

A Report

VIDYASAGAR UNIVERSITY, WEST BENGAL & CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP, KOLKATA

PANDEMIC, MIGRATION & POLITICS OF LIFE
A TWO-DAY INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS' WORKSHOP

supported by Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM), Vienna



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September 24 & 25, 2020

This event is organised as part of CRC's migration & forced migration studies programme, supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, IWM (Vienna) and other universities and institutions in India

The 1st day of the International Webinar started off with an Inaugural Programme followed by a Business Session I.

Inaugural Programme

Prof. Sibaji Pratim Basu, Dept of Political Science, Vidyasagar University, initiated the welcome, proposing Prof. Samir Kumar Das, Calcutta University and also the Honorary Director as the Chairman of the inaugural session. Prof. Samir Kumar Das spoke on the joint collaboration between Calcutta Research Group and Vidyasagar University. The collaboration comes under the program of migration and forced migration studies being supported by Institute of Human Sciences, IWM Vienna. Prof. Das also elaborated the objectives of the project, such as, framing the study of migration into the syllabus of higher education, working for inclusion of forced migration studies, sensitising the young faculty to the importance of policy development knowledge and exploring the possibility of turning the workshops into a longer certificate course etc.

Prof. Ranjan Chakrabarti, Vice Chancellor, Vidyasagar University formally inaugurated the International Webinar and delivered the Keynote Address. With rich illustrations from history, Prof. Chakrabarti dealt elaborately with the instances of epidemic during the Greek Peloponnesian War – recorded by Thucydides; the European black fever after the Crusades; and the Spanish Flu (1918) after the end of First World War, and argued that these epidemics/pandemics had deep connection with war and movement.

Following these historical instances, he emphasised how the situation arising out of COVID-19 has worsened due to failure of international politics, capitalism and science and how we have failed to learn from the lessons of the past. In the name of development and progress, human beings have extracted heavily from nature and tried to eradicate all viruses from the earth. Nature is now hitting back. The keynote address was followed by a very engaging Q&A session.

Prof. Samir Kumar Das and Dr. Sujoy Ghosh, Dept of Political Science, Vidyasagar University presented their vote of thanks.

Business Session 1

The theme of the session was titled 'Pandemic, Migration & Governance', which was chaired by Prof. Debashis Bandyopadhyay, Dept of English, Vidyasagar University.

The speakers were:

- 1- Prof. Manish Kumar Jha, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (Topic- Migrants in the Pandemic, Politics of Precarity and Invisibility)
- 2- Prof. Samir Kumar Das, Dept of Political Science, Calcutta University (Topic- Governing the Pathological: Social Governance in Times of Pandemic)
- 3- Prof. Sibaji Pratim Basu, Dept of Political Science, Vidyasagar University (Topic- Pandemic, Community and Politics of Life: Reflections from Indian Thought)
- 4- Prof. Koushiki Dasgupta (Vidyasagar Chair Professor), Dept of History, Vidyasagar University (Topic- Troubled Lives: Women in the Shadow of Pandemic)

Key points from the presentations

Prof. Manish Kumar Jha, following the writings of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, emphasised that the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is being used as a justification to normalise exceptional power such as by the provisions of Disaster Management Act or law and order mechanism. The citizens, specifically the poor, are resigning themselves to compromise with their rights in the name of biological crisis. He concluded his speech by highlighting the nature and character of the state from migrant workers perspective.

Prof. Samir Kumar Das spoke based on his on-going study highlighting the illegally migrated Bangladeshi manual scavengers and the authority's measure in hiding this fact to maintain the "normal conditions of life", which is contrary to the accepted law. The precarious conditions of the workers due to demand for their labour is delivered. The talk raised questions on the social governance in the face of a pandemic today and sought to show how the erstwhile caste

Prof. Sibaji Pratim Basu began with the 'new' or 'renewed' terminologies like 'social distancing', 'home-isolation', 'quarantine', and so on, which have become the vocabulary of the 'new normal'. He valorised the importance of community in the present pandemic situation and established his arguments with the instances of the efforts of Ramakrishna Mission in the late 19th century; Rabindranath Tagore's concept of Atmashakti that problematizes the present political agenda of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'; and Mahatma Gandhi's way of breaking out of the existing normal. He argued, following the instances recently given by Ranabir Samaddar, that to fight the spirit of community has to be evoked.

Prof. Koushiki Dasgupta, pointed out, emphasising the unequal relations between man and woman, how there is a dearth of sufficient data and the memorabilia of women in history during plagues such as the Black Death; how women died, indicating lack of meta-narrative on the history of women struggle. She referred to Virginia Woolf and Katherine Anne Porter and their experiences in this context.

Thereafter, an engaging question and answer session followed.

Paper presentations by Teachers and Research Scholars ensued:

Chaired by Dr Sujoy Ghosh and observed by Dr Suratha Kumar Malik, Dept. of Political Science, Vidyasagar University. The papers touched a wide range of topics around the theme of the webinar such as education in the times of pandemic, human development, problems of healthcare in the time of corona, change in our daily lives, migration issue in Europe, the Indo-Nepal border issues, the role of media played in the times of pandemic, and so on.

Dr. Rukmani Joshi presented on Unlocking the Locks during Lockdown: A Study of Reverse Migration in Uttarakhand, India during Pandemic.

Siddhartha Sankar Manna presented on Impact of COVID-19 on Migration and Overview.

Purnima Chatterjee presented on An Assessment of Education System in India during Pandemic.

Sukanya Mukherjee presented on Understanding Refugee Education in Pandemic Crisis: A Critical Assessment of Afghan Refugees in India and Pakistan through Policy Analysis.

Amit Lugun presented on COVID-19 Pandemic: A Jolt on the Human Development Process.

Priyanka Bhaduri presented on Emerging New Normal in our Daily Life.

Sanika Banerjee presented on Women Migrant Workers and COVID-19 in India: Impact and Implications.

Rahul Kabiraj presented on Impact of the Pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 over the Economic conditions of the Tribal: A Study of Rural Areas of West Bengal.

Debarati Biswas presented on Pandemic, Migration and Healthcare.

Navonil Dey presented on Pandemic, Politics and the Issue of Migration in Europe: Greece-Turkey border.

Arunava Das presented on Unplanned Lockdown and Migrant Workers during Pandemic time in India.

Basudeb Das presented on Plights of the Migrant Workers during Pandemic: A Narrative from Indo-Nepal Borderland.

Chiranjit Bar presented on Liberalism, Dark Politics and COVID-19.

Indrajit Samanta presented on the Agricultural Crisis in West Bengal: Notes from the field.

Oindrilla Bhattacharjee presented on Understanding Poverty in India at the juncture of COVID-19 Pandemic.

Madhubanti Ganguly presented on COVID-19 Pandemic: A Push factor for Migration and Inequality.

Manoj Bisai presented on Discourse of Media in the time of COVID-19.

Nibedita Samanta presented on Impact of COVID-19 on Tribal and Forest Dweller Communities of India.

Prasenjit Chuyan presented on Politics in Pandemic, Humanitarian Crisis and Migrant Workers.

The 2nd day of this International webinar had two business Sessions followed by a special lecture and valedictory address.

Business Session II

The second business session was chaired by Prof. Sibaji Pratim Basu and the speakers were:

Prof. Raj Kumar Kothari , Dept of Political Science , Vidyasagar University

Topic: Pandemic & International Regimes : Emerging Challenges

Dr. Shyamalendu Majumder , Dept of Political Science, Sivanathan Shastri College

Topic: Forced Migration: The Vagrant & Society

Dr. Eyasian Khan, Dept of Political Science, Vidyasagar University

Topic: The New Normal: A study of Migrants in Southern West Bengal

Dr. Suratha Kumar Malik, Dept. of Political Science, Vidyasagar University.

Topic: Politics of Pandemic: The tribals in Orissa

Key points from presentation:

Prof. Kothari in his deliverance, highlighting the current pandemic's impact on the global society, emphasized the role of International Health regimes, particularly WHO and other supporting health agencies. He first elaborated on the theoretical background of the concept of 'regime' and then pointed out the challenges that these health regimes are witnessing and strongly argued for some curative measures in the functioning of these bodies.

Dr. Majumdar spoke on the subjugation, humiliation and helplessness of vagrants in India from an historical and societal point of view. Taking a Foucauldian stance, he showed how, especially after the partition of India, which resulted in mass forced migration to West Bengal, the law to 'control' the vagrants was enacted and how this law was used to control any vagabond as 'other'. The paper was based on some first-hand experiences of the speaker.

Dr.Khan, presented his paper based on some actual plights (in Chabra and Khakuda of Paschim Medinipur) of the migrant workers from an empirical standpoint. He also elaborated on the so-called 'New Normal' on these migrants.

Dr.Malik reflected on the pathetic situation of some tribal people (known as 'primitive tribe group' or PTG) living in the forest and hill infested remotest parts of Odisha, without practically any health and medical facilities necessary to fight the disease. He also pointed out the fact that owing to uncultivable nature, most of them migrate to the 'developed' parts of the state and even outside.

After this, there was an engaging question-answer session – participated by the students, scholars and teachers.

BUSINESS SESSION III

Theme- Studying Migration in syllabus: Possibilities and Challenges

It was an interactive session in which teachers and students of Vidyasagar University shared their experiences of teaching and learning of some courses of the syllabus of Political Science, VU, which has components like Forced Migration, Refugee Regimes, UNHCR, IDPs etc. They also expressed their thoughts on expanding the migration studies syllabus at Post Graduate and Undergraduate levels. The suggestions and queries had received warm reception and were responded by Prof. Samir Kumar Das and Prof. Byasdeb Dasgupta from CRG.

Theme- Pandemic, Migration & Politics of Life: Experience from South Asia.

Notable Speakers were: Dr. Meghna Guha Thakurata, Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh;

Dr. Hari Sharma, Director, Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, Nepal;

Dr. Rajarshi Dasgupta, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, India.

This session was moderated by Dr. Iman Mitra, Dept. of History, Shiv Nadar University, UP, India.

Key points from the presentations

In this round-table session, the eminent speakers shared the experiences of the pandemic in Bangladesh, Nepal and India and pointed out the problems of dealing with the unprecedented crisis by the governments. They raised some critical theoretical as

well as practical issues. Ably moderated by Dr. Mitra, the session became a very engaging, discursive as well as enlightening one.

Special Lectures

The Special Lecture, delivered by Prof. Ranabir Samaddar, Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies, CRG, opened up new possibilities of research when he talked about 'bio-politics from below' and 'bio-politics from above' experienced in the present pandemic time. The idea of 'bio-politics from below' was further explained with reference to crises like famine, war and epidemic. Centred on the ideas of Foucault and Marx, Prof. Samaddar thought-provokingly expanded these ideas to understand various dimensions of 'politics of life' during the present crisis.

A brilliant question and answer session took place following the Special Lecture.

Valedictory Session

The session was chaired by Prof. Ranjan Chakrabarti, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Vidyasagar University.

Prof. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Vice Chancellor, Rabindra Bharati University in his valedictory address, brilliantly put forward the binary of 'politics of life' with 'politics of death' and sought to show how both of these affected us during the pandemic.

Vote of Thanks

After the Valedictory Session, the formal vote of thanks was offered by Dr. Swatilekha Bhattacharya, on behalf of Vidyasagar University and Dr. Shyamalendu Majumdar, on behalf of CRG.

After this, the two-day collaborative international Teachers' Workshop on 'Pandemic, Migration & the Politics of Life' came to an end.