

# Media and Forced Migration

## (Module E)

### Abstract from Debraj Deb

**Figures**, they say, matter a lot in media. Every column-inch of a newspaper costs – a lot. So, better focus on figures than analysing the phenomenon. Speaking about news coverage on displacement, both quantitative and impactful issues supersede the cause behind. When it comes to media coverage in Tripura, the first fact that perhaps demands discussion is 'news-men'. Out of 22 daily newspapers of the state, very few have got regular correspondents or stringers engaged in each district, forget sub-divisions and the blocks! What happens as the only ensuing outcome is a conceptual experiment of possible outcomes of any given incident in the newspapers. Raw facts and figures play the major part of the hypothesizing.

Migration or displacement doesn't usually make news in the mainstream media – both print and electronic. Even local media institutions abstain from covering the issue unless migration creates endemic or secular disbalance.

An electronic media correspondent gathers a few vox populi shots and adds his own nice face and few vague questions which get added with a short interview of some minister from the news desk. A newspaper correspondent considers his work done if there are sufficient numbers involved; in case of an accident or an incident, a single casualty doesn't matter but a dozen does, even if the former comes from a murder and the latter comes from a fight over the cards. The gruesome internal politics that runs within the relief camps remains unseen.

**Secondly**, ethnic bias plays a very integral part in the local media. Community-based class sentiments get involved into coverage and relief camps in areas with tribal majority often get scanty coverage. One of the direct outcomes of the phenomenon is invisibilization of victims as a mass of faceless people in the stream of news. Mostly, displacement victims start by being labelled as 'problem' or 'refugees'. Mainstream media, in the chase of cooking the story more sensational, tends to label them as terrorists, anti-national conspirators in cases and in Tripura, it is even more interesting. Reang residents of Memit district of Mizoram got displaced in 1997-98 due to ethnic violence in Mizoram. The same became Bru, a locally coined name, used rather sarcastically by Mizos on the displaced Reang people.

Over the years, displacement victims get more inclined to their host culture and a new generation comes up, devoid of both their parental and their host culture. A rootless generation is thus created; its effects all the more aggravated by the absence of education among them. Call it dissolution of identity or erasure of subjectivity – the impact on IDP victims is nonetheless troublesome.

**Thirdly**, the local media of Tripura has, by and large, always avoided the growing concerns of health issues related to the displaced Reangs. Bru – a rather derogatory name used to term Reang community of Mizoram were reported to have been persecuted by local residents of neighbouring Mizoram after the former opposed religious conversion. A Christian dominated state, Mizoram came up in the headlines with news of persecution on Chakma people and a large number of Reangs fled from Damparengpui, Tupuibari, Damdial, Bawngva, Khanthum and such few villages of Memit district. The exodus took place in 1997 when Reang tribals faced inhuman treatment from Mizos in Cacchar district of Assam and North Tripura. Troubles had started since then.

Over 30 thousand displacement victims from Mizoram have been living in Tripura since then whose daily earning is rs. 5 for an adult and Rs. 2.5 is daily allocation from the government for a minor. Each displaced family is allowed one soap every year, one blanket and one pair of slippers in every three years and dough, rice and salt for food. Over 2 reports are published every month in an average in major

newspapers and yet, fourteen years did not suffice to make malnutrition an integral part of the Reang displacement-centric reporting.

**Fourthly**, the local media of Tripura has always avoided the question of shortage in legal coverage of the displaced masses. Since no refugee-specific laws govern protection of rights of the displaced Reang population in Tripura, they are mostly left with no alternative but to seek refuge of the local legal framework. General provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) are all that provides legal assistance to the displacement victims.

The connection of modernity with territoriality has become well known by now. It includes a sense of identity which might involve a nation, a community or even a group of people. In most cases, the term 'refugee' is considered with awe and discomfort. To the mainstream media, Reang displacement victims are inconveniences while to the local media, they are an uncomfortable source of human interest stories. Though the massive bulk of displaced Reang people provides a pool of cheap labour which in turn benefits the host, hostility towards migrants hasn't come a bit in one and a half decade.

**Fifthly**, media is largely a party to the conflict that induces displacement by multiplying the effect of victimization among the displaced. While media communicates the claims of rights of displacement-victims, it also repeats the statelessness of the same victims each time the news is carried. Media, in a sense, does deprive displacement victims of their subjectivity and bonds with forces that displace them – nation in most cases.

**Sixthly** and lastly, the saga of internal displacement has unleashed a politics of vendetta and retribution in the region. The phenomenon started to surface when repatriation of Reang refugees back to Mizoram was disrupted for the first time. Repatriation has been conducted in four separate phases till date from the state and still nearly 30 thousand displaced Reangs dwell in relief camps of Kanchanpur sub-division in North Tripura district. Newspapers and news channels have been reporting repatriation for years but then the more significant issue of the cause of disruption has been ignored under the veil of apprehending communal discord.

I consider responsible journalism is the only solution to all the given problems. A reporter should focus more on foot-work and data collection than merely compiling them and cooking a saleable copy. Analysis of the problem is more significant than merely reporting it. Media has the responsibility to ensure the ambience of protection and displaced Reang people of Mizoram, who are being called as refugees since years, have been largely deprived from it. Copy and paste journalism has become highly prevalent in the state and a large chunk of reporters come from highly non-professional background. Counting myself into the illiterate chunk, I guess making reporters would be a more important task for the media institutions of the state than make reports on displaced Reangs.