

# Researchers Proposal Presentation Workshop: A Report

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

Date: 20.05.2021, Time: 6.00-8.30 pm

Zoom Hybrid Meeting

## **Attendees:**

1. Amit Prakash (JNU, Delhi)
2. Madhurilata Basu (Sarojini Naidu College for Women, Kolkata)
3. Manish K Jha (TISS, Mumbai)
4. Mouleshri Vyas (TISS, Mumbai)
5. Nasreen Chowdhory (University of Delhi, Delhi)
6. Parivelan K M (TISS, Mumbai)
7. Ranabir Samaddar (CRG, Kolkata)
8. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata)
9. Samata Biswas (CRG & The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata)
10. Shyamalendu Majumdar (CRG & Sivanath Sastri College, Calcutta)
11. Subhas Ranjan Chakrabarty (CRG & The Asiatic Society, Kolkata)

## **Researcher—Discussant:**

1. Anand Upendran (CRG)—Sahana Basavapatna (Karnataka High Court, Bengaluru)
2. Ankur Tamuli (CRG)—Subir Bhaumik (Eminent Journalist)
3. Priyankar Dey (CRG)—Mahalaya Chatterjee (University of Calcutta, Kolkata)
4. Rajat Kanti Sur (CRG)—Samir Kumar Das (CRG & University of Calcutta, Kolkata)
5. Rituparna Datta (CRG)—Paula Banerjee (CRG & University of Calcutta, Kolkata)
6. Shatabdi Das (CRG)—Achin Chakraborty (Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata)

## Researchers Proposal Presentation Workshop: A Report

The Staff Researchers Proposal Presentation Workshop, held on May 20, 2021 aimed to create a discussion platform where Anand Upendran, Ankur Tamuli Phukan, Priyankar Dey, Rajat Kanti Sur, Rituparna Datta and Shatabdi Das detailed out the rationale and progress of the individual research project they are associated with at Calcutta Research Group supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Institute of Human Sciences, Vienna. The session was moderated by Ranabir Samaddar. Over the past few decades there has been increase in the momentum where people have been forced to leave their home(land) and become migrant either to avoid violence and extremism, climatic changes, work, health etc. But how far a person migrates from the locale of its home determines the distancing from the responsibility of the states-nation in its offerings of affectionate care. The greater the distance the lesser is the visibility of citizen-migrant in gross domestic development to the point of becoming invisible stateless. Such invisibilities require thorough protection mechanism if not to insulate but to offer a dignity in life in resettlement and asylum. The series of legislations, acts, charters and their revision over the years highlight the violation of humanitarian rights of a migrant and brings forth the problematic of locating the migrant-refugee in the binary of citizen and its pluralistic 'non'. However, the outbreak of the pandemic and its global effect once again brought forth into visibility the vulnerabilities of the migrant life and the increasing tendency to panoptinize the migrants and visualize them as pathogenical bodies in the micro-social local as well as to trace and link the immediate circumstances in the historic past. Thus, time in the Long 2020 was not only shaking up the anxieties of the futures unfolding but was also moving in reverse and temporal dimensionality lost its fixation with unidirectionality and once again urges us to seek for a new understanding of the migrant-refugee figure in the continuum of nation making. The major research theme is conceptualized for a nuanced understanding of the migrations through—public health, environment and displaced population groups; the pandemic, economic governance and restructuring and migrant labour; sanctuary cities; social mapping of migrants, migrants and jurisprudence, pandemic and migrants.

**Research Theme: 'Public Health in Refugee Camps and Colonies of West Bengal during 1947-1958: Policies, Practices and Politics'**

**Researcher: Priyankar Dey**

**Discussant: Mahalaya Chatterjee**

Priyankar's research project seeks to study the discourses and practices of public health in the East Bengali refugee camps and colonies in West Bengal during 1947 to 1958. He is primarily interested in understanding what constituted the 'crisis' of health of the refugees in the government as well as popular discourses and what practices were adopted by various governmental as well as non-governmental agencies to manage them. By analysing different forms of collective actions around the question of public health of the refugees, the study also seeks to understand the 'politics of health' in the period under study. Finally, the research will try to understand how far the discourses of crisis of public health helped in establishing the refugees as a distinctive population group and to what extent this made the refugee bodies visible.

While discussing Priyankar's research plan, Mahalaya Chatterjee sought clarification about choosing 1958 as the closing year for this study. The refugee influx from East Bengal, she pointed out, continued well after 1958 and was renewed at the time of Bangladesh war of liberation in 1971. Ending at 1958, she opined, could cover too little of the whole story. To this, the researcher replied that the year 1958 was chosen because the study, in its limited scope, was primarily interested in the history of the early days of the post-colonial nation-state and therefore restricts itself to the early years of the refugee crisis. 1958 served as a convenient marker as this year divided the 'Old Migrants' from east Bengal from the 'New Migrants' in the government registers. In reply to another query from discussant, the researcher explained that his use of the time 'postcolonial' was primarily in a chronological sense, but it could also invite us to think over whether there was a break in the discourse as well as practices of public health from the colonial times. In her discussion of the project, Chatterjee also shared her apprehension about clubbing

the camps and the colonies together as both had different histories and different government policies for them. It was also opined that the government policies of using refugees as labour were short-term experiments. On the question of the refugees as a distinctive population group, she pointed out that the refugees were not always eager to identify themselves as a distinctive group from the local host population. Finally, she suggested that the researcher should reflect upon what the concept of public health was at the time of the study. Were the 'crises' of a preventive dimension or a curative one? One must also pay attention to the rural-urban divide as the markers of the public health are very different in two locations.

Paula Banerjee, while commenting on Priyankar's project, advised against using the term 'refugees' as a homogenized category. Amit Prakash inquired about the rationale behind the study while alerting the researcher about the difference between the apparent crisis or threat to public health or that of an order. The two, he emphasized, could invoke equally strong but very different critiques or reactions. Again, in his opinion, counterpoising that too can be quite interesting and often a crisis of health may be a later dressing up of what was originally a crisis of order, as colonial concerns about the Bombay pandemics often reflected. According to Ranabir Samaddar, it is through these practices of public health administration that a city becomes a city. Therefore, the concept of public health is integral to the imagination of an urban life. Samir Kumar Das was of the opinion that looking at the documents from the government archives, it seems that the 'crisis' was never thought as one of public health but a temporary, corollary one to the contemporary refugee crisis.

### **Research Theme: 'At Sea? The State of International Refugee Law'**

**Researcher: Anand Upendran**

**Discussant: Sahana Basavapatna**

Taking note of the seventieth anniversary of the Refugee Convention (1951) and the present intractable issues in refugee protection, the proposed study traces the evolution of international refugee law from Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to the recent Global Compact for Migration (2018). That evolution passes through the Refugee Convention and its Protocol, the work of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, relevant UN General Assembly resolutions, various regional mechanisms for refugee protection, etc.—these instruments and mechanisms will be kept adjacent so as to impart a wholesome understanding of international refugee law. The study, inevitably, will reflect on the different situations and crises of forced displacement which occurred in the previous decades; the evolution of international refugee law, in most instances, being a response to these real experiences. This knowledge gained of the past will be used to probe the current tensions which exist in refugee protection and essay an optimistic vision for its future trajectory. Also, in particular, the study will seek to understand the legal strength of refugee protection norms such as non-discrimination, non-penalization, and non-refoulement.

Sahana Basavapatna affirmed the relevance of the study and at the same time expressed her concerns about the research theme is too broad to be covered in the time available to conduct the study and suggested to crystalize the research agenda. She also advised to explore the absence of a regional refugee protection mechanism in Asia, having in mind the existence of progressive protection mechanisms in Africa and South America. In conclusion, Sahana Basavapatna reflected on how domestic politics and the malfunctioning of domestic human rights mechanisms affect the fulfilment of international human rights principles. While Ranabir Samaddar urged him to explore Gil Loescher's work on the Refugee Convention, Nasreen Chowdhory highlighted the importance of the 1967 Protocol to the Refugee Convention.

**Research Theme: ‘Bangladesh News’: Narrative Frames of Refugee and Relief in the Liberation War 1971’**

**Researcher: Rituparna Datta**

**Discussant: Paula Banerjee**

Refugee crisis in India was neither a single phenomenon nor followed unilateral trajectories and characterization. If ’47 refugees were looked upon as ‘nation seeking’ mobile flows, the ’71 refugees were part of the ‘nation making’ process and could only be looked upon as temporary habitations on Indian soil and not as ‘citizenship in wait’. The research project is an attempt to delve in the problematic of representation of the refugee crisis in West Bengal through different forms of media narratives—audio-visual and print—critically analysing such figurations in the morale of the medium. What constituted this ‘crisis’ and how its coverage created newer ‘solidarity networks’ of relief for the refugees. But the question may arise; Can ’71 refugee crisis only be looked upon as matter of doles, death, debility or mortality? Paula Banerjee, Ranabir Samaddar, Subir Bhaumik reflects on the creative resilience of the refugees in sustaining the spirit of the Liberation War in its eastern theatres. The *muktir gaan* (songs of Liberation War) were the annals of hope for a free Bangla Desh contrasting the sufferings of Bengalis under the West Pakistani administration. These songs travelled far and wide to the different refugee camps and were often sung by the politically active/conscious migrants themselves. When humanity is huddled together in refugee camps—fleeing to avoid certain condition of risks or violation of life—the refugee body in its biological existence becomes the identifier of physical and mental trauma. These ’71 refugees unlike the ’47 refugees were bearing marks of genocide thoughtfully instigated by the state, yet on both instances it made robust claims on the Indian resources for ‘care’ of the refugees and health became a priority in maintaining/protecting the life of the refugee. These refugees were not merely looked from the angle of humanitarian efforts at ameliorating their conditions of want but how the figure was treated more than an amorous mass in transit in ‘U’ bends due to the embargo of violence instilled by the West Pakistani government moving in the indispensable statistics of ‘waste’ of souls and lives— a conditionality that produced them not as by-product of the genocide but essential binary alongside the *muktijoddhas*— often recruited from the ranks of the refugees, who no longer could be looked upon as passive subjects but active catalyst of freedom struggle in ’71. Fleeing the violence was a self-choice but supposed image of the refugee as moving into tactile geographies of homelessness was not applicable. As Paula Banerjee highlights how the UN provided robust mechanisms for return of these refugees and only a fraction was left behind on the Indian soil. Images of war, refugee, liberation in the ‘nine months to freedom,’ Bhaumik says, has come to the recent limelight through the works of photojournalist like Abhijit Dasgupta and others. It was these photos that narrated the actual visualization of the war in the global north and the consumption of this pain of the suffering other generated global reaction for Bangla Desh Liberation War. But the question may arise should the ’71 refugees be looked upon through the victimhood lens of the biopolitics of the defiant only? For Banerjee the strive for dignity in livelihood and labour in an independent Bangla Desh were integral core of the cultural reproduction of the ’71 refugee. These refugees were not only coming in through West Bengal but Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura. In the later years, the porous borders and the continued immigration through the states in the northeastern terrains of India became the problematic in the identification/rights of citizenship which in more general terms has been popularly known as the CAA and NRC. The necessity to look into the autonarratives and visual representation of the refugees both in ‘want’ and in ‘self-resilience’ and dignity was stressed upon by Banerjee and Bhaumik as an essential requirement for a holistic understanding of the refugee crisis of 1971 in West Bengal.

**Research Theme: ‘Election Campaigns as Performance: How importantly the issues of migrants, refugees and displaced were addressed in three assembly elections in West Bengal (1977, 2011 and 2021)’**

**Researcher: Rajat Kanti Sur**

**Discussant: Samir Kumar Das**

The research proposes to study the election campaigns of 1977, 2011 and 2021 assembly elections in Bengal to understand evolution of the election campaigns and to theorise the election campaigns as a political performance for the parties.

Samir Kumar Das advised to structure the study into two consecutive sections—the first part contains a reading of the campaign literature to understanding its somatic variations which Rajat Kanti Sur has amply delved into. But, an election campaign is an intense process to relate or provoke the voters to favour or criticise any political party or government. Therefore, it needs a more intensive ethnographic study among the refugee or migrants voters to understand the impact of campaign literatures on the elections. An analysis of the shift of the nature or style of campaigning is necessary to understand the extensive use of social media during the elections in 2021. Role of the recent pandemic behind the increasing use of social media campaigns should also be analysed. The second important part of this proposed study is performance. This is an important part of the research. The performance during campaigns varies in different stages. This study should show the variations of the natures of campaigns on the ground. Especially how the nature of campaigns changes from state to district and block level and what the ordinary voters are thinking about it. Interviews of state, district and local leaders of the constituencies should help to understand the campaign strategies better. The acquisitions of violence from different political parties should also be an important part of the study. Ranabir Samaddar suggested the detailing of the logic that connects the election campaigns of 1977, 2011, 2021. The amendments of the Thika Tenancy Act would be an important part of the study; because the refugees and migrants in the slums, getting the legal right to own or inherit property changed the scenario. The political parties used it in the election campaigns.

**Research Theme: ‘Development and Displacement in the Damodar Valley of India’**

**Researcher: Shatabdi Das**

**Discussant: Achin Chakraborty**

Shatabdi Das briefly presented the major themes of her proposed research paper and highlighted the exploratory approach through the identification of the causal factors, analysis of the impacts and mapping of development and displacement in the Damodar valley with specific reference to the Jharia and Raniganj coal belt. The study area will particularly encompass the Dhanbad and Paschim Bardhaman districts of Jharkhand and West Bengal of India respectively, for the recent two to three decades (1990s to present) along with an elucidation of the history of the genesis of the region. She mentioned that the study would temporally and spatially attempt to examine the nodes of displacement in the region in the context of mining, dam development, industrialization, urbanization, hazards and their social and ecological impacts. The research also aims to look into the challenges of planning and implementation of the resettlement and rehabilitation schemes for displaced persons in the region.

Achin Chakraborty laid stress on the objective of the study and posed question on the major theme of study as well as the delineation of the study area. Questions were raised on the usage of research tools, materials and maps for tracking the trend of migration, planning and implementation of resettlement-rehabilitation schemes, study of spatial pattern, urban scenario. It was discussed that analysis of causes of displacement should be given importance— whether DVC induced or due to development of mines.

It was also suggested by resource persons that there should be theorisation of displacement in the Nehruvian era, coal nationalisation, captive mining, and distinction between types of displacement in post-colonial and neo-liberal times. The study may attempt to focus on extractive capitalism, water harnessing and dam displacement as well as industrial displacement in different time-periods, along with the constraints of rehabilitation of displaced persons in the villages surrounding the coalfields. It was discussed that the research should attempt to examine ecology-induced displacement, with special reference to the rise of incidents related to land subsidence, mine-fire, and rat-hole mining, 1990s onwards in the Jharia and Raniganj coalfields. Literatures for study were mentioned such as the civil liberty reports, Nirmal Sengupta’s ‘Destitutes and Development: A Study of the Bauri Community in the Bokaro Region’.

**Research Theme: ‘The Politics of the Local: the contingencies of citizenry in Assam: Some Case Studies’**

**Researcher: Ankur Tamuli Phukan**

**Discussant: Subir Bhaumik**

The presentation tried to address some of the glaring inconstancies of citizenship modalities in northeast India and stressed on how political culture of certain particular local has determined the process of registering a person as citizen or non-citizen. Such political culture operated, the presentation tried to argue, beyond the legal-juridical structure and sometime even influenced it. The study wanted to focus on the question of practices, particularly the efficacy of practices, their commonsensical fall outs in the social. So the focus of the study is to understand how different actors develop their own interest in this culture of practices (including the victims) and what kind of contingencies generate through it and eventually affect the juridical-legal structure on citizenry discourse of Indian state both in the particular local and generally throughout the nation state.

Subir Bhaumik accepted the overall focus of the study and discussed some of the important issues on the subject. He commented that the scholar should try to put his study in the larger historical context of ethnic and community politics in Assam as there have been a tendency of shifting alignments in the community politics of the land and those shifting alignments in most cases determines the structure of political-legal discourses of citizenry politics in Assam. He also discussed two perpetual thematic of Assam’s political life: the conflict between Indian Nation and the Assamese nation and secondly between the local and outsiders. Sahana Basavapatna raised her experience of detention camps in the state of Karnataka and its administrative modalities on which Ranabir Samaddar suggested to the scholar to seek how different administrative experiences of different regions of Indian state on the subject got exchanged within, translated and thus produced a governmental knowledge on the administrative modalities on the question of citizenry, detention camps and so on in different regions and context of the Indian state.

**Concluding Remarks**

The research themes presented, spanned across varied historical tidings and geographical spaces, and were appreciated by the experts and faculty as promising research in the making. The research projects highlight how crucial is the identification of the migrant/refugee as a politico-social-jurisprudential ‘being’ in its relation to the nation-state and acts as an operative mechanism within the transcendental scale of cognitive capacities of the nation and formulating as well as identifying the subject in its binary the non-subject that becomes the crucial element of ‘thinking of being’ and as ‘claimants as being’.

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