

Report on an Online Discussion: The Migrant in the Electoral Time: A Case Study of Assam, West Bengal and Bihar (30 June 2021)

In recent times refugees and migrants including internal migrant workers have assumed an axiomatic position in nationalist political discourses across the world as they become targets of increasing racism, communalism and xenophobia. In this background, the Calcutta Research Group considered it important to undertake a study to locate how migrants and refugees figure in the elections of India. The assembly elections of Bihar (October-November 2020), West Bengal (March-April 2021) and Assam (March-April 2021) were taken into account for this research project. As elections in India provide snapshots of the political reality, the study that was undertaken was thought as crucial in developing a critical understanding of the political discourse around migration in the country. After nearly two month long field studies and research, the researchers presented their draft papers in a two-and-a half-hour long online workshop on 30 June, 2021. The presentations were discussed by discussants and followed by a general discussion on the theme.

Report on the presentations on Assam

The report on the Assam elections (prepared by Ankur Tamuli Phukan) focused on the contemporary shifts and changes in the discourses of Assamese nationalism in order to understand the visibility of migrants in the electoral politics in Assam. The presentation tried to highlight the specificity of Assam and its “national question” by invoking the academic and public intellectual Hiren Gohain’s declaration in 1983: “National Left” had failed to understand the complexities of the “national question” in Assam. Gohain argued that “nationalist forces are more powerful than the class forces” in Assam. Dr. Gohain’s new-found understanding of the national question was a critical historical shift and was significant in the context of political discourses in the state. To emphasize the contemporary shift in the Assamese sub-nationalist politics, Ankur Tamuli Phukan in his report has argued that when he wandered around different parts of Assam during the Assembly Elections of 2021, looking for the visible or invisible figure of the migrant in the overall electoral arithmetic, he finds that the so-called national question has lost its charm in Assam. Its present political power no longer thrives in opposition to centrist patronization of the Indian State; now it comfortably sits and enjoys its position in the vicinity of the utopia of the Indian Nation. That is why the researcher has tried to emphasize in his report that Dr. Gohain’s very recent articulation on so-called indigenous migrant workers and the nationalist discourse of *atmanirbharata*

(self-reliance and self-sufficiency) have become compatible in the assembly elections in Assam in the wake of a pandemic time. Phukan raises the question, can we say that at least in upper Assam, the Assamese sub-national anxiety of productive labour is now manifest through a new alignment of the discourse of *atmanirbharata*? The significance of the ruling party's so-called developmental politics in the first phase of the assembly elections in upper Assam could be understood through it. So is the near proximity of the service sector migrant workers of so-called indigenous origin to that developmental politics. The figuration of a migrant is very contextual, so is the idea of illegality. In the wider context of election politics, Phukan tried to locate the migrant in the Bodo areas of western Assam. On a small scale, he has tried to show an overtly complex politics of negotiation in an election time.

Responding to the presentation, Professor Samir Das of Calcutta University, as one of the discussants of the paper, cautioned the researcher that the conjunctures and stories of the locals are fascinating. But without having a conversation with the grand narrative(s), the local narratives would simply become isolated stories without having a larger context to it. He suggested that the researcher should investigate the "materiality" of these "conjunctures" of the locals. He also asked the researcher to think about a critical disciplinary methodology where culture and economy could be sensibly entwined. Otherwise, too much emphasis on cultural politics would deprive the story of the migrant in election politics the critical gaze it deserves. He also requested the researcher to discuss more about the election speeches as a text, because the election texts were meant to "happen" while ordinary texts only described the events. He suggested the researcher to think seriously about the power of language in an election time.

Professor Manirul Hussain of Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi, the second discussant of the paper, talked generally about Assam's post-election situation and the fate of the migrant in that context.

Report on the presentations on West Bengal

The report on West Bengal (prepared by Priyanka Dey and Rajat Kanti Sur) covers the dynamics of the election campaigns in different districts of West Bengal and the visibility of the migrants and refugees in the election campaign narratives. The report also shows the vulnerable conditions of the migrant workers during the pandemic and their responses to the campaigns of different political parties. The researchers collected material from the districts of Purulia, Murshidabad and Cooch Behar, as these are among the major suppliers of migrant workers in West Bengal. The focus of the report is on different meanings of border and marginality among citizens who live in the border districts. The report highlights

how the election campaigns in the bordering districts of West Bengal addressed the issues of citizenship, infiltration, and rehabilitation of refugees. The Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), the discourse on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and central government's policy of preparing a National Population Register were some of the major issues in the election campaigns in the border districts like Cooch Behar, Maldah, Murshidabad and North 24 Parganas. The issues of the Bengali language and the Bengali nation were also part of the election campaigns, which emphasised the figure of refugees and its different projections from different sides of the political spectrum. The report also focuses on the role of different civil society groups and student organisations, and their readings of the idea of migration and citizenship in the context of the West Bengal Assembly Elections, 2021.

The report was discussed by Rajat Roy, a journalist, formerly with Ananda Bazar Patrika, and Maidul Islam, a political scientist from CSSSC, Kolkata. Roy pointed out that the issue of migrant workers should be emphasised more in the report as the plight of the returnee migrant workers had actually inaugurated the electoral campaigns of 2021 in West Bengal and the CAA-NRC politics followed it. Roy was trying to suggest the temporal articulation of discourses and its various alignments and shifts in the span of the election campaign.

Maidul Islam, on the other hand, said that the report was a work of good ethnography and instructive of how one could use primary resources extensively. He further stated that the report gave a picture different from the one revealed by the quantitative analysis published by CSDS, Delhi. Therefore, a balance between the qualitative and quantitative data should be maintained in the report. He advised that the researchers should locate in historical timeline the changes in the significance of migrants in the electoral politics of West Bengal. The role of the populist schemes of the West Bengal government for the informal sector workers should also be probed. The researchers were also advised to analyse why and how BJP's usual, polarised campaign could not produce much effect in the West Bengal assembly elections in 2021. Some important observations were made during the general discussion on the Report. Nasreen Chowdhury asked the researchers to think whether the visibility of migrants in the election campaigns was due to the recent pandemic, and what would be the status of the figuration of migration in a *normal* time. Sudeep Basu advised the researchers to study the influence of Hindutva politics among the migrants and how it differentiated migrant labourers from the so-called illegal infiltrators.

Report on presentations on Bihar

The presentation began with Abdullah Rahman putting forth his experiences during the study of Bihar assembly elections in 2020 through analysis of newspaper reports and his interactions with migrants and the minority communities comprising a large section of the migrants returning to Bihar from Delhi and other parts of the country after the nationwide lockdown in late March 2020. He also noted that the long history of migration in Bihar had paved the path to rationalisation of government strategies and the lack of support for migrants was taken as “normal” on the pretext of safety during the pandemic.

Gopal Krishna reflected on the reception of the migrants by the state amidst the crises of the pandemic. *Janta curfew* and subsequent restrictions were issued under the National Disaster Management Act and all restrictions were placed in compliance with the government orders. His presentation focused on the importance of manifestos of the political parties, which were mostly inclusive of the demands and needs of the migrant families. The issues of registration under the Aadhaar Scheme and the lack of health facilities, social security and jobs under the MGNREGA had created resentment among the migrants.

Anamika Priyadarshini mentioned that denial of entry and lack of support system for the migrants was evident in certain phases of the ongoing pandemic. A Bihari migrant worker was often placed at the lowest tier of migrant community in the country, and this was “nationally” approved. She pointed out that the consequent failure of the State to protect the large number of such returnees at the time of a public-health emergency became evident and was deplorable.

Discussant Manish K. Jha commented on the title of the report and emphasised that the title should encapsulate the larger objective of the research. He suggested that the study should attempt to capture the migrant’s identity through caste groups, regional parties’ alliance with or representation of a caste group and the voting pattern in the elections. The shadow of NRC and CAA in Seemanchal region of Bihar, repercussions of fear on experiences of migrant communities, are some of the themes that the research may capture in further detail, along with the role of castes and occupations of the migrants and the interface of politics around the socio-economic conditions in the State. Analysis of visual and textual references, such as slogans, pamphlets and use of dialects in local campaigns, is also important. Other areas of exploration could be the diminishing use of local texts in election campaigns and the transition to a supposedly more effective coverage through social media platforms; prominence of livelihood issues in urban areas of Bihar; engagement with the reality of the pandemic in rural Bihar; and finally influence and control on provision of relief and grains supply. Interrelating the economic plight and remittances of informal workers with investments in Panchayat elections would help to look into the macro role of migrants in the economy. The link between the role of migrants in the economy and the

political parties, and the impact of benefits provided to migrants on the result of the elections were suggested as points of inclusion in the study.

Discussant Amit Prakash emphasised the impact of the elections and the importance of election manifestos during the pandemic and the response of economic migrants from Bihar at a time of emergency, when the elections failed to consider the significance of migrant rights. A situation that denied economic rights, despite the hype of political responsibilities, articulates the migrants as marginalised subjects, and it is an area of interest that should be probed in the research.

The Chairperson of the workshop, Shyamalendu Majumdar, closed the session with a brief summary of the focus areas of research themes analysed in the studies, as well as the areas that could be probed in further detail.