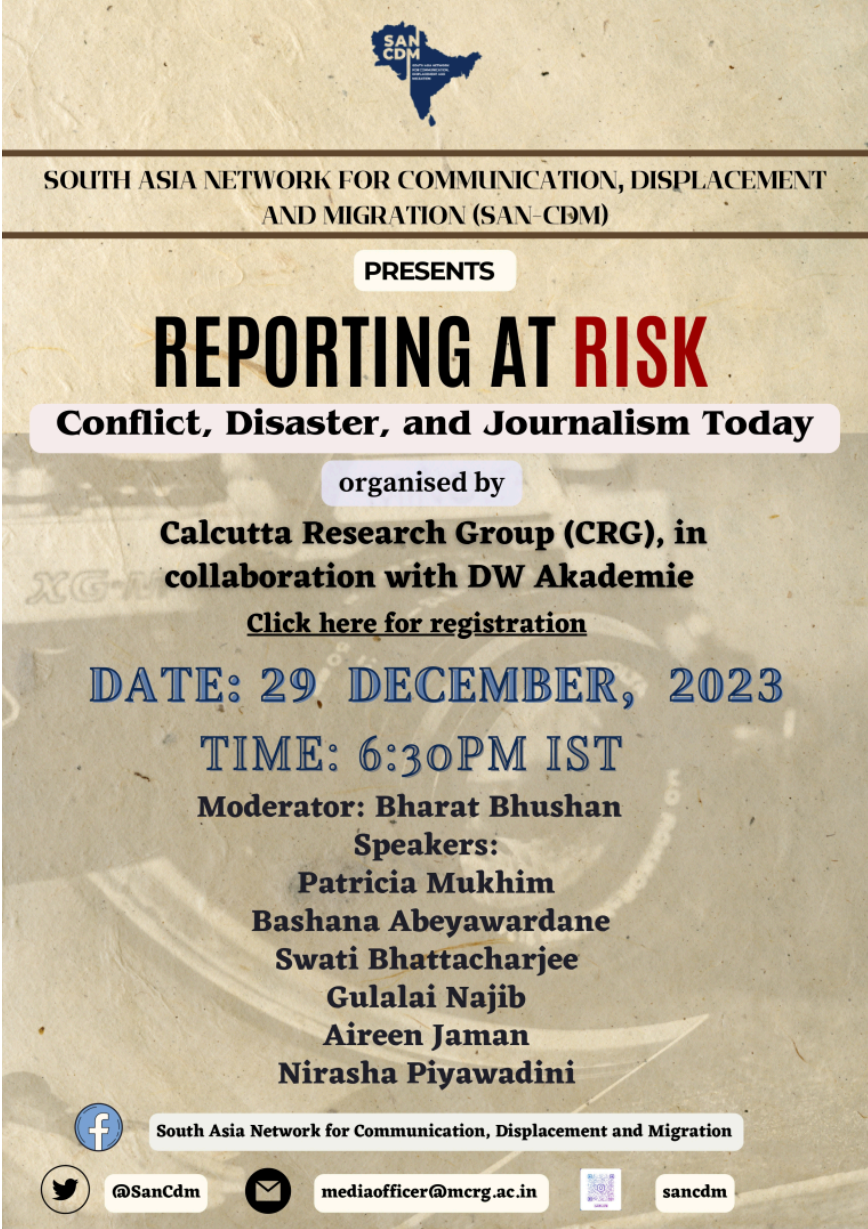



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“Reporting at Risk: Conflict, Disaster and Journalism Today” – A Report




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

PRESENTS

REPORTING AT RISK

Conflict, Disaster, and Journalism Today

organised by

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

[Click here for registration](#)


DATE: 29 DECEMBER, 2023




TIME: 6:30PM IST

Moderator: Bharat Bhushan

Speakers:

Patricia Mukhim
Bashana Abeyawardane
Swati Bhattacharjee
Gulalai Najib
Aireen Jaman
Nirasha Piyawadini

 South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration

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Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, in collaboration with DW Akademie, organised an online discussion by *South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration (SAN-CDM)* on “Reporting at Risk: Conflict, Disaster and Journalism Today” on 29th December, 2023. Supratik Sinha reports on the proceedings of this roundtable discussion.

The speakers participating in this discussion included Patricia Mukhim, editor of *Shillong Times* and a Padmashree awardee, from India; Bashana Abeyawardane, exiled journalist and member of *Journalists for Democracy*, Sri Lanka; Gulalai Najib, editor of *Afghan Times*, a woman led web portal; Swati Bhattacharjee, Senior Assistant Editor, *Anandabazar Patrika*; Nirasha Piyawadini, an independent journalist from Sri Lanka, working for UN Women Asia Pacific; and Syeda Aireen Jaman, the President of Forum for Freedom of Expression, Bangladesh. The discussion revolved around the risks that journalists face while covering conflicts and how their identity plays a factor in their reportage as well as in the risk faced.

As the moderator of the discussion, Bharat Bhushan, well-known journalist and expert in the field of migration, noted that the discussion would revolve around the risks faced by journalists while reporting on conflicts. Nature of conflicts could range from ethnic, religious conflicts to full-scale wars, which pose threats like harassment, imprisonment or death for journalists. The discussion would also take into account the identity of the journalists which poses professional as well as moral dilemmas in their reportage. The discussion would also investigate the ways in which, according to him, journalists and editors "reproduce and renegotiate" the meaning of media coverage in societies during conflicts.

Patricia Mukhim began with an anecdote about how a militant outfit in the Indian state of Meghalaya sent a letter to the newspaper wherein it demanded actions to be taken against the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) for not protesting the closure of a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) and asked for the publication of it. Through this instance, the dilemmas of reporting were teased out. Depending on the decision to publish or not to publish, the police or the militants were likely to attack the newspaper office. Drawing attention to the reportage around the Manipur conflict, Mukhim commented on how being a local is simultaneously an advantage in terms of rendering a nuanced understanding of the conflict while also posing risks to the lives of journalists if they choose not to align with a particular faction. The lack of training and the ease with which reporters are expected to practise emotional detachment, in which their identity itself can be at stake, does not translate into effective reportage in praxis. The "do no harm" protocol often cannot be enacted since editors themselves order coverage to be sensationalised. Returning to the Manipur conflict, Mukhim criticised the practice of 'parachute journalism' which resulted in media coverage only from Imphal valley while ignoring the situation in the hills.

Bashana Abeyawardane traced a brief history of the organisation of exiled journalists from Sri Lanka, Journalists for Democracy that he is a part of. Post 2004, the murder of a Tamil journalist by the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) sparked off scores of journalists leaving the country for asylum. Since that incident, "44 media workers (had) been made to disappear" of which, 39 dissenting voices belonged to the Tamil community. This depicted the concrete links existing between ethnic identity and victims of State violence. Reporters from the majority community were targeted based on their position on the Tamil issue. Abeyawardane argued that the biggest criminal and perpetrator of violence since the independence of Sri Lanka has been the State. Through the two Sinhalese uprisings against the government and the Tamil insurgencies in the country, more than 60,000 people have been killed. The 'sin' of journalists was to expose the violence perpetrated by the State on innocent young men through the use of videos recorded by the armed forces themselves. Abeyawardane opined that journalists can hope to have some "breathing space" in the country and not be killed for their reportage unless they investigate the crimes committed by the State.

Gulalai Najib highlighted the difficulties faced by Afghan women journalists by drawing on her experience on working in *Afghan Times*. The arrival of Taliban confined women to their homes, preventing them stepping outside without being accompanied by male family

members or relatives. The inability to have jobs in this milieu has forced women journalists to work covertly. Women were hesitant to talk about their concerns and experiences due to the fear of being caught by the government. The abysmal presence of women reporters has contributed towards the lack of coverage of women's voices. Financial constraints faced by the media outlets and reporting as only conducted in Pashtun and English while ignoring the other local languages are some of the other issues plaguing reportage. Amidst the continuous assault on human rights by the Taliban, women journalists have continued working in conditions inimical to their well-being. The pathetic economic and social conditions have forced women to adopt the choice of not having daughters which in turn, reflects the impact the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan are having on women.

Swati Bhattacharjee spoke on how the Indian government has been invoking borders in the form of gender or ethnic identities in society. To deflect attention from the lawlessness of the State, it deploys strategies that make the journalist appear biased in nature. The speaker recounted an anecdote where people, mostly belonging to the general category, protested against the sale of liquor by tribals in front of their apartment. Women protested against the anti-social behaviour that emerged out of this practice. A journalist had reported that the authorities took no action during this protests. Ironically, this reportage led to this journalist being booked under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. This depicts how laws are used by the State against the interests of reporters. The appropriate concerns raised by the Editors Guild around the biased coverage towards Meiteis in the Manipur conflict solidify her point of the State being intolerant towards dissenting voices. Referring to the bills passed in the Indian parliament ranging from the Telecom bill, IT bill and the impending Broadcast Bill, Bhattacharjee argued that the laws were becoming "diabolical" in nature. Portraying these trends, the speaker warned against the dangerous implications of government controlled bodies deciding the truth or the correct representation of conflicts.

Nirasha Piyawadini focussed on how online harassment of women journalists pose a threat to their well-being. A survey released by Hashtag Generation showed how women accessed social media to a lesser extent due to the fear of being harassed online. The speaker commented that harassment against women reporters and social activists is "one of the three gravest threats to International Press Freedom." Continuous violence shown through this means silences women, discredits individuals and prevents their concerns from getting heard in the mainstream. This necessitates the institution of a support system for women. Citing two case studies where a journalist named Sharmila Seyyid received rape threats from fundamentalists for suggesting the legalisation of prostitution to ensure safety standards in it and cases filed against comedians in Sri Lanka for being critical of government policies, Piyawadini depicted the precarious existence that women face both in online and offline spaces. The speaker suggested measures like punishment for perpetrators of harassment, prioritisation of preventive education for women journalists and ensuring creation of protection mechanisms for women to feel safe in society.

Syeda Aireen Jaman discussed the various sections under the Cyber Security Act (CSA 2023) in Bangladesh which has been described by the US Department of State as "one of the most draconian acts in journalistic history." Nine sections, respectively, 8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 43 and 53 were amended and changed from the older Digital Security Act. These sections have been used by the government to criminalise certain kinds of information and publication of facts. Definitions of crime have been left deliberately vague to twist it and suit the State narrative. By drawing attention to amendments in seven sections dealing with punishment and bail, Aireen Jaman depicted how the government was only interested in these domains to serve its ends of criminalising dissent. Along with these amendments, sections in the older act which gave the right to government bodies to take down or block content deemed as

'inappropriate' and sections which enabled the police forces to search any place without warrant have been retained in the new act. The speaker warned that the authorities were bound to misuse the powers it entrusted upon itself and stifle dissent. Apart from the CSA, other laws which threaten freedom of expression in Bangladesh include the Penal Code 1860 and Official Secrets Act 1923.

In the question-and-answer session, Gulalai Najib stressed on the secrecy that has to be maintained while engaging in reportage in Afghanistan, especially in the aftermath of cases where women journalists have been incarcerated and killed. Patricia Mukhim reminded everyone that journalists have to continue covering conflicts to let the stories circulate among people even under unfavourable conditions by wriggling out of bottlenecks in the form of extortions and threats issued by non-State actors. Bashana Abeyawardane argued that identification with victims in conflicts enables coverage of it from mainstream media and ignorance to crimes committed against minorities is what "makes a nation." Replying to a question on the muteness observed by Sinhalese journalists when their Tamil colleagues were being killed, he asserted that the majority was complicit in the murder of innocent people and they deliberately prevented crucial information from reaching to people. Offering his closing remarks, Bharat Bhushan observed that in conflicts, journalists deliberate and act in ways that "defines public opinion." He further drew attention to the fact that a transition to a peaceful state does not guarantee the erasure of pressures that existed on journalists and censorship – imposed externally as well as internally- continues to operate unabated.

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🗓 April 2, 2024

Uncategorized

afghan women, aghan women, cyber security act bangladesh, Disaster, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, gaza, journalism, journalists in conflict situation, manipur conflict, news, palestine, politics, reporting at risk, taliban, tamil conflict in sri lanka

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