

A Research Symposium on

Public Health & Migrant Workers

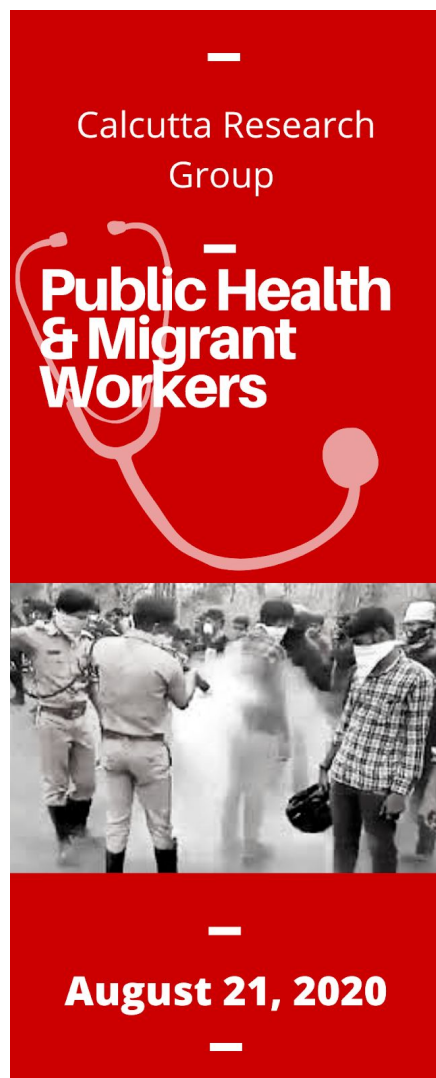
The nationwide lockdown declared by the government in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic ruptured the country's society and economy in unforeseen ways. The long march of migrant workers to their towns and villages in unprecedented numbers drove home the extreme precarity of migrant lives. The lockdown also generated a new discourse of stigma based on the movement of migrant bodies, giving rise to new forms of exclusion, monitoring and control. In this context, the pathologizing of migrant bodies marks a shift in the discourse of public health from concerns of sanitization, hygiene and clean drinking water to the question of survival itself.

The covalence of the migrant crisis and public health crisis creates an urgent need for research on the structural questions arising from this humanitarian emergency. At its heart is the exclusionary dimension of the word public. The near absence of migrants in policy discourse prior to the lockdown lent their visibility during the pandemic a pathologized nature.

The epidemiological crisis has brought out in the open the neoliberal face of healthcare. The existing public health discourse in India further exposes the fault lines along which welfare measures and health care for migrants are laid out.

This situation generates an alternate set of questions, from access to healthcare to a medical insurance-centric health policy, privatisation of healthcare, the precarity of impoverished bodies in informal settlements like slums and bastis, to the rhetoric of militarization accompanying the Covid-19 response, with 'frontline' workers – most often vulnerable migrants – traversing this 'battlefield' without any safety gear and provision. The situation urges us to revisit some of the questions that had received inadequate attention in policy and academic discourse. The assessment of migrant vulnerability through an examination of national health policies across economic and social divides can be indicative of the scale of the problem.

This symposium on migrants and public health is a platform to investigate and integrate some of the primary concerns arising from the state of public health in India, privatisation of the health care system, the skewed nature of governance in addressing public health concerns in our cities' poor, overcrowded neighbourhoods, and the fact that workers leading the response against the pandemic are rendered disposable for fear of disease and contamination. How do these binaries coexist and become new sites of discrimination? This symposium aims to inaugurate discussions that posit the migrant crisis as a collective crisis and public health as the need for the security of all lives.



August 21, 2020
06:00 PM - 08:00 PM
Indian Standard Time

In collaboration with
**Institut für die Wissenschaften vom
Menschen**

Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna

Schedule

Chair: Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Professor, Rabindra Bharati University & member, Calcutta Research Group

Opening Remarks

6:00 - 6:10 PM

Ranabir Samaddar, Distinguished Chair in Forced Migration Studies, Calcutta Research Group &

Ayşe Caglar, IWM (Institute of Human Sciences), Vienna, and Professor of Anthropology, University of Vienna

Paper Presentations & Comments

6:10 - 6:20 PM

Migrants in India's Health Infrastructure: Ethnography on India's Frontline Workers

Ishita Dey

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, South Asian University

Comments

6.20 – 6.40 pm

Shahram Khosravi, Professor, Stockholm University;

Anant Maringanti, Executive Director, Hyderabad Urban Lab

This symposium is a part of Calcutta Research Group's *Migration & Forced Migration Studies* programme supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna and other universities and institutions in India.

6.40 - 6:50 PM

Migrant Workers in the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Crisis of Work and Life

Mouleshri Vyas, Professor,
School of Social Work, Tata
Institute of Social Sciences; and
Manish K. Jha, Professor,
School of Social Work, Tata
Institute of Social Sciences

Comments

6.50 – 7.10 pm

Shalini Randeria, Rector, IWM,
Vienna

V. Srinivasan, trade-union &
human rights activist, People's
Union for Civil Liberties,
Chennai

7.10 – 7.20 PM

Public Health, Migrant Workers and a Global Pandemic: From a Social Crisis to a Crisis of the Social

Iman Mitra, Assistant
Professor, Department of
History, Shiv Nadar University

Comments

7.20 – 7.50 pm

Imrana Qadeer, Distinguished
Faculty, Council for Social
Development, New Delhi;

Subir Sinha, Senior Lecturer,
School of Oriental and African
Studies, London

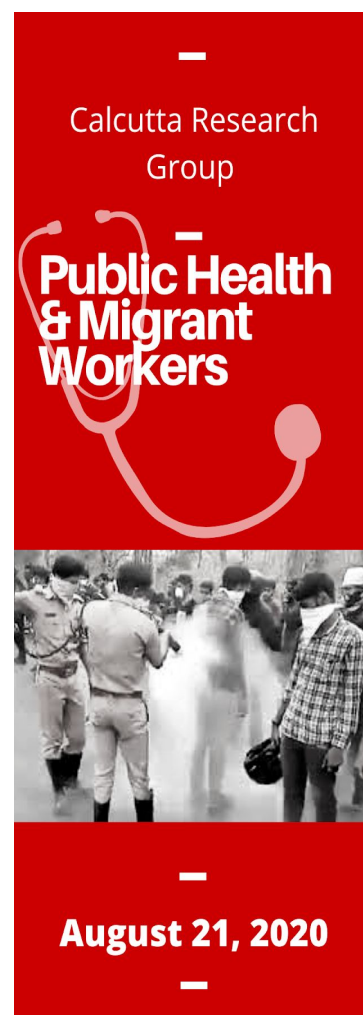
Volkan Yilmaz, Associate
Professor, Bogazici University,
Istanbul

7.50 – 7.55 PM

Open discussion

7.55- 8.00 pm

Closing remarks by the Chair



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Participants and Abstracts

Migrants in India's Health Infrastructure: Ethnography on India's Frontline Workers

Ishita Dey

With an ever-increasing spillover of zoonosis in the human habitat, the human – non-human divide has deepened, and the epidemiologist has emerged as the cultural hero of our times. Amidst the changing perceptions of risks, threats around COVID 19 some of the metaphors that have taken over our lives are fighting, the war against, winning, flatten the curve, frontline, invisible killer etc. War metaphors in connection to diseases is not a new phenomenon. What is new is how the state regimes have adopted war-like metaphors, and war-like machinery such as security personnel (military, state police forces) for mapping 'bodies' at the 'border/s', and creating 'zones of threats' such as quarantine centres, containment zones. In this war, the health system and medical personnel are being hailed as frontline health workers. Drawing upon a network of health workers in a resettlement colony in Delhi – that of pharmacists, 'jhola chhap daktar/ Bangali daktar' and ASHA workers the presentation tries to capture the limits of legal medical infrastructure that interlaces the migrant community.



Ishita Dey is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology in South Asian University, Delhi. She is a food anthropologist with an

interest in food, labour studies and forced migration. She has an M.Phil. and a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Delhi.

Migrant Workers in the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Crisis of Work and Life

Manish Jha and Moulshri Vyas

In the contemporary context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper investigates the history and trajectory of earlier pandemics and their implication for public health policies and practices vis-à-vis migrant workers in the city of Mumbai. The evolution of public health policy in India in general, and in Mumbai, in particular, is the backdrop for examining aspects of governance of this pandemic in the city. With a focus on urban poor living in informal settlements (Shivaji Nagar) and informal work (sanitation work), we propose to study the role of migrant workers in their community and through their work, particularly after the onset of the pandemic. Their everyday experiences as residents and workers in regard to health care and services would highlight access, alienation, refusal, and sites of fear and anxiety.



Manish K. Jha is a Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai at the Centre for Community Organisation and Development

Practice, School of Social Work. He has served as a faculty in the Department of Social work, University of Delhi from 1999 to 2003. In an academic career spanning over two decades of teaching

and research on Social Policy, Social Action and Social Movement, Rural society and State, Community Organization and Development Practice, etc., Prof Jha has had the opportunity to engage with students, academicians, development professionals, leaders of multilateral and non-profit organization across different parts of country and abroad. He has extensive engagement with post-disaster relief and rehabilitation intervention.



Mouleshri Vyas is a Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai at the Centre for Community Organisation and Development Practices. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from Mumbai University, Master of Arts in Social Work (with Specialisation in Urban and Rural Community Development) from TISS, Mumbai, and PhD in Sociology from Mumbai University.

Public Health, Migrant Workers and a Global Pandemic: From a Social Crisis to a Crisis of the Social

Iman Mitra

In the last few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the horrible indifference (or severity) with which the migrant workers were treated has exposed a deepening social crisis in India. The proposed study will attempt to explore this crisis by studying the intersecting historical trajectories – the histories of privatisation of the health sector in India and the absence of the migrant worker in the public health discourses – against the backdrop of a global crisis of capital.



Iman Mitra is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Shiv Nadar University. His research interests include History of the economic discipline; Economic History and Political Economy of South Asia; Urbanization, migration practices and informal economy in South Asia; State and non-state networks of dissemination of economic knowledge, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts; Relation between economic rationalities and governmental reason.