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A Report on “Climate Disaster, Migration, and News Reporting: A South Asian Discussion”



Calcutta Research Group
In collaboration with **Deutsche Welle Akademie**
Presents

27.10.2022, Thursday, 6.30 PM IST

Climate disaster, migration and news reporting: a South Asian discussion

Moderator: **Bharat Bhushan, Journalist & Member, CRG**
Panellists: **Fatema Abedin Nazla, Journalist, Bangladesh**
Nidhi Jamwal, Gaon Connection, India
Meena Poudel, Migration Researcher, Nepal
Nagraj Adve, Author of *Global Warming in India: Science, Impact, and Politics*

South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration
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Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (www.mcrg.ac.in), in collaboration with DW Akademie (DWA), announced the launch of a network titled *South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration* (SAN-CDM) with an online discussion on 27th October, 2022. Supratik Sinha reports on the proceedings of this inaugural meeting on Climate Disaster, Migration, and News Reporting.

Paula Banerjee, Professor in Calcutta University and Governing Body Member of CRG, delivered the welcome note through an overview of CRG’S stance as a “peace group” critiquing authority by discussions and questions on issues like migration, land and food. She also outlined the media programmes undertaken by CRG which have strived to critically evaluate its role in reporting on migration and set agendas for further discussions on the same. Emphasising on migrant labour as vulnerable to socio-economic factors, she stressed on the role of media in adopting questions of violations in human rights focussing particularly on migrants. The SAN-CDM is born out of CRG’S interest in issues of peace, ethics, and gender. Andrea Marshall, Program Director, Displacement and Dialogue, South Asia, DWA, outlined briefly the interest of her organisation in promoting freedom of expression and an open access to information. She succinctly put forward the need to include communities in the discourses affecting them so that the “discourse is not only about them but run by them.” Samata Biswas, CRG member, introduced the scope of the SAN-CDM while pointing the audience to the regional consultation of stakeholders held earlier in the year.

The four speakers participating in this discussion were Meena Poudel, migration researcher based in Nepal; Nidhi Jamwal, managing editor of Gaon Connection, India; Fatema Abedin Nazla, journalist based in Bangladesh and Nagraj Adve, author of *Global Warming in India: Science, Impact, and Policies*. The discussion was centred on the devastating impact of climate change in the South Asian region rendering countless people migrants and leading to forced displacement. Re-thinking climate change induced migration and the role of the media in reporting such issues was declared as the concern of this discussion.

The moderator for the discussion was Bharat Bhushan, an eminent journalist who long experiences and expertise in the field of media. He linked the increasing instances of extremities in weather to climate change and showed how this leads to the deterioration of mental and physical health, coupled with economic insecurity, for people. He quoted the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report which predicted that "over the next thirty years, 143 million people are likely to be uprooted" from climate change induced disasters. Citing the inter-connectedness of the South Asian region, he stressed on the need to think such disasters, which lead to forced displacement of people, not in straitjacketed terms of national boundaries. Migrants born out of such climate crises should be studied, according to him, in terms of their temporality or permanent nature and the demand for social safety nets and legal help for them should be raised. He asserted the focus of the discussion as analysing the role of mainstream media in reporting on climate change induced migration which was wanting in examining the structural links between climate change and migration, thus obfuscating a holistic understanding of the crisis for the viewers and readers.

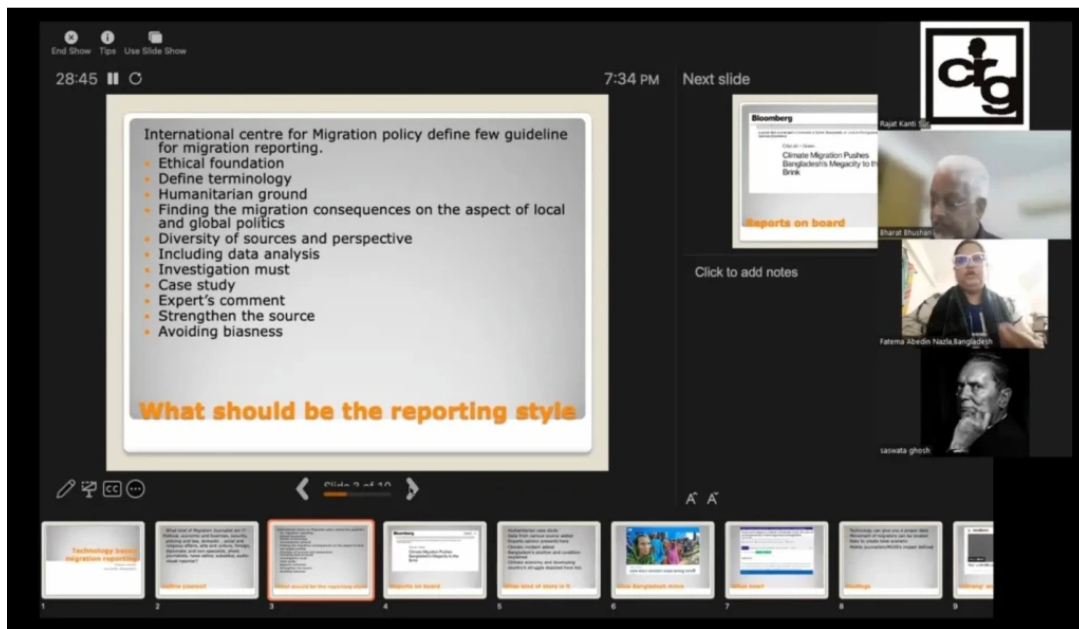
Meena Poudel, the first speaker in the discussion, brought in the perspective of Nepal on climate change induced disasters. Migration caused by climate change is an issue raised by politicians during elections which does not feature on regular agendas of policy makers. This leads to the informalisation of migrant labour who have been forced to move due to climate induced reasons. She listed some linking factors between climate change and migration which the mainstream media has been unable to pick on. Political factor is the examination of how policy makers or politicians "talk, why they talk and when they talk" which will reveal, according to her, the siphoning of funds received for climate change disasters to other purposes, leading to the mention of climate change issues as an electoral gimmick. Social factor should look at the socio-economic identity of the people worst affected by climate crises which will reveal them to be overwhelmingly daily-wage earners. Economic reasons should be factored in to see why people migrate to provincial and federal markets or cross the borders. The media should look at the Global South being viewed and considered by the countries in the Global North and show how the discourses peddled by the latter on climate change mitigation efforts does not factor in the specificities of different South Asian countries, thus leading to no practical relief efforts being adequately carried on. Citing geographical disadvantages, like Nepal being a landlocked country, cannot be a way of shirking away responsibilities and "institutional capacity" should be built to address them. Two obstacles hinder the relief efforts of South Asian countries: structural stress which includes low to no resources and migration management stress which includes internal and cross-border migrations.



A screengrab of Nidhi Jamwal's presentation documenting disparities in media reportage.

Nidhi Jamwal brought her experiences gained through working in Gaon Connection to the discussion and spoke on the climatic disasters that struck rural India particularly in 2022. She explained how the severity of the climate crisis could be gauged from increasing migration to urban areas and this was seen in the kharif season also owing to droughts in the Indo-Gangetic belt. Wheat production was hit severely due to the heat waves which disrupted supply of the crop to the Public Distribution System (PDS) and had a debilitating impact on the food security in India. The fodder crisis made farmers starve their cattle to death rather than giving them to butchers which dealt a serious blow to the dairy business in India. Women, a majority of whom work as farm labourers, had to migrate to cities for jobs. The randomness of climate change is evident from floods in Assam accompanied simultaneously by droughts in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. She compared the reportage of mainstream media with non-mainstream media outlets wherein the former was shown to cover only 'spectacles' like SUV's getting submerged in cities and completely ignoring the plights of farmers. This nonchalant shamelessness is also evident in less than one percent questions being asked in the Indian Parliament during a span of twenty years by the elected representatives on climate change.

Fatema Abedin Nazla is a journalist based in Bangladesh who articulated her views on how the media can be made more viable for reporting on climate change induced migration. She brought forth an interesting side to migration which are remittances sent from people working in Middle East countries to South Asian countries. She emphasised the need for social media to be leveraged by migrants in order for their stories to be heard and building up social media networks in the process. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be utilised in locating migrants and evaluating the risks they encounter and ensure mobility for them. Mobile phones are ubiquitous in people's lives and MOJO(Mobile Journalism) can be easily practised.



[A screenshot of Fatema Abedin Nazla's presentation about how best to make the media report on climate disaster]

The final speaker in the discussion was Nagraj Adve, author of *Global Warming in India: Science, Impact, and Policies* and a renowned expert in the field of climate studies and migration. He spoke about the need to know the reasons for migration and work on them at a structural level. He emphasised on the need to view sea-level rise as an important factor which will cause large scale migrations in the future and start working on this issue now since this will wash away lands of people which will shatter the very existence of them. He also harped on the changing dynamics of agriculture which include mechanisation of labour and structural inequality based on caste, class, gender deciding migration patterns. A gendered perspective is required to look at the condition of women who are the most vulnerable and left to fend for themselves after the men have migrated. He proffered some ways in which mainstream media can take up questions on climate change and migration. Putting in resources with journalists earmarked for specific aspects of climate change, updating climate change literature in multiple languages, bringing forth the precariousness of workers after the phasing out of coal and energy transition are some ways articulated by him. State policies should be designed to help migrant labourers and an extension of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to urban areas should be considered with an inclusive view of the migrants not predicated upon their ethnicity, cross-border origin. Bharat Bhushan also offered his views on matters plaguing media reportage which include under-reporting of migration issues, stereotyping cross-border migrants as outsiders and criminals and little to no interest in climate change caused migration.

In the question and answer session, Nidhi Jamwal offered her views on issues affecting climate change reportage. She responded to the inability of articulating an issue as serious as climate crisis to be extensively discussed within the word limit set by mainstream media and stressed on the need for constructive journalism by posing solutions and negating the news fatigue that sets in after continuous presentation of negative scenarios. She also stressed on the need to prevent climate change stories from becoming repetitive in nature and factoring in people's experiences while narrating stories. She encouraged the formation of networks wherein migration and environmental journalists from all kinds of media houses would work in tandem to ensure a holistic understanding of issues. Nagraj Adve offered a pragmatic concern and that being media houses, funded by corporates, covering clean energy sources as a solution to climate crisis but ignoring the plight of workers to this transition. His

views were echoed by Fatema Abedin Nazla who said expecting mainstream media controlled by business houses to cover climate change issues was futile and only politicians had the capacity to bring issues to the mainstream. Bharat Bhushan offered his closing remarks and stated that the established network should not be "left as a skeleton but lent some muscle" by setting agendas and working extensively on the ideas discussed in this session. A recording of the session is available here.

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