

## **The Subaltern Migrant in the Era of Neoliberal Empires**

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### **Introduction**

Historical evidence has globally demonstrated that ‘stateless minorities’(1973: 149), as Hannah Arendt designated a group, have hardly been accepted, by nation-states, even on grounds of altruism. Arendt’s term had an instance of exemplification in the Olympic Games held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 when a new set of athletes were grouped and allowed to participate under a category called the Refugee Olympic Team. These athletes did not have any state or nationhood to identify themselves with. They were individuals who underwent dislocation--- exiled in some manner from their home nation-states, they are people who turned out to be asylum seekers, reflecting a quest for shelter for they could not procure an affiliation from any other nation-state either, rendered stateless, thereby.

In the neoliberal world order, migration often becomes imperative and involuntary. It represents an aspiration to survive, re-work the material conditions of existence, and re-spin the threads of belonging in new contexts. Besides the already established diasporic groups, there is a sizeable number of migrants whose journeys happen beneath the surface and in broken ways, migrants who exist in the new world in a way where rehabilitation remains far. Apart from economic and cultural subordination, there is a subalternity about their displacement and existence. I identify them as the subaltern migrant in my study. The

objective of my study is to understand the problems of settlement and their experience of displacement in a world dictated from a neoliberal vantage point. I contend that it is these subaltern migrants, not the successful elite diasporic community, who get branded as the dreaded stranger in the wake of indigenous nationalisms which neoliberal economies have come to embody today.

The ideology of neoliberalism articulates in such a way that an individual is geopolitically ejected from home/-land for want of a shelter and livelihood, made to move, and turned into an individual seeking refuge. Even in many democracies, it is nativist elitism that guides policies of international cooperation, the travel, relocating, and settlement of various people. Often, these democracies become totalitarian political states, sounding nationalist rhetoric of economic growth and military might. Homi Bhabha terms their attitudes as ‘nationalistic barbarism’ (2019). Denied shelter, basic means of subsistence, and health care, the irregular migrants, IDPs, seasonal workers, refugees in internment camps, are dying worldwide.

The current administration in the United States had been staunchly voicing ‘American state interests’: it began to fence its borders against “illegal” transits, recommend refugee reinstatement in homelands, and withdraw cooperation for alleviating global humanitarian crises. During the COVID 19 pandemic, India has seriously undermined the basic rights of its domestic migrants to travel in respectable conditions, while it continued to show concern for its settled diaspora abroad which is not forced to return. The Rohingyas tortured and thrown out from Myanmar, their homeland, denied asylum by Bangladesh, and deemed illegal by India are having a horrendous experience to narrate. The current pandemic seems to have exposed only an inherent structural contradiction deeply formative of the neoliberal totalitarian systems and economic ambitions.

Defining the refugee as a threat to national safety, public security, and a liability on the economy, and using such definitions for shaping electoral agendas, the modern nation-states could be seen procuring democratic consent in disposing them of. According to the world-system geographer David Harvey, the neoliberal nation state aims to “facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation” (2006: 14) to serve the state’s national (elitist) interest. Martha Nussbaum had once stated that “... patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and...subversive of some of the worthy goals (of) patriotism.” (2002: 4) Indeed, slogans like ‘Make America Great Again’ or ‘Making India Viswa Guru’ (global leader) seem to testify today what Nussbaum had said about the sense of national greatness.

My research probes the trajectories of South-Asian subaltern migrations in the United States to initiate a critique of ‘diaspora’ as a concept. The scholarship on South-Asian diaspora has traditionally placed primacy on legalities and successful migrants; such frameworks, as I observe, fail to acknowledge the broken journeys of the subaltern counterparts. I consider this as fundamentally an epistemological problem entailing an intersectional investigation of ongoing policy debates as well as an imperative to formulate an empathetic, but also a politically acute, sense of the destitute ‘migrant’ that would critically extend the idea of diaspora.

### **Reville the poor, tired, huddled masses yearning to breathe free**

The Second World War had reverberated with millions being displaced all over Europe and America authorized in admitting an umpteen number of these Europeans through The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 for permanent residence. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 stated that refugees are people who lacked the essentials of life and hence the US supports them. The US is one of the largest immigrant-receiving countries and over the years has proclaimed as the global leader in the resettlement of refugees. Until recently the country

has been providing asylum to populations- the victims of conflicts, violence, and persecution from across the globe and the number had reached a colossal level in the last decade. The Trump administration after resuming Office in 2016 improvised policies for the first time in American history curtailing the prevailing intake of refugee immigrants. Besides, the new system of security checks and vetting process introduced by the federal government, instead of accelerating the process of admission, it significantly delayed it and kept them hanging with a lingering hope for shelter. Every individual to qualify as a prospective refugee has to undergo a rigorous process of screening and vetting process where it is necessary to prove that the individual is indeed engulfed with fear of life-threatening tyrannical badgering in their current location and therefore requires a comparatively sheltered turf to dwell on. Moreover, the prospective refugee might be denied resettlement under the US policies if any other country had already extended similar assistance. They might also be restricted in aspects such as previous criminal and/or deportation records, health issues, manipulation of facts on the application, smuggling, and polygamy. Even though the worldwide graph displays soaring inflation in the number of victims of forced displacement, the United States, especially under the Trump administration, has uninhibitedly capped the influx in recent years.

Data statistics might vary but it clearly shows that the hopes and prospects of resettling in the largest immigrant nation for the refugees have dwindled since 2017. The refugee resettlement program that was once a global model of how neoliberal countries as powerful as the United States should be assisting and supporting with basic sustenance for the vulnerable populations of the world has taken a U-turn, since the federal government after assuming duties in 2016 has been implementing executive orders to filter out refugees and asylum seekers from the US territory. Even after 9/11 the then-Republican government led

by George W. Bush had lowered the refugee admission ceiling but it was still significantly above the current rate.

The Administration argued that by accepting a smaller number of international refugees they would be able to better rehabilitate the refugee-turned-asylum seekers already existing in the national perimeters. But this is far from true, the federal protocols rather suggest the implementation of exclusionary measures against the resident asylees as well. In 2017, at the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters, Trump declared that “the United States is a compassionate nation” but “for the cost of resettling one refugee in the United States, we can assist more than ten in their home region”. It is quite ironic that at a global convention whose thematic structure actively focuses on ‘people’, where dialogues are on pro-sustainable development and peace, the President argued to resettle refugees in the same location from where they are trying to escape. Shutting the doors on refugees, first with a 120-day refugee ban and then with a subsequent ban on refugees from what the administration called “high-risk” nations, which included several Muslim-majority countries and North Korea, according to the President were a cautionary measure for the protection of the American citizens from any kind of terrorist penetration by foreign nationals; completely oblivious to the fact that there is a monumental population of humans who are victims of same violence and bigotry from which he wants to protect his citizens and his policies have suspended these victims from a potential haven. He squarely stated, “The United States will not be a migrant camp and it will not be a refugee holding facility ... you look at what's happening in Europe and you look at what's happening in other places we can't allow that to happen in the United States – not on my watch.” (@MSNBC TWEETS JUNE 18, 2018) He not only berated the refugees and their condition but made no attempts in showing actions like some of his European allies. Trump considers asylum ‘loopholes’ in the American security system and therefore his administration has been

actively deploying policies deterring asylum seekers from entering the US territory by limiting the number of applications and restricting the grantees. The neoliberal governments often rely and act on the myths that portray the non-citizen- humans in a disdainful manner. Those refugees are responsible for initiating terror driven activities is one such popular myth propagated globally. And extremist governments play with the sentiments of their citizens with these insinuations strategically to get their support in further declining the refugees and asylees, after all, no citizen would ever want to compromise with their safety and security because humanity is not the primary priority.

### **South-Asian asylum-seekers in the United States**

The condition of seeking refuge or safe shelter stems from extreme harrowing and scourging constraints in one's home country. In the Indian context, although there have been several armed conflicts since her independence mainly with the neighboring countries, the casualties were protected by the Indian nation-state. Indians have largely migrated to the United States for higher education and white-collar professional jobs and as a part of the family reunification policy, the immediate kin in the relation of the immigrant has also taken the flight. No records of instances could be found in which Indian citizens sought refuge in the United States because of potential life-threats, until recently, of course. With the rise of far-right extremist Hindu nationalism, individuals have been trying to escape impending threats. According to Shoshanna Mallett, an immigration attorney and human rights activist based in New York and specializing in asylum policies, who writes for Nolo.com, a leading website dealing with law firms and legal issues in the United States, the country had witnessed thousands of asylum seekers of Indian origin in the years following Sikh persecution of 1984. Three decades later, it is mainly the Sikhs of separatist groups like Akali Dal Mann

advocating Sikh homeland in Punjab, who directly join the Sikh communities in New York and San Francisco and then file for asylum status in the US. But they are mostly refused asylum status since there is no real objective evidence of consistent and plausible violence against the community in recent years. Apart from them, there are reportedly other asylum seekers hailing from the Jammu and Kashmir region and Gujarat who fear persecution because of their religious and other forms of identities. Several individuals of the LGBTQ community have also sought asylum in 2018. The latest trend in migration of Indians displays a surge in the number reaching Central America and then traveling to the southern borders of the United States and requesting asylum to the border officials. These Indians who usually arrive without legal visas spend thousands of dollars to be smuggled into the United States borders. The Annual Flow Report on Refugees and Asylees, published in 2019, by the Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S Department of Homeland Security (DHS), further corroborates this claim. Even though the number is paltry compared to other nationalities especially Latin American, nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that apart from the Indian Diaspora, celebrated for their shimmering successes, there is another population group consisting of Indian citizens who are definitely not a part of the mainstream Diaspora and they do not even feature in the emigration statistics or policies. The Office of the Homeland Security of the United States had reported similar instances from India's neighbors as well. In 2008, the report estimated that there is a fair amount, roughly around a few thousand, of Bangladeshi refugees and asylees residing there. They might be potential victims of the perceived threat and other anxieties or are fleeing because of political unrest and instability at home. Pakistan has been witnessing armed conflicts due to the overpowering presence of the Taliban regime since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early decades of this century, millions of Pakistani nationals have been displaced thereby. Following this, there were almost a little over half a million Pakistanis claiming asylum in the

United States in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their woeful narratives have hardly ever been addressed by the nation-states--- home or host. For instance, in the Indian context, the national discourses revel in the achievements of the Indian diaspora or the skilled legal immigrants residing in the United States. The host administration does not intend to get rid of them immediately, for their economic contributions as well as to maintain diplomatic and business ties with the home nation-state. The latter too basks in the surging remittances as well as the glorious reputation earned by the “ideal immigrants” or the “model minority”. The Indian-American community was hailed by both the Indian Prime Minister and the American President at the Houston event in 2019; unfortunately, there were hardly any comments on the desperate plights of the subaltern counterparts. The popular image of an Indian immigrant in the US--- speaking English fluently, living legally with a white-collar job, or pursuing higher education--- must not be tainted under any circumstance.

### **The neoliberal stratagems**

We live in a globalized era and one of the dominant ideologies that configure the economic and political structures of the nation-states policies is beacons by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism which is largely a capitalistic tradition has not only influenced transnational flows of commodities and cross-border trading but also has drastic implications on the migratory processes on various levels. The ideology mainly operates on the accumulation of capital; would overthrow and disintegrate any political structure that threatens the modes of capital gains. Since neoliberal nation-states have been the hub of the capital, it has always attracted the labor force from the under-developed and developing economies to cross the nation-state borders and seek harbor in its flourishing economy. The home nations have encouraged this further and the neoliberal host also did not obstruct such a move because the cheap labor force is a neoliberal principle and immigrants were a blessing in this context.



But in the recent political developments across the globe, a new dimension has emerged. Migrants, obviously not a homogenous population, are structured in a hierarchical model where one category is welcomed by the neoliberal host but the 'other' is discarded, much too often disrespectfully. The ones who receive an invitation to be hosted are famously the elite migrants, the educated and well established in the managerial sectors with an enormous potential to contribute to the host economy. The refugees seeking protection are not explicitly invited. They are considered an imposition by the host and are often pejoratively perceived as 'emerging' in the host nation. They are not welcomed, still, they just show up, often out of nowhere. They are considered a threat to the fundamental aim of neoliberal economic policies since their presence and acceptance foregrounds a social democratic approach in the global arena. More of a right-wing stance on traditional liberalism, neoliberal notions are not just limited to the economic arena. It has spelled itself out in the socio-political arenas as well. As Harvey aptly claims, "The conflation of political freedom with freedom of the market and trade has long been a cardinal feature of neo-liberal policy and it has dominated the US stance towards the rest of the world for many years." (2006: 15) The nation-state policies condemning the individuals who are in dire need of a haven thereby exacerbating their vulnerabilities while unstintingly accepting economic migrants highlight the neoliberal tangents in action. The far-right nationalistic attitudes and rhetoric that have been employed in ostracizing refugees and asylum seekers and even criminalizing them as illegal immigrants is a perfect portrayal.

Neoliberalism which propounds individual freedom has eventually translated into the freedom of market and trade across nation-state borders orienting on profit is nothing but self-centredness on the part of the neoliberal nation-state which has depreciated human solidarity on a transnational level while implicitly aiming for homogeneous sovereignty. The cultural nationalism of the working-class natives and their chronic economic insecurities

were targeted to mobilize them through blatant racism, anti-illegal immigration rhetoric, and refugee-phobia. Harvey remarks “Not for the first, nor, it is to be feared, for the last time in history has a social group willingly voted ... for cultural, nationalist and religious reasons.” (2006: 22) The neoliberal nation protects the financial interests of the elites to consolidate power with a certain class but in the garb of national interest. Any kind of welfare being provided to refugees drains the national economy according to them. So, removing such population groups from the national territory is of utmost importance.

### **Subalternity shaping migrant subjectivities**

The term ‘subaltern’, used in the post-colonial context of South-Asian historiography, critically refers to the colonized population groups who were ousted from the hierarchy of the power structure induced by the state and the other dominant groups. A theoretical legacy of Antonio Gramsci, ‘subaltern’ first appeared in his *Prison Notebooks* where Gramsci had discoursed upon the development of the subaltern classes premising on Italian history. The Gramscian elucidation includes within its scope all those who are marginalized and alienated by the dominant sections of the society and had no autonomous representation in the socio-economic and political superstructures of the state. Therefore, the Subaltern Studies from its very inception had considered the political voices and roles of the masses which were earlier denied by the elites. Dipesh Chakravarty had stated that “It (Subaltern Studies) looked for an anti-elitist approach to history writing, and in this, it had much in common with the ‘history-from-below’ approaches... The declared aim of Subaltern Studies was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history.” (2002: 7).

In this study, I have borrowed this conceptualization of subaltern to foreground the voiceless and often mis-/ under-represented ‘refugee’ migrants. In a manner like the colonial history, I have found that Diaspora Studies conventionally focuses on the accomplishments of the elite members and if they suffer from a social debacle, the homeland, and other fellow communities rush to their aid. But it should be remembered that the parameters of migration are not solely enunciated by dominant groups within the Diaspora; there exists a parallel of history of migratory struggle as well- one that involves the ‘doubly marginalized’ or subaltern immigrants. In the scope of my study, I identify the skilled immigrants, those who have been stamped as legal residents in the host country as the elites and according to me, South Asian Diasporic historiography pivots on their success stories. Hence, I find it necessary to underline these existing epistemological knowledge gaps and address them deploying the subaltern lens approaching migration history from below.

Incorporating the Gramscian methodology of studying the development of subaltern groups whose histories are “... intertwined with that of civil society and thereby with the history of States...” (1971: 202), I have also looked into the “...objective formation of the subaltern...” (ibid) within the diasporic community, through its essential diffusion and the alterations mechanized in and by the subaltern presence in the social and political spheres. The struggles of the migrants and their avenues of negotiations in the border zones are quite distinct from that of the mainstream diaspora in the host land--- emblematic of what Ranajit Guha claims, “...the subaltern as the maker of (their) own destiny.” (1984: vii) but these struggles outside the hegemonic diasporic hierarchy have often eluded the historiography as well.

I refer to these migrants as particular individuals with the references being contextual and not as a collective entity because their experiences are different and unique and cannot be heralded collectively in a generalized group or category as Gramsci states, “The subaltern

classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’” (1971:202) I dare not imagine these migrants adhering to an enclave. Each refugee, asylee has undergone distinct individualistic experiences and cannot be lumped together by the nation-states as a whole nor do they consolidate among themselves for defending common interests. Hence, I attempt at drawing parallels between their experiences stemming from subaltern quandary and their simultaneous absence from diasporic metanarratives.

Subaltern history has mainly targeted in rewriting the peasant history and those alternatives which did not find any recognition in mainstream colonial history, curated by the elites. The refugees are not considered a part of ethnic diasporas. The ethnic communities far from recognizing them, discriminate against them. These immigrants are those who are not simply marginalized by the nation-states but also by their ethnic allegiances in the host land. The homeland, too, hardly alludes to their presence while glorifying the mainstream diaspora for their achievements. The neoliberal home and host nation-states are aware of their presence but refrain from acknowledging them. They are considered a burden on the host economy and a blight on the homeland reveling in the achievements of its diaspora. These displaced refugees are subalterns as they are “...persons and groups cut off from upward- and in a sense, ‘outward’ social mobility” (Spivak, 2000: 325) for they can neither climb the social ladder and become a diaspora nor can they escape their position. Although socio-political mobilities are vetoed, their cultural resistances do not yield to neoliberal impediments. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak further states that “... the cultural space of subalternity, although cut off from the lines of mobility...was not seen as stagnant...How (culture) is transformed into militancy, and thus produces tangents for the subaltern sphere, is one of the most interesting aspects of subalternist analysis...” (2000: 326) The acts of survival presented by the refugees is an interesting claim to this premise.

## **Conclusion**

An individual in search of refuge is hitherto homeless, stateless, and eventually rightless. Since they left home/ nation-state they were also deprived of human rights. The 'scum of the earth' (Arendt, 1973: 147) are victims of the totalitarian politics, unjust cynicism, and abnormal pervasive hatred of neoliberal governments, the elite bourgeoisie, and the working-class citizen-nationals. Arendt further claims that refugees suffered even more than the unemployed nationals, rentiers, pensioners as apart from the fact that they did not have any social status or the rights to work and possessing property, they were additionally deprived of 'human rights' which were once considered inalienable 'Rights of Man' (1973: 148) These stateless minorities or "cousins-germane" (S. Lawford Childs 1938; Hannah Arendt 1973) have no shelter or government to protect them and their interests or concerns. Without a nationality, a passport, and valid documents, and financial security they transcend frontiers only to be meted out with the cynical inability of the powerful neoliberal nation-states to guarantee human rights.

The plights of these innocent immigrants' of being unwanted anywhere on this planet are certainly "...a practical demonstration of totalitarian(ism)" (Arendt, 1973: 149) practiced by the alleged democracies and their blatant apathy towards sanctifying the fundamental human rights. The neoliberal policies while scoffing prejudice unmasks the sheer hypocritical attempts at brandishing the disenfranchised migrants as economic liabilities and restricts their entry for the welfare of the nationals. Human rights are not only denied to them but according "...became for all concerned...the evidence of hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy." (Arendt, 1973: 149) The cowardly acts of withdrawal of inalienable human rights to these homeless immigrants underline the constitutional inability and the fact that neoliberal regimes are constantly threatened by the appearance of stateless minorities seen as having the potential to disintegrate the neoliberal status quo. The neoliberal representatives while endorsing a protectionist regimen within the nationalistic

tradition characterized by homogeneity and rootedness in the soil, never quite realize the full impact of domineering implications of those whose basic rights have been compromised, who are left without a nation-state of their own. Even if they accept a few the representatives want them to be assimilated by humanitarian considerations or coercive measures, in case the enraged migrants who hardly suffer from “numerical and cultural weakness” (Arendt, 1973: 153) resisted the process of liquidation. Although they have left their respective homelands and hardly harbor the slightest intention of returning, the stateless minorities whether refugees or asylees insist upon retaining their cultural and national aspects. Their self-determination as a different foreign national undermines the neoliberal naturalization project.

It should be understood that the term ‘refugee crisis’ is quite misleading; the crisis as unequivocally assumed is not fomented by the stateless humans, rather the actual crisis of being without a home, with severed ties of belonging, and thriving precarity are encountered and lived by these subaltern migrants, both within the nation-state perimeters and outside. The brutal perpetuation of nation-state borders in the garb of nationalism draws on the narrative of the foreigner or outsider and according to Saskia Sassen this narrative further helps “...to define refugees as not belonging to national society, as not being entitled to the rights of citizens...refugees in the twentieth century were identified as a distinctive category; the (nation) state now had the power and the institutional legitimacy to exclude refugees from civil society.” (1999: 78)

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