

Understanding the perils of statelessness through an analysis of the newspaper coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic in India

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic in India and the lockdown imposed in order to check the spread of the disease made the hitherto invisible domestic economic migrants suddenly visible on the streets. While the migrants got some visibility by dint of the sheer numbers that couldn't simply be ignored, there were many more marginalized groups and people who could not make it to the nation's headlines and remained invisible. This paper tries to understand the issues faced by the Rohingyas who remained invisible during the lockdown in the news media. Their invisibility brings out the questions of their vulnerability even more starkly. The constant recurrence of the term 'home' in connection with the economic migrants trying to reach home, also leads one to think about the plight of the stateless who, by contrast, have no place to return which they could call their home. In order to understand some of these issues, this paper attempts a study of *The Indian Express* newspaper. This newspaper has been selected for the study keeping in mind the claims of *The Indian Express* to impartial and quality journalism. The newspaper is a mainstream newspaper and yet has the reputation of maintaining quality in journalism with serious news and discussion. Therefore, it can be an apt reflection of the issues which are considered important by the mainstream media and the debates therein.

The paper tries to understand the issues of homelessness, belonging, vulnerability, rights and dignity of the stateless through a study of the news in the months of the lockdown in India during April and May 2020. The stateless were one of the most vulnerable of groups not only because of the absence of proper living conditions in overcrowded camps but also because of their inability to claim any rights. They were also one of the most disempowered because they were either bearing the burden of stereotyping or were treated as objects of mere sympathy rather than as people deserving a dignified, self respecting life. Therefore, their invisibility raises questions on who is considered worthy of visibility by the media and in what circumstances. An analysis of the discourse of the mainstream media

also helps shed light on how the stateless become invisible in the media which is heavily skewed towards the statist concerns.

INTRODUCTION: COVID-19 had tragic consequences of unimaginable magnitude for the social and economic wellbeing of the people across the world. The pandemic was instrumental in making visible many of the fault lines in the socio-political and economic organization of the world – problems which had been simmering under the layers of routine life, and had been allowed to pass unnoticed and had been accepted and normalized in the world. However, the countries came face-to-face with these dormant problems as the pandemic defied any easy solutions. One such problem was the issue of migration and the states could find no easy solutions to stopping the spread of the disease amidst the massive populations which had been rendered into hapless illegal economic immigrants, or refugees fleeing political conflicts or persecution, or the stateless people tossed amid the troubling seas in search of a dock.

The only way in which the states could find themselves managing this problem was through measures which only exacerbated the problem, by closing the borders, by sealing off the migrant camps, not allowing the boat people to land on their territories and leaving the rescued to fend for themselves with very little assistance. However, this huge problem was also managed by not allowing it to become an agenda for the public, with the mainstream media keeping the debate confined to issues which resonated with the priorities of the statist agenda.

This paper tries to examine how the immense tragedy of the stateless during the pandemic reflected in the public debate through a study of *The Indian Express*. The paper underscores that the stateless remained invisible in the debate in the

mainstream media. The paper also draws upon coverage on some other debates and concerns to throw light on how the various socio-economic problems and issues, discussed in the newspaper, can be deconstructed to understand the exclusion of the stateless from the very language of rights and entitlements which theoretically can be utilized for advocacy of people with a recognized existence within the state. The paper emphasizes that a reading of the prominent issues during the pandemic reveals the vulnerability of the stateless who are deprived of the very basic human needs for life – security, identity, recognition and belongingness (Burton, 1990)¹.

The Media and the Agenda: A study of the role of the media in agenda-setting could help in understanding how the selection of news in the national media is very much about agenda-setting – of making the people think about certain issues, while neglecting, knowingly or unknowingly, certain other pressing concerns. This could help explain which news could find space, and to what extent, while competing with a volley of news items. Current research on the impact of media has come up with various theories of how the media set the agenda for people. The term agenda-setting, as explained by Bernard Cohen, implies that the media:

may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*. (Cohen 1993:13)²

Studies on agenda-setting pick up the threads from Lippman's concept of stereotypes (the bundle of likes and dislikes and orientations about particular objects that we carry in our minds) and how these mental images are formed by what the media choose to bring to us. Agenda-setting is defined as, "The ability of

¹ John Burton (eds.) 1990. *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*. London: Macmillan.

² Cohen, Bernard C. (1993), *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California.

the media to influence the salience of events in the public mind” and it follows from this that, “the press does more than just bring these issues to a level of political awareness among the public. The idea of agenda-setting asserts that the priorities of the press to some degree become the priorities of the public” (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 75)³.

Scholars aver that the media tell people not only what to think but also how to think about these issues. Another concept related to agenda setting research is the concept of priming as given by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder. To explain the concept, it is based on the “process whose psychological basis is the selective attention of the public”

When asked their opinion about political topics of the day, such as the performance of the President, most citizens draw upon those bits of information that are particularly salient at the moment rather than assessing their total share of information. (McCombs 2005: 163)⁴

A lot of empirical evidence exists to show that the media, through selective highlighting or obscuring, set the agenda before people. Yet scholars have pointed out that it is not the media which set the agenda, rather they are useful conduits for the elite to win support for the agenda which they want to highlight. For instance, Schudson criticizes the agenda-setting theories which give too much importance to the role of media, and downplay the forces which actually shape the content of the news in media:

...this research demonstrates that people at large will name as important subjects on the national agenda those items they find frequently in the

³ McCombs, Maxwell E. and Donald L. Shaw (1972) “The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press”, in Doris A. Graber (1990), *The Media Power in Politics*, Delhi: Macmillan India Limited, reprinted in India, 1994.

⁴ McCombs, Maxwell (2005), “The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press”, in Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds) *The Institutions of American Democracy: The Press*, New York: Oxford University Press.

news. But how did those items get in the news in the first place? (Schudson, 2003, 21)⁵

He gives the example of the coverage of famine in Somalia in 1992. The TV coverage was regarded as an important factor which pushed the US to intervene in Somalia. However the reality was that the coverage started at a large scale only after politicians and senators had supported the US intervention and not before that. Thus, the politicians had set the agenda for the TV news to gain support of people and not the TV which had set the agenda for the politicians. Danny Schechter (2003)⁶ examines how mainstream media are manipulated to propagate official views and policies. He avers that the governments set agenda for the media in this age of “media politics”, something which he calls “media management”. The author analyses how the US government tried to manage the media coverage of terrorism after September 11.

This paper, therefore, studies the debates in the mainstream media for understating the inclusions and exclusions of issues in the national agenda. It also tries to find the reasons for this inclusion/exclusion. Finally, it tries to understand the basic issues which remain unaddressed by studying what is included. Thus, the paper tries to understand what is excluded, by deconstructing the discussion on issues which are included.

Research Method: This paper is based on an analytical study of the archives of *The Indian Express* for the months of April and May 2020. Twenty nine issues during April (one missing issue – April 23, 2020) and thirty issues in May (One missing issue May 5, 2020) were studied. This is the period of a stringent lockdown in India as a result of the spread of COVID-19. The news as well as opinion columns were studied to delineate the key themes and debates which could enable one to understand the situation of the stateless people – the Rohingyas during the lockdown. A mainstream and reputed newspaper – *The Indian Express* (Delhi Edition) – has been selected for the study in order to understand how far the concerns of the stateless are given a space in the mainstream discourse. It raises the

⁵ Schudson, Michael (2003), *The Sociology of News*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

⁶ Schechter, Danny (2003), *Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

questions related to who sets the agenda for the public debate, and what news is considered newsworthy by the media. For this kind of analysis, *The Indian Express* could be very useful as a newspaper which engages seriously with the news, claims to maintain high standards of journalism, and at the same time is not seen to be closely tied to any specific ideological position.

The Invisibility of the Stateless: Key Issues

The internal migrants in India, migrating from the villages to the urban centres for jobs are the backbone of the cities and have contributed to the industrial force. They have worked as low-end workers in many sectors like construction, hotels, sanitation and so on. The sudden lockdown unexpectedly brought these people out on to the roads, forcing the media and the public to take note of them. These migrants who had silently served and enriched these urban centres but remained invisible from the public gaze suddenly were forced to a mass exodus from these metropolises, showing the extent of the crisis. The massiveness of the crisis forced the media to take cognizance of the problems of these people who had remained invisible for seventy years in the history of independent India. It is in moments of such extreme crisis that the marginalized get some space in the mainstream media and public debate. One might compare it with the news on the Rohingyas in 2015, who became visible to some extent in the international media when the sheer numbers of these boat people on exodus from Myanmar after violence forced the international media to dedicate some space to them.

This might be understood through a discussion on who is considered newsworthy by the media and in what situations. Schudson points out that news is not a reporting of the routine life but the journalists are more likely to cover the “unplanned and unanticipated scandals, accidents, mishaps, gaffes, embarrassments, horrors, and wonders” (Schudson, 2003, 6). This aspect of news as an extraordinary event has been dealt with at length by various scholars who have attempted to explain how and why are particular items selected for news. Scholars discuss various factors which go into the selection and framing of news – events become news if they are sudden rather than long term trends, if they occurred recently, if they are of interest to people, are dramatic and visually attractive, if news about them is in demand, if they are close to the audience community, if they are shocking or unexpected, refer to elite people and nations and above all if they are about something negative. The factor that news tends to

emphasize the negative is often described by the statement, “ ‘Dog bites man’ is not news ‘man bites dog’ is” (cited in Palmer, 2000, 26).

The concept of newsworthiness can explain to a large extent how newspapers, which are inundated by events and news, select those worthy of being published and how the alternative news fails to make it to prime news. These news values are based on the concept of infotainment (information and entertainment) which derives from the profit imperatives of newspapers and their need to woo the advertisers. The net effect is that what entertains becomes news, or what is promoted by the powerful becomes news, rather than the actual social concerns which merit attention. It could be noted how an unprecedented event, for instance a conflict, becomes news, but both sides of the conflict are not represented fairly in the news story.

Many pressing concerns were simply ignored or remained invisible in the media which gave priority to sensational news. One such issue is that of the stateless people, in this case the Rohingyas. As search of news on the Rohingya on the internet shows how the pandemic was especially a tough time for these boat people. In April and May, this tragedy had taken tragic dimensions and as repeatedly reported by various human rights organizations. The UN reported, “Amid COVID-19 pandemic, thousands stranded in Bay of Bengal ‘unable to come ashore’”⁷; Human Rights Watch focussed on this tragedy, “Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugees in Risky Covid- 19 Quarantine” “Boat People Face Cyclones, Flooding on Bhasan Char”⁸; In a very powerful rebuttal of the statist politics, Amnesty International asserted, “COVID-19 no excuse to sacrifice Rohingya lives at sea”⁹. It stated,” “More boats likely carrying Rohingya refugees spotted off the coasts of Malaysia and southern Thailand in recent days” and further that the ““Regional governments cannot let their seas become graveyards.”

⁷ UN News. 2020. “Amid COVID-19 pandemic, thousands stranded in Bay of Bengal ‘unable to come ashore’ “. 6 May 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063402>

⁸ Human Rights Watch. 2020. “Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugees in Risky Covid- 19 Quarantine. “Boat People Face Cyclones, Flooding on Bhasan Char”. May 5, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/bangladesh-rohingya-refugees-risky-covid-19-quarantine>
⁹ Amnesty International. 2020. “COVID-19 no excuse to sacrifice Rohingya lives at sea”. 17 April 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/covid-no-excuse-sacrifice-lives-more-rohingya-see-safety-boat/>

The news at once shows the perils of statelessness during the pandemic, wherein the Rohingya remained on sea for days, starved and without proper food and facing the weather and the risks of storms. However, the mainstream media was unmindful of finding enough space for this human tragedy which continued through the pandemic, and many important developments went simply unreported. This also shows how the newspapers become a privileged space for the statist concerns. Interestingly, many news items found place in the online version of *The Indian Express*¹⁰, but when it came to competing with other news for the space of the international page of the print version, the news lost out before other statist concerns. Late in May 2020, one such news item made its way to the international page of *The Indian Express*. This was on news of 29 Rohingya refugees reaching Bangladesh including 15 women and six children which informed that “Rights groups say hundreds of Rohingya are stranded on at least two fishing trawlers between Bangladesh and Malaysia. The refugees reportedly attempted to illegally reach Malaysia, but failed because of strict patrols to keep out the coronavirus.”¹¹

Yet the international pages of the mainstream media in the global South remain more concerned with the news about the countries of the global North, most prominently the US and Europe rather than the news about the marginalized of the global South. A study of the coverage of the international page of *The Indian Express* reveals that over the two months, the international page barely carried three short news items about the Rohingyas. This can be explained through Van Dijk’s excellent work in the field. Teun A. van Dijk shows that the media in the third world countries focus less on problems in Asia and Africa and more on news of powerful countries like the US because of the influence of the foreign news agencies (Van Dijk 2013). It could also be added that the stateless failed to gain much media coverage because of the fact that they were stateless, and the national media, its bias to the statist concerns, found it undesirable for the people who were not anywhere in the priority of any nation, to be given much space.

¹⁰ *The Indian Express*. 2020. “Malaysia urged to allow Rohingya refugee boats to land. AP”. Kuala Lumpur. April 18, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/malaysia-urged-to-allow-rohingya-refugee-boats-to-land-6368422/>; *The Indian Express*. 2020 Two dozen Rohingya died on drifting boat; 382 rescued: Bangladesh. Reuters. April 16, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/two-dozen-rohingya-died-on-drifting-boat-382-rescued-bangladesh-6364880/>

¹¹ *The Indian Express* .May 4, 2020, “Rohingya at sea for weeks arrive on Bangladesh island”. Associated Press, Dhaka.

The states and the stateless: It was in the middle of the pandemic that the states were also reminded of the perilous world that they had created, wherein the groups of refugees, migrants and stateless started looking unmanageable and uncontrollable. There were anxieties about the possibility of the spread of disease in overcrowded camps – spaces created by modern states to manage the masses of desperate people on move who are a product of the intrastate and interstate conflict. These camps and sites were sealed off becoming the unwanted and undesirable spaces which seemed to defy simple answers. There were short news items in *The Indian Express* giving information of how the government of Greece sealed off the migrant camps¹² and about the lockdown in Cox Bazar in Bangladesh¹³

Towards the beginning of the 21st century, scholars like Saskia Sassen (2000)¹⁴ had provided a brilliant analysis of the extended concept of citizenship in a globalized world. However, the pandemic raised question marks on the hopes for having a borderless world based on universal hospitality. A study of the discussion in *The Indian Express* had two interesting opinion pieces on the contradiction between the visions of a borderless world and the ‘reasons of state’. The issues of national interest seemed to triumph over any humanitarian concerns. In an article C. Rajamohan commented, ““Is everyone for himself, when the chips are down? That is not true of most communities- a village, city or a nation-where the social capital is strong enough to put the collective above the self. But when it comes to the society of states, it would seem that each nation is for itself, especially in the middle of a pandemic.” And furthermore, “One of the first steps most governments took during the current crisis was to shut down their borders. The idea of a “borderless world” had gained much acceptance in recent years, but is now under serious questioning.”¹⁵

¹² *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 3. “Greece: Government seals off migrant camp with cases”. Athens. P11

¹³ *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 10. Bangladesh: Rohingya camps under ‘complete lockdown’. P10.

¹⁴ Sassen, S. (2000). *Democracy, citizenship and the global city*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵ C. Raja Mohan. 2020., “Between nationalism and globalism”. *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 6P9

Upendra Baxi raised some concern about this contradiction between the states and the stateless, asserting the rights of the hapless groups¹⁶: “Nations must not ignore fundamental and overriding principles of existing international law in fight against pandemic.” Further, he mentioned the obligations of the states towards the rights of the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, “equal health for all, non-discrimination, and the norms of human dignity”.

Home and belonging: The huge number of internal migrants on the roads of India, returning “home” during the lockdown became a spectacle for the media and the public. The question was, why were they returning home? An interview in *The Indian Express* captured the expressions of the migrants themselves. In its coverage of the city, *The Indian Express* had at the top photographs of three migrant labourers and their wearied faces, longing to go home. Upon being asked why he left for home, Sunil Kumar said, “I had to stop working after the lockdown was imposed... it has been very difficult...if they extend the lockdown. I can’t be stuck at shelter.” Ramesh Kumar said, “I tried to return home but police stopped me due to lockdown. Though this shelter has been my home for the past one year, I need to get back to my family in Jaipur.”¹⁷

The migrants expressed how home was about their families and provided them the feeling of security and being looked after. It came out very clearly that though forced by economic circumstances to leave their villages, the migrants regarded the urban centres as mere temporary “shelters” and not homes. The feeling of security, the warmth of care, and the feeling of belongingness was lacking in these temporary shelters, and therefore the migrants preferred perilous journeys back home to their villages, rather than the horrors of starving to death, untended, in the urban settings. There was an article by Manvendra Singh emphasising this, “Memories of hunger, fear of dying without care, lie behind migrants’ long trudge home”¹⁸.

During the lockdown the importance of home got reiterated though innumerable news items talking about the scramble to return home not only amongst internal economic migrants but also different groups of people including

¹⁶ Upendra Baxi, “The law cannot fall silent”. *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 10, P9.

¹⁷ Anand Mohan J. For Many, Home is where family is. *The Indian Express*. 2020, April 1. P4.

¹⁸ *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 17, “The state cannot hold” P1.

foreigners and students. There were photographs of flights evacuating foreign nationals (see *The Indian Express*. 2020, April 1, P7), or news of students desperate to get back home – “UP buses cut across states to bring students home from Kota centres”¹⁹. The idea of “home” and the associated feeling of belongingness, thus forcefully made its way to the public discourse about migration. Yet, the newspapers, remained unmindful of the plight of the stateless in these times who had been living in conditions of extreme destitution exacerbated by the lockdown, living without a national identity and secure jobs or incomes. They had no place to call home where they could aspire to return and nowhere to feel this belongingness and the associated feeling of security which accompanies belongingness. The absence of the concerns of the stateless in the national agenda, shows how the stateless are forced to a subhuman level of existence, being deprived of the basic human needs belongingness (John Burton, 1990) of security, identity, recognition and.

Rights: The stateless, as aptly pointed out by Chowdhory lack all “four facets of citizenship – status, rights, participation and identity” (Chowdhory, 2018, 1)²⁰. This can be understood with respect to the debate around the question on who could receive aid by the state in distress. The rations were distributed on valid ration cards, while the claim to any financial aid required identity proofs like Aadhaar and bank accounts, all of which were simply not available as options to the stateless. Yoginder K. Alagh in his article titled “world is not a village” remarked, “So, the government should not insist on Aadhar and bank account numbers and biometric identification for handing over threat life-sustaining grain or income payment. Reform can wait, death does not. Leakages are inevitable at this time, but the part which reached will be literally life saving.”²¹ This concession, suggested by the columnist, was for those who have not been able to procure identity proofs due to their marginalized situation in society. Yet, this discussion again can throw more light on the plight of the stateless who have no locus standi to procure any identification documents, and remain outside the realm of the obligations of the state towards its citizens. The issue of access to identification documents has been a major problem for the stateless, who are

¹⁹ Hamza Khan, Asad Rehman and Ankita Divedi Johri . 2020. UP buses cut across states to bring students home from Kota centres. *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 18, P1.

²⁰ Chowdhory, N. 2018. *Refugees, citizenship and belonging in South Asia: Contested terrain*. Singapore: Springer.

²¹ Yoginder K. Alagh. “World is not a village”. *The Indian Express*. 2020, April 1, P8.

neither entitled to any documents, nor are they granted (except for the UN recognized refugees) any recognition or protection by the state, and they continue to live in the dark liminal spaces of illegal existence.

Even for those who were living as recognized refugees in camps, aid is not about any entitlement but charity that is doled out by the respective states, to the extent they determine to do so. In his article in the *Express* titled “Beyond solidarity”²², Pratap Bhanu Mehta pointed out the distinction between the language of rights and the language of charity, “The migrant labour and the unemployed will be demanding their rights, not our mercy.” He outlined the difference between being a subject and being a citizen, “Compassion speaks to the language of subjecthood, justice speaks to the language of citizenship. Justice allows you to be angry at the state when you see injustice. Compassion is a disfiguring appeal to someone’s power.” Thus, speaking about justice, rights, rightful claims and obligations Mehta comments, “So a justice based solidarity will ask a different question. It will not ask: What is the bare minimum we can get away with to avoid starvation, or social unrest? The question is, what does the state owe as a matter of obligation in these circumstances?” These are some very important terms in the discourse on rights and citizenship. However, when the hierarchies within the citizens seems to be rampant, one could well imagine the plight of the stateless who do not have even the support of the legal structures to ensure any rights or obligations. The right to a life of self respect for the non-citizens becomes inapplicable in such cases.

Vulnerability: The stateless of the world remained the most vulnerable population during COVID, yet the mainstream media simply marginalized their concerns. Only a single report (in the entire period of two months) given to the slum of the Rohingya could be located in the newspaper. The reporter pointed out how these people lived amid medical waste with surgical masks, gloves, syringes. A Woman was reported saying that without work her children were starving.²³ It became amply clear in the discussions and news on the urban poor that the lockdown

²² Pratap Bhanu Mehta. 2020. “Beyond solidarity”. *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 18, P8.

²³ Anand Mohan J .2020 Living amid medical waste, these refugees don’t fear virus, only hunger. *The Indian Express*. 2020, April 11. P4., New Delhi.

resulted in lack of work, which was more of a concern for these people than the disease. Again, the plight of the stateless who cannot even claim the right to decent work and wages remained hidden from the discussions. Here, an article by Amartya Sen in the *Express* might be cited which said that during the pandemics, “the more affluent – may be concerned only about not getting the disease, while others have to worry also about earning an income...”. He finds the solution in encouraging a participatory democracy where the government would work on the basis of consultation and participation with the help of a free press. Here again the question arises, what are the prospects that the participatory democracy holds for the stateless, who have no locus-standi to participate in any country’s democracy by virtue of being non-citizens.²⁴

The debate remained absent from the mainstream media, when overcrowded refugee camps of Bangladesh became a major concern, with possibility of uncontrollable spread of COVID-19 amid the poor medical facilities and extremely poor sanitation conditions prevailing in these areas. They also remained zones which were denied basic access to information because of the ban on internet in their area. Here also there was only a single news item on the international page on the Rohingya in Bangladesh in the entire period of two months. This was a news item on complete lockdown of Cox bazaar refugee camp – crammed camps with people living in canvas and bamboo shacks, poor medical facilities and lack of protective gear. The news took note of the “Internet ban in the Bangladesh camp has also led to the spread of rumours.” The news was sourced from Agence-France Press and there was no follow-up from the newspaper in subsequent days²⁵.

Dignity:

The use of expressions like “Establish Migrants as full citizens” in an article shows how, despite the claims of equality, citizenship is hierarchical. In this article Harikishan Sharma indicated how the, “Differences not just in the levels of income but in their volatility as well as differential access to social insurance (healthcare, pensions) distinguish these two classes” (by the two classes he meant

²⁴ Amartya Sen. 2020. Listening as governance”.*The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 8, P8.

²⁵ *The Indian Express*, Bangladesh: Rohingya camps under ‘complete lockdown’. New Delhi, 2020, April 10.. P10:

organized and unorganized sector workers).²⁶ While the access to rights and a dignified life remains a dream for a majority of the citizens, it can well be imagined where would the non-citizens stand in the hierarchy.

The news during the lockdown on migrant labourers shows how the people at the bottom of the economic and social ladder are valued not for being human beings, but for the utility that they serve. Many states were concerned about this exodus as it could result in problems of the availability of labour and could have tremendous economic implications. This anxiety reflected in articles and editorials as well, for instance, an editorial read, ““Exodus of migrant labour from cities is an enormous human crisis, and an impending economic one”²⁷. There were instances of disinfectant sprayed on the migrants, with pictures of migrants being treated like herds of animals, again starkly revealing how economic status confers the right to be treated with dignity.²⁸

Further, numerous incidents of internal migrants dying on the way to reaching home out of fatigue and hunger, being mowed down by trains while sleeping on railway tracks, committing suicide out of anxiety of having no work, meeting with accidents on highways while walking back home – all point towards the hierarchies in popular imagination of whose death is acceptable. The structural and cultural violence inherent in these deaths also shows how in the discourse on the migrant problem the question of the sanctity of human life was absent. With the stateless, the magnitude of the problem was much more, because their death count remained outside the ambit of any census for citizens. As non citizens, their death, was a fact to be accepted for its inevitability, or simply to be ignored – these are the people standing outside the narrow circle of nationalist obligations. The dignity of human existence and the sanctity of human life seemed to be concepts inapplicable to the stateless. There was some discussion about migrant deaths from this perspective. In “The cure that lasts” Matthew Varghese in the *Express* observed, “While every death diminishes us as a society, I am more worried about all those marginalized for whom existence is no more than being on being on the

²⁶ Harikishan Sharma. 2020. “As growth slows, demand for work under MNREGA shoots to 9-yr high.” *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 2020, April 3.

²⁷ *The Indian Express*. 2020. “Parts of a whole” (editorial) 2020, April 1, P8

²⁸ Abantika Ghosh. “Why disinfectant must not be sprayed on humans”. *The Indian Express*. April 21, 2020. P11.

edge of extinction.”²⁹ This discussion also shows how the media might give some space to such views but they fail to integrate them as part of their news values, by giving inadequate attention and coverage to the tragedies in the life of the marginalized.

The stateless, at the best, are considered objects of sympathy rather than as people deserving a dignified, self respecting life. They are typically seen to lack an agency and remain mere recipients of aid, denied the opportunity to make their life choices. The Rohingya in India also remained one of the most disempowered people, bearing the burden of stereotyping and othering. Even in the time of the pandemic, they were accused of being potential carriers of the disease and stigmatized. While the *Express* carried some news on the accusations on the Rohingya³⁰, yet the news or views to counter these seemed to be lacking. This kind of alternative coverage could be found in the media like *The Wire*, “COVID-19: Rohingya Refugees in India Are Battling Islamophobia and Starvation” which underscored, “The refugees will not be covered under the relief measures announced by governments and their settlements are prone to outbreaks if even a single person is infected.”³¹

CONCLUSIONS: This paper studied the coverage related to the Rohingyas in *The Indian Express* during the period of lock down in the months of April and May. While the *Express* had some very intense discussions on the migrant problem and this human tragedy during the lockdown, yet the concerns of the stateless were relegated to the margins by the newspaper. Some of such discussions on the humanitarian concerns have been used by the paper to compare them with the concerns of the stateless, as discussions on this parallel tragedy were almost absent. The purpose of using the newspaper archives was thus not only to find out how much space was given to the tragedy of the stateless and why, but also to analyse the news on other humanitarian problems during the lockdown to enable one to figure out the extent of tragedy for the stateless.

The paper hence flags important themes which emerge from the study of the news and views in the newspaper – the idea of home and belongingness, the

²⁹ Matthew Varghese . 2020. “The cure that lasts”, *The Indian Express*. May 14 2020, p 11

³⁰ *The Indian Express*. 2020. “Rohingya Muslims sinned by attending Tabligh event: Uttarakhand MLA” Lalmani Verma. *The Indian Express*. April 22, 2020, p 11

³¹ Tapan Kumar Bose. 2020. 01st MAY, 2020. <https://thewire.in/rights/india-rohingya-refugees-starvation-covid-19>

question of rights and dignity, the problems associated with vulnerability, stereotyping and marginalization of the stateless. Through this analysis, the paper points that the COVID pandemic has raised serious question marks on the entire statist discourse focused around giving priority to one's own national interests and security to the neglect of the situations of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.