SPECIAL EDITORIAL

Migration: Contemporary Issues and Concerns

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The phenomenon of migration and related experiences are contentious. We live in an ‘age of migration’ where the mobility of people to different places is either celebrated or contested. The scale of mobility is immense comprising different types of migrants - refugees, illegal immigrants, economic migrants, climate and environmental refugees, previously internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, trafficked men, women, and children, escapees of war, violence, and natural disasters.

The process of migration impinges on several socioeconomic aspects of existence and its inter-relationships. Though the neo-classical economic perspective emphasises upon individual choice behind the decision of migration for ‘maximising their well being’, the historical and political circumstances are nuanced. The Economic Survey (2016-17) presents a standpoint about interstate migration in the chapter ‘India on the Move and Churning: New Evidence’ that quotes B.R. Ambedkar as follows: “An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to the other”1.

In fact, the migration process has been eulogised as transformative for economic development. The experience of many developing countries shows that migration has tremendous potential to improve human
development (UNDP 2009; IOM 2015). Although migrants are crucial to the economic development of nations/regions, the continuous ‘othering’ of migrants by those who claim themselves as ‘natives’ or ‘sons-of-the-soil’, complicate the migrants’ life, which presents challenges for the political economy. The labouring poor migrants are at the receiving end of this nativist-majoritarian politics. The contention is visible in recent incidents against migrants in several states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Assam in India. The politics and tension around the Citizenship Amendment Bill and the National Population Register, underline the complex nature of legality, identity and citizenship. The nation-state boundary, issues of legality and illegality and contentious citizenship vis-a-vis the lives and circumstances of the labouring poor, have become legal quagmires. Seasonal and temporary migrants with low levels of education and skills are more vulnerable to exclusion in urban areas, for example, social security programmes, access to education and healthcare, and, most importantly, entitlement to housing at the place of destination, owing to the absence of identity and residential proof (Bhagat: 2018). Besides, migration frequently involves longer working hours, poor living and working conditions, social isolation and poor access to essential amenities.

Even though labour migration from rural to urban areas is a persistent feature in India, a substantial chunk of the migrants belonging to poor working classes, are unable to rent or own a home in the city. They are forced to live in public spaces, such as pavements by the roadside, at workplaces, in slums or makeshift shelters (Jha and Kumar 2016). The ever-growing informalisation of labour, displacement and inadequate resettlement of people results in restricted access to affordable housing, services, workspaces and social welfare. Migrants suffer from the condition of ‘suspended citizenship’ and lead their everyday domestic life under public gaze and face structural violence. Migration, therefore, offers itself for research and engagement around the rigidity as also the fluidity of the conception of citizenship and the enactment of boundary around it. The relationship between the migrant and the state involves deeper scrutiny, so as to develop an informed response from human service professions.

Despite their contribution to the economy and social life, the migrants are made out to be misfits within the nation and outside the nation-state boundary. They make host society ‘anxious’ and put the life of mobile people in continuous temporality and uncertainty. The exigencies of majoritarian democratic politics often make mainstream political parties
take hostile and intolerant views towards the migrants; who are called ‘infiltrators’ and often blamed for ‘rising crime’, ‘responsible for the crime against women’ and such other concerns.

With heightened tension, conflict and violence erupting around issues of ethnicity and natural resources across the world, the nature, character and discourses on migration are getting further complicated. For example, the recent European migration crisis has seen anxiety around safety and security of the host country gaining prominence in the discourse. Beyond the prevailing understanding of a west-centric nation-state, the forced migrations in Asia, Africa and other places, demonstrate a far more nuanced and complex reality. How are we to make sense of the complexity of the milieu and vulnerability of migrants?

When one shifts attention from internal migration to the situation of cross-border movement, the predicament of ethnic conflicts and violence, the problematic of identity and citizenship draws ones’ attention. We frequently encounter situations that render the vulnerable community as stateless. The number of people being forced to leave their homeland is growing exponentially; it is an estimated 65 million worldwide (UNHCR 2016)6. In the recent construction of migration as ‘European crisis’, Samaddar (2015)7 exposes the paradox of human mobility by insisting “Crossing borders might be a banal routine for cosmopolitan elites, yet reports, everyday, show that it continues to be a death-resisting and not infrequently death-embracing journey for refugees, and immigrants in search of life and security”. Closer home, labelled as Asia’s ‘boat people’, Rohingya experiences of violence and forced eviction from Myanmar is an exemplary case of ‘bare life’8. The post-colonial Myanmar differentiated between social groups, separating the Rohingya as “others”. The state induced-violence based on ethno-religious lines and the policies of exclusion and ethnicisation led to experiences of forced labour, removal of citizenship, depopulation of their communities and severe abuse of children, elders and women.

To add to the woes of the suffering community, the neighbouring countries turned a blind eye towards this vast humanitarian crisis. Bereft of citizenship and denied refugee status, the Rohingya turned out to become a stateless community. Except for Bangladesh, all neighbouring countries have been extremely hostile and have not allowed the community to enter into their territory. By now, more than 907,199 Rohingya are living in camps in Bangladesh in abysmal conditions9. They face a cycle of poor infant and child health, malnutrition, waterborne illnesses, and abysmal
lack of health care, making everyday life miserable in the camps. How are we to make sense of this persistent insecurity, vulnerability and deprivation and how are we to engage with the enormous humanitarian crisis? These are complex challenges for national and international social work practice. The situation demands a dynamic response by way of serious research-based advocacy and policy intervention by social work educators and practitioners. Being trained to respond to the humanitarian crisis, the intervention towards varied concerns ranging from identity issues to access basic services and health care require a concerted and coordinated response. The social workers need to comprehend the nuances of disenfranchisement and organise their role and relevance beyond bureaucratic intransigence. Through research, field intervention and policy engagement, social workers can ensure that people who had to flee their country and cannot return due to persecution are entitled to basic human rights and dignity.

NOTES
8. Drawing from Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s concept for life, Bare life refers to a conception of life in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way a life is lived which means life with possibilities and potentialities.