

A REPORT ON

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CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP's

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**BENGAL-BIHAR
DIALOGUE**

On

Migration of populations & ideas/ Languages,
cultural exchanges & interlinked political histories/
Borders, border towns, logistics & logistical labour/
Media and the popular/ Ecology, natural disasters
& displacements/ Caste, gender & social justice

29-30 October, Kolkata

In collaboration with

Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna



This dialogue is a part of CRG's ongoing research and orientation programme
in migration and forced migration studies, supported by IWM, Vienna, Rosa
Luxemburg Stiftung, and several other universities and institutions in India.

A Report on

Bengal–Bihar Dialogue

[A Dialogue on Issues of Culture, Identity, Caste, Migration, Citizenship, Justice and Media]

Organised by
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

Supported by
Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna

October 29-30, 2021
Swabhumi, Kolkata



Introduction

The Calcutta Research Group (CRG) has consistently proven itself to be deserving of its status as a pioneer research organisation in the field of migration studies, not just in India, but all of South Asia. Since its inception, CRG has made immense contributions in ensuring the integration of forced migration studies with the nuances of the modern world while also keeping the history of the subject in perspective. In an attempt to initiate more conversations surrounding the relations between the Indian states of West Bengal and Bihar on the specific subject of the exchange of migrant labour, CRG organised a one-of-a-kind Bengal-Bihar Dialogue from October 29-30, 2021, in Kolkata.

The Dialogue had the following objectives:

- a. Rethink the constant process of making and remaking of the two contiguous regions, divided by politico-administrative, economic and cultural boundaries, in a comparative and connected framework;
- b. Compare different experiences from the two regions and draw crucial insights about the changing patterns of inter-regional migration in and from eastern India against the backdrop of a larger history of capitalist accumulation;
- c. Identify the continuities as well as discontinuities from the colonial to the postcolonial times which contributed to the making of the two separate but deeply connected regions;
- d. Highlight how the fixity of administrative borders has been challenged by natural calamities and ecological disorders;
- e. Find and discuss possible areas of future research along the above lines with a specific focus on the experiences of eastern India.

Accordingly, the Dialogue was divided into six broad themes:

1. Migration of populations and ideas;
2. Languages, cultural exchanges and interlinked political histories;
3. Borders, border towns, logistics and logistical labour;
4. Ecology of rivers and deltas, natural disasters and displacements;
5. Media and the popular with a special focus to the local media;
6. Caste, gender and histories of social justice.

Given its character as a ‘dialogue,’ the event produced conversations that were guided yet free-flowing. The conversations within each session, after being initiated by the respective moderator and discussed thoroughly by the respective speakers, took an expansive form wherein every participant was welcomed to share their views and ideas.

Migration of Populations and Ideas

Moderator: Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury[Rabindra Bharati University & Honorary Director, CRG]

Main discussants: Sonmani Chaudhary[Centre for Catalyzing Change, Patna]

Sabir Ahamed [Pratichi (India) Trust, Kolkata & CRG]

Sheema Fatima [Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai]

Sonmani Chaudhury spoke about the composition of migrants in India’s population dynamics and how our national statistics record or fail to record them. She highlighted that employment is the strongest factor which causes individuals to migrate within India. This is especially true in the case of Bihar where there is a large section of people who live below the poverty line. Ms. Chaudhury reported that, according to a study conducted in the state, there is at least one migrant worker in 58% of all Bihari families. In fact, migrants from Bihar constitute more than half of the Hindi speaking population of Bengal. She concluded by calling attention to the systematic exclusion of women from most migrant literature and statistical data in India. The census data has a section where the reason for migration is recorded, and it concludes that most women migrate only as a consequence of marriage. However, the reality that the informal labour sector in the country is mainly comprised of women proves that such official conclusions do not tackle formidable questions of social justice. Since this female population is not officially identified as migrants, they are not eligible for government welfare schemes in various states.

Sabir Ahamed elaborated on the condition of Bihari migrants in West Bengal. He spoke of their engagement in the informal food industry in Kolkata and their concentration in certain pockets of the city. Contrary to patterns observed in other migrant communities in the city, Bihari migrants refrain from picking up Bangla as a language of communication even after having resided in the city for several generations. Having interviewed several Bihari migrants, he noted that almost all of them identify Bihar as their true home. He also pointed out that these migrants suffer a lack of individual identity in Kolkata and they are mostly referred to by their occupations which are almost always at the lower tiers of the social hierarchy of livelihoods. Their given names are barely ever used. Moreover, nowadays, Bihari migrants who have been living in Kolkata for several generations are being dislocated of their residences due to infrastructural development in the city. He submitted that the lack

of reliable data and literature on Bihari migrants in Bengal, regardless of their massive numbers, is appalling.

Speaking about women migrants in Kolkata, Sheema Fatima remarked that the apparent unwillingness of Bihari migrants to stay in Kolkata for a long period of time applied mostly to men. Women who came to Kolkata experienced more freedom in the city than they did in their villages and this made them want to remain in the city.

During the discussion that followed, several interesting perspectives were put forth. A proposal to map the material memories of migrants received much interest. Bihar's status as a major labour-supplying state was recognised along with the fact that regardless of their large numbers in Bengal, Biharis have not found themselves a place in Bengal's folk culture. The same cannot be said for Bihar's folk culture which has been heavily influenced by Bengal. Similarly, the participants spoke about the exclusion or absence of Biharis from Kolkata's imagination, even as surveys and interviews reveal that the most laborious occupations were usually left to Bihari migrants. There was consensus that the lack of reliable data on migrants in Kolkata requires remedy.

Languages, Cultural Exchanges and Interlinked Political Histories

Moderator: Pushyamitra [Author and Journalist, Patna]

Main discussants: Farid Khan [Author & Poet, Patna & Mumbai]

Biplab Mukherjee [Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Kolkata]

Jishnu Dasgupta [Serampore College & CRG]

Farid Khan started by acknowledging the inseparable entwining of the cultures of Bengal and Bihar. He spoke about his childhood in Patna spent listening to *Mahalaya* and *Chandi Paath*. He also expressed curiosity at Bihar's decision to make Urdu the state's second official language. He noted that the decision to adopt a second official language should logically have favoured Bangla, given its extensive usage and cultural/historical significance in the state.

Biplab Mukherjee comes from a diverse background and provided several interesting insights on the theme. Though a Bengali by ties of language, he faces difficulties in identifying as a Bengali after having been brought up wholly in Bihar. His talk focussed on the Bengali literature that sheds light on Bihari culture and way of life. He also spoke extensively about the life of Bengalis in Bihar. He called attention to the influence of Bihar's societal structure and beliefs on Bengal's politics and the impact that several political movements in Bengal had on Bihar. Moreover, he classified the general Bengali population in Bihar into certain categories which broadly included the literary class (who produced some of the most important literary works in Bengali) and the elite class (who are doctors, engineers and civil servants). He concluded by stating that the Bengali upper class in Bihar had failed to identify the aspirations of the local Biharis in terms of recognition and acceptance of their culture.

Jishnu Dasgupta provided an interesting historical context to the discussion. He started by speaking of the period when Bihar and Odisha were carved out from Bengal. He submitted that the main reason behind this separation was not only a difference in cultures but also the fact that Bengal did not accord enough respect to Bihar. Unfortunately, this disrespect is still prevalent in certain narratives emerging from Bengal. He also bemoaned the discrimination suffered by tribal languages in these regions.

During the discussion, participants highlighted the fact that Hindi-speaking journalists in Bihar were constantly overshadowed by Bengal's media. However, it deserves mention that the first Hindi newspapers in India were born in Bengal. In Bihari culture and society, there has been a long debate on the identification of a quintessential Bengali. A view was expressed that the main cause for the rejection of Bengali culture in Bihar is the fact that Bihar itself has no unique cultural identity. The people of Bihar have an affinity also to Uttar Pradesh—another major Hindi-speaking state with the added significance of being prominent in Hindu mythology. In the present day, Bihar appears as continuously striving to achieve a distinct identity and claim for prominence within the nation.



Borders, Border Towns, Logistics and Logistical Labour

Moderator: Anamika Priyadarshini [Centre for Catalyzing Change, Patna & CRG]

Main Discussants: Paula Banerjee [University of Calcutta, Kolkata & CRG]

Sheema Fatima [Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai]

Sheema Fatima spoke of her own experience of migration and of encountering urbanization in Patna and Mumbai. She gave a historical context to Patna's urbanization, speaking of archival records and municipal reports. These reports were often patronising and asked the town planners of Patna to learn from their counterparts in Kolkata. She spoke of how the

discourse on sanitation led to the master planning of urban cities, a concept that started in erstwhile Madras and then travelled across India. The Calcutta Improvement Trust was also a formidable force as it was an instrument of patronization and also kept away dissatisfied citizens. Even today, the notion of learning from Bengal persists as engineers and machinery from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation are brought to Patna during emergencies. Ms. Fatima also reminded the audience that the nature of urbanization in Patna was quite distinct as it traverses both rural and urban spheres, engaging with its own rural identities even while being shaped by urban growth. She also spoke of how, contemporarily, the migrant discourse was quite alive in Mumbai along with the slum discourse as more areas are needed for settlement of slums and then those areas are also gentrified. The question of housing for migrants has also intensified in the context of Covid-19. In her opinion, the peri-urban space left for the migrant and the subsequent processes of eviction and gentrification keep the category of the migrant alive.

Paula Banerjee opined that borders initially start at the level of the state and then multiply within the city and its migrants. Her talk shed light on how the Bihari migrant worker was viewed in the past and is still viewed today. She pointed out that it was difficult for urban metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Kolkata to forget the existence of migrant workers and slums because of their prominent presence in the city. She opined that in these modern cities, constant gentrification and beautification has also led to the displacement of migrant workers as they now face the ‘outsider’ or *bohiragato* status. As a consequence, they tend to jealously guard their culture and language, which becomes an important aspect of border towns like Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur. She mentioned the great leaps in education and culture visible in Bihar’s history, the ancient Nalanda University being an epitome.

Anamika Priyadarshini added her own thoughts about the deep internalization of the notion of a Bihari migrant worker and the acceptance of stereotypes that lead to further dehumanization. She pointed out how even in precolonial times, Bhojpuri songs had travelled across the country showing the presence of migrant workers from the region.

The ensuing discussion spoke of the universalization of the ‘other’ North Indian to the Bengali through the usage of the term *khotta*. The etching on borders of residential houses and apartments in Kolkata was also discussed along with the Bengali *bhadralok* trying to negotiate with people they consider as others as they do not speak the same language. The refusal of the Bengali *bhadralok* to acknowledge the migrants who have been living in North Kolkata for generations also shows that borders can stretch beyond the physical and become a mental entity. It was also remarked that the colonial government, while planning the city of Kolkata, had already started to segregate non-Bengali populations. These historical facts also provide a new perspective to rethink the riots that have happened in the city. The notions of ownership also came up with respect to the mass eviction of Delhi slums in 2007. It was agreed that humans as social beings always look to create an exterior mark on their social space which often happened to be the ownership of a house, something that has become even more difficult for migrants in a new city.

Ecology of Rivers and Deltas, Natural Disasters and Displacements

Moderator: Mohammad Reyaz [Aliah University,Kolkata]

Main Discussants: Gopal Krishna [Toxic Watch, Patna & CRG]

Ishita Ray [New Alipore College, Kolkata]

Dipanjan Sinha [Independent Journalist, Kolkata]

Shatabdi Das [CRG]

Gopal Krishna commenced an illuminating discussion on ecological degradation and climate change. He pointed out how anthropocentric narratives lead to inadequate economic planning. Consequently, entire geographies are rewritten with policies that focus not on river basins but only industries. There has been continued water quality deterioration and water level depletion that has not been managed. Rather, more embankments have been built by displacing people without compensation. He argued that the legitimacy of the state will decrease, and public perception of its institutions will deteriorate, as they are unable to reverse the worsening water crisis and degradation. Often, reports that are published on water crisis commit an epistemic violence since they speak the language of financial gains and not that of conservation and preservation.

Ishita Ray contributed to the discussion by arguing that problems like air and water pollution are not static and such problems in either West Bengal or Bihar would affect the other state negatively as well.

Dipanjan Sinha's talk was based on his experience as a journalist in different parts of India including Mumbai, Bangalore and in the Sundarbans in West Bengal. He conveyed that many migrant workers from Bengal and Bihar lived together in perilous conditions in Mumbai's slums, and their helplessness compels them to steal low-quality water through corruption. Speaking of the Sundarbans, he remarked that most people in this flood-prone region refuse to relocate. Even among those who consent, relocation was not possible as there is no policy yet for a climate-resilient urbanization which would give space and inclusion to vulnerable communities. His findings also brought out important aspects of electoral and identity politics among the migrant workers who often agree to the *bohiragato* metaphor, even while in their own home. He also noted an informal tension among the migrant communities that settle in or around cities with large construction projects and local political elements that try to establish their control over these communities by giving them access to basic needs.

Shatabdi Das spoke of how the creation of embankments leads to overflowing of rivers and flooding during storms or cyclones. Hindrance in natural drainage systems of the region compels inhabitants to live in waterlogged conditions.

The political rhetoric surrounding rivers was discussed, as was the commodification of natural resources. The general instinct of scientists and engineers to perceive rivers as assets to be controlled was also questioned. It was noted that while international agencies

recognize climate crisis, they do not adequately acknowledge climate refugees leading to lack of suitable policies and guidelines. The suggestion was made that citizens had to engage in acts of reclamation to restore the health of their natural resources.



Media and the Popular with a Special Focus to the Local Media

Moderator: Rajat Roy [Senior Journalist, Kolkata & CRG]

Main Discussants: Seetu Tiwari [Senior Journalist, Patna]

Chandan Srivastava [Jayprakash University, Chhapra, Bihar]

Mohammad Reyaz [Aliah University, Kolkata]

Introducing the session, Rajat Roy spoke of the decline in the quality of journalism and the need for journalists to engage in introspection. He noted that during the pandemic, there was an absence of the migrant as a category and journalists treated them as the ‘other.’ Mr. Roy also noted that journalism has suffered a loss of idealism since the emergence of neoliberalism, and journalists today feel unprotected by laws and insecure about their jobs. This makes the present-day media reluctant to raise meaningful questions.

Seetu Tiwari spoke of the great divide between rural and urban areas, and how each sphere is consuming newspapers even less everyday but due to different reasons. While the urban sphere has mostly stopped looking at newspapers because of the popularity of mobile phones and social media, the rural sphere has started to depend on these new forms of media simply because they do not have access to newspapers which is almost a luxury. News applications like democratize news content and make it available to all. Journalists have also modified their behaviour and become more unethical based on popular trends while regressive gender norms and aggressive nationalism is becoming legitimized. In a post-truth

age, there is no concept of checks and balances in news content. In addition, unfair and exploitative revenue policies hinder the publication of honest and important news.

Chandan Srivastava spoke extensively on the concept of the ‘local’ and how returning migrants perceive their own local. He spoke of journalists’ reluctance to speak truth to power, and to boldly counter the narratives published by the state in order to show itself to be progressive and developing.

Mohammed Reyaz added to the discussion about popular narratives and stereotypes through employing a historical perspective. He spoke of folk songs in Bihar that express the insecurity of married Bihari women who were worried they would lose their husbands once they went to Kolkata. Contemporary movies, at times, portray Hindi-speaking Muslim terrorists and fuel stereotypes. There are also perceptions regarding safe and unsafe areas in Kolkata with the areas perceived as unsafe being mostly Muslim-dominated. Reyaz also noted how migrants from Bihar who earlier lived in small pockets across the city are becoming more assertive and celebrating their cultural festivals with more pomp. He submitted that the new media should not be discredited completely as it has the potential to reveal the truth, and spread it far and wide.

The discussion explored the phenomenon of organized propagation of fake news.

Caste, Gender and Histories of Social Justice

Moderator: Samata Biswas [The Sanskrit College and University & CRG]

Main Discussants: Anamika Priyadarshini [Centre for Catalyzing Change, Patna & CRG]

Pushyamitra [Author and Journalist, Patna]

Ashmita Gupta [Asian Development Research Institute, Patna]

Mohammad Reyaz [Aliah University, Kolkata]

Sreetapa Chakrabarty [Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata]

Ashmita Gupta emphasized how liberalisation policies commencing from the 1990s have led to more inequality and regional disparity regardless of the growth in India’s economy. Asserting that the Bengal Presidency was largely ignored during the implementation of the New Economic Policy, she pointed out that factories were constrained to certain regions resulting in unfavourable situations of employment and labour. She remarked that 70% of people in India take up their father’s profession. She discussed the opportunity cost of hiring a new, inexperienced labour force and recognized how studies have shown that employers find it cheaper to make the existing workers do more chores than hire new people. On the issue of gender, Ms. Gupta said that there is very low participation of women in the labour force. She emphasized that women suffer more due to a fall in income and that, often, the first response to a negative income shock is to pull young girls out of school. Ms. Gupta called for a more refined education system that focusses on imparting skills that jobs in the near future will demand.

Pushyamitra spoke about the extensive social justice work that has been carried out in Bihar. He also remarked that in recent times, several backward classes have been excluded from politics, leading to communal conflicts and erosion in the sense of belonging.

Sreetapa Chakraborty focussed on the lost childhoods of migrant children. She brought out the evidence presented in several reports indicating that every fifth migrant in India is a child who lacks proper education and therefore faces vulnerabilities. Talking about brick kilnworkers, she pointed out that many of them are children who hide their ages in order to find jobs and evade child-labour laws. She called for initiatives from the government to prevent school dropouts.

Mohammad Reyaz focussed his discussion on caste and religion. He remarked that people who are not directly affected by the negatives of such social hierarchies seldom oppose them, and questioned public indifference to social injustice. Further, he spoke about the challenges faced by Bengali and Bihari Muslim migrants.

Anamika Priyadarshini spoke about the ‘invisibilization of women.’ She discussed how the identity of a worker is defined in Bengal. In speaking about the historic exclusion of women from brahmanical society and the *bhadralok* movement, she asserted that the contemporary challenges facing women must be taken note of.

The discussion that followed the final session focussed on the idea of recognizing individual rights. An interesting question was raised regarding the lack of clarity in perceiving justice: what defines justice better—equality or liberty? It was also noted that identification is not equal to identity.

Concluding session

The Bengal-Bihar Dialogue unanimously called for an ‘Eastern India Comprehensive Justice Initiative’ after recognizing the various themes of injustice that the discussions brought up. It was decided that the second round of the Dialogue would be held in Bihar. Participants also suggested that the next round could employ a semi-structured or hybrid form. Regional films can also be shown to spread more awareness. Perhaps, similar dialogues could be organised to cover the whole of Eastern India. It was decided that some prominent texts in any of the regional languages used in Bihar will be translated to Bangla to keep the conversation flowing.

Digangana Das and Sukanya Bhattacharya were rapporteurs for the event.