering the farmers' protests and the negotiations of the farmers with the Centre at Vigyan Bhavan, they should have refused to partake of state-sponsored food as it disrupted a journalistic code of ethics. This undermined the dignity of the farmers' protests. Secondly, truth should not be a casualty to national interest. Journalists should be defenders of truth. The moderator agreed that national interest was more and more often being used to railroad many pertinent issues. He gave the example of the recent Hyderabad municipal elections where the BJP raised issues that were ideological and national and not issues on roads and gas connections and other issues pertinent to the municipality. This national rhetoric won them the elections. If people were ready to vote for surgical strikes and prioritize that over a municipal election that has no foreign policy or security component, then the remedy to this needed to be fleshed out.

Concluding Session: Media, Migrants and the Pandemic in Europe
The final panel discussion was a public virtual session with two distinguished panelists, Prof. Ruth Wodak, Emeritus Professor in Discourse Studies at the University of Vienna and Mohammed Hamarsha, Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Paris. The chair for the session was Prof.

Ranabir Samaddar, Distinguished Chair of Migration and Forced Migration Studies, Calcutta Research Group.

The session started with welcoming the guests to the penultimate session of the two-day workshop. The title of the first speaker Ruth Wodak's speech was "Fortress Europe'? A Politics of Shameless Normalization". The key focus of her lecture was the migrant and refugee children and unaccompanied adolescents in various camps and detention centres at the Moria camp in Greece where they were forcefully parted from their parents and made to live in abysmal conditions, similar to the Mexican border problem where the Trump administration did the same thing. Children were usually the biggest casualty of war and conflict. The question that came up during the pandemic and the accompanying refugee crisis was the injustice meted by some EU member states to normalize the lack of saving of children in crisis. What was the policy and function of normalization of such decisions that was common among far-right politics and how did this gain legitimacy? Does this indicate a discursive shift by right-wing state agencies and how did that shift happen?

There were several conceptual parameters she discussed to understand the discursive construction of the "stranger" as encountered in the media and political rhetoric. These were:
1. War: Not real war but a conceptual metaphor of war which conceptualised migrants as an army trying to invade the host country, implying a victim-perpetrator reversal as refugees who are poor and have managed to escape their dire circumstances are suddenly constructed as strong and threatening.
2. Natural disasters: Gerald Knaus calls this migration physics where refugees are perceived as floods, waves and earthquakes and similar catastrophes where everybody else is innocent and helpless.
3. Apocalypse: Incoming refugees serve as a tsunami and will lead to the decline of the country they enter.
4. Disease: Strangers, migrants and refugees being viewed as a virus or parasite eating the body of the people and the nation, a discourse which leans towards biopolitics and body-politics. This racist metaphor of disease and contagion contained attitudes that were found to replicate the attitudes of the Nazis or Fascists.
5. Replacement: This is a trope that has increasingly been used by the identitarians, espousing a scenario of extinction where it is indicated that autochthonous people would die aand be replaced by migrants and refugees. This is indicative of a numbers game at play. This debate was used by the Nazis to eradicate Jewish settlements and fill it up with their people. A similar machinery had been used by the identitarians to remove minority communities from their places and replaced them with migrants from the majority community.

The idea of "shameless normalization" and far-right populist agendas reached the political mainstream: arguments and ideologies that were taboo now took centre-stage, indicating that the boundaries of the sayable had been shifted. In the name of keeping "traditions" intact, these provocations have been normalized by conservatives and far-right politicians and normalized by the

media. The far-right ideology would not be successful without the help of the media. Using Wilhelm Heitmeyer (2018)'s idea of "coarse civility" and "coarse incivility", Prof. Wodak spoke about the propagation of racist, sexist rhetoric by the far right by packaging them in a civilized, polite manner under which authoritarian attitudes were cloaked. This was also referred to by Shalini Randeria as soft authoritarianism, and required a close linguistic analysis.

She uses the example of euphemisms such as Orwell's 1984. For contemporary examples, Wodak showed the role of the National Conservative Far-Right Coalition in Austria in converting the name of arrival centres as departure centres, indicative of the state urging them to turn around leave again; this also became a euphemism for detention camps or deportation. The arrival of this in the mainstream was heralded through the coalition papers of the Conservative-Green coalition which again renamed refugee arrival centres into return centres. This not only challenged the human rights agenda of the Green Party but also speaks an insidious, euphemistic language of xenophobia. The unquestioning representation of such euphemisms by the media showed the changing nature of the media in Europe. Another example in the political mainstream offered by Prof. Wodak was the photographic representation of refugees as a big faceless mask of strangers, a propaganda poster for the Austrian Freedom Party including a slogan for closing the borders and protecting the homeland. This was taken up by the Austrian Chancellor and Foreign Minister, both of whom held membership in the Austrian National Conservative Party, about Moria. Prof. Wodak remarks how the latter said in a video interview about it making strategic sense to keep the Morya camps full and in the terrible condition that it was in so it worked as a deterrent for further refugees from wanting to enter Europe. Such logic was extended to protect Austria's external borders. Prof. Wodak understands these messages as examples of coarse civility that are put forward as rational discourse.

At the end of the presentation, Wodak pointed out the functions of the shameless normalization:
1. Performing authenticity when challenging traditional conversational conventions and forms of political correctness.
2. Rejection of any content related rational dialogue which simultaneously using mechanisms of political propaganda.
3. Establishing identification with the party and its agenda by offending and undermining so-called elites and the establishment.
4. Providing an efficient distraction from intended measures via scandalization and provocation.
5. Challenging constitutive democratic principles to attack the freedom of the press and other electronic media.
6. Facilitating implementation and its normalisation of execution and undemocratic policies and measures of exclusionary and undemocratic policies measures by mainstream political parties.
In conclusion, she referred to Zygmund Batman's idea of loss of livelihood, social entitlements and human dignity in an uncertain world espoused by the politics of fear disseminated by the media, which at the same time supports the wave of renationalization and the political justification for closing of borders.

The next speaker of this panel was Mohammed Hamarsha. According to him, COVID 19 exposed the problem that people faced all over the world. It also affected global political systems and economic models that have made a shift to the right. The pandemic exposed the horrifying realities faced by migrants and refugees not only in Europe but all over the world, most commonly with countries in the Global South: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Latin Americas, with countries facing a multi-layered crisis with Covid exacerbating an already existing crisis. For migrants, the first problem was the fund crunch faced by the national and international aid organisations by donors, and public and private sectors due to the economic crisis. Especially in Europe, the prolonged lockdown prevented aid workers from reaching refugees and migrants in detention camps and refugee centers due to the virtual walls constructed in many countries and the confinement and lockdown rules. Decisions regarding asylum applications were delayed by months due to the shutting down of public offices in the first wave of the COVID -19 pandemic. Due to the failure of the registration process, these refugees or migrants could not manage to find even informal jobs or approach government offices for help. The media frequently covered their helplessness, living in risky situations without proper food, sanitation and hygiene.

The media also did a commendable job in understanding the migrant situation in other parts of Europe. In Greece, for example, media reports indicated that detention centres in the island were overcrowded and had upto 37,000 people living in facilities made for 6,000 people. In an already inhumane living situation, they had very little access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Hamarsha noted that the Greece government took steps to depopulate the detention centres only in August after the spread of the virus among the inmates and on the insistence of aid agencies and the UN. The pandemic, therefore, exposed and exacerbated an ongoing crisis. Hamarsha mentioned recent reports of police brutality towards migrants in Paris where they removed 500 tents set up by mainly Afghan migrants. The dismantling of this "illegal" camp came on the back of the previous dismantling of bigger migrant camps resulted in a cat-and-mouse game between the migrants, aid agencies and the French police that the media covered in depth. The government justified these acts of brutality by defining the victims as immigrants, not asylum-seekers, being Afghan and subject to the EU demarcation of Afghanistan as a "safe place". He explained how the Covid-19 pandemic was weaponized to attack and spread misinformation against migrants and refugees, primarily by right-wing media. Migrants issues have been used by such media to further a conservative narrative, whether depicting migrants as terrorists when there was a terrorist attack in the EU.

During the pandemic, right-wing media began portraying refugees as carriers of the virus. He quoted a European Policy Centre report that looked at 1,500 articles published in Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic and Spain between May 2019 and June 2020 on migrant issues and traced the shifting of the narrative in February-March 2020 as portraying migrants as disease carriers and to be stopped at the border. In contrast to the conservative media, he spoke of liberal media houses like AFP, EuroNews and The Guardian's depiction of the migrant issues as humane and reflective of migrant suffering. But they contain a recurring theme lacking historical context and indulging in charitable gestures without acknowledging historical responsibility, from the EU policies that propagated

building a virtual wall between Turkey and Greece which was concurrent with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and thousands of people fleeing to avoid persecution. He spoke about Turkey being assigned as the border guard for the inflow of refugees to Europe, ridding Europe of the responsibility to take them in. Looking at the creation of economic dependency, he spoke of how loans from IMF, World Bank and organizations to countries of the Global South resulted in imposition of austerity measures, leading to large-scale unemployment and mass migration. The lack of reflection of these issues in the media coverage of the migrant crisis removes the responsibility of European countries to take in migrants and provide them shelter and uplift as a form of reparation for European colonial expansionist policies in the last few centuries of which the migrant crisis is an outcome.

Hamasha concluded that the administration of Covid-19 vaccines should be a responsibility of European countries to their counterparts in the global South that have not only been historically wronged but also doubly adversely affected by the pandemic. It would be one of the key roles of the media to generate this kind of historical accountability in its own depiction of the migrant crisis.

There were five-six questions addressed to the speakers. The Chair asked a question whether the social and political acts of solidarity being extended to migrants since 2012 and up to 2019 form a parallel narrative to the language of alienation and disease within which media reports often locate them. In reflecting on a question of the impact of Islamophobia towards migrants, Prof. Wodak said she was making a distinction between migrants and refugees. She was speaking about refugees mostly and 2015 created refugees from countries of civil war and also a question of climate refugees which is not included in the Geneva Convention. Once refugees apply for asylum they are not illegal anymore, but this narrative marks everyone outside this circle as a stranger, which has been disseminated by both conservative and progressive media. She mentioned that in a study of British media representation of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, even papers like The Guardian used works like bogus and illegal to define them. Only the Financial Times didn't use such notions.

To Prof. Samaddar's question, Prof. Wodak said there were significant counter-narratives and the conflict of narratives by civil society and progressive parties, Social Democrats, Greens, leftwing populists, and the conservatives and the far right. The development of these discourses however showed that many former progressive parties like Austria's Green Party had taken over conservative discourses, propagating the normalization of far-right tropes. The countries taking in from the Greek islands did represent progressive governments like Luxembourg, Germany, the Dutch and Scandinavian countries while those like Austria have completely rejected the intake of refugees. The argument being espoused was the problem of a country's own poor people, exacerbated by the post-Covid economic crisis had to be addressed before taking in refugees. Identitarian movements that go back to the French Nouvelle Droite have taken over far-right discourses using social media. There is the need for strong counter-positions and positive narratives and images and also a positive agenda that provides for an affirmative politics for migrants.

Regarding a question about the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Hamarsha said that the Palestinian refugees were living in refugee camps that evolved into small areas in Lebanese cities that were ruled by many Palestinian factions and Lebanese authorities could not govern those camps. The Lebanese state thus had no responsibility to provide for the Palestinian refugees. UNRWA and PLA that worked for the refugees faced a massive fund crunch due to aid cuts by the US amounting to a 100 million dollars by the Trump administration. Palestinians in Lebanon were also restricted from practicing upto 72 jobs and were forced into informal work. The pandemic thus exacerbated the problem and saw huge job losses for the migrants without any state security. When Hamarsha visited the camps as a journalist this year, he saw the situation in the camps to be apocalyptic, with no room at all for social distancing. He commented on the refugee situation being similar in Gaza, with very little medical intervention and planned attacks by Israel on medical centres in Gaza. The session ended with the vote of thanks by the Chair.