

LONG 2020: A RESEARCH WORKSHOP

7 October 2021 (RANGMANCH, Swabhumi, Kolkata)

Organised by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

In collaboration with Institut für die Wissenschaften, vom Menschen (IWM), Vienna

On 7th October 2021, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group organised a workshop on its 2021 research thematic called “Long 2020” in Rangmanch, Swabhumi, Kolkata. The workshop was conducted in collaboration with Institute of Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna along with the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Berlin and several universities and institutions of India. The essence of the thematic is to create a critical understanding of the Novel Corona Virus pandemic and its impact on human lives and livelihoods. The thematic perceived that the suddenness of this moment is not merely a conjectural event of the contemporary but a notion that will dominate and reshape the lives and livelihoods of humanity in precendently reemergent cycles of the epidemiological experiences. In that sense, the ‘long’ can also be understood in reference to the projection of a current event into the future by looking back into the past. Informed by such a paradox, the ‘Long 2020’ research workshop programme attempted to rethink issues of epidemiological governance, jurisprudence, public health, restructuring of labour, and the idea of ‘crisis’ with a special focus on refugees and migrants caught in the Covid-19 crisis. The research collective consisted of economists, historians, political scientists of different Indian universities and research institutes had presented their final research findings in the workshop and followed by extensive discussions on their presentation.

Introducing the workshop, CRG’s honorary director, Professor Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury discussed the research thematic and why CRG had initiated this important research thematic in terms of understanding refugees and migrant question in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic. The first technical session named as “Life and Labour at the Time of the Pandemic: Lessons in Political Economy,” was chaired by Professor Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury. Professor Byasdeb Dasgupta of University of Kalyani & CRG and Mr Sabir Ahamed, Pratichi (India) Trust & CRG and Ms Madhurilata Basu, Sarojini Naidu College & CRG had presented their respective papers. The discussant of the session was Professor Anjan Chakraborty of Calcutta University, Kolkata. Professor Dasgupta in his paper titled, “Global Capitalism and Corona Pandemic – In Search for Radical Solution,” discussed how the Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the global economy. Professor Dasgupta by identifying some characteristics of the neoliberal economy discussed the intrinsic flaws within these characteristics. These characteristics include the undemocratic nature of the neoliberal economy as also its vulnerability to periodic collapses. The economic collapse triggered by the pandemic, therefore, would have occurred even in its absence - albeit at another time and because of another reason. The pandemic, by making evident these inherent weaknesses of the neoliberal economy, offers a challenge and an opportunity to make fundamental changes to the

present ordering of the market, he concluded. Mr Sabir Ahamed & Ms Madhurilata Basu's paper titled, "The Long 2020 and the Informal Care Economy: Case Studies of Select Careworkers", examined how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the lives of healthcare and sanitation workers in Kolkata. Based on interviews with ASHA workers, *aayas* and *safai karamcharis*, the research revealed the ground realities which these neglected foot soldiers of the public health system had to negotiate in the early, frightful days of the pandemic. Realities such as discrimination, poverty, lack of training and equipment emerged from the depiction offered by the paper. Professor Chakraborty as a discussant attempted to situate the two papers within the idea of 'long' conveyed by the title of the workshop. He argued that a proper examination of the long history of mankind will disclose the inevitability of pandemics. The question then becomes how to prepare for pandemics and, more significantly, who must take the responsibility of such preparation. In his opinion, the private sector, carrying traits such as those mentioned by Professor Dasgupta, will not take this responsibility.

The second technical session titled "Managing Crisis, Governing population," was chaired by Professor Anjan Chakraborty. Professor Amit Prakash of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi & CRG and Dr. Jyothi Krishnan of Loyola College of Social Sciences, Trivandrum presented their research papers and discussed by Professor Byasdeb Dasgupta. Professor Prakash in his paper titled, 'The Long 2020: State Impunity and Erasure of Rights through Logistics of Governance' elaborated on the logistics of governance during the medical emergency in the backdrop of management of the exigencies of the pandemic - encompassing identification, isolation and medication of people infected during the spread of Covid-19. The presentation threw light on the apparatus of the state that geared towards a veritable erasure of right to life and livelihood and rendered life of a very large section of the population bare. The logistics mobilised and deployed to police and enforce the curfew model to fundamentally transform the processes of governance — was marked by centralisation of powers and funds while decentralising responsibilities to lower tiers of governance without concomitant powers and resources. The logistics of testing and vaccination that emerged was likely to contribute another layer to the story of transformation of governance by prioritisation of logistics. Healthcare personnel were provided protection for combating epidemic diseases, by amending the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, by an ordinance on 22 April 2020. However, in ways, the framework of logistics of governance, geared towards *étatisation* of the polity, leading to state impunity and undermining of a host of citizen's rights was thus complete. Professor Prakash had also

attempted to examine the logic, mechanisms and implication of the National Disaster Management Act/Authority and the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897; and political economy of testing and vaccine delivery in terms of its conversion of the process of governance from that of political to mere management. The paper aimed at identifying, documenting and analysing the impact of logistics of governance on the right to life and livelihood, especially that of the poor and the marginalised.

Dr. Jyothi Krishnan paper titled, 'Guest Workers in Kerala. Is Welfarism Enough?' She by focusing on Covid-19 pandemic and how the subsequent lockdown measures in the country revealed the scale of internal migration in the country; revealing the precarious livelihood scenario of the migrants and their families. The talk highlighted the ways in which Kerala government was one of the first to formulate welfare programmes for the migrant workers, while the overall approach towards the migrant population in the state was couched in welfare schemes and programmes demonstrating evidence of the state's welfare objectives. The lockdown induced departure of the migrant workers created a crisis and employers/contractors made desperate efforts to get the migrant workers back once lockdown restrictions were relaxed. Many sent buses and some even sponsored air tickets to bring back migrant workers from northern and eastern states of the country; however, whether this led to an enhanced bargaining power for the migrant force, and whether they benefitted from better working conditions and a higher wage rate following the lifting of lockdown restrictions remained indistinct. The speaker stressed on the importance of assessing the overall well-being and degree of inclusion that the migrants themselves experienced during this period.

Discussant Byasdeb Dasgupta, summarised the implications of the model of governance during the lockdown due to the pandemic that Amit Prakash's paper discussed and the examination of the various structures of governance and welfare schemes in Kerala as a model state that Jyothi Krishnan's paper brought out. He observed that in the context of the Covid-19 situation some glaring facts about the necessity of implementation of decentralised responsibilities had come out. It was pointed out that the loopholes of the welfare schemes in Kerala with Kerala being a model in welfare programmes, the state laws and Kerala migrant welfare schemes are not bereft of the cases of implementation failure; but even with the failure of legal system within the schemes, the programmes have to an extent acted sufficient in providing support to local people in the middle of a nationwide crisis.

The third technical session titled “Many Histories of Public Health Crises and Epidemics,” was chaired by Dr. Iman Mitra of Shiv Nadar University, Noida & CRG. Dr. Samata Biswas of The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata & CRG and Priyanka Dey of CRG presented their research papers. The discussant of the session was Urvi Mukhopadhyay of West Bengal State University, Kolkata. Dr. Biswas began her presentation with an analysis of the role of epidemics in Bengali literature. She referred that the novels and other popular cultures have references on the epidemics and the health crises since the nineteenth century. She also tried to focus on the representation of pandemics in both nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengali literature and discussed how the community responded during the epidemic. Dr. Biswas discussed about the Cholera epidemic which first began in 1871 and was followed by Malaria and Smallpox. Dr. Biswas’s paper analyzed the representational politics, textual and inter-textual practices and fictional representations of the histories of public health crises in literature. She prepared her argument based on three well known Bengali novelists and their well known fictional characters. They were Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Srikanto of the 1930s, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s Satyacharan of 1939 and Balaichand Mukhopadhyay’s Shankar of the 1940s. These protagonists in the novels though live in different temporalities but at the moment of the epidemic, they took the initiative to solve the crisis. The paper talked about the organization of the social as well as the compromise of the social in different cases in Bengali literature. Biswas referred to another well known Bengali novelist Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay to consider the initiatives taken by the male protagonists to fight the Cholera epidemic in the novels like Ganadevata, Dhatri Devata and Arogya Niketan. The paper has discussed the references of solidarities and disassociations in the time of epidemic, public health crisis, war and the partitions that represents the crisis in the Bengali novels and relate how the different types of participation and solidarity towards the diseased people during the epidemic played a crucial role to fight against the crisis.

Priyanka Dey’s paper began with discussing the role of the public and the refugees in West Bengal in the discourses of public health between 1948 to 1958. Dey gives a critical reading of the policies and the health care practices taken by the West Bengal government between 1948 to 1958 and the contradictory images of the public at different registers maintained by the government. Keeping this contradiction in mind, the paper discussed the idea of the public in the context of the refugees who came from the eastern part of Bengal (now Bangladesh) and settled in the colonies and camps in different parts of Calcutta and its surrounding areas. In the discussion on public health, Mr. Dey also

tried to show the location of these refugees in the popular discourses of that period. Mr. Dey, in his paper, argued how the imagination of the 'public' in the context of public health became the sights of political contestations. This idea of the inclusion of public through the concept of public health, according to Mr. Dey, is ultimately contributing to the politics of life in the larger electoral political discourse in post-independence West Bengal. Mr. Dey's paper was divided into three different sections. The first section describes the state government's response towards the public health crisis in post-independence West Bengal. Dey referred to the smallpox outbreak in 1948 and the reaction of the state towards the migrants regarding imposing the "epidemic diseases act" in the colonies and camp areas. Thus, the power to regulate the life of the people in the name of building a healthy community for a healthy nation become the trend in post-independence West Bengal. In the second section of his paper, Dey argued the emergence of "social medicine" as a category. Dey analyzed how the idea of social medicine treated the diseases as a community problem that involves the socio-economic conditions of the people.

The final section of the paper was based on the figure of the refugees in the public health discourse in post-independence West Bengal. Dey described how the nation-state feels threatened by the refugees because of their identity as the "outsiders". The paper concluded with the argument that the refugees in post-partition West Bengal have been seen as the "discursive formation of the public" in the different registers prepared by the nation-state.

Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay began her discussion by thanking the panelists. She said that the session defined the ideas of changing the nature of a community and the challenges they faced during fighting with the diseases. It discussed different layers of "hierarchical social identities" that became prominent during the time of the epidemic. However, the discussant raised several questions to the panelists. According to Dr. Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Samata Biswas should focus more on different segmentations (caste, class & gender) in society reflected in literature. She advised Dr. Biswas to focus on the role of trauma and isolation due to the epidemic and how the literature responds to the question and contextualize it with the current COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Mukhopadhyay asked Priyankar Day to elaborate his argument on the refugee and the notion of public health. Dr. Mukhopadhyay advised doing more research on the state's role to isolate the refugees to stop preventing venereal diseases. Several questions and suggestions had been raised once the papers were opened for discussion. While Samata Biswas had been advised to contextualize her work with the historical moments and analyse the role of the hybridity of knowledge transformation while

discussing the role of the epidemic in the Bengali literature, experts among the audiences requested Priyanka Dey to focus on the role of nationalists on the refugee questions and the role of international organisations.

The fourth technical session titled “Techniques of Epidemiological Governance,” was chaired by Professor Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata & CRG. Dr. Iman Mitra of Shiv Nadar University, Noida & CRG presented his research paper. Iman Mitra began his paper with the comparison of responses by the society during the Spanish Influenza in 1918 and the COVID -19 pandemic of 2020-21. Though the government was a little ignorant in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response time was much quicker due to the role of the advanced knowledge production system and the accuracy of the content. The paper argued the logistics of knowledge production during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of economic rationality and the ecological reason behind the knowledge production. Referring to philosopher Benjamin Bratton’s idea of logistics as an aberration of war through the transfer of potentials to the armed forces both in the time of peace and war, Dr. Mitra argued that the fight against COVID-19 was itself an act of global war. The use of technology to fight the war helped the countries to share the knowledge production system more strategically so that it can provide logistical help against the pandemic. The strategic space to fight the virus helped the modern-day epidemiologists of the world helped to produce a policy with the help of the new knowledge production system. Artificial intelligence (AI) played a crucial role in it. This back and forth transmission of the strategic space in the logistical time, as Mitra argued, “is nothing but the realization of the present as well as the future”. Mitra’s paper had argued the role of the COVID-19 predicted the pathways of the pathogen draws upon the convergence in the futures of the state economy and the international business in the twenty-first century.

Sujata Mukherjee began the discussion by thanking the panelist. She said that the speaker efficiently presented the role of technology in the knowledge production system to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. However, she requested the speaker to find out the answer to whether the new knowledge production system based on artificial intelligence (AI) was brought into the society at the cost of the old knowledge production system or both had complemented each other. Mukherjee also asked that the paper had told about the possibility of the use of technology to detect the responses or changes in human behaviour like generating data on the spread of the virus all over the world.

The fourth technical session titled “Situating ‘Long’ in the Long 2020,” was chaired by Professor Byasdeb Dasgupta. Professor Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, Dr. Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, Ms Ritu Menon presented their respective research papers. Dr. Debarati Bagchi, Max Weber Stiftung, New Delhi & CRG and Dr. Rajarshi Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi were the discussants of the papers. The session was themed on understanding the complexity of the notion of time, its applicable temporality, and ism’ic notationality of the past in the contemporary through the lens of the Covid pandemic. Locating the event thus became the central trope in the continuum of the past in the present. Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty opened his discussion by quoting historian Braudel how the current event contains traces of yesterday and days before that—a *Longue Durée*’ time frame that creates a methodological ground for understanding historical temporalities. It has been a necessary tendency to look into how past, present, and future co-relate to each other, and in the process historians, sociologists, anthropologists have either stretched the dimension of time in the long past or reduced it to a very short span of time resulting in the growth of micro studies like Ginzburg’s. Intersectionality of time in the Past and the Present corresponds to its length of making it long or short at the different points of conjunctures of historical processes. But time is no constant single unity and as Koselleck is suggestive of layers of time and its multiple temporalities. Chakraborty considers a long-term event as the center stage on which to weigh the arguments and tests its flow in the long term and its micro-history. For example, the Enlightenment or end of Feudalism in Europe was a gradual change over the length of time whereas Black Death quickened the pace of events. Chakraborty highlights the importance of the micro and macro approaches of time as useful tools to explore the complexities of the current pandemic. It is in the losses—the micro-moments of the pandemic, the suffering of the migrant workers, the moments of misgovernance, the efforts of the caregivers as well as the long epidemiological history of pathogens can one situate the ‘Long’ in the Long 2020. Kaustubh Mani Sengupta’s discussion focused on the methodological tools used to write the current histories of everyday life during the Covid pandemic within the corpus of the role of State, collective politics, bio-power/ ‘bio-politics from below’ and how the neo-liberal infrastructures deepening the crisis furthermore as the pandemic was not a single monolithic event but had a rhizomatic growth affecting different groups of people with different impact factor. Ritu Menon’s responses to the Covid as a time warp in the sense of an urgency and the habitus around reading and especially with reference to the publishing and book

industry like other work sectors were facing severe shrinkages and that just cannot be attributed to the pandemic per se but certainly the causal factor for the immediacy of its consequences and raises the pertinent question if ‘are you reading?’ & ‘what are you reading?’ highlighting the specificity of monocultures of anxiety that became commonsensical during and through the pandemic. Debarati Bagchi and Rajarshi Dasgupta highlighted that it’s about finding the meaning of the larger question of temporality and belonging within the ecology of the pandemic that remains essential to the discussions from this panel.

In the concluding session as a concluding remark, Professor Prasanta Ray, Professor Emeritus of Presidency University, Kolkata &CRG reflected on the question of time which he acknowledged as a critical reference for the workshop. While accepting that a longer timeframe is helpful for a better cognition of any event, Professor Ray invited the audience to think of causality in terms of its interconnectedness with time and space. Professor Ray expressed his discomfort with looking at the past in search for ‘antecedents, because time itself does not have any agency but is always mediated through various predispositions. Dissenting observations, Ray remarked, while necessary in collective research, is not enough for knowledge formation. He concluded by asserting that multivariate data produced by micro-studies is critical for a better understanding of the past and the future possibilities or inevitabilities. The session ended with a congratulatory remark by the Chair, Syamalendu Majumdar, and was followed by the formal vote of thanks delivered by Rituparna Datta.