



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, March 2022

What killed Naveen? Violence and discrimination faced by Indian students in Ukraine

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Abstract

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine forced thousands of Indian medical students studying there to flee Ukraine, creating a transnational crisis. A crisis of this scale is illuminative as it visibilises the multiple forms of discrimination and violence circumscribing international educational mobility that usually remain obscure in ordinary settings.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

reproduction mobility, discrimination, violence, Indian students, reservations system.

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When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it shook and eventually killed the dreams² nurtured by Shekharappa Gyanagoudar, a retired factory worker living 6500 kilometres away in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. In the early morning on 1 March 2022, his son Naveen Shekharappa, a final year medical student at the Kharkiv National Medical University ventured out to buy food and water for himself and his starving friends. Standing in line for two hours, he was killed by sudden Russian shelling in the border city of Kharkiv. Naveen's tragic loss prompted a debate on social media on who is responsible for his untimely death. Rather than whom, I suggest we pay attention to contiguous forms of discrimination that had cumulatively rendered Naveen critically vulnerable.

Like Naveen, some 18,000 Indian students had migrated to Ukraine, most of them to study medicine.³ Their mobility in pursuit of specialised higher education constitutes 'reproduction migration',⁴ aimed at preserving and enhancing life chances. As this paper goes on to argue, such migrations are not exempt from everyday and structural forms of discrimination and violence, the prospects of which multiply manifold when a geopolitical crisis of the current proportion unfolds.

Visibilisation of discrimination during crisis

In peaceful times, states project themselves as the providers of security for their citizens, and non-citizens (migrants and 'aliens') are legitimately relegated beyond the purview of the state's pastoral care. Migrant rights are seen as part of larger and shared humanitarian rather than constitutional responsibility of the receiving states. During times of war or crisis however, when states are ill equipped to ensure the security of their own citizens, the *crisis of mobility* sets in, forcing some citizens to flee and compelling others to stay put in bunkers, and yet others to fight the war. In such an event, the host countries first suspend the humanitarian responsibility they have towards migrants, as was evident in the course of the COVID pandemic.⁵

During the ongoing Russian invasion, migrant students trying to escape the conflict were rendered particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of restrictions and violence at the border, based on nationality, ethnicity and race. News and social media reports of racial discrimination against South Asians⁶ and Africans⁷ facing racist attacks while attempting to cross borders proliferated. When non-white students were looking for safe passages to exit Ukraine, they were prevented while Ukrainian

² Poovanna, Sharan. 2022. Didn't have a meal in days, went out to get food for all, say friends of student killed in Ukraine. *Hindustan Times*. 2 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/didnt-have-a-meal-in-days-went-out-to-get-food-for-all-say-friends-of-student-killed-in-ukraine-101646158911838.html>. Last accessed 3 March 2022.

³ Benu, Parvathi. 2022. Russia-Ukraine conflict: Around 18,000 Indian students are studying in Ukrainian universities. *Business Line*. 28 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/russia-ukraine-conflict-around-18000-indian-students-are-studying-in-ukrainian-universities/article65083390.ece>. Last accessed on 4 March 2022.

⁴ Xiang, Biao. 2022. Educational mobility and "human nature": Changes in student migration from China since 2000. MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Available online at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/6026517/Xiang-Biao-Educational-mobility-and-human-nature_molab_1101.pdf.

⁵ Reynolds, John. 2020. Fortress Europe: Global Migration and the Global Pandemic. *American Journal of International Law*. 114, 342-348.

⁶ Bychawsky, Adam. 2022. Stranded Indian students watched as Ukrainian pets crossed border to safety. *Open Democracy*. Available online at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/stranded-indian-students-watched-as-ukrainian-pets-crossed-border-to-safety/>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

⁷ Pietromarchi, Virginia. 2022. More African students decry racism at Ukraine borders. *Al Jazeera*. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/more-racism-at-ukrainian-borders>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

citizens' movements were expressly facilitated.⁸ Given their European background,⁹ Ukrainians became welcomed refugees¹⁰ suffering a crisis that the west was morally obligated to address; a stark contrast to the recent Afghan crisis when the Taliban took over the country and the response by western powers to its fleeing refugees was muted at best.¹¹

Meanwhile in India, when the threat of Russian invasion appeared imminent, the government did not take anticipatory measures towards the students until they started posting SOS¹² messages on social media platforms and voiced their inability to pay five-ten times the usual cost of airplane tickets to return home. The Indian government had merely sent its first plane for evacuation, only to be met with closed airspace. This prompted a debate on Indian social media platforms:¹³ during times of crisis, whose responsibility are the vulnerable migrants? A similar question was asked when the government of India enforced a strict and sudden lockdown in the early days of the pandemic, forcing poor internal migrants in big Indian cities to walk thousands of kilometres to their respective homes in rural parts of the country, in the absence of any state support.

While generally the sentiments were in favour of government intervention, right wing narrative individualised this responsibility to the students themselves, as the quote below from a Twitter thread on 24 February 2022 indicates:

“Did these students take Indian govt guarantee before going abroad ? Did they follow advisory ? I am amazed that they have audacity of cmg [coming] Live and blaming Indian govt for this (...) While govt is rescuing people (...) in every border poland, Hungary Romania (...)”¹⁴

Why do Indian students go to a “small country” to study?

The large number of Indian students in Ukraine came as surprise to many, even in India. In the popular imagination, Indians go to the west for higher studies and working-class Indians go to the Gulf to earn. The complex rationales guiding educational mobilities are often overlooked. In this particular instance, Ukraine and other ex-soviet states have emerged as key destinations for Indian medical students whose prospects of studying in India are severely limited by the restricted¹⁵ number of places available, a punishing national exam called NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test), that many argue is discriminatory against the marginalized students of lower caste, class and

⁸ See: https://twitter.com/Angryoldman_J/status/1498890419601436675. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

⁹ Bayoumi, Moustafa. 2022. They are ‘civilised’ and ‘look like us’: The racist coverage of Ukraine. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/civilised-european-look-like-us-racist-coverage-ukraine>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

¹⁰ BBC staff. 2022. How many refugees have fled Ukraine and where are they going? *BBC*. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-60555472>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

¹¹ Lall, Rashmi Roshan. 2021. Despite all the international attention, Afghan refugees are not welcome. *Social Europe*. Available online at <https://socialeurope.eu/despite-all-the-attention-afghan-refugees-are-not-welcome>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

¹² See: <https://twitter.com/TeamSOSIndia>. Last accessed 3 March 2022.

¹³ I have closely followed these online debates on Twitter over the two weeks.

¹⁴ The comments on Twitter can be found here: <https://twitter.com/gundechaps/status/1497026701003755520>. The larger thread discussing the government’s action can be found here: <https://twitter.com/PoliticalKida/status/1496849617815699461>. Last accessed on 4 March 2022.

¹⁵ Misra, Barsa. 2021. Health ministry counts 88,120 MBBS seats 27,497 BDS seats in India. *Medical Dialogues*. Available online at: <https://medicaldialogues.in/news/education/health-ministry-counts-88120-mbbs-seats-27498-bds-seats-in-india-85668>. Last accessed 3 March 2022.

rural backgrounds,¹⁶ and finally an exorbitant fee (running up to 20 million Indian rupees or 265,000 UD dollars) in ‘management’ or open quota places. What attracts Indians to these countries are the prospects of securing confirmed places in medical colleges that also offer a relatively better quality of education at a fraction of cost.

When the news of stranded Indian students reached home, two statements by the Indian prime minister and a union minister called attention to the crisis of higher education in India. First, the prime minister Narendra Modi lamented¹⁷ that Indians should not have gone to ‘small countries’ to study medicine and asked educational entrepreneurs to start more private medical colleges. A few days later, an Indian entrepreneur Anand Mahindra responded by expressing his surprise at the ‘shortfall’ of medical colleges in India and suggested possibilities of starting private medical institutions with a friend.¹⁸ In a country already grappling with the rapid privatization of education, this exchange points to the global mobility of neoliberal policy that packages education not as a public good but a scarce resource controlled by private businesses, making it unaffordable for large section of Indians. In fact, as Naveen’s father later told the media, it was the cost of (private) medical education in India that compelled Naveen to migrate out in search of affordable education.¹⁹

Another telling statement was made by India’s parliamentary affairs minister Pralhad Joshi who said that up to 90 percent of students studying medicine abroad fail to clear the compulsory Foreign Medical Graduates Examination (FMGE), required to get a medical licence in India.²⁰ The figure, perhaps a gross exaggeration, attempted to portray such students as less worthy of state care. His statement should also be read against the backdrop of the discourse on merit that has taken off in India since the 1990s. Some social media users reiterated Joshi’s remarks mocking these students as less qualified, as the following tweets show:

“And a desire to become a mediocre Dr [doctor] (...) many of these students have very low scores in entrance exams but have parents with deep pockets. They will finally add to a pool of Drs making money from pharma cos by prescribing their medicines for a price”²¹

“Also these students would not have made the cut in India...these guys should not be anywhere close to a med school”²²

¹⁶ Subramanian, Lakshmi. 2021. NEET is discriminatory, will affect healthcare in TN if continued: Panel report. *The Week*. Available online at: <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2021/09/20/neet-is-discriminatory-will-affect-healthcare-system-in-tn-if-continued-panel-report.html>. Last accessed 3 March 2022.

¹⁷ Wire staff. 2022. 'Indian Students Go to Small Countries to Study, Especially Medicine': PM Modi amid Ukraine Crisis. *The Wire*. Available online at: <https://thewire.in/government/indian-students-go-to-small-countries-to-study-especially-medicine-pm-modi-amid-ukraine-crisis>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

¹⁸ See: https://twitter.com/anandmahindra/status/1499265503952797699?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1499274705588482048%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es2_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.news18.com%2Fnews%2Fbuzz%2Fanand-mahindra-wants-to-start-a-medical-studies-institution-for-indian-students-4830143.html. Last accessed on 4 March 2022.

¹⁹ Pattanashetti, Girish. 2022. Naveen went to Ukraine as he couldn’t secure medical seat despite 97% marks: Father. *The Hindu*. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/naveen-went-to-ukraine-as-he-couldnt-secure-medical-seat-despite-97-marks-father/article65156531.ece>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

²⁰ M.S., Sreeja. 2022. 90% Studying Medicine Abroad Fail To Clear Qualifiers In India: Minister. *NDTV*. Available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/90-studying-medicine-abroad-fail-to-clear-qualifiers-in-india-minister-2797502>. Last accessed on 4 March 2022.

²¹ See: <https://twitter.com/pintooganguly/status/1497999690079502340>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

²² See: <https://twitter.com/SridharKommidi/status/1498459853504851968>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

However, when news of Naveen's death started to circulate, the right-wing narrative on social media changed, projecting Naveen instead as a victim of reservations. Soon the hashtag #ReservationKilledNaveen trended on Twitter.²³ It was not only an attempt to protect the government from being held responsible for Naveen's death,²⁴ but also reflected the larger held belief in India that affirmative action like reservations kill merit, and force deserving and meritorious upper caste students to migrate to the west.²⁵ This discourse has become so deeply entrenched as 'commonsensical' among India's upper castes, so much so that Naveen's mother also blamed his migration and eventual death on reservations.²⁶

Is the reservations to blame?

Caste-based discrimination, ascriptive inequalities and generational marginalisation were the basis of the historical demand for reservations in pre-independent India. After independence, India constitutionally adopted reservations as a mitigative policy where 20 percent of seats in public higher education and 15 percent of government jobs were initially reserved for the scheduled castes and tribes who were socially and generationally marginalised in India. In 1980, the Mandal Commission suggested an expansion of reservations to accommodate other generationally marginalized backward castes.²⁷ When the Commissions' suggestion was finally accepted in 1990, it set off a series of protests across India, at the forefront of which were young doctors who deplored government intervention in diluting higher education by giving the non-meritorious students preference over the meritorious ones.²⁸

The discourse that reservations is responsible for lost opportunities among the general or non-reserved category is a widespread belief among the upper castes, as echoed in the following tweets:

"Reservation should be given only to the economically Weaker students & not to any particular Class, Society, religion. Due to the leprosy of #Reservation, most of the good talents get upset with this system & leave India & start working for USA. It's the need of hour to improve it."²⁹

"Our united Indian society is divided into many small communities bcoz of reservation. If you remove reservation then only our country will really make progress, otherwise we will be in a tug of war."³⁰

²³ See: <https://twitter.com/Pradeep76001927/status/1498988174567440386>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

²⁴ See these twitter threads and the comments they generated defending the government action and critiquing reservations: <https://twitter.com/ShashiTharoor/status/1498896147775168516>; https://twitter.com/Shubham_fd/status/1498855247111884803; https://twitter.com/Jairam_Ramesh/status/1498894088669925378?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw; https://twitter.com/IN_CIndia/status/1498907203175993345. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

²⁵ Subramanian, Ajantha, 2019. *The Caste of Merit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

²⁶ S.K. Nrupathunga. 2022. Naveen's parents urge government to end medical education mafia. *Deccan Herald*. 2 March 2022. <https://www.deccanherald.com/state/top-karnataka-stories/naveens-parents-urge-govt-to-end-medical-education-mafia-quota-system-1087064.html>. Last accessed on 3 March 2022.

²⁷ Balagopal, K., 1990. This anti-Mandal mania. *Economic and political weekly*, 25(40).2231-2234.

²⁸ Kumbhar, Kiran. 2021. Exploding the myth that reservations are responsible for 'mediocrity in the medical profession'. Available online at: <https://scroll.in/article/1012957/opinion-reservations-are-wrongly-blamed-for-encouraging-mediocrity-in-the-medical-profession>. Last accessed on 5 march 2022.

²⁹ See: <https://twitter.com/Sangeet16198417/status/1498962262983421953>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

³⁰ See: <https://twitter.com/Manavdharmi/status/1500154210926481409>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.

Despite decades of reservations, caste-based inequalities persist³¹ although it has allowed some limited social mobility for the lower castes.³² Incidents like Naveen's death however gives the discourse around reservations a renewed vigour, perpetuating epistemic violence on the lower castes atop already existing physical violence and discrimination they face in India, who are seen as beneficiaries of a system that rewards them rather than being seen as victims of a discriminatory practice based on ascriptive identities fixed at birth.

Amidst the senselessness of war, for Naveen's mother, it is perhaps easier to incriminate reservations rather than reflect upon the immediate and long-term violence that economic inequalities, hard geopolitical calculations or entrenched social discrimination create. Naveen was a victim of multiple discriminations: He was foremost a victim of economic discrimination due to privatization of education making his education in India economically unviable. His death is further being used as a case against reservations, thus potentially reinforcing deeply entrenched social discrimination. Had Naveen been alive, he may have still been in Ukraine³³ or he may have tried to cross the border to other parts of Europe, where he would have faced racial discrimination as other Indian students had experienced.

³¹ Shah, Alpa, Jens Lerche, Richard Axelby, Dalel Benbabaali, Brendan Donegan, Raj Jayaseelan and Thakur Vikramditya. 2017. *Ground down by growth: tribe, caste, class and inequality in 21st Century India*. London: Pluto Press.

³² Chalam, K.S. 2007. *Caste-Based Reservations and Human Development in India*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

³³ At the time of writing this piece, students are still sending SOS to the government of India to evacuate them. See: <https://twitter.com/dhanyarajendran/status/1500028077849542659>. Last accessed on 5 March 2022.