

**SOUTH ASIA NETWORK FOR
COMMUNICATION, DISPLACEMENT AND
MIGRATION (SAN-CDM)**

PRESENTS

SHOCK/ MOBILITY

Displacement in South Asia

organised by

**Calcutta Research Group (CRG), in
collaboration with DW Akademie**

Registration Link: <https://shorturl.at/gop26>


DATE: 11 DECEMBER (MONDAY), 2023


TIME: 6:30 PM


Moderator: Bharat Bhusan


Speakers:

- Babloo Loitongbam (Human Rights Alert)**
- Jayanta Roy Chowdhury (Senior Journalist)**
- Som Niroula (Alliance for Social Dialogue)**
- MBM Fairooz (Vedivelli)**
- Zia Ur Rehman (Senior Journalist)**

 **South Asia Network for Communication,
Displacement and Migration**

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Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, in collaboration with DW Akademie, organised and online discussion by South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration (SAN-CDM) on "Shock/Mobility: Displacement in South Asia" on 11th December, 2023. Supratik Sinha reports on the proceedings of the roundtable discussion.

The five speakers participating in this roundtable discussion were Babloo Loitongbam, Human Rights Alert; Jayanta Roy Chowdhury, Senior Journalist; Som Niroula, Alliance for Social Dialogue; MBM Fairouz, Vedivelli and Zia Ur Rehman, Senior Journalist. The discussion featured multiple instances of forced displacements in South Asia and the role played by media in covering these issues. The narratives circulated by the media, impact of obstacles like internet shutdowns and biases in affecting the reportage of the conflicts were the focal points around which the discussion centred.

The moderator for the discussion was Bharat Bhushan, eminent journalist and South Asia Editor for 360info and an expert in the field of migration and media. Bhushan has also recently edited the volume *Media, Migrants and the Pandemic in India*. In the welcome note, Bhushan defined shock mobility as "sudden movement of people due to acute disruptions" due to reasons ranging from pandemics, tsunamis, earthquakes to economic crises. Limiting the discussion to conflict induced shock migration and its portrayal in media, the genealogy of the problem was sketched in South Asia. Displacements during Partition, seize of the Afghan government by the Taliban, Rohingyas ousted by Myanmar, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, civil war in Sri Lanka, ethnic conflict in Manipur were some of the conflicts drawn attention to. Focussing on the media coverage of these events, Bhushan set out the aim of the present discussion as seeking to examine the narratives created around the displacements, the responsibility of media, impact of the government policies and the biases within the media itself.

Zia Ur Rehman spoke on the expulsion of undocumented Afghan refugees from Pakistan. He gave a brief overview of the exodus of Afghan refugees to Pakistan which commenced after the USSR invaded the country in 1979 and continued till the recent takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban which sent "600,000" people to seek refuge in Pakistan. Driving out Afghan refugees is a tactic employed by the Pakistani government to create pressure on the Taliban government to expel Pakistani militants. The media in Pakistan has covered this in different ways. English media has been critical of the government for granting the refugees only "28 days" to return to their country. But the local Urdu media in Pakistan has been inept and partisan in its refusal to engage with the issue. Lack of expertise in the local media to deal with refugee issues, shutdown of media houses due to economic problems prevents the emergence of any "informed commentary" about the displacement and have stifled the voices of refugees from being heard by people. By drawing attention to the fact that possession of documents did not stop refugees from being harassed by the authorities and Rohingya refugees have not been expelled, Zia commented on the biased and unethical nature of Pakistan government. He lamented the opportunity lost by the local media to do a humanitarian coverage of the situation and criticised the pressure created on media houses by the government to not report on refugee issues due to "national interest".

Babloo Loitongbam examined the inflow of Burmese refugees into Manipur. Beginning after the Japanese invasion of Burma (now Myanmar) in 1942, the displacement of people has been continuing till the present day as witnessed after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Loitongbam asserted that Indo-Myanmar border is one of the most "unregulated" borders in the country which witnesses movement of people in large numbers. By drawing on the figures released by Manipur State Population Commission which show the uneven growth of certain ethnic groups, the Central government has announced its zero tolerance policy for illegal immigrants. Meanwhile, the situation in Manipur has worsened with the recent ethnic conflict between Kuki-Zo and Meitei tribal groups contributing to an increase in the number of displaced persons. Lack of institutions, non-operational Foreigner Registration Office and a pending judgement in the Supreme Court over the invocation of Article 21 in safeguarding the rights of refugees are some of the existent bottlenecks mentioned by Loitongbam in ensuring humanitarian treatment for the displaced persons. He also spoke on the sparse

media coverage, ignorance of the abysmal condition of refugee camps and inaccessibility of national and international media to spaces of conflict induced migration as some of the roadblocks in balanced media reportage.

Mohammed Fairouz offered his views on the displacement of people in Sri Lanka due to armed conflicts. A leftist organisation, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna had led an insurgency against the government first in 1971 and then during 1987-1990 and a civil war which occurred between 1983 and 2009 between Sri Lankan government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were the two major conflicts which created large scale and protracted displacements. Figures show that approximately "1 million" people have been displaced in the Northern and Eastern provinces as an aftermath of these conflicts. People migrated to Tamil Nadu and also applied for asylum in countries like United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Some of the challenges faced by internally displaced people included inadequate shelters, economic crises, psycho-social trauma and security concerns. Mainstream media released biased reports which only featured the point of view of the government and failed in its responsibility of raising the concerns of the refugees at a critical juncture. Fairouz argued that the presence of social media in the past would have made a huge difference in depicting the pathetic conditions of refugees and force the government to take steps for their well-being.

Som Niroula spoke on the forced migration of people in Nepal to the cities due to the Maoist insurgencies that took place between 1996 and 2006. Till the present day, people have not been able to return to their homes since armed groups have laid siege on them. Niroula criticized the inadequate funds released by the government as compensation and the ignorant stance of the media to this crisis which was considered as not being "worthy of attention." He stressed on the "fabricated stories" constructed by the media outlets which stink of hatred for outsiders and the spectacle created out of crises like climate induced disasters by focussing only on the number of people killed and not directing attention of the concerned authorities to the livelihood problems, destruction of homes created as a result of it.

Jayanta Roy Chowdhury spoke of his experience of working in Press Trust of India (PTI) while covering the ethnic conflict between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur. He commented on the "cartelisation of news" wherein a single perspective was circulated among the media houses. To bypass a biased coverage due to the markers of identity lurking in the crisis, PTI had to rely on Assam Rifles officers to get a neutral perspective and recruit journalists from Guwahati and Imphal to get an insider view of the situation. Ban on internet services further escalated the problems of media reportage. Roy Chowdhury also spoke on the crisis in Mizoram which is hosting the "largest number of refugees in North-East India" from Myanmar, Manipur and Bangladesh and commented on the red tape as affecting the access of the State to international media outlets. Highlighting the predicament of the Bru tribes who have been displaced to Tripura, he spoke of the "double shock" that they face in terms of being uprooted from their homes and uncertainty after re-locating to a new place.

In the question and answer session, Fairouz mentioned the use of Tamil by the local media in Tamil Nadu to report on the displacement crisis as creating a language barrier for understanding the situation by the Sri Lankan government. He also drew attention to the fact that not only are Sri Lankan refugees unwilling to go back to their country but an increase in migration to India can be observed due to the economic crisis in the country. Loitongbam reminded the audience that it takes time and effort to become aware of the "hidden narratives" existing among the ethnic groups in Manipur and an alternative to Meitei-centric reportage was met with fierce disapproval by the government. He also suggested setting up a competent government body in Manipur or inviting the United Nations High Commissioner

for Refugees (UNHCR) to open an office there for the identification of refugees. Riy Chowdhury referred to the deliberate avoidance of ethnic markers by PTI to report on the conflict in Manipur which would negate any chances of escalation of the crisis and argued that identity markers had been co-opted as means of political mobilisation by people having vested interests. Tahir Khan, responding in the absence of Zia Ur Rehman, asserted that Urdu media disregarded the "ethics of journalism" by reporting the military and Pakistani government's perspectives and not doing a humanitarian coverage of the crisis.

Delivering the closing remarks for the discussion, Bhushan presented a brief list of to-dos for journalists who intend to report on migration matters.

1. Journalists need to be careful about spreading xenophobic narratives.
2. Reportage should not dehumanize the displaced people, depriving them of human qualities such as personality, dignity, professions.
3. The reportage should not create a separation between us and them—the viewing subject and the distant object, often captured through long shots in photographs.
4. Journalists need to be wary about feeding into stereotypes created by the state, as either security or economic threats, or criminals.

In an era where instances of shock migration and ethnic conflict proliferate every day, journalism should not obstruct any chances of integration of displaced persons in society.

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