

Challenging Media Prejudice

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Refugees are living testimonies to the fact that we live in a turbulent world where many parts of our planet are not safe enough to live in peace. They are reflections of the grim faces of conflict, gross human right abuses, repression and persecution. According to the records of UNHCR, there are over 23 million refugees and uprooted people dispersed and displaced all over the world. Refugees and asylum seekers represent the failures of humanity at large to create a safe, secure and habitable world.

The relative successes and stability of some parts of the world are not enough to claim that the world is safe and peaceful enough to enjoy life without fear and persecution. The glaring fact that is usually ignored is that the world allows a handful of dictators in many parts of the world to destabilise the lives of millions of people. Each and every refugee has lots of poignant and sad stories to tell but there are hardly any outlets.

The people of the United Kingdom have long given refuge and shelter for those who have fled their countries of origins due to various reasons. People flee their villages leaving behind everything they have and everything they cherish in the hope of finding a safe haven, a place where they can forget their past and rebuild their shattered lives. This seems quite obvious to the British media than to anyone else. The BBC World Service keeps millions of its listeners up to the minute on such tragic events as conflicts, human rights violations, repression and their adverse consequences.

Not all the media in Britain are like the BBC World Service, which is not as popular as it is outside the UK. Anyone who comes here realizes too soon that some sections of the British media and politicians are recklessly xenophobic, bent on fostering hostility and hatred against foreigners, especially refugees and asylum seekers. Their use and selection of vocabulary to refer to refugees and asylum seekers is totally unethical and unacceptable by any measures. For example, it is very common to read and hear among some sections of the British media such words as "invaders, scavengers, scroungers, bogus, illegal immigrants, spongers, vermin," the list goes on. Such words are usually splashed in all articles of vilification against those people who fled direct persecution and who have fallen prey to another forms of persecution. But why do some sections of the media, supported by xenophobic and narrow nationalist politicians, prefer to engage in indirect persecution against anyone who seeks asylum in the UK?

The obstinate assumption held by the media especially the tabloids is that asylum seekers and refugees are only here to claim state benefit and become

burden on British taxpayers. They believe that all asylum seekers are bogus and are flooding Britain to take advantage of its 'soft touch policies' towards immigrants and refugees.

The whole issues raise questions upon the worth of civilization. Basically the foundation of civilization is the full recognition of human dignity and the worth of every individual regardless of his or her unfortunate circumstances. Anything short of that challenges the very essence of civilization and the positive efforts to create a fully tolerant multicultural world.

The widespread claim that people come to Britain to fulfil their dream of living as scroungers contradicts the glaring facts. Though the tabloids failed to report the recent conclusions of a comprehensive research conducted by a team of social scientists drawn from the Home Office and the Cabinet Office, it clearly showed that immigrants give more than they take from the British society.

According to the research, Migration: an economic and social analysis, 'the broader fiscal impact of migration is likely to be positive, because of migrants favourable age distribution and the fact that migrants in work have higher average wages than natives.' It indicated that migrants contribute more in taxes and National Insurance than they consume in benefits in other public services. The researchers estimated that the migrant population contributes around 10 per cent more to Government revenues than they receive in Government expenditure. This was equivalent, according to the research, to £ 2.6 billion in the 1998/99 financial year. 'The analysis is reasonably clear that, on average and overall, migrants are not a burden on the public purse.' That is from a financial point of view.

The contribution of the migrant community, including refugees, in enriching the cultural diversity and filling the skill gap was found to be invaluable and hard to quantify in financial terms. This is the kind of fact that anti-refugee politicians and the media do not have the gut to talk about simply because it refutes their xenophobic agenda. The research further reveals that 31% of doctors and 13% nurses are non-UK born. Migrants fill IT, teaching, academic and other areas that have critical shortage of manpower. One example of this is that migrants fill over 70% of catering jobs in London.

Another research conducted by the homeless charity Shelter, though it wasn't widely reported by the media, indicated that asylum seekers are housed in squalor. The charity inspected 154 properties that housed over 300 people, including 48 children and found that asylum seekers live in appalling squalor not in luxury.

The report, entitled Far From Home, revealed that:

Nearly a fifth of all dwellings were unfit for human habitation with lack of cooking facilities and have serious disrepair and dampness;

19 per cent of occupied properties were infested with cockroaches, fleas, bedbugs;

One in ten of the occupied properties were very poorly furnished with severely inadequate facilities rusty saucepans, dirty second-hand blankets posing a health risk;

Households in over 80 per cent of houses in multiple occupation had inadequate means of escape from fire. This could prove fatal for occupants in the event of a fire.

Shelter's director Chris Holmes told ITN, "Our findings explode the myth that asylum seekers are fast-tracking into the best housing. We have found the grim reality that many are living in absolute squalor that puts their health and safety at risk." Why does the media shun such vital truths? It is simply because they refute their baseless propaganda against asylum seekers and refugees.

The need for a new vision...

The challenging question facing any refugees or asylum seekers, who are clearly victims of persecution by some sections of the media and politicians alike, is devising ways of reversing this unacceptable malpractice of grossly vilifying the vulnerable. Refugees and asylum seekers are facing growing racial tension and violence as a result of the media onslaught against them. There are a number of asylum seekers and refugees who have already lost their lives or have been permanently wounded both physically and psychologically.

According to a guide published by the Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, ill-informed, adverse media coverage of asylum seekers has contributed to a rise in racial tension and increased risk of public disorder. "Racial expressions towards asylum seekers appear to have become common currency and acceptable in a way which would never be tolerated towards any other minority." It indicated that failure to achieve a positive media message may undermine the police service's efforts to maintain community harmony.

The conclusions of the chief police officers is a positive step to challenge irresponsible and adverse media coverage against refugees and asylum seeker. But it is not enough. The efforts of public authorities and advocacy groups to reverse this dangerous trend which can potentially cause an uncontrollable outbreak of racial cholera across Britain should be supported by refugees themselves.

The involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in the media can significantly help challenge the irresponsible media and air the untold truths. New Vision, a refugee media group, is an answer to this challenge. As there is no common medium by which refugees and asylum seekers make their mostly neglected voices heard and tell the untold truth, it becomes all the more important to create a 'voice for the voiceless.' One of our objectives is set up a refugee newspaper that effectively airs the neglected views, concerns and interests of the refugee community at large

It seems quite obvious that empowering the refugee community to play active and constructive roles in the society seems the best way to tackle the entrenched bias and prejudice among the some sections of the media and populist politicians. The media can play the most potent role in that direction. It is high time that refugee journalists and writers took up the gauntlet and make their voices heard across all sections of the society