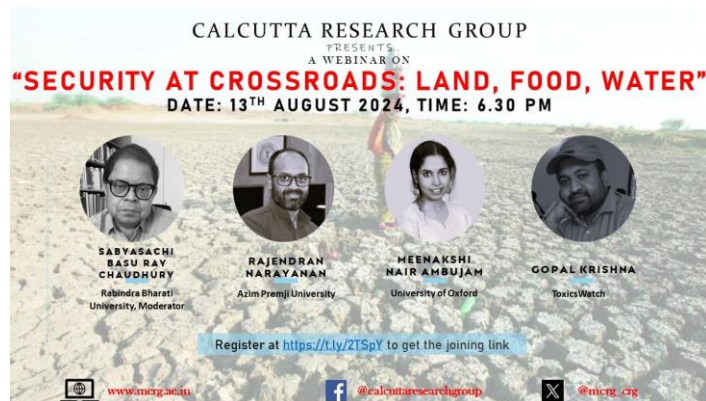A report on "Security at Crossroads: Land, Food, Water "

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Calcutta Research Group (CRG)'s , webinar series "Security at Crossroads", seeks to explore the evolving concept of security, emphasizing human security over traditional state-centric security studies. The first webinar of the series, titled "Land, Food, Water" was held on 13th August 2024. Moderated by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, the webinar comprised the following speakers, Rajendran Narayanan, Meenakshi Nair Ambujam and Gopal Krishna. This webinar was one of the first public exercises directed at forming the interdisciplinary network of persons/ actors invested in human security, and as the webinar showed, in the process of decolonizing and humaninizing security studies.

Basu Ray Chaudhry, Professor of Political Science at Rabindra Bharati University, began the discussion by categorizing security is an essentially a contested concept. Historically security studies took the state as its main referent point and analysed security issues either from the perspective of international State system or by focusing on state level decision making. Broadly speaking security studies has been preoccupied with the protection of borders from international threats and with ensuring state capacity to counter such threats militarily. But increasingly, it is being argued that National security cannot be fully accomplished without the everyday human security. At the same time, the retreat of welfare state and the proud march of neoliberalism creates new forms of insecurities, leading to dispossession of lands, erosion of livelihoods and decline of agricultural incomes. Ray Chaudhuri hoped that the speakers would interact modern state formations while inquiring into the governmental measures to ensure human security, and its margins.

The first speaker of the webinar, Dr. Rajendra Narayanan, a Data Scientist who teaches at Azim Premji University.

1. Conceptual Framework of Security: Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury

- **Contested Nature of Security**: Security is a contested concept, varying by context and perspective. Historically, security studies have focused on state-level threats, often neglecting human security.

- **Human Security**: The need for a shift towards human security was emphasized, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which raised questions about who and what is to be secured.

- **Neoliberal Impact**: The rise of neoliberal economies has increased vulnerabilities among marginalized groups, leading to a retreat from welfare states and exacerbating issues of justice and inequality.

2. Food Security Provisions in India and the dangers of a lack of data: Rajendran Narayanan

 - The National Food Security Act (NFSA) and its implications for food security in India.

 - The coverage of the NFSA, and the ramifications of not updating this data.

 - The migrant worker crisis and the Supreme Court's interventions to address food security for unorganized workers.

Rajendran is interested in building bridges between research, advocacy and public engagement, and is part of national campaigns that promote constitutional values, human rights, right to work and food. Rajendran's presentation used insights from the Right to Food Campaign (right to food secured only after a series of legal cases and consequent legislations since the early 2000s) as well as the current ambit of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) to understand how, if at all, marginalized households benefit from its ambit in all Indian states. While 67% of the households in India are covered by the NFSA, of it, 75% of the households in rural areas and 50% of the households in urban areas fall under its ambit, with a quota given in each state to ensure that the coverage does not exceed this limit. Even in 2024, this entire calculation is done on the basis of 2011 census figures, which is quite obviously not updated to ensure that the truly needy people get coverage. The Public Distribution System (PDS) falls under the NFSA, providing subsidised foodstuff to households, as does the Midday meal scheme for school children. Without recent data it is estimated that 13 crore additional people who should get benefits of these schemes are still outside it.

The Supreme Court has directed the Union Government to ensure that 8 crore workers in the unorganized sector registered in government portals should be covered by the PDS, which has not yet happened, instead the budgetary allocation for food subsidies have gone down.

In addition, the crucial document for accessing food subsidies as well as various other services, that is, the Ration Card, will now have to be connected to the biometric information available in the AADHAR cards, unleashing a whole new host of challenges, likely ensuring that even existing beneficiaries of food subsidy fall out of the system. The intervention of technology, without the requisite infrastructure create new margins for an already marginalised population, denied food security. This mode of governance, according to Narayanan, is "digital feudalism", in which digital technology, not yet in place in most of India, is used to keep the food-insecure further in nutrition deficit.

- Concerns about the digitalization of food security measures and the potential for exclusion rather than inclusion.

3. Land Security and continued disenfranchisement of Adivasis: Meenakshi Nair Ambujam

 - The complexities of land security, particularly for Adivasi communities in Telangana.

 -The importance of land documents and the disconnect between legal recognition of land rights and actual possession.

 - Ethnographic vignettes illustrating how individuals with title deeds still faced landlessness due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and historical injustices.

 - Land security is a process that requires continuous negotiation and cannot be taken for granted, especially in the context of digitalization efforts that may not address underlying issues.

The second speaker of the webinar, Dr. Meenakshi Nair Ambujam Post Doctoral fellow affiliated with the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. Meenakshi's doctoral research examines the entanglement of land, bureaucracy and the digital. Meenakshi took forward the digital feudalism discussion, tying the continuing and renewed disenfranchisement of Adivasis in the southern Indian state of Telangana with new forms of land management and documentation. Land has both a economic and a social life. Land is key to reducing poverty and inequality, and is also tied to memory and identity. However, just like the food security and public distribution system, land right require solid documentation. Adivasis in the Telangana who had acquired land deeds, either through land redistribution or legal steps, continue to not have actual access to it. Various agricultural welfare schemes like the Ryotbandhu can only be accessed through the possession of a series

of land documents, which were also expected to legalise their right to and possession of land.

Using two ethnographic vignettes Ambujam demonstrates how title deeds to land do not ensure possession of the land, multiple instances in different parts of the country like Kerala, Telangana and Gujarat—where instances of complete disjunct between the land document and the actual, in fact promised land, was experienced by the most marginalised people—Adivasis and Dalits, including cases where people were paying taxes for land they had never set foot on. Ambujam also shared instances of fabricated documentation which allowed the state and non-Adivasi persons to encroach into or occupy Adivasi land—

The third and final speaker of the webinar was Dr. Gopal Krishna, editor of ToxicsWatch, a journal of Earth, Science, Economy and Justice. With formal training in law, philosophy, mass communication and public health, Gopal Krishna is a public policy researcher, lawyer and bilingual author on science, ecocide, agriculture and justice. Gopal contended that the effects of climate crisis and environmental crisis are going to be felt first in water—leading to a resource crisis which will also in turn, be viewed as threats to national security (case in point the Ganga basin). Several international bodies and agencies have already started to term environmental security an issue of national security— complicated by how mainstream security apparatuses such as nuclear power have uncharted water footprint.

National projects such as the interlinking of rivers do not take into account the environmental impact of such a project, instead focuses only on the supposed economic benefits. Water security is also not something to be treated in isolation—land, water, flora, fauna, entire biodiversity of the region are all connected, but now, in the colonial legacy of separation of land from water, increasingly treated as something separately manageable. We forget that water linking projects also reframe geography,

Like land and food, data, or the lack thereof, continues to play a crucial role in the different national water security guidelines—which do not take into account climate crisis and continue to think of water as piped water. Rivers are also not the same. Himalayan rivers are unpredictable, but the development discourse treats them like any other water, to be dammed like those in the plains—often to disastrous consequences. This also shows the gap between natural science and economic policy.

Water is poised to become a source of major national and international crisis—it will cause regional tensions between India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, China—but nations continue

4. Water Security: Economic versus Ecological concerns- Gopal Krishna

- The intersection of water security with national and human security narratives, particularly in the context of UN discussions.

- The militarization of climate and environmental issues, highlighting the disconnect between state-centric security approaches and the lived realities of marginalized communities.

- The implications of large-scale water management projects and the need for a holistic river basin approach to ensure sustainable water security.

- Concerns about the impact of nuclear projects on water resources and the broader environmental implications.

Discussion and Reflections

- The transition from a rights-based language to a security-based language in contemporary discourse.

- The panelists highlighted the challenges posed by digitalization in accessing rights and resources, emphasizing that technology should not replace accountability and transparency.

to forego a river basin approach and treat rivers are bound by national borders—posing risk to human security within and across borders.

The discussion to the presentations asked questions about the interplay between rights and security, the potential dilution of rights in favor of security narratives, with the need to maintain a focus on justice for marginalized communities, the connection between digitalization and exclusion, and the linkage between security approaches and the SDGs. Is security a subset of rights, in as much as being ensured of security takes people one step closer towards articulating their rights? In the case of land rights, digital documents continue to produce the same kind of opacity that paper documents produced, undermining the land security which it was supposed to offer.

The three themes that connected the presentations were connection between continuing disenfranchisement of historically marginalized people through their interaction with governmental apparatuses, the shifting terrain of data drives which instead of strengthening, may undermine democratic rights, and the conflict between macro narratives of security with aspects of human security.

This also points at the importance of forming a network invested in 'human security'. Land, food, and water, three seemingly diverse elements, yet fundamental to the lives of humans (and all other species), all need to be secured for its populations by modern nation states, and yet, populations face new and emerging challenges due to new forms of governmentality and management of populations. The conversation across land, food and water, across different documentary processes, national and state boundaries, as well as citizenship entitlements shows that an interconnected and interdisciplinary network of actors interested in different aspects of human security can contribute to both an enhanced understanding of the underlying challenges to security, as well as possible ways to mitigate them. This webinar is a step in that direction.