



Asylum and Refuge amid COVID-19: An Indian Perspective

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The Indian subcontinent was introduced to the concept of 'Refuge' in later half of the 1940s when millions of people had to cross the borders of about-to-be-formed nations – India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The infamous exodus, propelled by religious fundamentalism, led to a series of man-made calamities – mutual killing between the two communities, relentless violation of women and insatiable hunger.

Towards the end of the following decade, the Indian people, while preparing to wage a war against China, were exposed to another term – 'Political Asylum' as a 24-year old Dalai Lama sought India's help to abscond from his native land – Tibet which was about to be occupied by China. In the following years, international political condition has witnessed a huge number of Political Asylums which included names like Idi Amin, Benazir Bhutto, Ayub Khan, Pervez Musharraf etc. Adding to that, a huge number of refugees from the countries like Syria and Myanmar had to abandon their homelands.

After the outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown caused by 'COVID-19' the socio-economic condition in India, demanded reframing and redefining of these two terms – Political Asylum and Refuge. According to the popular belief, the two terms are specifically applicable in case of international transfer of individuals or masses owing to social, cultural and political tension; it was usually not associated to the internal transfer within a specific political and geographical boundary. However, in 2002, when the religious unrest went to its level worst, a tailor named Qutubuddin Ansari (often referred as the 'Face of Gujarat' by mainstream media) sought shelter and



resumption of his occupation in Kolkata – an internal migration forced by then existing socio-political condition. Nevertheless, the economic aspect of such migrations has never gained adequate attention from the mass or the media.

That is why the condition created by 'COVID-19' driven lockdown stands different from its crisis-causing predecessors. A huge number of Indians, working away from their hometowns, have come to a state of complete standstill – they are unsure about their jobs, their destination and their destiny.

According to media reports, at least 23 lakh people had to migrate from one place to another within the country. Strikingly enough, no transport, at least in the initial phase, was available. Hence, such migrant workers started walking down the highway and railroads. The obvious question will be, why did they have to walk such distance which was (and is) almost impossible for the human beings to cover? First, most of such workers were either sacked by the organization they were working for, or evicted by the landlord whom they were paying rent to while staying outstation. Second, they had to look for an alternative way of income in order to survive. Most of them, hailing from some rural or suburban area, hoped to get some contractual work under the governmental schemes like MGNREGA. Third, some of them were forced to move for some other reasons like medical emergency. For example, a 15-year old girl named Jyoti Kumari had to take a humongous bicycle ride from Gurgaon to Bihar; she had covered a distance of roughly 1200 km in seven days and that too carrying her ailing father on the rear side of the bicycle.



However, such instances of 'Long March', if we can call them so, did not necessarily create any sympathetic or empathetic reaction among the common public. On the contrary, most of the people became apprehensive that such migrants could carry the virus along with them and it would cause a massive community spread. Moreover, they were 'breaking the rules' by two means – walking on the streets without abiding the law enforced by lockdown and walking together rejecting the idea of social distancing. In reality, a considerable number of such people died on the way – without food, water and shelter. The most pathetic incident was probably the running over of 16 migrant labourers by a train near Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Those labourers were totally ignorant about the fact that although public transport system was suspended, some goods trains were in operation. The horror of the accident (particularly the photographs showing scattered pieces of bread on the rail track) went to such an extent that the international media giants like 'The Guardian' and 'The Daily Mail' carried the news with great importance.

The whole situation, undoubtedly, invited an analysis through the Foucauldian lens. The first concept which is extremely important in this regard is 'Governmentality'. One of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, Michel Foucault had coined this term combining two words – government and rationality. This rationality is not an instinctive feature of a common human mind, but the sense of rationality which the government (established power or authority) intends to create among its public. In other words, 'Governmentality' is a conscious effort by the government to shape the mentality of the people in a definite and particular way. In the globalized world, the task has become easier involving the confidante media, as shown by Noam Chomsky



and Edward Herman in their 1988 publication 'Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media'. Interestingly enough, the senses created by the expressions 'Governmentality' and 'Manufacturing Consent' are quite close to each other. In the case of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, such intentions by the government, its manifestation and consequences, together, created a definite 'fear psychosis' among the mass. Hence, their reaction regarding the migration of the labourers, who sought refuge amid this crisis situation, was apprehensive instead of being humane.

Two more Foucauldian discourses are extremely relevant in this regard. First, 'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison', a book published in 1975. In this discussion Foucault showed how power is acquired, preserved, possessed and exercised to gain control over the people. Although the concept was given 45 years prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the basic ideas still stand tall in the ongoing pandemic situation.

A critical interpretation may suggest that the established power ignored the need to these migrant labourers stating the reason of 'greater good', at least in the initial phase. Hence, the reluctance of lawmakers to take care of the so-called 'lawbreakers' seemed somehow justifiable. On the other hand, remaining inside one's home (often considered as voluntary imprisonment by various individuals under the current circumstances) proved one's loyalty to the authority. Second, Foucault's 1961 publication 'Madness and Civilization' discussed in detail about phenomenology and how asylum came into existence for those who violate 'norms'. If interpreted from the perspective of the ongoing situation, and exercising the Saussurean idea of signification, we can come out with the ideas – COVID-19 (phenomenology), lockdown



(norm) and migrants i.e. ‘possible carriers’ of the virus who are to be kept in the quarantine centres (asylum).

Undeniably, the Government of India and different provincial governments took the necessary steps to counter the situation. Consequently, a number of ‘Labourer Special’ passenger trains were put into operation to make the migrant labourers return home; daily wage earners were given either ration or food cooked by the community kitchens. Yet, the whole arrangement seemed to be extremely inadequate considering the gravity of the situation. The socio-economic suffocating condition of the migrants, the confined, the hungry loudly echoed the last words of George Floyd – “I can’t breathe!”

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