

A REPORT
ON
MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF MIGRATION: A WORKSHOP

Organized by

Calcutta Research Group

In collaboration with

Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna

3-4 December 2021

Concept Note

As the prolonged lockdown which accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic brought the wheel of life to a standstill throughout the country, migrant workers encountered severe — even unspeakable — hardships. In 2020, the Media Workshop of the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) devoted itself to understanding this disheartening impact which the pandemic inflicted on the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers. While examining the precarious existence of migrant workers, the Workshop questioned whether their predicament was not aggravated by the absence of appropriate government interventions. Even the Supreme Court and several High Courts had demanded that the government take a more proactive role in ameliorating the condition of migrant workers affected by the pandemic and the restrictions which followed in its wake. In 2021, as the pandemic situation remains critical, it may be proper to revisit the precarity of migrant workers by widening the scope of the previous year's study.

Apart from the more devastating effect of the pandemic, several other incidents complicate the conditions of the migrants and refugees. The recent climate disasters in West Bengal, the protest against the new agriculture bill, the recent elections in different regional assemblies in India repeatedly bring back the identity question of the migrant and displaced persons. The current regime change in Afghanistan or Myanmar cause an exodus of thousands of pro-democracy activists and the role of neighbouring countries give the refugee question a new dimension.

While several questions are raised against the role of the mainstream media houses during the contemporary time, web magazines, small web channels make a unique space among the younger people. The growing use of smart-phones accelerates the use of social media that increase the dangers of false information, misinformation that causes atrocities against the marginal people, on one hand; it also unites the people in protecting civil, political and economic rights on the other. Thus, the role of the “new media” becomes more crucial. Sometimes, it has been used by the socially or politically influentials to divert the attention of the citizens from the original problem. Therefore, a proper awareness programme to prevent all the misinformation, false/ disinformation, fake news and evil campaigning through the “new media” is necessary to bring a sustainable, humanitarian and conflict-free world order.

Inaugural Session

The inaugural session commenced with the welcome address by the President of the Calcutta Research Group, ByasdebDasgupta. The Honorary Director of the Calcutta Research Group, SabyasachiBasu Ray Chaudhury chaired the session that opened with a brief introduction of all the participants and panelists. He presented a brief history of the work of CRG established in the 1990s by academics, human rights activists, media persons and other concerned persons working in different fields such as human rights, entrepreneurs and others. Refugee flows and migration were some of the causes that the organisation looked into. One of the flagship programme of the Calcutta Research Group has been the annual workshop on migration and forced migration studies which concluded in November 2021 and was the Sixth Annual programme this year; the programme is being now organised for almost ten years with minor revisions in the structure of the programme.



Pic 1: Inaugural Session: S. Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bysadeb Dasupta

Pic 2: Inaugural session: Rajat Roy and Bharat Bhushan

Rajat Roy, Senior Journalist, outlined the objectives of the workshop. CRG started studying and publishing books and articles when the pandemic initially broke out and highlighted the issues and the daunting task of protection to life threats from the pandemic. Capturing the reactions and responses of the state and common people to the pandemic was a major objective of CRG's work, presentations, discussion and publication of the findings for dissemination in the workshop. The role of media in documenting the changes in the wake of the pandemic and the limitations that the media has experienced; also the changes with the turn towards digital media with digital portals and social

media playing a more active role in access to news, started highlighting the perils faced by common people, especially the migrant workers. The emerging changes in life and society and their representation in mainstream media were well documented through the Bengal-Bihar dialogue organised by CRG in October 2021 which housed the experiences of social activists and frontline warriors from Bengal and Bihar - this media workshop was designed and organised in the light of expanding the dialogue and taking the discussion forward. The problems that media faces in documenting the disaster and health hazards during the pandemic were brought to the forefront by the Bengal-Bihar dialogue and this workshop also aims at a similar discourse.

Bharat Bhushan, Senior Journalist, spoke at the inaugural lecture on media and the politics of migration in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. The lecture focused on the different political dimensions of migration crisis and how the migrant crisis was understood and represented by media. The speaker brought to light the grim plight of people at a time of the harshest lockdown and the mass flows of migrants from cities and towns to villages during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 and the second wave in 2021 which was less severe than the first. The talk highlighted the loss of jobs of around 12 crore people by April 2020 and the return of some of the displaced persons and migrants back to their destinations of employment while the dispersed, decentralised lockdowns continued in 2021; the crises intensified for both the groups – the ones who had lost their jobs and were back in their hometowns as well as the ones who were going back in the hope of engagement with their previous jobs. The pandemic however did not affect all sections of the society in the same manner. People with resources could escape the brunt of the pandemic, others could isolate with work from home, but the worst hit were those who lost their livelihood means and were forced to segregate – in a way culminating into the politics of the pandemic. When the pandemic hit the country in April 2020, the stock valuation of the Indian billionaires arose; whereas thousands of people were losing their jobs every hour. The politics of the pandemic is not in collecting the statistics but being struck by the reality of the large number of people losing their means of income. At a time when the nation has been running out of funds of MGNREGA schemes, the mass migration of migrant workers and the impacts of their economic and social condition and job losses only became clear in hindsight. Media reported on this crisis, unaware of the political dimensions of the lockdown, while the government expected the media to act as a link between the state and people. The citizens needed assurance that the government would create safety nets through its handling of the migrant flows. The media was at a loss in identifying the ‘number’ of

workers among the migrants and the magnitude of the livelihood losses and health hazards. The points of origin and destination of the migrant workers and the names and other details of the organisations or institutions of their work association did not find much mention in the media.

The session closed with a discussion among the participants who continued raising questions on the ingenuity and dependability of data on migrants and the shift in representation of migrant workers in English and vernacular news dailies were questioned. The scopes of further investigation on the role of news coverage by regional media houses that have acted as flag bearer of the information diffusion at local level were debated.

Session I

Reporting on Migrants and Refugees in India: A presentation by CRG Media Fellows

The suddenness of the nationwide lockdown in the wake of the increasing Covid infections per day and the rising death rate, in reality, punched down with its draconian claws and life came to a standstill but not for the migrant labourers, who suffering the consequences of uncertainty tried to move back home and the frontline workers branded as Covid warriors who had to work to manage the health crisis. In both cases, it apparently showed the faultlines already existing within the infrastructure of the nation, especially at the front of health, employment, and social security. CRG's Media fellows Devika Singh Sekhawat, Aman Siddhant Gupta, and Nelli Manpoong discussed these questions through the lens of life in precarity based on the micro-study of the ASHA workers in Assam tea gardens, returnee migrant labourers in Bundelkhand and behavioural patterns of the locals vs the migrant labourers to Arunachal Pradesh's Covid response to the returnee labourer respectively. Through all the three discussions the central point focused on the extension of an externalization by the state, civil society, and the family. The fleeting ecologies of subsistence remained impropionate to the large numbers of floating populating that waxed and waned in the informal precarities of work. The pandemic revealed and reinforced the notion of 'made in crisis' as it was not just a question of 'crisis in motion' as the very act of mobility was ethically questioned or disciplined or securitised but also ushered in new social tensions that pre-existing social relations now longer could provide the solutions to the social tensions.



Pic 3: Session I: Devika Shekhawat and Aman Gupta



Pic 4: Session I: Shoaib Daniyal

Session II

Representation of Migrants in Images

The session on Representation of Migrants in Images had presentations by three independent photojournalists or documentary photographers from India where they showed their own works and shared their thoughts on the theme. The session was moderated by Shubrajyoti Ghosh of BBC World. It began with Shuvankur Ghosh's work on climate-related displacements and migration in the Sundarban region of West Bengal. Shuvankur's photos, taken as part of his short-term media fellowship with CRG in 2021, sought to capture the lives of the people in Sundarban islands like Ghoramara who are forced to migrate to cities in order to escape the hardships caused by cyclones, floods and rising sea level. The images shown by Nikhil Roshan in his presentation documented the displacements and dispossessions following the communal riots in North-East Delhi in February 2020. Ronny Sen showed images from three different works – a photo essay on the journeys of the inter-state migrant workers in India in the unreserved compartments of the trains, images on climate-induced displacements in the Sundarbans and in the Jharia coal-mines region. During his talk, Sen reflected on the politics of image-making and how mainstream media often ended up stereotyping the marginalized people, including the migrants. Sen insisted that a photographer has an ethical responsibility to ensure the dignity of their subject in the image itself. Photographers must never act like predators prying on human miseries, it was asserted. To Rajat Roy's question on how a photographer can ensure this, Sen invoked Robert Capa's idea of proximity and argued that a certain kind of closeness with the subject has to be there so that they do not feel uncomfortable. The

practice of securing formal consent is also discussed. In response to a different question from the floor, Sen said that mobile phones, in this context, have the potential of producing new images as they are less intrusive. Samata Biswas had a very important question about the limits in accessing the emotional or personal space of a woman in a conflict or post-disaster situation as a male photographer. All three photographers agreed to this and emphasized on bringing in the female perspective. In response to different questions, Sen and Roshan both claimed that a documentary photographer has to take a position vis-a-vis the political event they are trying to capture in images.



Pic 5: Session II: Ronny Sen and Nikhil Roshan



Pic 6: Session II: Subhajyoti Ghosh and Suvankur Ghosh

Session III

Politics of Reporting Migrants and Refugees in Europe and Asia

This session started with moderator Subir Bhaumik's brief introduction about the speakers. The first speaker of the session was Bertil Lintner. He was talking about the complex political culture in the South-East Asian subcontinent and the dynamics of reporting about the migrants all over the region. However, his major focus was the difficulties that the journalists, both veteran and young have faced from the majority communities in Thailand while investigating the precarious situation of the Muslim migrants in the southern part of the country. He said that the politics of hatred played by the anti-Muslim groups prevented the journalists from the beginning. But, it had increased in the last few years due to the lack of democratic administration. However, the situation was much better than the journalists who reported about the condition of the minorities in other South-East Asian countries. Lintner said that the Burmese journalists are facing state inquiries against them because of

the reporting about the crisis of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Even those who were reporting in favour of the democratic government were also sent to prisons. Several criminal cases have been registered against them. Therefore, the mainstream news agencies were getting scared to publish these kinds of stories. The only hope, as Lintner said, was the alternative media or the journalists involved with the alternative media. They recorded interviews and took the help of their friends to publish them from different countries.

Reka Kinga Papp, the editor of the Eurozine, also agreed with Lintner and said that while the condition in Europe is not that bad, the problem is about reporting on migrant issues in Europe. She blamed that the pandemic created more complexities among the common people and they adversely behaved towards the migrants who came to different European countries for jobs or study. She also emphasized the recent growing popularity of extremist politics among the youth in some European countries also played a crucial role in it. According to Papp, the journalists were facing multiple challenges to address the issues of migration because they did not get any protection from the state while they were going to publish a report about them. On the other hand, they faced several questions from the state or the majority communities to report in favour of migrants. Magazines like Eurozine and other web-based media played an important role to spread the news. She emphasized spreading consciousness about the migrant question in Europe all over the world and hope that the new media would play a crucial role in this initiative. She expressed her desire to connect with the initiatives of these kinds of workshops on the role of the media on several humanitarian issues.

Mohd. Mukhtar Rashid of the Daily New Age had agreed to the comment of both Lintner and Papp about the challenges to reporting about the migrants. He considered this issue as one of the sensitive issues in the field of journalism all over South Asia. His presentation was based on the challenges faced by journalists to report about the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. He said that the young journalists also faced atrocities from the religious leaders and the political parties to say anything in favour of the Rohingyas. They were harassed by the local police and the district administration. Sometimes the religious leaders provoked the local people against those journalists. As a result, in some cases, they were severely beaten by the local people. The political parties, religious leaders and local administration use the fear perception among the general people against the migrants and successfully use them against the journalists. Rashid said that although the journalist used the new and alternative media they could not get success due to unawareness among

the common people. He emphasized on creating awareness among ordinary citizens would be the only hope.

Session IV

Climate Migrants and Refugees in Media

The session started with moderator and senior journalist Suvojit Bagchi's brief introduction of the topic and the speakers. The first speaker of the session was Dipanjan Sinha who talked about his field survey in certain regions of sundarban area and how climate change induced flood and land depletion produced city-bound migration and climate refugees in the area. He talked briefly about how these migrations complicated the livelihood issues of these migrants and in turn produced new politics against the so called Bangladeshi foreigners in different cities in India. However, there is no data on these climate refugees with government of India or west Bengal state government. Thus there is no concrete policy for these climate refugees and migrants. Without any policy directives, this migration has become invisible and eventually producing different political discourses once these migrants reach a city outside the vicinity of their respective state, cultural and language zone. Senior Journalist and CRG's Media fellow Sukanta Sarkar in his talk titled, "Migrant Labourers in sinking Island of Sundarban," talked about the precarious condition of the climate refugees of Sundarban area and how the Covid 19 restrictions and particularly lock down worsen these situations. He also gave a brief overview how a relatively rich area with the contemporary climate situation increasingly getting worsen creating restriction on livelihood issues of the area.



Pic 7: Session IV: Sukanta Sarkar and Dipanjan Sinha



Pic 8: Session IV: Suvojit Bagchi

Session V

Migrant Crisis and the Role of New Media

The conversation started Utsa Sarmin's presentation on her podcast on the climate disaster and displacement in the Sundarbans. She has taken six podcasts which reflected the crisis of livelihood and the precarious condition of the displaced persons due to cyclone Amphan and Hud Hud. The podcasts covered a wide range of issues. These podcasts showed the limits of the main-stream media and how the displaced persons or climate migrants has ignored in the published or telecasted news clippings in the mainstream media. Her argument was how the alternative media put the light on the crises of the migrants and how new methods like podcasts, short Youtube videos, community radio etc. played a crucial role in it.

Sudarshana Chakrabarty, a journalist from Ground Zero was talking about the ethical question of the journalists who works on the alternative media. She said that the journalists had always facing the challenges that worked in the alternative media and published the stories ignored by the mainstream media agencies. She said that the new media played a crucial role in the politics of reporting. The reporting about the migration question has always been a challenge especially if the question has a relation with the Bangladeshi migrants. Most of the mainstream media agencies do not want to focus the story from the migrant's angle. Therefore, in spite of its limited resources, the alternative media has to play a crucial role in it. Chakrabarty said that the new media (news portals, web magazines etc.) give opportunities to the young journalists to take challenges. They never maintained the "top-down" role played by the mainstream media agencies. She concluded her argument by saying that the new-media is trying to create a democratic space in the media world.

Subhranshu Chowdhary of the CGNet-Swara was talking about the challenges facing by the media to send news among the migrant communities in the remote areas which is conflict infested and therefore facing various challenges to communicate with the people due to unavailability of internet services. He gives the example of the Baster region of Chattisgarh where the conventional "social media" is almost absent due to lack of internet services. Therefore mobile phone will be used as one of the major tool for communication as well as circulating the news. According to Chowdhary, the new media solutions have been successfully proved to be a savior of the democratic rights for the conflict infested tribal region at Chattisgarh. This new medium of communicating news is not only helps the tribal people who migrated from one region to another for resources to get helps from the

state, but also helps to prevent miscommunications from the separatist groups. The initiative also put emphasis on the language understandable for the tribal people and therefore the appointed citizen journalists among the tribal. The use of the basic mobile phone based journalism brought out stories about the conflict infested displacements which the mainstream media and the internet based social media is completely ignored due to the lack of information. These new initiatives through community radio also useful to bring out realities about the stories about the development induced displaced person who migrated from one place to another. Thus, it worked as a pressure upon the governments to announce rehabilitation packages for the migrants due to both conflict and displacement. The initiative of the phone based “community radio” established a step towards democratic representation among the media agencies as said by the previous speaker Sudarshana Chakrabarty.

Several important questions have been raised during the discussion at the end of the session. Rajat Roy raised the point of accessibility of the new media initiatives compared with the mainstream media, especially the television based media and how they took initiatives to go to more people with the issues of migrants through the new media is not very clear. It has limited to a smaller sections of likeminded people or a particular community. Suvojit Bagchi has argued that the initiatives are good but they should start the process to communicate with more people before accusing people. The problem faced by the journalists in the mainstream media sometime prevented them to do a story about the pertinent problems in the country. The role of the alternative media and the new media initiatives like a “community radio” is important at those places. The role of the “citizen journalists” can also be recognized there.



Pic 9: Session V: Sudarshana Chakrabarty and Utsa Sarmin



Pic 10: Session V: Samata Biswas and Subhranshu Chowdhary

Session VI

Concluding Session

Valedictory Lecture

The session began with the valedictory lecture by Pratik Sinha, journalist and co-founder Alt News. The topic was the role of fake-news and false information while talking about issues related to migration. The organized use of misinformation or fake information played a crucial role especially in the migrant question. He said that the dogma about the peoples of different religion, person or persons who migrated from different country, persons have a different (low) economic background etc. is one of important element to spread misinformation, or false information. This process of otherization among the majority community helps the opportunists to create a false news or false narrative. He gave the example of the image dead woman and her crying child at a railway station during the sudden lockdown in 2020. When the report came to the media, the process to prepare a false narrative of this image has begun. Even the news agencies operated by the state came with a wrong interpretation. The role of the news agencies like Alt News who fought against this kind of fake or false information was important in those cases. They went to the village of that woman migrant labour took interviews of her relatives and fellow villagers and publish it in their website. He said that the lack of the data about the exact number of death of the returnee migrants during the COVID lockdown in 2020 was due to the misinformation or false information from different news agencies. The agencies funded by the government were also not beyond that acquisition. Thus, the role of the crosschecking for the true stories and the role of the agencies who cross-check the truth became important. Sinha also gave the example of stampede at the Bandra station after the Prime Minister's speech about the lockdown and the misinformation about the government circulars by several mainstream news agencies. He gave several examples of this kind of misinformation or false information circulated during the first phase of lockdown, during the anti CAA movement, the farmers' agitation against the new clause in the agrarian act. Putting a communal angle was very common in all these cases and the organized operation to spread false information, especially in the case of death of number of returnee migrant labours in the railway tracks, the meeting by the Tableeghi Jamat at Nizamuddin were the most important issues. Sinha said that the trust on the information in the social media and a general reluctance towards consulting the news papers or the

well known national media made things more complicated. The role of the fact checking agencies became therefore important. He admitted the limitations of information for all the cases and requested the journalists, researchers and other concerned common people to check the truth before publishing any story or sharing any news through social media. He claimed that an organised operation system is working behind spreading misinformation or false information and the growing awareness and the introducing the digital literacy courses in the media schools should help to prevent spreading misinformation. Some free online courses have started to aware people about the fake news and the fact checking of the fake-news or misinformation. He concluded the address with the hope that these initiatives may grow the consciousness among the youth and would help to prevent false information or misinformation.



Pic 11: Concluding Session: Pratik Sinha and Rajat Roy

Bharat Bhushan raised the issue of possible solutions apart from fact checking during the discussion on the valedictory address. He said whether the defunding or the other legal solutions were a viable suggestion or not and whether Sinha define the distinction between false narrative and misinformation. Sinha said that the issue of fact checking can be a less costly issue and create awareness among a larger section. He agreed with the necessity of the legal steps or initiatives towards defunding. He also admitted that the narrative is created by the misinformation. Dipanjan Sinha enquired about the process of tracking misinformation or fake news by the fact checking agencies. Pratik replied that it has based on certain parameters like the timing, the reach at the social media handles (facebook, twitter, or whatsapp etc.).

Suggestions about future media programmes

At the end of the discussion Rajat Roy asked about the suggestion from the experts to develop the future media initiatives taken by CRG in field of media research.

Subhranshu Chowdhary advised to create a whatsapp platform to help each others for circulating information and each others' work and any person from the institute could administer the network. He also suggested involving activists and migrant sufferers and discussing about various issues.

Samata Biswas agreed with Chowdhary and put emphasis to create a communication between the participants and other experts.

Rajat Ray put an emphasis on translating the documents / readers that CRG published over the last fifteen years in vernaculars. This will be helpful to reach to more people.

Utsa Sarmin suggested that CRG should focus on the reporting on refugees and migrant women and the problems or challenges have faced by the journalists while reporting on those particular issues.

Bharat Bhushan also emphasized to create a separate network among the journalists, media fellows from the beginning who would meet and discuss about the potential fields on media and share their stories and experiences in the field. He advised the CRG media team to work on it. The representation of CRG's media team should also be there. Muktadir Rashid and Sudarshana Chakrabarty also supported Bharat Bhushan's comment and supported this kind of initiatives. They also suggested to taking a collaborative work with that.

Devika Shekhawat said that the precarious condition of the migrant labours should be discussed with an emphasis on the women migrants. CRG should organize a dialogue or separate panel discussion in the future workshops.

Ankur Tamuli Phukan gave the vote of thanks at the end of the workshop.