

Diasporas and The Fleeing Crowds Today

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The first ever time I came across this term “diaspora” was some years ago when I was reading an article in an English daily which focused on the “Indian diaspora” in the Gulf countries. In 1995, on a visit to the Middle East, I witnessed the abysmal living conditions of the South Asian labourers there. Subjected to often unregulated working conditions and almost inhuman living environments, these workers represented the first diaspora I had ever come in contact with. The plight of the date-palm climbers under the scorching sun, the cattle-like transportation of the construction workers, the painters hanging precariously on the skyscrapers, two young natives throwing currency notes at the face of an Indian shopkeeper, all these opened my eyes to the real life of a diaspora on a foreign soil and reminded me of the essential economic contribution they all make back home in their own countries including the State of Kerala.

The Greek term *diaspora* denotes religious, national, cultural or ethnic communities on a foreign soil, who had to leave their traditional native places and are scattered over different parts of the world. Once associated solely with the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their closed communities in Babylonia after the downfall of the Jewish kingdom in 586 BC, this term has today become synonymous with the challenge of coping with millions of people of different countries, cultures, languages, religions and ethnicities who have left their original habitat owing to economic exigencies or wars, and who are now left to establish their futures in unfamiliar circumstances on foreign soil.

India itself is no stranger to diasporas. India’s birth was stained in one of the largest, bloodiest ever-recorded human diasporas of all times: the Partition. More than a million people were brutally killed by those who were friends and neighbours until some time ago. With hopes of a safer, better life - not less than 16 million people comprising Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims - moved across the newly demarcated borders in endless caravans. Ever since, India has seen a huge influx of refugees from various countries, mostly from its immediate neighbours. It continued with the influx of Tibetans in 1950 after the invasion of Tibet by Chinese forces; the Bangladesh war in 1971 saw more than 10 million people moving over to Assam and West Bengal to escape sectarian violence; hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils arriving at Rameshwaram during the Eighties; many hundreds from the war-torn Afghanistan and quite recently the influx of some 40,000 Rohingya refugees from the Rakhine province of Myanmar.

Not all diasporas are so tragic. One of the oldest communities that one could today designate as *diaspora* would be the Amish in the United States. Driven by religious oppression in the southern parts of Switzerland and Germany during the 17th century, many of the Amish community members followed their leader Jakob Ammann on his flight to the State of Pennsylvania where they found acceptance and freedom to practice their belief. In 1770, the southeast region of Pennsylvania had a population of 500 members,

which has by now grown to 30,000. Despite the waves of industrialization, modernization and invasion by digital technologies, this community of approximately 300,000 members, still live a very secluded and strict life in 16 American counties. Even today, the Amish community follows a rigid dress code, uses horse carriages to travel, refrain from using electricity from the grid, reject the public schooling and medical insurance, earns its bread mainly from farming or skilled crafts and trades, maintains a strict discipline in the community schools where all children, irrespective of the age or class sit together in a hall, taught by unmarried, young lady teachers, speaking their distinct *Pennsylvanian Deutsch* and practicing their religion very traditionally every second Sunday with women strictly separated in their social positions and responsibilities from the men.

However, not every diaspora is so successful. Today, according to the statistics available with the International Office of Migration, approximately 55 million people have been forced out of their native places, either as internally displaced migrants or refugees in another country. In 2016, the number of international migrants worldwide – that means those who are residing in a country other than that of their birth – reached almost 250 million. This is approximately 3.5% of the world population. This indicates the huge significance that the term *diaspora* has assumed over the last few decades, starting mainly from the 80s and it goes without saying that no country or region in the world today is insulated from the inward movement of people from another country or region.

As per IOM's World Migration Report 2016, one out of five migrants in the world lives in the top 20 largest cities. International migrants make up over a third of the total population in cities like Sydney, Auckland, Singapore and London, and at least one in four residents in Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Paris is foreign-born. New estimates for the number of migrant workers globally show that the large majority of international migrants in the world are migrant workers.

Looking around the world today, it becomes evident that most of the international migration originates from the crisis-torn North African and West Asian countries like Libya, Syria, Jordan, Ethiopia etc. and this has resulted in a huge influx of refugees to the mainland Europe, braving the dangerous route of the Mediterranean. Despite this risk to life, there seems to be no end to the number of people undertaking this perilous path. The risk of being persecuted or even killed seems to be the only force behind this unprecedented outflow of refugees to Europe since 2015.

The year 2015 witnessed the highest numbers of forced migration since World War II, with a dramatic increase in the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people across various regions of the world – from Africa to the Middle East and South Asia. By the end of 2016 no less than 20 million refugees were added to the list, largely due to the continued conflict in Syria. Some 8.6 million persons were newly displaced in 2015 alone.

The last three years were also the deadliest ones for migrants: increased levels of forced displacement globally were tragically accompanied by record-high numbers of people perishing or going missing while trying to cross international borders. Over 10,000

migrants worldwide are estimated to have died or gone missing since 2015. According to IOM's Missing Migrant project, migrant fatalities during migration to Europe increased several fold compared to the previous years. The Central Mediterranean is considered to be the most lethal migration route in the world, with more than 14,500 deaths recorded in this area since 2014. During the first seven months of 2017, 2,224 migrant fatalities were recorded by IOM in the Central Mediterranean. During 2017, 1 out of 36 migrants attempting to cross by this route perished. This is a significant increase compared to 2016 when 1 out of 88 was reported as missing or dead.

The diaspora of people of a particular community or religion has always been a part of history and will remain so, notwithstanding the preventive or restrictive measures taken by countries that are directly or indirectly affected by this phenomenon. The extreme measures of erecting barbed wire fencing or walls along the border would only serve as a temporary deterrent. Despite all the dangers associated with such flight, people from these crisis-torn regions of the world will continue to attempt to find a safe place to live. The terror of what lies behind them as well as the longing for economic stability, human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religious practice continue to eclipse every fear the refugees have.

A diaspora often begins with a fleeing crowd. In his seminal work on crowds and power, *Masse und Macht*, the Nobel laureate Elias Canetti describes a fleeing crowd as a group of people subjected to a common threat. The danger is uniformly distributed among the fleeing members of this crowd. They all concentrate their entire energy on a single destination, where they expect to find safety. The inhabitants of a city, a region, members of a particular language, race or religion can constitute this kind of a crowd, as in Germany after World War Two.

Within the fleeing crowd, everybody flees together, sharing the danger together and the excitement is the same. The energy of the one increases that of the other. As long as they remain together, they perceive the danger as *distributed*. The most striking characteristic of such a fleeing crowd is its *direction*. What matters are not the distances and differences that existed a while ago among the individual members of the fleeing crowd, but the extreme concentration on reaching the safe *destination*. The flight of such a crowd resembles the flow of a river moving towards its estuary mouth. There are young, old, weak, strong, men and women in this crowd. Because they have a single goal in their minds, they converge to become an entity without any difference. As long as the members have the feeling that everybody moves in a single direction and not against each other, the cohesion in the crowd remains unchanged.

The fleeing crowd, as against the panicking crowd, derives its energy from its cohesion. No one is less endangered than the other and they all move with all their energy to reach a safe place. Such a flight could last for days, weeks or even months. During this uncertain period of flight, some are left behind, either dead or weakened, or killed by an adverse natural power or an enemy. Each dead or weak one brings more stimuli in the others to flee further. The one who lies dead or weak on the ground absorbed the danger of the others. These become more important in the dead condition for the living ones. It is rather difficult

to sufficiently highlight the significance of the dead ones for the survivors. They even crawl with the last traces of energy towards the safe place they have set as their goal, even when the probability of survival is reduced to the minimum. According to Elias Canetti, the fleeing crowd is the most tenacious form of crowd as the members remain together up to the last and final moment of survival.

The natural end of the fleeing crowd occurs with the arrival at a safe destination. The eventual elimination of the danger at the source – be it the end of an armed conflict or war – does not create a fleeing crowd in the reverse direction. The fear of being subjected again to atrocities, economic, political or cultural deprivation and discrimination prevents most of the members of the same fleeing crowd from returning to the place where they originally belonged.

It is interesting that Canetti could also recognize the one aspect that many overlook in today's world that is the role of political leaders in the creation of a diaspora. Leaders, be it Hitler or Kim Jong-Un, will continue to push the lives of people to the edge of extinction out of their own need for validation.

Canetti reminds us in "Crowds and Power":

Quote:

"He starts a war and sends his people where they are supposed to kill, but if large numbers of them die there, he will not regret them. However much he may dissemble, he is never free of a deep and hidden need to see the ranks of his own people thinned. To free him from the anxiety of command, what is really necessary is that not only his enemies should die, but also many of those who fought for him. The forest of his fears has grown so dense that he cannot breathe and he longs for it to be thinned. If he waits too long, his vision becomes blurred and he may do something, which will seriously weaken his position. The anxiety of command increases in him until it results in catastrophe. But before the catastrophe overtakes him, it will have engulfed innumerable others."

Unquote.

One major factor in the management of diasporas is the policy of the new host country. For many Eastern and Western European countries, the armed conflicts in North Africa and the war in West Asia had hardly appeared to be a matter or concern until – in 2015 - they were all of a sudden faced with the reality of millions of refugees who had crossed over to the European mainland in search of an escape and a safe future. Faced with this unparalleled influx of people, certain European countries resorted to measures that violated human rights expected of such circumstances. Germany, however, decided to open its borders and turned itself into a safe abode for more than a million refugees from West Asia and North Africa. Because of a firm decision taken by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her government, supported by a robust economic growth, these refugees could find a new home in Germany. A well-knit policy framework and a proper execution of the integration programs have led to an effective management of the refugee problem. Today, Germany stands as an iconic example for humaneness when it comes to intake and integration of refugees.

In 2015, Germany became the largest single recipient of first-time individual asylum claims globally, with almost 442,000 applications lodged in the country by the end of the year. Thus, Germany became the second most popular destination for international migrants globally, following the United States and preceding the Russian Federation, with an estimated 12 million foreign-born residing in the country in 2016. As Germany opened its doors to more than a million refugees during 2015-2016, many people wondered how this nation was going to cope with such a huge influx. Thanks to a strong economy, a structured plan for temporary accommodation of the refugees in barracks, town halls, schools, sports halls or even in defunct airports, as well as a planned distribution of the refugees across many villages, towns and cities, they managed the overnight increase in the population very effectively. The linguistic, cultural and professional integration of the refugees has started to show the first results by now in Germany.

However, the intake of one million refugees – the majority being members of another religion - has not gone unnoticed by people who represented a hardline view on this. These dissenting voices found their way into the German Bundestag at the recent federal elections, when the newly formed *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) won 12.6% of seats and thus became the first far-right political party to enter the Bundestag in the Post-War era. It is expected that this may cause problems for the ruling coalition of CDU/CSU under the leadership of the Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Despite all this political or social resistance to the arrival of refugees, Germany remains one of the most attractive and safe destinations for those who are forced to leave their homelands. In a nation that was reduced to ashes after the Second World War, one will today find people of not less than 50 different diasporas, who have found a new life there.

One example is the immensely successful diaspora of Keralites living in Germany. The Catholic Church of Kerala originally initiated this economic migration during the early Sixties to bring young nurses from Kerala in order to manage the scarcity of paramedical staff. Today, the 15,000 member strong diaspora of Keralites in Germany has significantly succeeded in socially and culturally integrating itself into the German mainstream. The second and third generations of this Keralite diaspora in Germany enjoy considerable acceptance, respect and recognition and they have moved up the social ladder just like any other German native.

Interestingly, Kerala itself has witnessed its own diasporas. In recent years, our state has been experiencing a large influx of migrant workers from different parts of India. Higher wages, large employment opportunities and an acute shortage of skilled local labour make Kerala a lucrative job market for workers from outside the State, mostly from Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and from nearby countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. Today, the presence of migrant workers in Kerala's labour market is so visible that the language spoken in many of the large-scale construction sites is often not Malayalam, but Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese or Nepali. A study conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (GIFT) estimated the number of migrant labourers in Kerala to be around 3 million, contributing one third of the

domestic production. Whether these migrant Diasporas in our neighbourhood have been recognized as a beneficial part of our society remains to be a topic of discussion. Our economic dependence on them provides at least a temporary shield of acceptance to these migrant communities living in our State.

In a world that is today politically and economically polarized, the peaceful co-existence of several diasporas in the State of Kerala can be an example for many to emulate. The Jains, the Gujaratis, the Punjabis or the Bengalis living in their own communities in Kochi or the millions of migrant labourers distributed across the State, they all so far present a vivid picture of intercultural co-existence. Voluntary or involuntary migration of people from one place to the other will certainly continue to redefine the demographic, cultural and economic composition of the world. No force has ever succeeded in preventing it completely. A fleeing crowd could emerge anywhere and everywhere. There is no prescribed time for a fleeing crowd to form, unless the 'leader' of the crowd gives notice to the expected participants to assemble at a particular point at a given time.

One may wonder about Canetti's obsession with the phenomenon of the crowd and the role it has played in his literary works. However, in today's globalized world, Canetti's encounters with crowds have created a body of work that even today provides us with rich insights into the powerful force that can topple seats of power and threaten the long established traditions of power. Despite this very fact, rulers of the past and even today, live in a kind of intoxication they derive from the power they possess. This feeling of survival is mostly provided by physical elimination of the opponents, namely the threat emanating from a crowd that appears to question the authoritarian seats of power. In Canetti's own words on the survivor's instinct for immortality:

Quote:

"Killing, in order to survive, is meaningless to such a man, for it is not now that he wants to survive. It is only in a hundred years that he will enter the lists, when he is no longer alive and thus cannot kill. Then it will be a question of work contending against work, with nothing he himself can do. The true rivalry, the one that matters, begins when the rivals are no longer there. Thus he cannot even watch the fight. But the work must be there and, if it is to be there, it must contain the greatest and purest measure of life. Not only does he abjure killing, but he takes with him into immortality all who were alive with him there, and it is then that all these, the least as well as the greatest, are most truly alive."

Unquote.

And in today's world, most of the diasporas are being created only because of this limitless greed of the rulers to remain in power at the cost of others' lives.

Thank you