

Human Cost of Migration in the Light of Coronavirus Pandemic and Partition 1947

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Abstract

The Partition of India embroiled itself as an event that caused enormous suffering to those who faced it. The sour traces of the ambush in the form of burglary, communal killings, dishonouring of women, and mass exodus are hard to forget. The long journey by foot in the summer heat, hunger and thirst, constant fear of an attack by people of opposite faith, separation and death, to name a few, were the dreaded consequences of the journey from one side of the border to the other. The enforced migration has significantly prolonged adapting to the colossal history of separation from one's land, home, work, family and identity. The advent of the Corona Virus Pandemic pictured an analogous situation. It returned as a blunt reminder of the history of migration years ago, in 1947. A close examination of the dismal migration scenes during the Partition and the Pandemic gives us an understanding of the anguish and misery people had to go through in the Indian context. This paper seeks to look upon the sights of migration as a curse on the country's inhabitants because of the innumerable human lives it costs.

Keywords: India's Partition 1947, Pandemic, Migration, History, Trauma.

Then began India's biggest migration since partition when millions of these migrant workers based in India's big cities began their march home to distant villages (Misra S10).

The Partition of 1947 is one of the most significant and devastating social and political events of the Indian subcontinent. It completely transformed the lives of millions of ordinary people (Gould and Legg 70). Literature on Partition centres on the social and political agitation, overwhelming riots, brutality along religious lines, and large-scale migration that ensued. As the years pass, more studies related to the holocaust are being conducted. The event, in its multiple forms like psychological impact, brutality against women and children, large-scale exodus, pangs of resettlement, its humane perspective, and many others, continues to inspire many scholarly works and research. Lately, comparative partition studies, material memories and oral histories are gaining prominence in Partition literature.

The ramifications of the sudden outbreak of Partition violence have kept visiting us since 1947 in various forms, like Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, several Indo-Pak wars, terrorist attacks, anti-Sikh riots, cases of Hindu-Muslim violence in the country, etc. As we move

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further away from the shared history of 1947, we are also on the verge of losing the Partition survivors with the nearest possible authentic accounts of the times during tension with them. Platforms like the 1947 Partition Archive and The Partition Museum, Amritsar, are working against time to foster and preserve as many as possible surviving stories from the people who lived through Partition. They invite people from both sides of the border to share the stories of their lives before, during and after the partition. They talk about love, humanity, suspicion, the fragility of human actions, perseverance through tough times and much more.

The present study discusses migration as one of the most overwhelming results of Partition (other than the communal killings) while presenting an analogous image of migration after the advent of the Corona Virus Disease in 2019 (COVID-19). Thousands of migrant workers escaped from cities to their homes in remote areas. With the burden of earning money and the pressure of feeding their children, they were forced to walk hundreds of miles to their villages.

The Disney Hotstar presentation 1232 Kms, by Bhagirathi Films Production, records the journey of seven migrants on the verge of hunger who decide to return to their villages. It is a significant effort to capture the plight of poor labourers, representing the plight of every migrant labourer. The migrants were shown to face the repercussions of one of the most significant pandemics in the world, being a part of one of the largest mass migrations since 1947. Such worthy efforts make it possible to keep the research endeavours alive and allow various scholars and writers to study their past closely concerning the present in the most reliable ways. The outburst of coronavirus cases in India and the subsequent lockdown stimulated the study and research on Partition. Guneeta Singh Bhalla, the founder of the 1947 Partition Archive, finds that the pandemic enabled her to organise the talk show Sunday Stories Life on a digital platform when the plans for a live event seemed impossible (Mohta). In the show, people from both sides of the border were invited to discuss the shared history lost to Partition. The Archive has recorded around 10,000 stories since 2010.

The counterparts of millions of people migrating across the newly drawn borders after the announcement of Partition were much smaller. There was no communal madness to run from, and migration was not one-way or permanent during the pandemic. The outspread of the virus and the mass migration of the workers still struck as a blunt reminder of the tragedy in 1947:

While many nations see echoes of the 1918 influenza epidemic, or even the medieval Black Death, in their battle against the new coronavirus, India is reminded of a more modern tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of desperately poor workers and their families have taken to the roads

recently, fleeing cities for their home villages in a mass migration reminiscent of the 1947 Partition that gave birth to modern India and Pakistan (Hazari).

The Partition- 1947

Since the beginning of civilisation, people have crossed lands and waters searching for a new settlement for centuries. Numerous reasons culminate in human migration- better opportunities, employment, economic conditions, or fleeing persecution and other sources of violence. Hence, migration is a significant element of the human experience.

Partition and the trailing migration caused countless suffering to their victims. The bitter traces of the unexpected occurrence in the form of burglary, communal killings, dishonouring of women, and mass exodus remain unforgettable. The imposed migration significantly loitered the adapting to the dark history of separation from one's land, home, work, family and identity. The extensive journey by foot in the summer heat, hunger and thirst, constant fear of an attack by people of opposite faith, separation and death, to name a few, were the dreaded consequences of the journey from one side of the border to the other.

The adverse effects of the event were prevalent; it brought disorder to the seemingly steady lives of ordinary people. They were forced to take an irrevocable journey to the other side of the dividing line, leaving everything behind. Immediately, people started to walk on unknown roads toward an uncertain future. 'By 1948, as the great migration drew to a close, more than fifteen million people had been uprooted, and between one and two million were dead' (Dalrymple). The immense wave of migration was one of the largest mass migrations in history, triggered by unprecedented riots and mass casualties.

The Pandemic-2019

The pandemic put the world in an unparalleled catastrophe and ongoing uncertainty, with countless deaths, depression, redundancy, unavoidable quarantine, loneliness and the ban on travelling. The outbreak affected all sections of the world population and was extremely detrimental to people living in scarcity, older people and persons with disabilities. Homeless people, unable to take permanent shelters safely, were highly exposed to the virus threat. Refugees, migrants, or displaced individuals also suffered excessively from the pandemic and its aftermath – due to restricted movement, scarcer employment prospects, increased prejudices, etc.

The sights of people embarking on gruelling journeys by foot after the announcement of a countrywide lockdown due to the Pandemic reminded us of the great migration in 1947. Of course, the intensity of the number of displaced people, casualties, violence and distress in

both situations is vastly different. The magnitude appears much smaller, but it was no less than a tragedy.

Since the end of March, when the government closed borders and halted public transportation, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers left cities despite fears that they'd encounter the police, run out of food or water, or succumb to the searing heat. They walked, cycled, and hitchhiked, often along the only route they knew: train tracks. Fathers carried children on their shoulders; women balanced belongings on their heads; people squatted atop crowded trucks—determined to find a way home (Bhowmick).

Anubhav Sinha, director of the film *Bheed* [Mob] (March 2023), also comes very close to the real trauma of the migrants through his striking cinematic depiction. It recaptures the stark challenges of one of the largest migrations in India after the partition of 1947, which happened during the lockdown of 2020. Migrant workers were the most vulnerable groups during the lockdown. Their lives were halted entirely. The well-off people during the lockdown managed to stay at home with online apps to order food and groceries. Gradually, the lockdown for them brought the 'new normal' times. But for daily workers, this might have been the scariest time of their lives. What makes this movie captivating and stand out is its filming in black and white colour. It might be done to evoke similar images of the great mass migration in 1947 through the scenes of suffering and migration in the film. Also, black-and-white filming points back to the older times when differences among people based on caste and religion were most prevalent in India. The film also deals with these differences and criticises their existence even during great difficulties.

The paper aims to study and compare the multiple adversities the migrants go through in India during the pandemic with those during the historical Partition of India. As a result, this paper will discuss the crises and the psychological impacts of involuntary migration.

The Human Cost of Migration

Forced/involuntary migration during Partition and the Pandemic carries a substantial human cost. People who could not safely reach their homes/destination and those reported as lost, injured or dead can be considered the human cost.

'While numbers vary, it is estimated that up to one million people were killed during the violence in 1947, and around 50,000 women were abducted. Some 12 million people were displaced in the divided province of Punjab alone, and up to 20 million in the subcontinent' (Zamindar). The ferociousness of the partition shaped an atmosphere of hostility and plagued the relationships among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims even to the present times. Trains filled

with refugees became the gruesome victims of communal violence. The communities that had lived together for years submitted to an outburst of religious violence during Partition. People had to flee from their ancestral lands to save their lives, leaving their properties and identities behind.

People migrated in caravans by foot, on whatever means could be available, like bullock carts, trains and people with low incomes with limited or no means. Trains were among the most enduring familiar images during the Partition and the Pandemic. The crowded trains, with people glued on every possible part. Refugees clinging to windows, balancing on footboards, hanging between the bogies, crowding on the roofs and hoarding in the most inhuman ways is the image that comes to mind when referring to the Partition. Writers have used trains in literature to give endearing details of the Partition violence. Khushwant Singh, in the book *Memories of Madness: Stories of 1947*, provides a poignant description of the refugee trains:

One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the days of peace. No one sat on the roofs. No one clung between the bogies. No one was balanced on the footboards. But somehow, it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality ... The arrival of the ghost train in broad daylight created a commotion in Mano Majra (74).

The cold-hearted butchery of the passengers on both sides of the border made Partition an unforgettable mishapening in Indian history. There were several instances of inhuman treatment of these migrants reported and recorded. They had to live in constant fear of being out of food, attacked, robbed or subjected to death throughout their journey.

Migrants who had to leave their homelands looking for safer places away from war and violence faced several social and psychological difficulties. Due to the severe internal shock caused by their experiences back home and the migration, resettlement became difficult. The meagre conditions of the refugee camps, lack of survival provisions by the government, improper supply of food and water, and poor sanitisation were some of the significant issues. Another factor that impeded the migrant resettlement was the locals' acceptance. The residents of the new place found it hard to accept the stranger refugees in their neighbourhood and looked at them suspiciously (Nanda 153). They were considered culturally inferior, outsiders or settlers.

During the pandemic, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared the lockdown on March 24, situations were initially under control. Later, on April 15, he announced that it would be extended until May 3, and turmoil occurred among people. Most of these people were the daily wage earners. The fear of running out of food and resources overwhelmed them, so their

decision to return to their hometown sounded completely practical. The poor labourers, working hand to mouth, amassed on the streets and waited for the means to reach their homes. But the conditions during migration were often unsafe:

Every day brings reports of migrant workers dying on the road. On May 8, 19 people were run over by a freight train; observers said they were so exhausted from walking that they had slept on the tracks and did not hear the train whistle. Just over a week later, in Auraiya in Uttar Pradesh, two trucks carrying migrant workers collided, killing 27 (Bhowmick).

The Hindustan Times report of June 2, 2020, says- ‘There were at least 1,461 accidents throughout the nationwide lockdown - from March 25 to May 31 - in which at least 750 people were killed, including 198 migrant workers. There were 1,390 who got injured...’ (Datta). The distressing pictures of migrant workers rambling on foot journeys to their homes, often hungry, confused, and in haste, with small children on their shoulders and arms, were the most enduring memories of the time. It was said to be the most significant displacement after the Partition.

According to the Census 2011, India has a staggering 450 million internal migrants, of which 60 million are inter-state (Rajan and Bhagat). The main places these migrants originate are primarily rural and densely populated states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. The movement is towards urban and industrialised states of Delhi, Punjab, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra. The closure of state borders due to the lockdown during the pandemic hit migrants and their families. The workers/ labourers, in most cases, had limited safety measures against the virus. They worked at factories, as day labourers, as domestic help or at construction sites, which were impossible to do remotely. They were also excluded from government policies to deal with the impact of job losses, resulting in limited or no income. In this crisis, many migrant workers remained stranded in the cities, unable to support their families at home.

Emptied of most vehicles, the roads were filled with bedraggled and poor pedestrians carrying all their worldly belongings in bundles on their heads or all that could fit on their bicycle carriers. Benoy Peter, executive director of the Kerala-based Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, says, ‘They needed to go home because it means a roof over their heads, food, and the comfort of a community’ (Frayer and Pathak). Cases have also come in front about the inhuman treatment of poor migrants on their journey. The government had run over four thousand Shramik (Labourer) Special Trains (although not enough) to ferry the workers/labourers to their respective hometowns until June 2020 (Hindustan Times report of June 5). The most significant criticism the government faced was that the journey was payable. People already out of most of the means of living were charged on the way.

Additionally, the provision of free food, water, slippers, blankets and other things of the requirement was dumped near the doors, creating chaos among the passengers who jumped over each other to get their share.

Mohan, one of the countless migrants, says, 'In the cities, they treat us like stray dogs' (Bhowmik). In *The Hindu*, Srinivas reports that police use force and wield lathis on five hundred migrants moving from Tamil Nadu to their respective home states. Several cases of police aggression over migrants have been reported from all over the country. Disinfectants and soap solutions were poured over the migrants when they crossed the city/state borders.

The thought-provoking film *Bheed*, focuses on the social rift during a difficult time. People were dealing with an unknown fear of being caught in the claws of the impending pandemic. It also focuses on racism emerging from the upper caste, the greediness of the people at power and possession, and religion. It is a film about how, in the Indian scenario, the web of caste and religion was inescapable even during adversity. The film sheds light on the struggles of marginalised communities and the stark divisions in our nation based on religion, race, and caste. It also explores other themes, including police ethics, biased journalism, and oppressive governance.

Rajkummar Rao, Bhumi Pednekar, and Pankaj Kapur are the main actors in the film. The plot revolves around the kaleidoscope of individuals representing various sections of Indian society who were forced to leave their homes in cities or stranded on their journey from cities to villages due to sealed borders. Many left their villages searching for a livelihood in the cities and considered their homes. However, during the lockdown, the city showed little concern for the workers who made it a comfortable living space. The purpose is to encourage the viewers to question their rights and justice in a compromised existence.

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant psychological impact on individuals globally. It's challenging to grasp the magnitude of the suffering experienced by millions of victims. Migrant workers were particularly vulnerable during this crisis, facing severe hardships such as minimal access to food and shelter, insufficient funds, sealed borders, and inadequate infrastructure for support.

The miseries didn't end there for the people. All the trouble they took to reach their safer places and homes resulted in a more profound realisation of their homelessness or, quoting Homi Bhabha's phrase, an 'unhomely' (141) site. He further explains it as a situation where the home does not remain a domestic space, nor does the outer world remain its social or historical counterpart. It is a sudden realisation of the 'world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world' (Bhabha 142). The whacked and worn-out people struggled on long roads to reach

their homes in search of meaning and a sense of physical and emotional security, facing other complications. Millions of migrants surged towards their villages, becoming unemployed, creating a pool of unemployed population in rural areas. There was a sparking of fights over family homes and lands. Reuters of 4 June 2020 reports 'that police recorded more than 80,000 property dispute complaints between May 1 and May 20, more than double the 38,000 cases recorded in April' (Sharma & Rupam). The cases of property disputes were another problem that aggravated the pangs of the migrants.

The pandemic also attacked people's sanity and psyche, especially those with limited means. It seriously impacted the psychological equilibrium of the migrant workers who depended on daily wages to provide food for their families. The lockdown was a blow to their mental stability, causing increased mental stress and disorder. The suicidal tendencies of vulnerable labourers who found themselves helpless and trapped in their houses without money and resources were also reported. The several mental health predicaments they faced were the shortage of jobs, hunger, unsanitary conditions, limited or no housing and transport facilities, uncertainty, lack of social security, and ambiguity in life. Also, 'Increased discrimination as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may further contribute to the already deleterious risk of refugees and migrants experiencing mental health difficulties' (Beerden 3). The pandemic was called the "pandemonium of the pandemic" by Banerjee and Bhattacharya (588) due to its colossal results.

Conclusion

Udit Misra from Indian Express (8 February 2021) asks two very thought-provoking questions- 'One, what did India learn about its internal migration patterns in this process, and why could we not avoid the disastrous reverse migration? Two, if, God forbid, another similar crisis was to happen again, would we be able to respond better and take better care of migrant workers?'. The answer to these questions is that in history where, we could not avoid a disastrous mishap culminating in millions of deaths and displacement.

During Partition and the Pandemic, one thing that was disdainfully ignored by the government of the time was "the visceral power of fear", says Hazari. With the first case of violence among the involved communities, Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other, the other people had a valid reason to flee from the places of tragedy. Gradually, this led to the most remarkable mass migration in Indian history. The miserable labourers and workers also waited twenty-one days after the first lockdown to support government plans and seek the help promised by the authorities. But the extension filled them with fear of

running out of food and other supplies, leaving them with no choice but to take the awful journey back to their villages.

Had the needs of the migrants been anticipated more carefully with appropriate aid, food and shelter before the lockdown order, people might not have experienced the extreme situations of poverty. Also, more time could have been allowed for the people to shift to their desired places. The government could also have the most recent census data to meet the above requirements. Lastly, we must also mitigate the indifferent approach toward the workers' class:

Be it academia, bureaucracy, or the political class, we have to accept that we are ignorant about our labour class and especially about migrant labourers. And this ignorance is borne out of [...] Ignorance fuelled by indifference (Misra).

On a concluding note, India and its citizens cannot afford to bear the destructive outcome of an event like Partition another time. Still, as discussed in the introductory part, people have been dealing with its legacy in many forms. The chaos and crises during the Pandemic revive the memories of the significant displacement in 1947. The oral historian and author Anam Zakaria from Lahore rightly says, 'Partition is not a static event, it is an on-going journey' in one of the series by 1947 Partition Archive (Mohta). Forced/ unwanted exodus for the victims can cost years of agony or a lifetime to settle down with it. We must learn from history and be better prepared each time to confront situations that portray threats to humanity.

From being stuck in the lockdown in migrant lands to going through the difficulties of reverse migration and the struggles of survival, battling through quarantine and financial crisis during the pandemic-time was a fierce combat they had to wage while trying to stay alive and safe from the risk of starvation and infection (Leslin 10).

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