

Abstract

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

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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.