

**POLICIES AND  
PRACTICES**

**154**

# **Media and Migration**

**December 2023**



Policies and Practices 154

December 2023

Published by:

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

IA-48, Sector-III, Ground Floor

Salt Lake City

Kolkata-700097

India

Web: <http://www.mcrg.ac.in>

ISSN 2348 0297

Printed by:

Graphic Image

New Market, New Complex, West Block

2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-87

*This publication is part of the Calcutta Research Group (CRG)-Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, Media Fellowships 'Climate, Routes and Ports of Migration and Protection of Refugee and Labour Migrants' in 2023, supported by and in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, as part of the research programme "Justice, Protection, and Government of the People: A Two-Year Research and Orientation Programme on Protection and Democracy in a Post-COVID World (2021-2023)". The articles/reports in this publication were presented in the Media Workshop 'Migrants and Roads: Reporting in the Wake of Disasters and Migration' on 28 July 2023, in Kolkata, at the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata, organised by the Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM), Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie, and South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration (SAN-CDM), and CRG expresses gratitude to the organisations and institutes for the collaboration and support.*

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# **Media and Migration**

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Farhana Ahmed**

**2023**



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# Women Bear a Disproportionate Burden of Distress Migration

Ritwika Mitra \*

Kamala dreads her life in Ahmedabad in India's western state of Gujarat. She coins her reason to migrate to the city in a word: 'compulsion'.

Every few months, Kamala and her husband Nilesh Damor migrate to the city. When the monsoons arrive, they return to their village to cultivate the small patch of land they own for agricultural produce.

In Ahmedabad's Vasna area where a significant number of migrant workers stay, the couple's day starts at 6 am. Around the same time, comes the most difficult negotiation for the day — convincing and then forcing her three-year-old daughter to accompany them in the garbage truck.

"She refuses to accompany us. But we force her. She is so young. How can we leave her to stay by herself?"

For the next roughly 10 hours, Nilesh drives the garbage tempo and Kamala collects garbage around the city. For every tonne of garbage they collect, the couple makes INR250. If they sort out the garbage, there is scope to earn some more money.

Sitting at her home in Kalinjara village in Rajasthan's Banswara district as the summer evening sets in, Kamala talks about her life in the city as her youngest daughter cosies up to her. When asked what she does not like about the city, Kamala barely pauses before answering — the work that she does to sustain the family, the living conditions, dragging her young daughter with her when she and her husband go to work, and staying apart from her two other children. Back in the village, she feels relaxed around her family members.

Kamala's life in the city — one without access to basic rights and entitlements — is not an anomaly. India has 450 million<sup>1</sup> internal migrant workers who are disproportionately employed<sup>2</sup> in the informal economy. Data shows the number of internal migrants rose from 30 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The reporter in this study interviewed at least 20 women in Kushalgarh, Ahmedabad and Surat who spoke about their compulsion to migrate to the cities every few months in order to bring home money. Most of the women interviewed were engaged in the construction sector. Women cited climate crisis and agricultural distress as the primary factors on why they were forced to move out of the villages. In a majority of cases, they moved to the cities accompanying the male members of the family — husbands and sons, while some women moved with other women from their villages when they were the sole breadwinners in their families.

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\* Ritwika Mitra is a CRG-IWM Media Fellow 2023, and Independent Journalist Policies and Practices, Issue No. 154, December 2023

Economist Jayati Ghosh says it is not only common to find distress migration of women along with their families but also with other women. “Women often travel in groups, especially for short term moves, as they are aware of the unsafe migration conditions.” There are also a number of cases where people travel relatively long distances for just a day or a few days in periods of greater economic distress.

She adds that distress migration of women spikes when there are climate-related events, including droughts and changing patterns of rainfall.

In India, 90% of workers<sup>4</sup> are engaged in informal arrangements which engage 92% of women and 90 percent of men.<sup>5</sup> Informal labour often means lack of social protection rights and decent work conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Kamala’s is an atypical case where informal workers are left to fend for themselves in the city in the absence of any social security benefits and who are relegated to the margins in the urban area.

“Rehna ka (dikkat), kaam acha nahi lagta hain. Gandegi acha nahi lagta hain. Pura din kaam karta hain... bahut ganda kaam hain. Nahane, dhone ka dikkat hota hain, khane ka bhi dikkat, time pe khana nahi milta hain...”

(“There are difficulties with the living conditions. I do not like unsanitary conditions. The whole day we work. It is under unsanitary conditions. There are problems with taking bath, washing up. There are difficulties eating meals on time.”)

On most days, the afternoon meals get postponed to evenings. Once back home, Kamala calls up her brother with whom her two other children stay when she is in the city.

When asked about the separation from her children, Kamala says it pains to stay away from them. “A day does not pass when I do not call them up. I call them whenever I get time — on some days in both the mornings and evenings.”

Suppa, who is in her early 30s, has a similar story to share. She talks about the pain of leaving her two children — aged 7 years and 5 years — behind while the younger ones aged 3.5 years and 1.5 years accompany her when she goes to work in Surat. At Teamera Kalan village in Banswara district where she had returned after a month in the city, Suppa spoke about the challenges of staying apart from her children, the dwindling agricultural produce back at home, and the necessity to migrate with her husband to earn wages in the city.

There is evidence<sup>7</sup> (“How Does Climate Change Affect Migration in The Pacific?”, N.D.) that shows that there is a link between climate crisis, poverty and migration. Distress migration<sup>8</sup> is typically described as movement which happens when there are climatic shocks in an area or there are stressors in the socio-economic factors. Distress migration is a big trigger for unsafe migration of women, say activists and economists.

When women migrate out of their villages, it is under dire circumstances, points out Rajeev Khadelwal, co-founder of nonprofit Aajeevika Bureau which has extensively worked in the Banswara-Surat-Ahmedabad corridor, “When women and children migrate, it is evident that there is large-scale agricultural distress in the area.”

Khadelwal explains the Banswara corridor is particularly vulnerable because of its arid lands. “This often pushes out the most vulnerable sections – women and children – out of the villages.”

For Sannu, life is no different than that of Kamala and Suppa. When she is in the city, she works for around 25 days. The total number of times she goes to the city varies between three to six times a year. On an average every year, she works for around four to five months. She has been going to the city for the past 10 years, and has never been to school. Earlier, she would go with her parents, and now with her husband.



“I stay at the (work) site. I take my daughter along (with me to work). There (in the city), we cannot take the child to the doctor when she is sick,” she said.

When asked what about the city she does not like, she said there are ‘difficulties. “*Sab kuch taklif lagta hai.*” (“Everything feels difficult.”)

Without any social security benefits, it is difficult for her to afford the city life.

“Everything is expensive here. You buy vegetables at such a high price. Here, we eat what we grow.”

Going to the city is a compulsion. Back at home, Sannu is reeling under a debt of INR70,000. Marriages in the family means additional expense of celebrations which brings a debt to the family. She is also saving up to firm up her house in the village.

Different areas in Rajasthan have different livelihood opportunities depending on the area. But rural poverty in Rajasthan is defined by the dependence on agricultural economy for employment. This often is the major trigger<sup>9</sup> for migration.

Adivasis<sup>10</sup> who remain at the bottom of the hierarchy are often among the most exploited when it comes to the labour industry. Research<sup>11</sup> shows that tribal communities live precariously in southern Rajasthan, west Madhya Pradesh, and eastern Gujarat due to poor agricultural produce. Data<sup>12</sup> shows that the scheduled tribe population has been among the poorest in the country. According to the UN’s global multidimensionality index<sup>13</sup> (“In India, 5 out of 6 multidimensionally poor are from lower tribes or castes: UN report” 2021), five out of six poor people in India are from the ST or lower caste.

Interviews with Adivasis in Banswara district showed that they were struggling with securing the basics when in the city and were reeling under huge debts in the village from the aftermath of the pandemic or familial obligations.

In one of the cases, the woman and her family members reported to be in a bonded labour situation. They eventually managed to escape the situation. The local nonprofit now aims to take the legal recourse against the contractor.

“Tribal migrant workers are the most marginalised sections with the poorest educational level. They do not have a support base. They are primarily from rural areas. If you look at Banswara, there is mostly family migration which makes them more unsafe as compared to the single men migrating from other corridors,” says Katiyar.

Katiyar adds that when a person migrates under distress, there is a number of violation of rights which translates into ‘unsafe migration’. “Seasonal migration becomes unsafe migration when people travel without security. The way people travel, where they go and stay in overcrowded rentals without any security,” adds Katiyar.

Seasonal migration is common in many societies. Workers typically rely on seasonal migration for extra income in addition to what they can earn back at home. Most of the women interviewed for the project said it was necessary for them to go to the cities in order to supplement their income back home. In many of the cases, they were the only earning members of the house. Women typically migrated to fetch an income for the families, pay off debts, invest in building a house back in the village and invest in wedding celebrations. Almost all of them said that seasonal migration was integral for them to survive.

## Climate Crisis and Distress Migration

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognises that climate change is a trigger behind migration.<sup>14</sup> While social security programmes can go a long way in reducing the vulnerability of workers, it may take a while for these to adapt to the climate crisis.

“The connection between climate change and migration is that the rainfall pattern is changing. Untimely and erratic rainfall is negatively impacting small-scale agricultural farmers. They are quitting the farming sector and migrating out. The other reason for farmers leaving is mechanisation as there is a fall in demand for agricultural labour,” says Madhuri, leader of Madhya Pradesh-based non-profit Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan.

Extreme heat situations take a toll on the physical health of workers, especially those engaged in long hours of physical work like agriculture and construction industry<sup>15</sup> (Estrada, 2019). The ILO recognises that heat stress is also another trigger for women to leave behind rural areas and migrate to cities to look for better livelihood opportunities when agriculture fails.

The United Nations adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (“Global Compact for Migration, United Nations”) in 2018<sup>16</sup> which states that people are leaving their countries large-scale due to “slow-onset natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation.”

In a policy speech in 2015<sup>17</sup> the then-president of the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker, had said in his policy speech: “Climate change is even one [of] the root causes of a new migration phenomenon. Climate refugees will become a new challenge – if we do not act swiftly.”

In 2019, Dina Ionesco who heads the migration, environment and climate change department at the UN had said there was a strong possibility<sup>18</sup> that more people will migrate in search of better opportunities, as living conditions get worse in their places of origin.

Distress migration puts women at a severe risk of sexual exploitation in transit and in cities which often remains untalked about. The women interviewed for this project said they had heard of sexual harassment cases of women while they were in transit or at work sites in their immediate circles.

“Sexual violence of migrant workers is an invisible problem because in many cases sexual violence is not being reported,” says Madhuri.

While women often<sup>19</sup> can be agencies of empowerment when they migrate, it also increases their risk of being victims of trafficking, sexual violence, discrimination at every stage of migration. The UN recognises that the lack of safe and regular migration pathways<sup>20</sup> increases the risk of gender-based violence.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Sent Ripple Effects on The Rural Population

Multiple surveys showed migrant workers were trapped in cities without any social security benefits when the government imposed a stringent lockdown across the country and transportation stopped. Migrant workers started walking back to their hometowns in the absence of the state providing any options. As livelihood abruptly came to a halt, workers were the worst hit<sup>21</sup> with unpaid wages

mounting and cities having nothing to offer them. They were forced to return to their origin states with a wave of reverse migration in the country.

A study by the Aajeevika Bureau “Assessing the situation of migrant returnees from South Rajasthan after the lockdowns,”<sup>22</sup> documents how workers were left to fend for themselves in the absence of work. Over 80% of the total workers surveyed had said they had no access to regular work for about 29-56 days. At least 50% had just Rs. 100 – Rs. 3,000 left with them showing the high level of distress that the lockdown left them in. Workers had also lost payments due to the lockdown with 30 percent of the respondents saying they had not received payments from employers. They were also forced to cut down on their daily expenses due to lack of work and income, the survey shows.

Workers also said there were discriminatory practices against them with most migrant workers being stigmatised once they return to their homes who were often treated as the carriers of the virus.<sup>23</sup>

While migration was looked upon as a male phenomenon, women have always been a part of the process.

The lockdown sent down ripple effects in the economy<sup>24</sup> with workers left without any work. Once Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work opened up, India’s rural flagship livelihood programme saw a massive increase in enrolments<sup>25</sup>– the distress palpable through the numbers and people returning in hordes to the destination states. However, there was not enough work to be allocated to all the seekers.

“COVID-19 has affected them getting back to the workforce. The shocks were felt in the long haul,” says Divya Balan, Assistant Professor at the Pune-based FLAME University.

When eventually work opened up in cities, workers started returning slowly and gradually. However, debts had mounted,<sup>26</sup> and so their sufferings. And their ideas of cities were never the same for them. The way workers experienced cities in the aftermath of the lockdowns was one where they were temporary. They were certain the cities did not belong to them.

The pandemic shock coupled with the agricultural and livelihood distress in the villages meant workers would again return to the cities when work started trickling in but under severe scale of distress.

“The rural poor migrate because of compulsion and they are completely helpless and at the mercy of the contractors, and in that situation, women’s problems are double as compared to that of men,” says Madhuri.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the cities saw forced reverse migration.<sup>27</sup> Workers realised they were unwanted in the cities they had helped build. In the absence of work and any social security entitlements, workers were trapped in cities without any wages.<sup>28</sup>

“The COVID-19 pandemic gave a lot of visibility to women migrant workers. That is when there was a lot of conversation around migration which was not addressed until the lockdown when they started walking alongside the male migrant workers,” says Balan.

Women move to support their families, and send back<sup>29</sup> a significant portion of their money back to their families in the villages. But when women come to the cities, they are not seen as independent earners even though they provide labour, and generate income for the families, says

Balan. “The women are rarely seen as autonomous agents. They are usually bracketed with men in policy-making.”

## Scrambling for Basic Rights

In the city of Surat in Gujarat, 17-year-old Mahima (name changed) talks about her first time away from her village animatedly on a sultry summer afternoon. Her husband beckons to her to stop the conversation several times. She pays no heed to it. Some distance away, her young son plays by himself. While Mahima seemed okay about her life in the city away from her family members, she said they were returning to the village in two days, and would not return. She would get her child vaccinated in the village as she did not know how to navigate the healthcare facilities in the city.

Mahima’s narrative finds resonance in other interviews where people typically returned to the villages when they had to access healthcare services, including deliveries. While they came to the city to earn, they could not access any entitlements.

Mahima and her husband manage to make Rs. 25,000 as a *‘jodi’* (working as a couple fetches Rs 1,000 for two people as a day’s rate where the woman is considered the helper. They work from 8 am to 6 pm and manage to land work around 25 days every month. In most cases, it was difficult to get picked up as a female labourer). Of the roughly Rs. 50,000 they made in two months, they were saving up for their families back in the village. Back home, Mahima’s in-laws had invested in a tempo, and their income would help pay off an amount of the debt. Every month they have to pay Rs. 15,000.

“We bring wheat flour from the village. Plus, we have to spend money on buying vegetables, and pay rent in the cities. We are going back in two days. We do not plan to come back here any time soon.”

## A Day in The Life of a Migrant Worker

Around 10 am at the *naka* — where contractors come and recruit people for work — there are few men and women left. Most of the people have been taken away for a day’s labour.

Hari, mother to three children, from Kushalgarh district says whenever her children have holidays, she comes to the city. Her husband works in Surat to make a living for the family.

“The vegetables that we produce more or less suffice for our meals. Plus, I do odd jobs in villages to sustain the family. When there is no rain, there is no agriculture. How will we get by?”

She joins husband in the city when the children have school breaks. At the time of the interview, she had come to the city a fortnight before.

“We engage in agricultural activities in villages. Here, it is difficult to work with kids. They (contractors) are reluctant to employ women with children. Sometimes I get work, and at other times there is no work. It will become difficult to manage expenses in the village if we do not come to cities to work. In a year, I come for one and a half months.”

But the rural life is rife with distress too with lack of basic sanitation, drinking water, and water for agriculture explains Teena Garasiya, centre-in-charge, at Aajeevika Bureau in Kushalgarh. “If governments give basic sanitation and water for agricultural use and drinking, the population would not be in such high distress. Districts with high aridness suffer because agricultural produce is sparse

in the long summer months. This means women are also forced to go out and seek work in the urban areas,” says Garasiya.

## **‘Not Built for Women’**

Women migrant workers interviewed for the paper said they struggled with the lack of amenities in cities. In most of the cases, they stayed in the open at the construction sites or under dismal conditions in the city’s margins. Access to safe drinking water, sanitation, housing and toilets was non-existent in most cases.

Balan points out governments have turned a blind eye to women migrant workers which reflects in the lack of gendered policymaking. The lack of safe housing in cities for women, toilets, and other basic amenities are testimony to the apathy in gendered policies.

But there is enough research documenting that historically women have migrated<sup>30</sup> independent of men, especially in caregiving, domestic work and agriculture sectors.

One of the solutions in order to bring down distress migration is allocating more days under India’s rural livelihood scheme of the MGNREGS. Under the scheme, people get employment for a maximum of 100 days in a financial year. Rajasthan has, meanwhile, increased the number of days to 125. Khandelwal points out that in high distress areas, there is an urgent need to increase the number of days to between 150 and 200. “This would mean employment for women. The level of distress can be tackled once there are some livelihood opportunities,” adds Khandelwal.

Amba Pande who works at JNU’s School of International Studies points out that MGNREGS has not been able to tackle the distress as it could have done. “This is primarily due to curtailing of funds, corruption and lack of sustained employment through MGNREGS at the villages. Work is available only for a few months which is why people find it difficult to rely on it.”

## **How Housing can Change Experiences of Migrant Workers**

In Surat, this reporter visited a shelter which housed migrant workers hailing from villages in the state and outside it. Women spoke about how this was a different experience for them as compared to staying in the open where they did not have access to basics.

Hailing from Banswara district, Kali said this was a different experience as to when she was staying outside in Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh where she had migrated for work in the construction sector. She talks about multiple challenges in Ujjain where she was staying out in the open when she relocated for different periods of time—sometimes for 15 days, and sometimes for a month.

“Access to water and bathroom were major problems. There were no such arrangements there (as in the shelter). Finding these arrangements would be helpful for us (when we migrate for work). I have three children—two sons aged 10 and 5 and an eight-year-old daughter. They are with my mother-in-law. Once the monsoons arrive, I will go back to my village”

For Kajal from Gujarat’s Dahod district who is in the last trimester of her pregnancy, the shelter was a relief for the past six months of her stay in Surat. While her husband goes to work, she stays behind in the shelter and cooks. This is her first time in a city, and she said she had never stayed in the open. But when the time for delivery comes, she will go to her village where she has her family members.

“While there are multiple hazards of women migrating, there is a certain sense of autonomy that women receive when they migrate. However, this is dependent on the region that women are migrating to and the kind of work that they are doing. In certain cases, there has been empowerment and increase in the role of women in the process of migration. But in some you will see there have been, they migrate as wives,” says Pande.

Sixteen-year-old Mayuri, who accompanied her parents for the first time and went to work, the shelter was a safe refuge when she could not accompany her parents to work after she started feeling sick after the first day’s work. After a day’s work of carrying bricks for which she got Rs. 500, Mayuri started working from severe body ache. Mayuri is the youngest of her four siblings who were back in the village. She accompanied her parents as she was on vacation.

## **Lack of Transparency of Wages**

Distress migration is compounded with the problem of lack of transparency of wages when women migrate to the cities and the presence of middle-men who control the wages and not the builders who typically rely on the middle-men for the recruitment process.

Labour economist Ravi Srivastava who is the Director at the Delhi-based Institute for Human Development says workers struggle with poor rates because the recruitment process is non-transparent.

“Their wages are set when contractors are set in the source areas and this may not be in sync with the wages contractors receive from developers and builders. In many cases, contractors and sub-contractors supervise their work at the site, and there is labour exploitation due to the involvement of the middle men. Despite the fact that the use of mobile phones is probably for family units, employers are reluctant to hire workers directly,” says Srivastava.

He explains that when it comes to construction sites, it is still preferred to hire through a chain of contractors. “The chain would be a subcontractor at the source area and larger contractor at the destination area and possibly under him a sub-contractor on the site.”

“The fact is that there are improved modes of communication, improved channels of communication between employers and labourers with the coming of the mobile phone, the recruitment methods do not seem to have improved, and employer’s preference to hire them through middlemen who also supervise the labourers in most cases that seems to have remained,” he adds.

Meanwhile, Kamala, and Sannu are mildly optimistic of a better life for their children. They are taking one day at a time to negotiate their lives in the city.

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# Know Thy Neighbour: Can Centering Positive Refugee Narratives Improve Host Perceptions?

Riya Singh Rathore \*

## Introduction

India hosts 2 lakh refugees. Of these, 20% are Muslim<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, a Muslim refugee in India will encounter their Indian hosts 31890 times as often as an Indian will meet one Muslim refugee. It can then be safely assumed that the perception that the host community develops dictates the daily lives of refugees in asylum. An exploration of factors that influence host perceptions is critical since improved host perceptions can improve host-refugee relations which in turn can function as a protective measure for the refugees.

Improving host-refugee relationships is the need of the hour because of two factors. First, India is without a national refugee policy and is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugee rights are currently hinged on the patchwork of domestic legislation, constitutional measures, and international obligations<sup>2</sup>. Second, international aid organisations such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have reduced their help through the years, with the latest example being the ration cuts across the world resulting in food-insecure refugees.

With both avenues of national legislation and international aid closing, refugees are left at the mercy of the third one – the host community. The discretionary power of local NGOs, local authorities, and residents aided the refugees in gaining access to basic amenities such as food, water, accommodation, health care, and education. Especially during the pandemic, locals often provided medical resources like vaccines, medicines, counselling, and so forth. In several instances, locals worked as human rights lawyers, activists, and journalists to protect refugees, even stopping deportations in some cases<sup>3</sup>. Abraham noted that “sustainable protection may be found outside the law, through fortunate conjunctures of goodwill, hospitality and/or faith-based charity”<sup>4</sup> in asylum seekers’ interaction with their hosts.

Host-refugee relationship requires more attention. After all, hosts are the first responders to the asylum seekers. They distribute relief goods, assemble residential camps, and bear the administrative costs<sup>5</sup>. Outside of a circumstance of assistance, the host community regularly interacts with refugees in the capacity of landlords, employers, customers, teachers, government officials, and so forth.

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Policies and Practices, Issue No. 154, December 2023

Strengthening this relationship in the face of national and international mechanisms failing refugees is the surest way to ensure refugee protection. In an attempt to explore the tools to improve host-refugee relations, this report studies host perception of refugees and if centring humanising stories of refugees can offset host prejudices.

The work undertook a qualitative study comprising perception surveys and vignettes with 23 respondents based in New Delhi. The research is furnished with both primary data and secondary data on global host-refugee relationships. Through the case of Muslim refugees, this work will explore the current host perspectives and the factors that continually shape them. The research ends with recommendations to improve host perceptions and how they may be employed to promote social cohesion.

The study has growing relevance in the context of increasing numbers of global displacement and lack of national refugee laws. The larger aim of the study is to find ways to nourish the host-refugee relationship that would not only protect asylum-seekers in times of need but also in daily interactions with the host state. This is to suggest that protecting refugees does not need only be a top-down mechanism but also a bottom-up one.

## **Background**

India was born in the crucible of the world's largest forced migration. Nearly eight decades later, when asked if the country should close borders to refugees entirely, Indians ranked the third most agreeable demographic after Turkey and Hungary. A substantial 60% of Indians were opposed to admitting any more refugees. More importantly, 79% of Indians thought that asylum seekers were terrorists pretending to be refugees, and 71% thought that refugees entered India for economic reasons or to take advantage of our welfare services.

Though 70% of Indians believe in offering refuge to those displaced by war, most believe that refugees are economic migrants and not those fleeing war, and therefore tend to be more hostile to refugees.<sup>6</sup> The CEO of IPSOS found<sup>7</sup> that Indians also believed their economy to be resource-poor and saturated. Despite holding such contradicting views, Indians make anxious hosts when accommodating refugees in an economy already saturated. Such anxieties are reflected in the public discourse with the latest reportage describing refugees as 'illegal', 'foreigner', '[without] valid documents', 'Bangladeshi', 'influx', and '[requirement for] containment' routinely.

Such perceptions were not merely limited to media houses but extended to legislators such as home minister Amit Shah. Out of three tweets<sup>8</sup> on Rohingyas, he used the term "illegal" four and "foreigner" three times, briefly mentioning detaining and deporting the refugees. Atishi, an opposition minister, added that the "Bangladeshi" refugees were carrying out "hooliganism, riots, and violence."<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is critical to study the prevailing perceptions of hosts on refugees and how they may be neutralised to promote more social cohesion.

## **Literature Review: Host Perceptions of Refugees**

The global attitude towards refugees is becoming hostile. With four in ten people wanting to close borders to refugees entirely,<sup>10</sup> a primary obstacle between host and refugee amity, and therefore aid, is the distrust hosts hold towards those seeking refuge. These opinions, either resulting from prejudices or perceptions of real or symbolic threats, dictate the lives of refugees seeking asylum. This section covers factors that shape refugee perceptions, the role of media in creating the public imagination, and the stereotypes that result from the combination of both.

## **Factors: Building Blocks of Perceptions**

Elements that build the public perception span far and wide. One of the main enquiries about refugees is how they arrived in the host country. Several studies<sup>11</sup> show that seemingly banal administrative factors like a refugee's mode of entry, documentation, and length of stay determine public attitudes. There is especially a strong dislike for those seeking asylum without completing legalities such as possessing passports or immigration documentation.

Furthermore, international aid policies prioritising refugees upset the host community's sense of justice or fairness. The latter tends to decontextualise the refugee struggles and place them equally with those who willingly migrate without any threat of persecution. Therefore, the priority treatment of refugees is seen as unjust "queue-jumping."<sup>12</sup> Europe, the United States, and Australia often display this behaviour in citing 'illegal' crossing as a reason not to accept refugees.

As may be surmised, not all refugees are created equal. Hosting refugees is not a homogenised humanitarian affair devoid of political categories. Jaji notes refugee hosting is political, and it differentiates asylum seekers based on their identities.<sup>13</sup> Such perceptions may be determined by factors such as religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, social class, skin colour, linguistic familiarity, and even age.<sup>14</sup>

Differentiation, therefore, invokes politically and socially driven in-group and out-group categories. Allport outlines this societal condition as one where the out-group is excluded from the in-group based on specific characteristics not shared with the in-group. Although group identity can form on any characteristic, from being part of a family to supporting a specific sports club, subjects feel most threatened by those differing in ethnicity, religion, or ideology.<sup>15</sup> Such out-groups face social rejection in the form of verbal rejection, discrimination, or physical attacks. In this complex nexus, refugees are often viewed as alien and foreign to the 'natives', invariably becoming the outgroup. As Allport points out, "What is alien is regarded as somehow inferior, less 'good'."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, one of the most significant factors influencing, and therefore with the power to de-influence, perception is hosts' contact with refugees. This is termed contact hypothesis, wherein exposure to individuals of the outgroup creates emotional bonds which reduce suspicions and support the positive perception of the out-group.<sup>17</sup> The study found that only 16% of respondents with no contact with asylum seekers 'strongly agreed' to host refugees. This likelihood becomes 24% for those that have had contact. Individuals with exposure were over twice as likely to hire a refugee or allow their child to marry one compared to those without exposure.<sup>18</sup> The contact is not required to be personal. Hosts who may be in contact, whether via friends or otherwise, are more likely to support hosting refugees.

It is worth noting that not merely refugee circumstances that influence hosts' opinions of refugees. Host community's perception of refugee identities, circumstances, and interpretation of the conflict that refugees are fleeing determine how they will behave with the asylum seekers. These interpretations are determined by factors individual to hosts too. This includes their level of education, employment, and age. Those better-educated, employed, and younger tended to record a more favourable attitude to migration than those with lesser education, unemployed, and older.<sup>19</sup>

## **Media: The Architect of Public Imagination**

The media plays an indispensable role in constructing the refugee image. Media narratives are deeply culturally and politically relevant because they do not merely reflect a social reality but in fact "actively construct meaning." They intentionally assign meaning to events through the active

“selection, presentation, structuring and shaping of events.”<sup>20</sup> Such constructions are replicated and echoed by the hosts.

As scholars record,<sup>21</sup> most journalistic writing on refugees assumes a polarising ‘us’ versus ‘them’ stance, not dissimilar to the in-group/out-group typing. The reporting constructs differences between hosts and refugees through language. For instance, employing binaries such as Indian/Rohingya, citizen/illegal migrant, peaceful/terrorist, Hindu/Muslim, civilised/barbarian, endangered/dangerous, or native/intruder erect symbolic and consequently real-life boundaries between refugees and host states. Such coded language does not only other refugees but also reinforces the existing hierarchy of cultures and ethnicities in the nationalist imagination of the hosting country.

Media narratives may not even need to employ language to construct meaning. A study of the visual portrayal of migrants across ten countries found that images of refugees used in the news portrayed a negative emotional valence.<sup>22</sup> Refugees are shown as living in poverty, depicted mostly in crowds where their faces are unclear and unrecognisable, leading to individual and collective dehumanisation. In contrast, ex-pats (usually White) were depicted with more positive emotion, living in wealth, and appearing individually.

Broad-sweeping portrayals of refugees dehumanise and successfully make aliens out of humans fleeing violence. This othering creates an in-group and out-group dynamic wherein all those ascribed to the out-group are perceived as not meriting any humanity.<sup>23</sup> Dehumanised refugees are seen as lacking human attributes such as complex emotions, morality, or warmth and are therefore seen as falling outside of the realm of basic moral obligations.<sup>24</sup> Such barbarisation of asylum seekers encourages antisocial behaviour towards them, making it more challenging for refugees to settle in the host country peacefully.

There are two broad types of discussions in the media on refugees. The first, more visible, type highlights refugees being maladjusted or alien in their host society. This is conveyed through news that expressly covers incidents of violence, cultural differences between hosts and refugees, political opinions on refugees, opinions on government policy on refugees, and public perception.<sup>25</sup>

On the opposite end is the common practice of portraying refugees as helpless victims. Specifically, as people in need of unending charity and goodwill of the hosts to sustain. Media, and even civil society discourse sometimes, frames narratives eliciting pity for asylum seekers exaggerating their dependence on the hosts. In some cases, such a perception may prompt hosts to perceive refugees as burdens the country must bear, decreasing the likelihood of supporting refugees. Refugees, often themselves, reject the stereotype of helpless victims with no self-reliance.<sup>26</sup> This view must change since “support for refugees is grounded in a framing of refugees as in need of charity, rather than a discourse of justice and rights.”<sup>27</sup>

## **Stereotypes: Inhabitants of Prejudices**

There is a tendency to lump refugees “at best with economic migrants, and at worst with cheats, criminals, or even terrorists,”<sup>28</sup> Kofi Annan confessed in a conference at the turn of the twenty-first century. Annan unknowingly summarised the two most common and widely spread perceptions of refugees, which would prevail well into the first quarter of the new century. While refugees are made to inhabit several stereotypes, two of the most prevalent and repetitive ones are refugees being economic burdens or terrorists.

A survey conducted in 25 countries found that 59% of those surveyed, believed that asylum seekers were terrorists pretending to be refugees. Around 53% thought they were economic migrants pretending to be refugees.<sup>29</sup> In both cases, most hosts believed refugees made a conscious effort to deceitfully enter the country instead of persons seeking refuge from persecution, conflict, and violence. Also, in both cases, the common denominator is the hosts' denial or overlooking of the violence and vulnerability refugees endure, instead choosing to perceive refugees as persons who take resources and dole out violence.

### **Poor Refugee Stereotype: Perception of Economic Burden**

That refugees are economic burdens is a common opinion. The hosts' perception of their personal finances and the country's economy contributes to building the stereotype.

Hosts who are economically struggling or vulnerable themselves may see refugees as an exaggerated threat compared to hosts who are better off and safer.<sup>30</sup> The more that hosts perceive asylum seekers as financial liabilities, the less likely they are to support hosting them. Therefore, contribution to the national economy is a significant determinant of host perspectives on refugees.

The strongest predictor of attitudes towards immigration is people's perception of their own and their country's economy. Those who believe their national economy is faring poorly favour lower immigration levels and are almost twice as likely to suggest decreasing migrant flows than those individuals who see their countries' economic situations as good or improving.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, during conversations of refugee integration, regardless of respondents' overall views of immigration, they prefer accommodating those from 'high-skilled' categories with qualifications like doctors or teachers, preferring younger asylum seekers over older ones. Refugees, which hosts think would contribute to the economy are preferred over 'low-skilled workers' and extended families.<sup>32</sup>

However, these preferences are difficult to meet. Since 70% of refugees come from economically less developed countries, of which 41% are children, immediately becoming self-reliant without state aid is nearly impossible. An additional obstacle is that state aid becomes difficult to access as 76% of refugees are hosted by low- and middle-income countries<sup>33</sup>. Hosts in countries with already low incomes are predisposed to perceive their country's resources as limited and not enough to share.

Though homing refugees comes with a high cost, it is widely understood across scholarship that it is a short-term and up-front one. Once settled, the finances directed towards asylum seekers decline considerably. In the long term, refugees become financial contributors to the host country.<sup>34</sup> Upon integration,<sup>35</sup> refugees become self-reliant and gradually begin contributing to the local and national economy. Their integration into the labour force, like ordinary citizens, relies on their access to the workforce. However, since most asylum seekers are confined to camps at the periphery of cities with limited movement and interaction with the host economy, they are unable to become self-reliant, therefore perpetuating the hosts' belief that refugees are only beneficiaries of the host economy and not beneficial to it. Thus, the stereotype continues.

### **Muslim Refugees Stereotype: Perception of Terrorism**

Muslims are perhaps the most unwelcome groups in the world. The global surge in anti-Muslim attitudes translates to an anti-Muslim refugee stance. A survey showed that 55% of European respondents felt that "all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped."<sup>36</sup> While this sentiment refers to migrants who arrived intentionally and through legal channels, the



sentiment applies to Muslim refugees with even more harshness. Perceptions of Muslim refugees are “more negative than toward refugees of other religions.”<sup>37</sup>

Though it is unclear exactly where the Muslim terrorist stereotype emerged, scholarship concurs that the global demonisation of Muslims as terrorists began post-USA’s ‘global war on terror.’ The stereotype of Muslims being radical Islamists and, therefore, terrorists have roots in the political churnings of the Cold War as the United States and its allies began engaging in proxy wars with the USSR across the world following its defeat in Vietnam.

Though orientalist differentiated between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims based on their participation in moderate or political Islam, this category exploded in scope to include all Muslims after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>38</sup> Predominantly Muslim states, like Afghanistan, were suddenly branded rogue states needing proxy rule so that they do not acquire weapons to further terrorism.<sup>39</sup>

However, it is worthy of note that the portrayal of asylum seekers as threats, instead of those escaping threats, has remained consistent in local and international news before and after 9/11.<sup>40</sup> While the Asian and African continents have undergone ethnic strife involving Muslims for centuries, Islamic countries labelled as extremist states combined with the rise of political Islam has cemented the terrorist label, further demonising Muslim refugees.

As this attitude grows, scholars<sup>41</sup> postulate that this demonisation of Islam and therefore refugees who practise it has become a symbolic threat to their host societies. Host populations view the Islamic faith as being a symbolic threat to the host culture’s values, morals, and norms; it is especially associated with refugees with the fear that they may reject local beliefs and customs, gradually changing the hosts’ native ones.<sup>42</sup>

More relevant to India is the fear that Muslim refugees may turn the country’s ethnic demographic balance of the country and trigger mass civil unrest and promote terrorism. Despite this narrative being prevalent, a study work spanning 1975 to 2013 finds that countries have only seen increased violence if there were underlying political tensions in the receiving country<sup>43</sup> before the arrival of refugees. Specifically, if the tensions were between the refugee group’s co-ethnics and the dominant ethnicity. On the contrary, the dominant ethnicity of the state is less hostile to ethnic kin refugees. That is to say, refugees do not cause conflict directly. They become unwilling factors in already tense circumstances where one ethnic group is marginalised by another.

Besides this, studies show little substantive evidence for the case that more refugees result in more terror attacks.<sup>44</sup> However, the stereotype that Muslim refugees equal more terrorism persists. The continued subtyping of Muslims into ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals’ and prejudices against them are significant predictors of support for anti-immigration policies.<sup>45</sup>

## Methodology

To study the prevalence of both the economic burden and terrorist stereotypes married to Muslim refugees, this study recorded qualitative interviews with 23 Indians from different backgrounds. The primary data was collected in June 2023.

Particular emphasis was paid to the incomes and religious identities of the respondents. Using PEW Research Centre’s classification<sup>46</sup> of income, the respondent’s class was divided into low income (₹24,000 or below per month), middle income (₹25,000 - 50,000), and high income (₹51,000 or above). Of all the respondents interviewed, 11 identified as Hindus, eight as Muslims, three as Atheists, and one as a Christian.

Predicting the problem of confirmation bias of the interviewee with the interviewer, the study used two vignettes to record the respondents’ perceptions so that the interviewee may relate to the



story's character and answer accordingly. The framework borrowed its understanding using a previous work by Padmaja, Khed, and Krishna.<sup>47</sup>

With the study's pursuit being the impact evaluation of positive stories on hosts' perception of refugees, it employed two stories of real Rohingya refugees but fictionalised the context of interaction with Indians to fit the questionnaire. The stories were deliberately chosen to offset the views of refugees being economic burdens and Muslim refugees being perpetrators of violence as opposed to being victims of it. The study conducted a perception survey of pre-and post-Vignettes to assess the effect of positive refugee stories on the hosts. Both vignettes are available in the Annexure.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **'Economic Burdens' on the Country**

Pre-vignette perceptions of refugees were mostly positive in so far as most respondents did not view them as economic threats. When asked to rate the statement, "In my belief, refugees are an economic burden on the country," 52% of respondents disagreed. Whereas 21% agreed and another 26% were neutral.

Of those who disagreed, the common sentiment was that India is a large nation and should be able to accommodate refugees easily. Statements such as, "Our India is big anyone can live here" and "We have a lot of room to accommodate them," were expressed. Multiple respondents pointed out that the number of refugees in comparison to India's population would always be minuscule. Therefore, providing aid would not make much of an economic difference.

Disagreeing respondents also sympathised with refugees stating those who flee homes will only strive to become financially independent. One respondent noted, "If they come here, then they come here to do good things, no one runs away from home just like that." A few respondents drew parallels between refugees coming to India and Indians going abroad for work to illustrate the point that refugees contribute financially to the economy. They mentioned feeling that government aid rehabilitating refugees could yield benefits for the country in the long term.

It is worthy of note that even in disagreeing candidates, one mentioned that they did not view refugees as a burden as long as the asylum seekers received enough to sustain themselves but to the degree where it took away hosts' economic opportunities. Another mentioned that India would be happy to accommodate anyone as long as they arrived "legally", not illegally, confirming that banal administrative factors impacted even those who did not view refugees' arrival negatively.

Those respondents who chose neutrality on the statement displayed no particular trend or rationale. A couple of respondents felt that India should host refugees for the sake of humanitarianism but that refugees are a burden. Another two viewed refugees' economic costs more individually, mentioning that some may work while others may not. Another couple of participants mentioned that refugees did not contribute to the country's resources since they were not recognised citizens, and that as the most populous country in the world, most Indians could not afford a minimum standard of living, accommodating refugees would prove difficult.

Of the respondents who agreed, many disclosed their apprehensions about the shortage of employment and resources in the country. A respondent expressed, "We [Indians] don't get jobs in India, but they get them." Another said that administrating refugees takes a lot of effort that could otherwise be redirected towards poor Indians in need.

Economic perceptions of refugees confirmed the scholar's finding that citizens' perception of their country's economy strongly indicates their attitudes towards non-citizens. Hosts' perception of the economy, resources, employment, and population heavily dictated their opinions on accommodating refugees. All those who agreed, disagreed, or remained neutral on the statement did so based on their understanding of India's capacity to host refugees instead of judging the refugees themselves. Unique to India is the fact of being the most populous country in the world. Therefore, many respondents understood 'burden' not as the burden of more economic dependents but the burden of simply more people.

### **'Religious Perception' on the Country**

The second perception statement enquired from the respondents was as follows, "In my belief, Muslim refugees are more violent than other Hindu or Buddhist refugees." Around 56% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, while 30% agreed and 13% were neutral.

Notably, the statistics vary when divided along religious lines (Figure 1 and Figure 4). Only four of the eleven Hindus interviewed disagreed with the statement, while six agreed and one was neutral. Meanwhile, seven out of eight Muslims strongly disagreed with the statement, with one being neutral. Two of the three Atheists in the group disagreed, and one was neutral. The only Christian interviewed in the survey strongly disagreed with the statement. This trend confirms that religion and the political identities of refugees played a large part in the host community's perception of them.

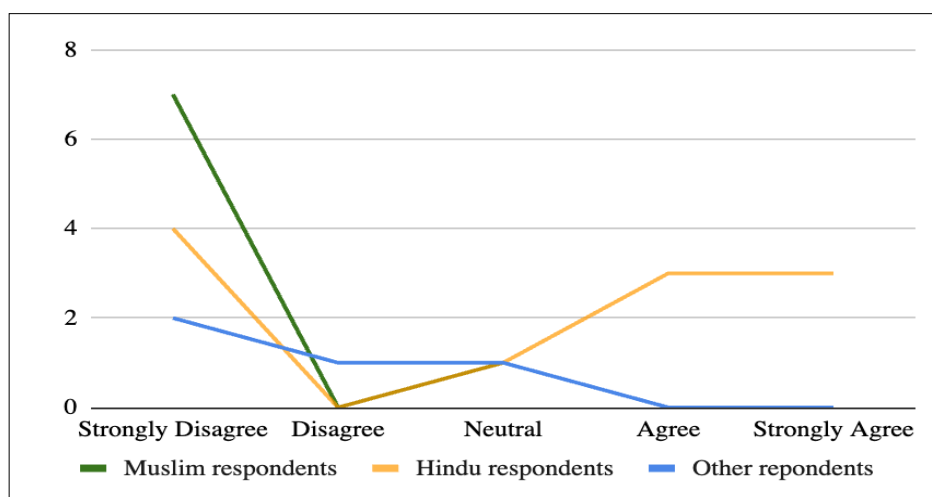


Figure 1: Responses to the statement, "In my belief, Muslim refugees are more violent than other Hindu or Buddhist refugees."

When all responses are combined solely based on agreement, disagreements, and neutralities. A strong trend noted among those who disagreed with the statement was that they did not view religion as a deciding characteristic of violence. Of thirteen who opposed it, 69% expressed that violence did not depend on one's religion.

A second characteristic across answers was a deep distrust of the news ecosystem in the country. When questioned, one respondent simply replied, "You know how the country is these

days,” referring to routine anti-Muslim propaganda aired on mainstream news channels. Many participants expressed that the media depicting Muslims, and therefore Muslim refugees, as more violent than others is a political and partisan stunt.

Of the three who recorded neutral on the survey, all unanimously said they had no information to either disagree or agree with the statement.

Around seven of the participants who agreed with the statement confirmed the scholarship’s finding that Muslims are viewed as inherently more violent than other religions. The justification provided by six of seven participants was that Muslims were more prone to violence than other religions. The extremities of this belief varied. One respondent expressed that a poor Hindu would eat by begging for charity, but a poor Muslim would resort to thieving. When taken to the extreme, this sentiment becomes more vicious. For instance, one of the respondents expressed that he thought Muslim refugees were terrorists, and even though India gave them shelter, they radicalised more peaceful Indian Muslims to “kill us [Hindus].”

It was felt that though Hindus could live in harmony with Muslims, the latter could not do the same. Agreeing respondents perceived Islam as a threat, with some saying Muslims were more inclined to violence, respected only one God, and were more regressive than other religions. Hinduism was always discussed as the parallel religion, perceived as more peaceful, accepting, and even docile. There was no one clear source of this rationale, with respondents attributing their beliefs to the news, hearsay, or just their personal opinion.

Though respondents did mention the caveat that they did not believe all Muslims were violent, they believed a majority of them to be more prone than others. The word “majority opinion” was used often, with participants mentioning that though they had personally not witnessed any violence by a Muslim person, “all the news channels” had. Two of the respondents drew the correlation between the Middle East largely practising Islam and being war-torn as an example for their agreement.

The agreeing respondents confirmed Allport’s finding that groups were chiefly threatened by those from different religions and ethnicities.<sup>48</sup> The out-grouping of Muslims in India has continued to dehumanise them and any refugees sharing their religious faith. The stark parallels drawn between Muslims and Hindus affirmed the assertion that hosts viewed Islam as a symbolic threat to their culture’s values, morals, and norms.<sup>49</sup> It also established Ruegger’s decade-long research finding that refugees only exacerbated political tensions if the dominant community already had ethnic tensions prior to refugees’ arrival.<sup>50</sup>

## **Analysing the Impact of Vignettes on Hosts**

### **Vignette 1**

Vignette 1 explored the story of Aritha an Indian housemaid who receives financial help from her fellow Rohingya housemaid Leila (Please see Annexure). Based on Rohingya refugees aiding Kerala flood victims in 2018,<sup>51</sup> the vignette aimed to explore how hosts perceive the financial independence and charity of refugees who settled in India.

When asked how the event would change Aritha’s perception, 91% of respondents felt that Aritha’s interaction with Leila would positively change a host’s outlook on refugees. Answers carried two primary trends.

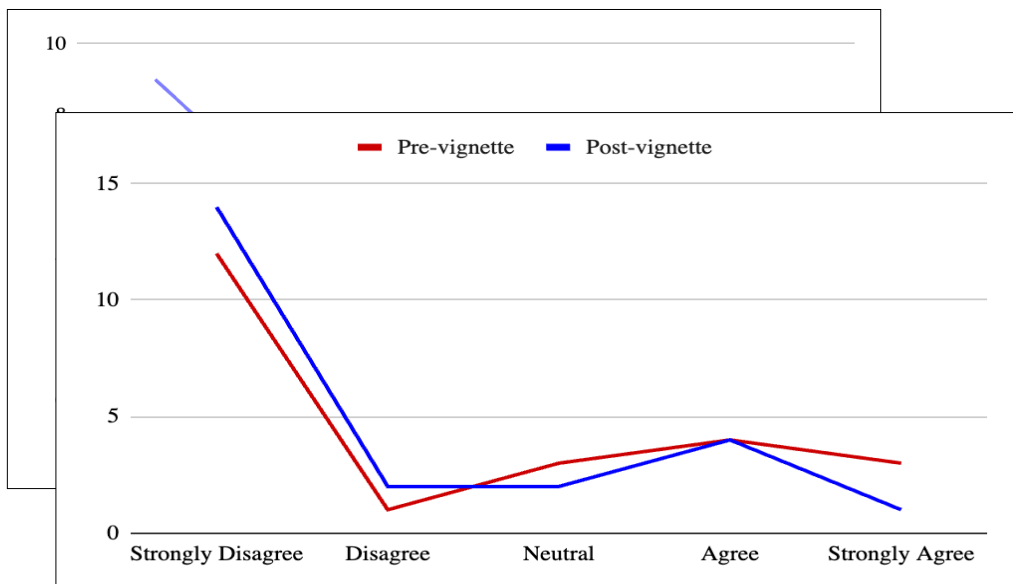


Figure 2: Responses to the statement, “In my belief, refugees are an economic burden on the country,” pre- and post-vignette.

The first one, expressed across the economic and religious lines, was that the story humanised refugees to Aritha because of their aid. One respondent noted, “Help changes perspectives, no matter the religion.” 52% of respondents thought that Aritha would change her mind about refugees being an economic burden because she received aid in times of need. A refugee’s financial aid, specifically in a time of need, brought refugees out of the demographic and political stereotypes they were earlier put in by the hosts’ perception. The act of help affirmed the refugees’ role as members of the host society. A respondent particularly mentioned that since Aritha’s entire community assisted, it would encourage Aritha to view them through a humane lens rather than making Leila an exception to the burdensome-refugee rule.

A second point expressed by 43% of respondents was that Aritha's personal tragedy of losing a home allowed her to empathise with the refugees' conditions. Since they shared circumstances of crisis, Aritha's perception of refuge-seeking would become more empathetic. Their shared experience of forcibly losing homes would humanise both Leila and the refugee community to Aritha.

## Vignette 2

Vignette 2 reported the story of Rohan, an Indian student, who interacted with Younis, a young Rohingya boy, who worked as a garbage collector and had a bullet injury (Please see Annexure). Based on a true story<sup>52</sup>, the vignette aimed to explore how hosts would perceive Muslim refugees who were victims of terrorism instead of being perpetrators of it.

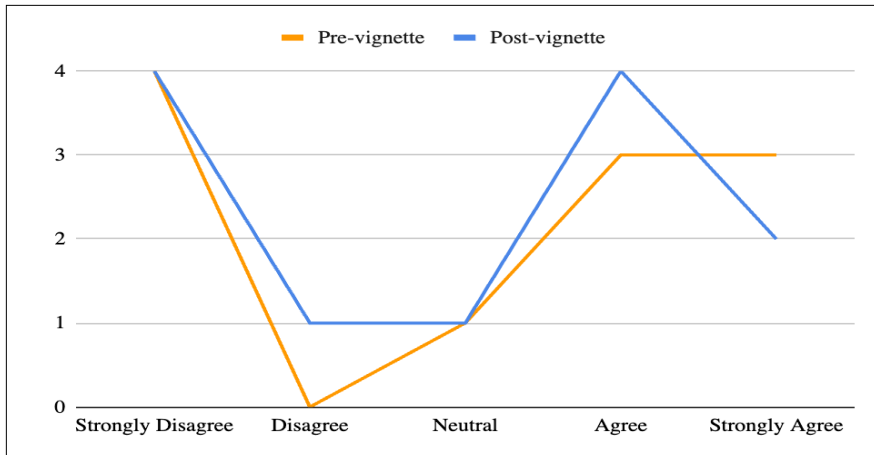


Figure 3: All responses to the statement, “In my belief, Muslim refugees are more violent than other Hindu or Buddhist refugees,” pre- and post-vignette.

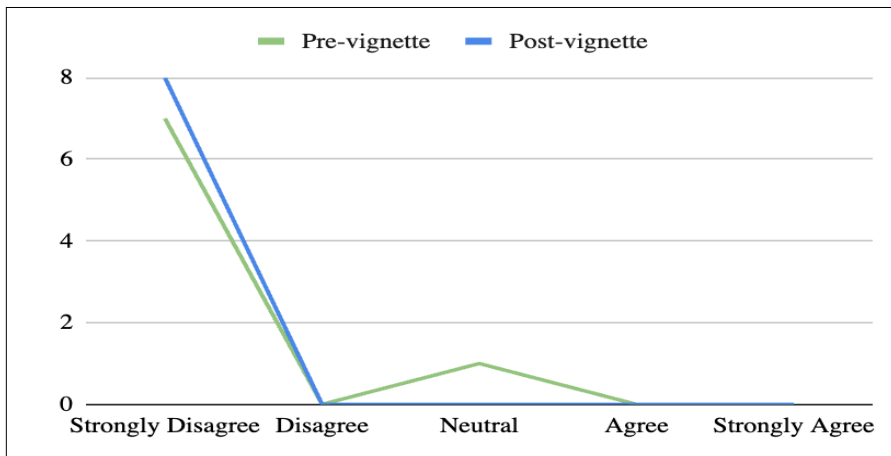


Figure 4: Hindu and Muslim respondents, respectively, on the statement, “In my belief, Muslim refugees are more violent than other Hindu or Buddhist refugees” pre- and post-vignette.

When asked how this interaction would change impact Rohan, 82% of hosts mentioned that it would make Rohan more sympathetic to violence against refugees. Of these, 52% attributed Rohan’s change of mind to meeting Younis and establishing first-hand contact. The in-person interaction took precedence over Rohan’s interaction with the media stories about refugees. One respondent mentioned that they felt “Rohan will tend to believe the people he met in passing more than the politicians in the media.”

This confirms the previously discussed work on contact hypothesis.<sup>53</sup> A factor here which strengthened the hypothesis was that 42% of respondents displayed a strong distrust of the mainstream Indian media. Many mentioned they avoided listening to the news since it often “incited

violence for the benefit of politicians.” One respondent expressed that “such [Younis’] stories should be put out because politicians use partisanship but real-world stories like these are required.” Respondents used terms such as ‘propaganda’, ‘rumours’, and ‘fake news’ almost synonymously with mainstream media.

One respondent mentioned, “The kid had told the truth but that is not in the news. The news is fake. If one Muslim does something bad, it is inflated to four Muslims. When one Hindu does something bad, there is no news covering it. There are false rumours of terrorism in the country right now. Daily news never tells the truth.”

A third trend captured was that Younis’ age played a significant role in respondents’ responses. A total of 47% of the agreeing respondents explicitly mentioned that Younis being a young kid would embolden Rohan’s trust in the story. This confirms the previous discussion that hosts tend to favour younger refugees arriving in the country.

A final trend noted in the responses was that Younis’ drive to study and become a teacher influenced the hosts’ feelings toward Younis positively. 31% of agreeing respondents were overtly moved by a young refugee wanting to pursue his dreams of education. The respondents showed a strong inkling towards refugees who worked hard to settle in India and disliked those who could not. Some mentioned that Rohan’s mind would change favourably towards refugees on the condition that Younis makes something of himself in the future.

An observation relevant in the Indian context is that two of the oldest respondents, 80 and 67, had either lived through the partition or were from families who had been refugees during the partition, respectively. Both respondents varied from other respondents because they did not view refugees as a collective demographic and said every refugee was an individual. Though refugee identity was not met with a broad stroke, both participants viewed religious groups as collectives without individualism.

## Impact of Vignettes

When asked which story impacted them the most, 34% expressed feeling moved by both, followed by 30% reporting Vignette 1, 26% by Vignette 2, and 8% by neither.

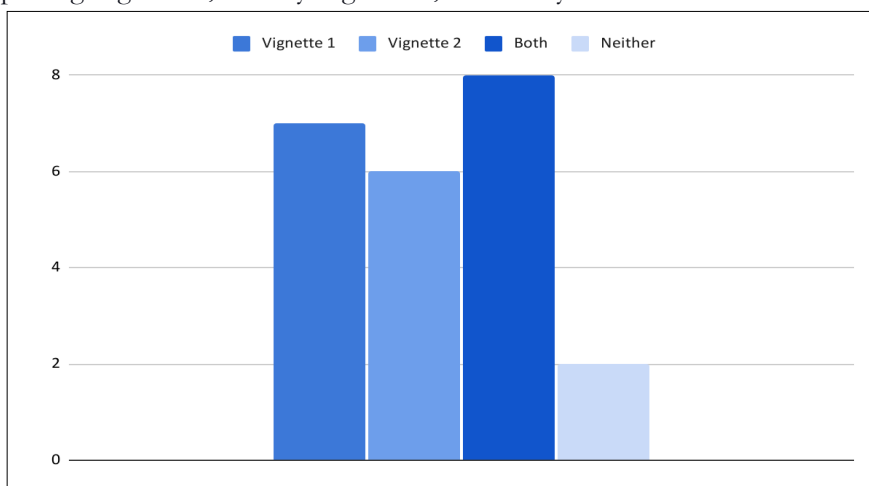


Figure 5: Vignettes which impacted the respondents the most

Post-vignettes host opinions swayed slightly on refugees' economic impact. Around 34% of respondents, eight of twenty-three, changed their answers. Five of eight respondents who changed their mind did so in favour of refugees not being a burden. Interestingly, the story that softened their stance was Vignette 2 instead of Vignette 1. All five respondents expressed sympathy for Younis. The common sentiment was that they were moved by the humanity in the story and were hopeful for Younis' future. Respondents who had confirmed refugees as burdens pre-vignette were noted saying, "The kid can lead his life here. He is earning for his family; he can turn his life around. He is working very hard and has gone through so many trials. All refugees are troubled and we should help them."

Of the three of eight whose opinions harshened expressed that although the stories humanised refugees, it did not change their opinion that India first accommodated the Indians already struggling here, instead of refugees. Two respondents did note that they "would change [their] mind in the face of data and logical arguments." The net result was a positive trend. Around 8% of those who expressed neutrality earlier disagreed with the statement post Vignette 1. The number of those who agreed with the statement remained stable.

Post-vignette perceptions on statement 2, six respondents changed their perceptions about Muslim refugees being more violent than others. That is 26% of participants were influenced by the vignettes. Five of the six softened their stance by several points after listening to Vignette 2 specifically. Although the participants praised Leila for the help she provided, two of five reported being impacted by Younis' story, one of five felt being moved by Leila's, while two felt moved by both. Participants also expressed the feeling that they had seen the "real condition" and the "ground reality" of refugees. The one respondent whose opinion was harshened did not specify their reason but expressed sympathies with Younis, mentioning that the hosts should aid him in achieving his dreams.

It is evident that though hosts reported feeling most impacted by Vignette 1 between the two stories, the respondents who changed their minds did so based on Younis' story.

Factors individual to hosts' such as their income, education, age, or even where they received information on refugees<sup>54</sup> did not impact the respondents' perception of refugees. The most salient factor that affected the perception of the hosts was the hosts' religious identity and their understanding of India's ongoing political dynamics.

## Conclusion

Host perceptions of refugee shape refugees' experiences in the country. However, with the recent surge in anti-refugee, especially anti-refugee sentiment, it is critical to understand what factors dictate hosts' harsh perceptions of refugees. This study aimed to go a step further to explore the possibility of improving hosts' perceptions of refugees by disseminating positive stories about refugees.

To do so, the study employed a perception survey and the use of vignettes in its methodology. Results show that after one interview, 34% of hosts changed their views on statement 1 and 26% on statement 2. Although limited in scope, this exploratory qualitative study deduces a net positive impact of centring humanising narratives about refugees in the public imagination.

The study also affirmed two points indicated by previous refugee scholarship. First, the strongest indicator of attitudes towards refugees is the hosts' understanding of their own nation. Though otherwise discussed in the context of economy, when exported to India, this statement finds root in Indians' understanding of their country's population and resources. The second finding corroborated by the study is that attitudes towards refugees are predetermined by the attitudes

towards their coethnics. In India, Muslim refugees such as Rohingya were disliked more on the account of being Muslim rather than being refugees.

Despite heightened tensions, humanising stories about refugee lives and their struggles did sway opinions. The second vignette, which discussed a boy facing terrorism due to his religion, was the story which impacted the host's perceptions the most.

To improve hosts' perception of refugees and therefore their relations, policymakers or the civil society must aspire to:

- Disseminate stories about refugees from their own perspectives. Though narratives may range from their recollections of violence and fleeing persecution to their experiences in the host country, the goal must be to engage hosts with the ground realities of refugees. Stories written in conversation with or reporting on behalf of the refugee may create a sense of first-hand acquaintanceship between the host and refugees, which may promote compassion and solidarity.
- Combat anti-Muslim propaganda and ethnic tensions promoted through mainstream media, social media, and hearsay. Discouraging language that uses in-group/out-group categories that promote ethnic or religion-based grouping should be changed in favour of more neutralising terms. It is critical to neutralise the demonisation of Muslims by challenging the most common misconceptions about the community via mass dissemination. Any other policies promoting harmony or social cohesion between Hindus and Muslims would also directly impact the treatment of Muslim refugees in India.
- Include verified statistics about the impact of refugees on the country. Several neutral hosts reported wanting more data to inform their opinion. Publishing such data and fact-checking existing claims about India's population, demographic, and resource allocations should be prioritised.
- Help refugees self-sustain, especially through promoting their education. Refugees' dreams and ability to achieve meaningful employment were positively received by the hosts. Assisting refugees through this journey and publishing progress updates may better their adjustment in the host nation.
- Ensure that refugees are permitted to move freely with access to the host economy. Since they encourage national and international investment in the region, new local markets, businesses, infrastructure, or relationships uplift both the displaced and host communities. Their integration into the labour force, like ordinary citizens, may promote positive economic beliefs about refugees being self-reliant.
- Promote host contact with refugees. First- or second-hand contact with refugees is shown to promote favourable attitudes in hosts compared to those who did not have any contact. Hosts also report trusting their personal interactions with the Indian media and political ecosystem. Creating programmes or circumstances of increased interaction with the two groups may promote host-refugee harmony in the long term.

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## **Annexure**

### **Vignette 1**

Aritha is a girl from Kerala who worked as a housemaid in Faridabad. While walking to work, she always crosses a Rohingya camp on the way. Although Aritha knew a few other Rohingya women who, like her, earned through daily wage labour, Aritha still felt they put unnecessary financial pressure on the economy and received more aid than others. One day Aritha's mother informed her that their house was submerged because of the Kerala floods. Many of her family and friends lost their belongings in the floods. Aritha became worried and began to collect charity to send home to

the flood victims. One morning, Aritha was surprised to see that Leila, a fellow maid and Rohingya refugee, had collected money to donate. Leila mentioned that she had heard about Aritha seeking charity after her village got submerged. Therefore, Leila and a few other refugee families came together to contribute 500 rupees each and collected nearly 40,000 rupees for the flood victims. Aritha asked Leila why she was contributing money when she might also be in need of it. Leila told Aritha that she knew what it was like to lose a home and be desperate for help during a crisis. She wanted to show support in whatever way she could.

*How do you think this event will change Aritha's opinion on refugees' economic contributions?*

## Vignette 2

Rohan is a student at university and is preparing to give his UPSC exam. Rohan read the newspaper every day in preparation. One such week, he read multiple stories about local politicians accusing Rohingya Muslims of causing violence and ruckus in the area. He was upset by the news of there being a ruckus in his city due to refugees. After reading, Rohan left the house to empty the garbage at the nearest disposal place. As he was throwing the bag, he met a young 13-year-old boy collecting garbage. The boy had a big scar on his head and said his name was Younis. Rohan asked Younis how he got hurt and the boy told him that he got shot in the head when he was eight years old, by the Buddhist military in Burma. Rohan realised Younis was a Rohingya refugee. Curious, he tried to find out more about him. Younis told Rohan that he used to live in Burma with his family when he was younger. He used to study and hoped to work as a teacher when he grew up. But one year, the Buddhist military arrived in Younis' village and started firing guns at everyone. Everyone started running but one of their bullets hit Younis in the head. He told Rohan that he does not remember what happened next and that he only remembers being in immense pain. Younis' neighbours took him to the clinic, soon after which Younis and his family fled to India in hopes of safety. Now Younis works as a garbage collector to support his family and hopes to live in peace. Although he misses home and wants to go back to Burma, he knows it is unsafe for Muslims like him. He wants to continue studying so that he can become a teacher one day.

*How do you think this interaction will change Rohan's opinion on refugees being called violent?*

## Notes

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<sup>54</sup>Around 10 of 23 (43%) respondents consumed information on refugees from TV channels, and another 10 of 23 said they got news from social media. 6 of 23 said they received it through reading newspapers, and 2 said they acquired information through hearsay.



# State of Migrant Workers from Assam in Kerala: Climate, Displacement and Xenophobia

**Farhana Ahmed \***

Inamul Haque (18) of Suapata (Part-5) village under Bahirsuapata Gaon Panchayat under Bilashipara Revenue Circle of Dhubri district in western Assam decided to drop out from the senior secondary classes he was studying and looked forward to get a 'job' in Kerala in March this year. Inamul's family lost four bighas of agricultural land in their village to the bank erosion by the Brahmaputra last year. As their basic source of livelihood was destroyed, Inamul had no choice but to head for a long train journey to Kerala in search of work where several youths from his village had gone earlier. He, along with a group of five youth boarded a train to Kerala as told by their contacts and landed instead in Tamil Nadu. Their contacts actually diverted them to Tamil Nadu instead of Kerala where the demand for workers has been growing in the post-Covid scenario. Inamul is currently working in a thread making factory in Madurai in which his employer pays him fortnightly. He also earns extra income by working overtime.

Same is the story of Hasen Ali (21) from the same village of Dhubri district who is working as a mason under a real estate contractor in Chennai. Hasen too is satisfied in the wages he gets from his employer and earns handsomely by working hard and long. However, he acknowledges that his body will suffer later on due to excessive work he does for extra income.

Agapit Xalxo (32), from Langshung Forest Block which is 33 km away from Kokrajhar district headquarter in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) was only five years old when armed Bodo militants carried out a killing spree in his village in 1996 to evict the Santhals, an Adivashi community, who are the descendants of tribal communities brought by the colonial British to work in the tea plantations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Growing up in relief-shelter camps for the entire period of his childhood to adolescent period without proper education, Agapit joined group of youths from his village in 2007 that went for jobs in Kerala. Initially working in eateries and latter in a carriage company, Agapit is currently working as a driver in a logistics company in Kochin, managing to send some money back home to his ageing parents.

Mainul Ali (21), who originally hails from Barpeta district in lower Assam, migrated to Lakhimpur district in upper Assam along with his family 15 years ago when their entire agriculture land was devoured by the Brahmaputra in Baghmara Char under Mandia Revenue Circle. His family settled in Hekerajan village under Bogeendi Gaon Panchayat of Kadam Revenue Circle in Lakhimpur district, growing crops and collecting woods that come drifting in the river Subansiri. But since 2016, the area faced unabated riverbank erosion by the Subansiri. Within a span of just four

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Policies and Practices, Issue No. 154, December 2023

years, the land where Mainul's family was settling for some eight years were completely lost to the Subansiri, making them displaced again. After struggling with some daily wage jobs, Mainul moved to Kerala in 2022. He is now working as a painter in Ernakulam.

Saleha Khatun (29) is a single mother of 12 years old girl from Kawoimari village in Bhurgaon in Morigaon district of Assam. She was born in Nagaland where her parents moved after most of their family land were lost to river bank erosion by the Brahmaputra in 1988. She was married at a tender age of 17 years but her husband left her soon after her daughter was born. Her mother, who works as domestic help in couple of households in Dimapur, has been desperate to get her remarried. But with several such failed attempts and initiatives, her mother decided to send her to their original village in Morigaon district of Assam to stay with their relatives. Unable to get a job for her unskilled status and primary level of education, Saleha was lured by a fellow village girl, working in Kerala in 2019 offering a job and possibilities of getting married. She left to Kerala with the consent of her parents, leaving her daughter with them and is currently working in a hotel as a cleaner in Thiruvananthapuram. Her possible marriage in Kerala has not been materialised so far.

Dominic Karketta (21) from Buroi Tea Estate in north Assam's Biswanath district was a promising footballer. He played for his school and the tea estate's football team in various local and regional tournaments and dreamed of getting a job in Assam Police for his sports activities. His one elder brother and one cousin were working in saw mills in Arunachal Pradesh under harsh conditions. Desperate to get a job after completing his tenth grade, Dominic first went to Arunachal Pradesh to join his elder brother and cousin. But the exploitation by their employer and hazardous work conditions forced him to come back after few months at the saw mill and the timber depot in 2018. After staying at his home and failing to make a cut to the police recruitments, Dominic moved to Faridabad, Haryana in 2019 and started working at a warehouse as a labour. The working condition and low wages made him uncomfortable from the very beginning at Faridabad. During the first Covid lockdown in March, 2020, Dominic returned home after losing his job. After another two years of joblessness, he moved to Kerala in early 2022. Presently he works in a filling station outside Kozhikode earning something for his satisfaction in a hospitable work condition.

Though Inamul and Hasen, both belonging to the climate displaced community, could not make it to Kerala and presently engaged as migrant workers in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, Kerala is still India's 'Gulf' for workers from other states because of higher wages they get there than in their home states. Migrant labour from Assam consists of 17% of total migrant workers of 2.5 million (Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation-2013) – the second highest after Bihar (18%). The migration of its Malayalee labour force to the Gulf countries and a gradual decline in the flow of workers from neighbouring Tamil Nadu in recent times has filled the gap of the workforce in Kerala by the migrant workers from Assam and other states.

## **Climate Induced Displacement and Migration**

According research the movement of people from one location to another location are caused by various factors such as economic, social, political, environmental, are termed as drivers of migration. But forced migration in recent decades becomes a common phenomenon in the world. Bates (2002) and Warren (2015) explains that forced migration that caused by environmental disaster or natural disasters is termed as an environmental refugee. The environmental events such as land degradation, soil erosion, and droughts have severe effects on farmers that lead to migration of farmers from rural agricultural area to urban industrial area for getting employment (Larson et al. 2004). There are various studies that reveal the relation between environmental degradation and migration, such as



land degradation and migration, riverbank soil erosion and migration, impact of riverbank erosion and migration.

Riverbank erosion has become a vulnerable phenomenon in the bank of the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries in Assam. There are 17 riverine districts in Assam which are affected by riverbank erosion losing large plots of lands. Riverbank erosion leaves the victims losing their homestead and crop land as well as their survival strategy in the eroded areas. It is the farmers that largely get affected by riverbank erosion as they lose their sources of income. This forces the farmer to migrate to another place for their survival. Inamul Haq, Hasen Ali of Dhubri, Mainul Ali from Lakhimpur and Saleha from Morigaon district migrated to Kerala for this river bank erosion which displaced them and denied their basic livelihood.

According to the report of the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) Commission (2013), the severe erosion in the Brahmaputra River leads to loss of large plots of land during the period from 1990 to 2007-08. The length of the total erosion during the period in Assam was 742.98 km. Out of which 538.80 sq. km of land was lost in north bank and 914.62 sq. km in the south bank. Dhubri was the worst affected district during that period in which 124.461 sq. km of land in the north bank and 194.983 sq. km in the south bank of Brahmaputra was lost. As a result of this severe erosion, large number of villages and families disappear from the Brahmaputra River basin. Inamul Haq and Hsen Ali both belonged to this district of Assam. The ten workers who escaped captivity in remote Huri region on Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh in the summer of 2022 and lost their lives – were all from Dhubri district from the erosion hit villages. In 2020 Assam's Revenue and Disaster Management had records of eroded land of 1,20,493 bighas in Barpeta and 87,036 bigha, 9 katha and 43 lessa in Barpeta district.

Flood and river bank erosion is immensely painful and leaves unequal effects on different social groups. The impact is all the more devastating on the people who are abysmally poor and marginalised. About 75% people of Assam are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. Destruction of the standing crops due to floods brings penury to hundreds and thousands of people in the state. It is estimated that since 1960-2008, the Brahmaputra wiped out more than 4000 sq. km of land and displaced more than 25 thousand villages. In the year 2020, in the middle of July, an estimated 40 lakhs in Assam have been affected by the floods already across 27 districts among the state's total of 33 districts.

Among various forms of natural disaster riverbank erosion becomes an endemic disaster that creates long term impact (Das *et al.* 2014). Riverbank erosion leads to decrease in crop area as well as an effect on the production of food-grains. Due to bank erosion victims are compelled to migrate in search of livelihood. However, there are a handful of studies which have endeavoured to see the relation between riverbank erosion and population migration in Assam. This is compounded by the government's unwillingness to rehabilitate the internally displaced persons induced by climate driven river-bank erosion.

Fifteen of the 25 districts in India most vulnerable to climate change are in Assam and the state has seen an exponential increase in the frequency of flood events since 2008. Rising of temperatures have been causing the melting of glaciers in the Himalayas from where two big rivers – the Brahmaputra and Subansiri originates. Both these rivers carry excessive water causing heavy landslides in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh resulting of increased deposit of silt on the river beds. This shallowness of the river beds causes bank erosions on one side when currents flow during monsoon. Climate change also creates frequent cloud bursts in Arunachal Pradesh resulting in abnormal rain creating flush floods in these two major rivers of the state.

Apart from that hydro electrical dams constructed over the rivers in Arunachal also cause devastation in their downstream areas of Assam during monsoon. In 2008 and 2017, dam induced flood caused havoc in the downstream areas of river Ranganadi in Assam's Lakhimpur district. The release of excessive dam waters on the downstream side of the river by 405 MW Ranganadi Hydro Electrical Power Plant by North East Electrical Power Corporation (NEEPCO) at Yazali in Arunachal Pradesh created havoc in Lakhimpur district in 2008 and 2017. Apart from causing widespread devastation, this dam induced flood also destroyed thousands of acres of agriculture lands with sand deposits, depriving hundreds of families from their livelihood. Young men and women of these affected families, who are very much part of the mainstream society, have also migrated to various states outside Assam including to Kerala in the last fifteen years.

## **Xenophobia, Displacement and Migration**

Universally displacement brings a series of risks, including – homelessness, landlessness, joblessness, food insecurity, marginalisation, loss of access to common property and services and social disarticulation. In the context of Assam, such displacements risk one's citizenship, especially when the displaced person belongs to Miya ethnic group or people of Muslim East Bengali descent.

The Miya Muslims of lower Assam face an additional problem that surfaces with displacement – the problem of citizenship. When these displaced people, especially from Chars, migrate to different places of upper Assam in search of livelihood, they are harassed, stereotyped and prejudiced as “illegal immigrants” or as “Bangladeshis” a section of the local chauvinists and a significant section of majoritarian political elites. A significant section of electronic and print media partners in this atrocious practice of targeting and vilifying the Miya ethnic group of Assam.

An element that plagues the Miya Muslims in Assam is their population. The birth rate among them is very high and this population explosion has affected the community in sharing resources for sustenance. In the last three decades or so, thousands of Miya Muslims, displaced in their Char and riverine areas in mostly Barpeta, Morigaon and Dhubri districts have been migrating to urban areas in search of livelihood. They also have moved up eastwards to districts of Darang, Sonitpur, Biswanath, Golaghat, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji and settled in remote riverine areas producing crops. Their distinct identity always attracts the attention of the indigenous communities which leads to antagonism thanks to the xenophobic political narratives developed in the recent decades. So, there are regular reports of eviction demands, harassments on them from various quarters.

Many displaced Miya Muslims go to upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to work as labourers in various infrastructure development projects and are employed as cheap workers by contractors. For example, the construction of Bogeabil rail-cum-road bridge over the Brahmaputra from Dibrugarh to Dhemaji from 2012 to 2018 saw a large number workers from this communities. But they also faced hostilities and trouble from various local elements. In Arunachal Pradesh, the biggest problem they face is the remoteness of their place of work and captivity by the contractors who collect them from agents that traffic them promising a better job.

The effect of flood and erosion on the citizenship of the marginalised people exposes how some in the garb of disaster management tend to exploit the human conditions under distress, further. For these reasons young persons like Inamul Haq, Hasen Ali, Mainul Ali and Saleha Khatun have opted for Kerala where they can at least work and earn undisturbed.

## **Ethnic Violence and Displacement**

Ethnic violence has been affecting Assam since early 1990s when the Bodoland movement, demanding a separate state for the Bodos, an indigenous tribe in Assam turned violent with formation of armed separatist groups. These armed Bodo militant groups—initially the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and later National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) indulged in a spree of massacres and bomb blasts targeting non-Bodos. Adivasis and Miya Muslims are the two major non-Bodo ethnic groups which fell victim to this targeted attack. In 1993, more than 20,000 Muslims were displaced in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. The attacks continued in 1994 and 60 villages in four districts of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Dhubri were targeted in which 400 were killed. In 1996, NDFB massacred over 250 Adivasis mostly in Kokrajhar district and burnt down scores of villages displacing over 2.5 lakh people. About 50 were killed, over 500 houses burnt down and 70,000 displaced as Bodos and Adivasis clashed in 1998 in Gossaigaon sub-division of Kokrajhar district. The conflict involving Bodos and Miya Muslim in Udalguri in 2008 left more than 100 people dead and about 1.5 lakh people of various communities as refugees in relief camps at Darang, Udalguri, Kharupetia and other places. Conflict between Bodos and Miya Muslims in 2012 claimed 80 lives and displaced over four lakh people from both the communities. In May 2014, over 30 non-Bodos, mostly Miya Muslims, were killed by Bodo ultras to avenge defeat of Bodo candidates in the lone Lok Sabha (Kokrajhar-ST) seat. In the December of the same year Bodo militants massacred 76 Adivasis Chirang, Sonitpur, and Kokrajhar districts.

Both Agapit Xalxo and Dominic Karketta belong to Adivasi community in Assam that live outside the periphery of the mainstream society. A sense of insecurity and uncertainty because of the memories of ethnic violence and displacement they seek a safer place to work and earn, which they have got in Kerala.

## **Hospitality and Skill Development Opportunities**

Roselyn Chetia Phookan, who was a student at Guwahati based Gateway Institute of Hospitality and Hotel Management was sent to a sea side resort in Kerala for her apprenticeship following graduation. After completing her apprenticeship Roselyn was retained by the resort and appointed as its front manager in 2019. Many graduates from hotel management from the private sectors across the north east are regularly sent by their institutes for apprenticeship in hotels and resorts in Kerala and project work and most of them decide to do their jobs in Kerala. Thus, prospects of getting employed in the hospitality sector also send skilled professionals from Assam to Kerala as migrants.

The National Skill Development Corporation also has been taking initiatives in sending skilled workforce from Assam to the textile and apparel industries of Kerala. However, people from the mainstream Assamese society and the indigenous tribes also constitute a significant number of migrant workers in Kerala. They are not victims of any climate induced displacement, ethnic violence or political prejudices in their home state, like the Miyan Muslims or Adivasis. Lack of employment opportunities, lack of interest in agriculture and other traditional livelihood activities lead them to migrate to have salaried jobs like security guards outside. This type of migration from Assam to Kerala also have been taking place in recent years.

## State of Migrant Workers in God's Own Country

Since its formation in 1956, the Kerala state has been witnessing increasing in-migration, particularly from the neighbouring states. A majority of these migrant workers have come from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Almost half of the male migrants of various durations of residence and approximately ten per cent of the female migrants to Kerala during 1991-2001 came seeking employment.

When the Supreme Court of India banned forest-based plywood industries in Assam in 1996, it resulted in the collapse of this industry in the state which had the monopoly in this sector in India. This was followed by the rise of Perumbavoor, which depended on rubber wood for plywood production, as a major hub of plywood production in the country.

Migration has been a significant catalyst in Kerala state's economy. With a diminishing diaspora of the size of nearly three million in 2016, the state is increasingly dependent on migrant workers from the rest of India, the volume of which appears to be growing beyond three million. The state has evolved as one of the most prominent destinations for migrant labourers from other states in India, mostly from Assam. While the first wave of migrants from Assam constituted predominantly Miya Muslims with Nagaon as the focal point, the latest wave of migrants includes Hindu and Christian men and women from most of the districts. Migrants from Assam came to work in the plywood industry in Perumbavoor first. Now the plywood sector in Perumbavoor as well as Valapattanam in Kannur engages workers from Assam. Workers from 24 districts in Assam were found working in Kerala during 2016-2017.

Some of the longest migration corridors in India have evolved in the past two decades connecting Kerala with eastern and north-eastern India. Nearly 60% of the source districts belonged to the east and north-east India. Recent studies have identified 12 such new inter-district corridors, the longest among them being from Assam's Dibrugarh to Kottayam. Workers from Dibrugarh in Assam travel over 3,500 kilometres to work in Kottayam district, taking up jobs in the unorganised sector. Nagaon-Ernakulam is another corridor where workers, particularly Miya Muslims, come from Assam to work in the plywood industry in Perumbavoor. Workers from Nagaon district in Assam are available as footloose labour almost universally in Ernakulam district.

The migration from Assam to Kerala is mainly driven by social network. However, in sectors such as textile and apparel and seafood, it is more organised. The textile and apparel sector engages significant number of migrants, particularly women and girls from Assam.

The seafood industry in Alappuzha district engages women and girls from Assam in large numbers. Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Baksa, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Kokrajhar, Jorhat, Chirang, Lakhimpur, Barpeta, Nalbari, Dhemaji, Karbi Anglong and Udalguri were some of the source districts of Assam.

Unlike Miya Muslims from Assam who are found in large numbers across several districts in Kerala, single Hindu and Christian men from lower Assam were found to be the majority in the laterite mining sector. A significant number of Hindu men from Assam were found engaged in dredging and sand mining operations at Azhikkal in Kannur. The men who worked in laterite stone mining areas in Indianoor in Malappuram district were mostly from Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Kamrup districts of Assam.

Men from Assam, who never had any previous experience in fishing, worked as deck hands on fishing boats that operated from several harbours. Several migrants from Assam were also engaged as labourers, loading and unloading ice and fish, at various fish landing centres. Men and women from Assam also worked in the hospitality sector across the state. Assamese families were also found working in the plantation sector in Idukki and Wayanad.

Demographically Muslims constitute the largest group of migrant workers from Assam in Kerala. Seven of the nine districts in Assam, where Muslims comprise more than 50% of population according to Census 2011, are important sources of migrant workers in Kerala. The corridors that have been evolved between Nagaon district have the largest concentration of Muslims in Assam and the districts of Ernakulam and Kollam in Kerala.

While migrants have become an inevitable part of the Kerala society, several challenges have emerged with their arrival. Ensuring them decent working and living conditions as well as wages, access to quality health services, financial and legal inclusion, and education for their children are some of them. Though the Government of Kerala has initiated several ambitious steps to promote the welfare of the migrant workers.

As discussed earlier the Miyani Muslim and Adivasi Christian migrants from Assam, face the constant heat of being an illegal Bangladeshi infiltrator in the Brahmaputra valley and as outsider in Bodoland Autonomous Territory areas, and feel quite comfortable in Kerala compared to other parts of India. This is a significant reason for Kerala being chosen as their work destination—indeed God's own country.

Kerala offers the best wage rates in the country in the unorganised sector. Sustained job opportunities, comparatively peaceful social environment, relatively less discriminatory treatment of workers, presence of significant others, direct trains from native states, the ease with which the money they earn can be transferred home and the penetration of mobile phones cutting short the distance from homes influenced the migration to Kerala.

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The strong social network of the migrant workers from Assam who already work in Kerala, with potential migrants, too, play an important factor in workers choosing Kerala as their destination from among several options. Better travel and communication facilities have also helped such long-distance movement of workers. Direct trains without transit points beyond home states have made travel hassle free. The Guwahati-Thiruvananthapuram Express and Dibrugarh- Thiruvananthapuram Mail from Assam make it easy for migrant workers to travel to Kerala. Even direct bus services from Assam's Barpeta to Kerala are operational. The ease with which the money they earn can be transferred to their homes through formal and informal mechanisms and the penetration of mobile phones have also cut short the distance from their homes. Many of the migrants who have come to Kerala with their families cited the availability of better educational and health facilities in Kerala as an additional impetus for sticking on here.

Except a few traditional sectors such as coir, handloom and beedi, most economic sectors in Kerala depend on migrant labour. While most of the jobs involved belong to the unskilled or semi-skilled categories, migrant workers have also taken up vocations that demand high level of skills. Informalisation of employment has resulted in even public sector undertakings in Kerala employing migrant labourers from Assam through contractors.

The construction sector absorbs the largest proportion of the migrant workers. Marine fishing, plywood, mining and quarrying, plantation, iron and steel, textile and apparel, furniture, seafood, hospitality, footwear, gold jewellery making and processing of rice, cashew and several other food products are some of the major economic sectors that survive on migrant labour. Most of the industrial parks in Kerala also depend to a great extent on workers from other states like Assam.

The footloose labourers, not attached to any particular employer, constitute a large proportion of the workers. These workers from Assam, like from other states, are free to choose their vocation, the location of employment, and have a reasonable negotiation power over their wages. The footloose labour constitutes most of the naka-based labour in Kerala. Most of them arrive in Kerala through their social network. Though these workers get the highest of the wages for an eight-hour job in Kerala, their chances of getting work every day are highly unpredictable. The daily wages of men for any unskilled job range from Rs 400 to Rs 700. They stay at rented premises they can afford, and a minority among them live on pavements.

The informal employees, the most common category of workers employed in the industrial sectors in Kerala, are either attached to an enterprise or a contractor, but without any formal agreement. These workers will not be on the official rolls of the company and do not enjoy most of the social security benefits. Their wages are generally lower than the footloose labourers, but they have steady employment. They work for ten to twelve hours a day and many times on shifts.

In the case of large-scale employment, free accommodation is generally provided by the employer. Workers are usually deployed through a contractor to whom the manufacturer usually assigns the deliverables. Most of the time, the contractor himself/herself is a migrant and payments are usually made on piece rate or flat rate. Informal employees perhaps constitute the majority of the migrant labour in Kerala. A minority among the migrant labourers is also engaged as formal employees who enjoy all the social security benefits at par with the native labourers. A lot of industries have a handful of such employees who have been working there for years, while the rest are employed informally, directly or through a contractor. Workers are also appointed as trainees for long periods on minimal wages without benefits.

In Kerala, like any other states, the migrant workforce has to work the jobs which the local never do. Migrant workers from Assam also do similar works in Kerala that involves physical risks in hazardous working environment. A significant proportion of migrant workers do not have the required preventive gears that could reduce health risks. Helmets, masks, chest guards, gloves, shoes, thermal insulators, safety nets and life jackets are seldom provided to migrant workers. Migrants' lack of awareness and the resultant complacency are used to their advantage by the employers, who perceive such investments as unnecessary. Besides, the emergency response systems at such workplaces generally tend to be weak or nominal.

Many employers in Kerala, mostly those who outsource their workforce through contractors do not adhere to most of the labour legislations in the case of migrant workers. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act 1979, is applicable to only a section of the migrant workers in Kerala, as a majority of them are recruited while they are in Kerala. Besides, the law has not been strictly enforced. The trade unions in Kerala are yet to undertake significant action to mainstream the migrant workers.

Despite all these, Kerala offers the best wage rates in the country and relatively better working environment to the migrant workers compared to a lot of industrial states in the India. For this reason, many workers from climate hit peasantry, politically and ethnically marginalised minorities migrate to Kerala in search of employment. Significantly none of the migrant workers in Kerala have reported the use of child labour in that state.

The migrant workers of Assam in Kerala have also shined in various other fields and brought glory to the state. In November, 2018 Dimbeswar Doley, a youth from Assam's Lakhimpur district participated in the National Long Jump Championship in Kerala and earned second position. He was working as a security personnel in an agency in Kakkanad, Kochin. He was supported by a college to practice and prepare.

In December 2020 in the local body's poll in Kerala, Munmi Gogoi a migrant worker from Lakhimpur district of Assam, married to a local resident, contested the election on a BJP ticket.

Migrant worker's favour for Kerala from Assam can also be attributed to the state mechanism which had helped greatly during the Covid-19 pandemic during the nationwide lockdown in 2020. Migrant workers from Assam were given free food and healthcare by the Kerala state government and buses were arranged for their transportation back home. Even announcements were made in Assamese public loudspeakers for the benefit of the migrant workers from Assam to guide and help them out during the lockdown.

## **Conclusion**

Kerala has emerged as one of the most promising destinations among the Indian states for migrant workers from major states in the country known for out-migration. Given the demographic scenario of the native population, shortage of labour, current penetration of migrant workers in the state and the precarious state of human development in the source regions, this migration is only likely to increase.

The majority of the migrant workers from Assam in Kerala appear to be from socially and educationally disadvantaged, poor agrarian communities, whose livelihood opportunities in their native places have been severely constrained by a multitude of factors including climate change, disasters erosions and floods, conflicts and oppression. The size of the migrant population in Kerala from Assam in terms of minorities and other marginalised communities seems to be fairly substantial. This may lead to a new dimension of demography, social transformation and cultural identity in a state where the local population is increasingly moving out abroad.

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ISSN 2348-0297