

Justice, Security and Vulnerable Populations of South Asia

An EVALUATION AND ADVISORY MEETING

organised by the

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG)

8 January 2025, Kolkata

A Report

The concluding workshop of the Research Programme *Justice, Security and Vulnerable Populations of South Asia 2024* evaluated the year-long activities and its overarching discussions focused on the relation between macro-security and micro-insecurity, and the security practices of the state and life's insecurity. Therefore, the purpose of this **Evaluation and Advisory** meeting was to discuss the work done in 2024 under the said research programme, and to take a stock of activities and progress, to examine the part of dissemination- what was planned and done so far in 2024- and finally to discuss key achievements, points of improvement, learning and reflections and the way forward in 2025. Around 15 Key Experts, besides CRG staff were present at the day-long Meeting to take part in the discussions.

Session 1: Introduction to the Programme

Ranabir Samaddar, CRG, introduced the purpose of the meeting. The session was moderated by **Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury**, *Rabindra Bharati University & CRG*. Samaddar said, the fundamental understanding of security in the context of Indian and South Asian societies is complicated, and social scientists have worked on it, but CRG decided to interrogate the whole notion of security as it works on the ground, in the micro level. It is not an easy task and CRG has taken the initiative to inquire into different aspects of security to locate the gaps in these studies. He emphasised upon a few points in the context.

1. **The question of Gender** - why is it that in the usual discussions surrounding security, insecurity of some like women, refugees are barely discussed?
2. **On Peace** - Given CRG's own history of a group that began work on peace activism, in discussions surrounding security, one can notice that the question of peace is still very relevant and that it has yet come out prominently in the forefront. For example, how to end civil war situations? Since its inception, CRG has organised peacebuilding dialogues and the question should be revisited.
3. **Data Security**- Technological intervention, cyber security, different technologies of urban security, environmental security etc., are significant challenges to present-day discussions on security. Cyber security is one of the major concerns of the governments in South Asia. There are ample instances of people being harassed in the name of maintaining cyber security. CRG addressed the issue in 2013 through its work on the electronic database and ADHAAR (*Branding the Migrant* book). Samaddar suggested this project will help look back at some of CRG's earlier works on food and environmental security and can take the work forward in 2025. It will be important to talk about insecurity as the fulcrum of security. The lack of social protection in the name of identity and ambiguity in citizenship should be discussed. In many ways social security is expanding but very few reach people. This aspect needs more exploration.

Sucharita Sengupta, *Researcher, CRG*, was the next speaker of this session. She presented the Annual Report of Events & Activities done in 2024 as part of the Research Programme *Justice, Security and Vulnerable Populations of South Asia*. She described the research activities, and programmes in detail, reports of which are available in the website. Online resources also include publications of policy papers and policy briefs. The Annual Report too is available on the website with individual links to all programme organised so far under the Research Programme segment (http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Security_Studies/Security_Studies_Home.asp).

Several suggestions emerged after the presentations. Participants suggested working on perceptions of insecurity and its consequences among ordinary citizens, increasing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) as a challenge to security, misinterpretation of data, fake news, etc.

The day's events followed through several sessions. Some of the key discussions are mentioned below.

Session 2: Discussion of the Report (2024)

In the second session of the day, the detailed Report that was presented by Sucharita Sengupta was discussed. Most participants took part with comments and suggestions but the discussion was moderated by **Paula Banerjee**, *Asian Institute of Technology & CRG* and initiated by **Francis Adaikalam**, *Loyola College, Chennai and CRG*. They discussed various facets of security and insecurity on the ground, some of which are given below:

- Francis Adaikalam spoke about human security and the importance of discussing issues such as land, water, resources and the circles of insecurity that people are often

faced with when it comes to resources. Issues of addressing these contested spaces of human and state security and the ways of resolving disputes and taking ahead discussions were deliberated upon. He also referred to the importance of building solidarities in the context, while also referring to marginalised communities, like some of the Tribal communities in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, and the issue of child protection, especially children security, thus also giving importance to the context of family needs.

- Picking up the thread from here, Paula Banerjee retaliated to the fact that family is not a homogenous unit. In professions such as Textile or Garments in Bangladesh, where intricate handwork like zari is involved, often the entire family does the work—therefore family offers an interesting study when it comes to discussing security-insecurity dynamics. Within the ambit of security, there are multiple insecurities that can become vicious.
- Paula Banerjee also said in evaluating the Annual Report, it will be important to consider the work that has been done alongside what has not been done. The need of exploring, if situation permits, some more of South Asia like Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was highlighted. She also pointed out that a lot can be traced out from state-market relationships and the way insecurity is produced through this. State and market are often allied with each other, yet how the both often get pitted against each other, was among the queries and juxtaposition raised for reflection and dialogue.

In the open discussions some of the important points that have emerged from the Research Briefs and Policy Papers were discussed. As a suggestion, pre-circulation of material before workshops was floated, to help facilitate discussions.

Session 3: Planning for Research Themes and Policy Briefs for 2025

The third session was moderated by **Samir Kumar Das**, *Calcutta University*, & *CRG*. Discussion on the plausible themes was introduced by **Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury**, **Samata Biswas**, *The Sanskrit College & University* and **Nasreen Chowdhury**, *University of Delhi* & *CRG*.

- In 2025 the research focus will be to: a] consolidate, revisit and expand on the existing research of CRG on the theme of justice, security, and; b] bring out the postcolonial insecurities that are always in the making and redefining its contours with regards to borders, citizenship, caste, minorities, etc., following up on the issues that are relatively specific to the South Asia and Global South. A society always lives in cognitive mode and the concurrent understanding of security and punitive state resulting in existential crisis also manifests itself.
- It was decided that the research focus, therefore, should try to introspect, innovate, consolidate and disseminate research which can broadly be classified in three parts: **a] postcolonial insecurities in South Asia, b] insecurities in neoliberal South Asia, c] traditional and non-traditional insecurities of old and newly emerging marginal communities.** Insecurities are embedded in violation of rights and access to justice, denial of security which in itself is an exclusive category always leaving someone behind. There is an intermeshed nature which makes it difficult to always put rights and security in watertight compartments.

Constitutions of each country mandate accessible rights that offer certain notions of security. But, the reverse approach is rarely looked upon. What can be the third dimension when we try to look beyond the two registers of security vs. rights, one is a question of survivability and other is of emergent momentariness. Everyday experience of insecurity is emblematic of the zoning of the enmeshed space of security and rights especially when one considers the dynamic nature of non-traditional threats or permanent change that are unpredictable.

- It is important to delve in the grey zones of the security-insecurity trap especially as neoliberal economy pushes vulnerability in every dimension making everyone question: Who is vulnerable? While situating the vulnerable one has to look from the perspective of both the state and from the margins. Margins and subalternism should be studied as conjecture of concepts. It is therefore important to create a new definition of security by CRG that is not only statist but is also popular in nature since the way one approaches security causes insecurity and it is the mediating agent or factor that determines the nature of (in)security. A change in perspective causes an ideological change in viewing the cause of vulnerability and seeing who is vulnerable.

In this context, the following themes were discussed:

Climate insecurities, climate induced displacement, environmental insecurities:

Cropping patterns and rural-urban migration, public health, fast fashion and impact on environment, recycling of waste; conflicts contributing to climate change and related migrations and health challenges.

Insecurities in a Post Covid-19 world: Continued effects of pandemic on categorizing life, medical insecurities, Epidemiological insecurities leading to the medicalisation of borders.

Urban (In)Securities: The focus should not be only absence of violence but also detail on how securities can be ensured at any urban site especially for women and children. In South Asia, this year should bring in regional dimensions from Nepal and Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Protection mechanisms within family and workplaces should be interrogated.

Economic Insecurities: a] **Insecurities emerging from poverty:** New definitions of poverty and its impact on hunger, health, etc., and its differential impact on urban and rural poor; issues of homelessness in cities; b] **New Labour and Workspace insecurity:** New labour forms are creating new workspaces that are not place bound. In such an economic structure like digital nomads, street vendors, trans theatre practitioners etc. who either do not have a fixed workplace or make the street and walking and performing along the street as their workplace, what will be the mechanism of protection for these emerging labour forces. The socio-legal dimension needs to be explored. The cross section of categories of vulnerability like land, food, water, work, hygiene etc., and its differential embodied experience for women, trans person, man, children and others should be take into consideration; c] **Gig Economy and Platform Labour:** State policies on regulating work conditions, workplace security; d] **Microfinance and debt economy:** Different government schemes and its impacts on

women. e] **Land security, global politics and local manifestations:** Land and communalisation of land. Acts on allotment of land and its impact on different communities. Role of land and impact on eviction and compensation

Insecurities of minorities: Focus on insecurities not just based on constitutional classification of those belonging to minority groups but also other emerging categories like sexual minorities, LGBTQIA+; work and insecurities of Dalits.

Media and insecurity: Reporting at risk in situations of violence, war, escalations. Legal interventions for protection of reporters at the field. Fake news.

Artificial intelligence, cyber security, production of insecurity and ethical considerations: People and technology are becoming more connected with each passing minute. With the increasing state control over its citizens through access to data like biometrics and other primary details, the over transparency of data often ends up being misappropriated. There is a production of insecurity through security. The focus can be on borders and digitization. By border it is not just a geophysical border that cuts across countries but can be more broadly interpreted as anything that vulnerably impacts life like food, water, public distribution systems and its impact on digitized migrants not just international migrants but interstate migrants. Citizenship and digital migrants. Role of third party vendors in managing individual data and data leaks. Role of e-shram portals in managing labour data. AI and epidemiological interactions. Role of AI in social governance and peace keeping. Digital security in an urban framework.

Security of cultural practices and heritages: Documenting and protecting intangible practices, preserving and promoting them. Like recovering tribal languages that do not have a script and are on the verge of extinction or art practices that are dying as only a few practitioners are there. It is important to look into the politics behind heritage security. Preserve and promote heritage security. How heritages are modified in particular times like Covid pandemic. Corporatisation or politicization of heritage versus authenticity of heritage.

Electoral security: Masculinisation of electoral politics; social security and social protection.

Proposed Plan:

- A **Seminar** was proposed on the theme of “Digital Security and Artificial Intelligence: Strategising Legal Framework”.
- A **Workshop** on the selected research theme in 2025.
- A **Compendium** on CRG’s work on security and justice.
- Constituting a **Research Committee** to work, finalise and review the research themes and submissions.
- Academic engagements with civil society organisations.

Session 4: Network Building

In the fourth session of the day, the efficacy of building networks was discussed in lieu of CRG's own trajectory of having organised very successful networks in the past, facilitating peace dialogues in the Northeast, and so on and so forth. Experts present in the Evaluation Meeting, most of whom are long standing associates or members of CRG, discussed at length what is essentially meant by a network and how to conceptualise it in this research programme. The discussion was moderated by **Ritam Sengupta**, *O.P.Jindal Global University*, and led by **Paula Banerjee** and **Jayanta Roy Chowdhury**, *Media Expert & CRG*. **Banerjee** addressed "networks" as "relationships". CRG has built relationships, sustained through years of collaborative efforts. It is important to identify like-minded people and groups and to not lose focus, the strengths and merits of CRG. Even in collaborative efforts, CRG's questioning spirit will strive to exist along with the intersections of politics, integrity and raising voices when and where they are least heard. In this context, CRG's work in India's Northeast has been commendable. Together with **Khesheli Chishi** from Nagaland, a long standing member of CRG, Banerjee said CRG should revisit its work in Nagaland- adding new dynamics of gender, and the aspects of women being forced into dependence on state. It is important to reflect how new liberal policies create insecurities in our time. **Jayanta Roy Chowdhury** underscored that change in the ideological underpinnings of the state can create new forms of insecurities. Thus, there is need of further exploration on how protective measures by the state creates insecurity in relation to children, women, communal violence, refugee populations, etc. It will also be important to investigate the angle of media security, how securitisation of conditions and assurance for reportage can be built-up. **Som Niroula** from Nepal spoke about refugee groups like the Rohingya and how they reach Nepal; how can their movements be securitised in the context of border securities.

Concluding Session

The concluding session of the day was chaired by **Ranabir Samaddar**. **Samir Kumar Das** while summarising the day's proceedings, noted that, through the deliberations two registers of understanding security had emerged—i) The question of life as a question of security; and ii) Rights need to be claimed in order to claim security. A conclusive summary of what CRG has done in the past one year and what is still left to be done was also made and the discussion then veered towards the question of rights. A first order question that came up in the discussion on rights was that one needs to be a human in order to claim rights and at the same time, the intermeshing of rights and security need to be probed deeply in order to have a comprehensive understanding of rights itself. Such probes also bring up a cardinal question—if life is a question of security, then in whom and where should rights be sought? —and also, there should be some sort of human development in the first place in order to be able to claim rights.

The discussion also focused on the nodal points from where security or a sense of it originates and from where rights could be sought. One such critical nodal point is family. Family, as a unit, has traditionally been defined as a site of security. While it acts as a vehicle of providing security by means of securing rights and needs and is entrusted under the neo-liberal construct of protecting rights, it also challenges security of its members when faced with emergency threats and needs urgent response.

In that way, family becomes an ideal example of how rights and security get maneuvered in real time situations pertaining to the state. Insecurity, on the other hand, has its own dynamics and is part of the discourse on security. Insecurity can be best understood when read in conjunction with security. Insecurity, oftentimes, is a response to the time span in which security of certain kinds operate. Modules of solidarity appear in the gaps that arise in the intermesh of security and insecurity. In that way, one of the key outcomes of insecurity is solidarity regimes which in turn facilitate and coordinate solutions.

Sucharita Sengupta briefly spoke about important themes and issues that were discussed throughout the day, the key takeaways, and lessons learnt. Dissemination of works, and publications being done under the programme should have a wider reach. She also spoke about themes like caste, environment, and food security that can be important thematic for 2025. Food security was discussed in Chennai and has scope of further exploration. She also mentioned steps taken towards forging a dialogue in Manipur on the situation of forced displacement with special reference to India's Northeast.

Samata Biswas spoke about how insecurity governs spaces that are inhibited on an everyday basis thus bringing in the question of micro insecurity. She spoke of how security itself becomes a source of insecurity at times. Zoning of spaces like offices, public places, society, etc., give rise to insecurities. Citing a few examples of micro security which exist in these spaces, she noted that insecurity also has a transnational nature. The global irreducible nature of insecurity renders it as a site of debate and discussion because its impacts get manifested across the globe in various forms.

Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury commented on the need of addressing insecurity by citing it to be a relentless process. He also noted that the present neo-liberal times also give rise to newer forms of insecurity. New forms of labour like gig and platform work increase the insecurities of marginal people like migrant workers. Popular political and nationalist discourses become reasons of insecurity of Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities. In order to mitigate this struggle, addressing sites of insecurities is an utmost necessity of these times.

Adding to the discussion, **Neingulo Krome** spoke about the insecurity of people and communities living in borderlands. He noted that the way borders have been drawn in South Asia, have added to the insecurities of communities who live on these borders. He cited the example of Indo-Myanmar Burma in Nagaland and noted how communities, who have lived on these lands way before the borders were put up as part of nation-state building exercises, are suffering in terms of loss of indigenous culture, language and community rituals which date back to centuries. Not only this, these communities also suffer from lack of medical and educational infrastructure which get worsened when tensions in the border areas escalate. Speaking from his personal experience, Krome also talked about how CRG has for long, initiated peace talks and how the learnings he has gained from CRG over the years, have helped him in formulating solutions and strategies while working as a peace activist in Nagaland. The session ended with these positive comments from Krome and the Vote of Thanks given by Sucharita Sengupta.

A few pictures from the day



Ranabir Samaddar



Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Ranabir Samaddar, Samir Kumar Das



(From L-R)- Pavananthi Vembulu, Ritam Sengupta, Neingulo Krome, Khesheli Chishi, Paula Banerjee.



Khesheli Chishi and Paula Banerjee



Francis Adakalam and Samata Biswas



The Participants