

**“TEACHING, DOING RESEARCH AND ACTING WITHIN A NETWORK”  
REGIONAL VOICES**

**Responses and Responsibilities of Catholic Institutions in the Asian Region in  
the context of Refugees and Migrant Issues**

Good morning. I am honoured and pleased to be in the midst of this distinguished assembly. Thank you for this invitation to make this presentation at this conference.

“Athithi Devo Bhava”. ‘The guest is equivalent to God.’ I come from that part of the world that treats its guests as God. This has not only remained a tradition but is also reflected in our actions. You may ask, ‘Isn’t it quite natural to treat your guests well?’ Here, I am reminded of what Jesus said, “When I was a stranger, you invited me in” (Mathew 25: 35-40).

This conference comes at a time when the world grapples with the problems where, as, Mr. Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees observed: “At sea, a frightening number of refugees and migrants are dying each year. On land, people fleeing war are finding their way blocked by closed borders.”

As we deliberate on issues relating to refugees and migrants, the Rohingya refugee crisis, in the region of the Indian Sub-continent, has reached such alarming levels that it has been likened to a ‘mass exodus’ of one of the world’s most persecuted communities, both to India and Bangladesh,

In 2017 alone, there are reports from the Government of Bangladesh stating that over 400,000 Rohingyas have crossed the borders and reached Cox Bazaar (Bangladesh). The genocidal ethnic war is displacing hundreds and thousands of Rohingyas who are by virtue of their ethnicity, the poorest and most vulnerable

inhabitants of the state of Rakhine on the western coast of Myanmar. The government of Bangladesh is now building a huge camp to house them.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-government-to-build-camp-for-400000-rohingya-muslims-who-fled-myanmar/4031861.html>).

This is not the only group forced to flee their homelands to the subcontinent of India. The region has been witness to an influx of refugees from time immemorial.

### **Identification of the matter on the basis of the region – Indian Sub-Continent**

India's geographical location on the global map has made it one of the largest host countries to the fleeing refugees from neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

India provides refuge to Tibetans, Chakmas from Bangladesh, Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik refugees from Afghanistan, Tamils from Sri Lanka and Chins, Karens and Rohingyas from Myanmar, Hindus from Pakistan.

According to the office of the UNHCR, India had a refugee population of just over 200,000 by the end of 2015. Presently close to a 500,000 population of forced migrants, which includes refugees and IDPs, reside in the country. According to the UNHCR (2017), there are 7.7 million refugees in the Asia and Pacific region, which includes 3.5 million refugees, 1.9 million IDPs (internally displaced persons) and 1.4 million stateless people. The majority of the refugees are from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Until the crisis in Syria unfolded, this sub region produced and hosted the most number of refugees in the past quarter of a century.

Currently India has at least 400 settlements of Pakistani Hindu refugees. Since 2012, at least 40,000 Rohingyas have entered India, all via Bangladesh.

India does not try to force refugees to return to their countries of origin despite the fact that it is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention related to the status of refugees and considering the fact that it does not have any domestic or regional laws pertaining to refugees. India provides long term visa for the refugees.

### **Challenges and Issues**

The protracted challenges in settlement and rehabilitation are donor fatigue, reduction in funding, lack of government support, absence of systematic and planned humanitarian assistance, which have limited the scope of proactively responding to the grievous situation of the refugees. The refugees have very limited options. The scope for self-determination depends very much on the policy of the State. Oftentimes their freedom to think is curtailed as they are hostages of a situation, which they did not choose.

The issues of protection and increased vulnerability, mental health and physical health, access to rights, entitlements, education, sanitation, food and livelihood, human rights violations with the least regard for the dignity and worth of an individual, denial of legal identity and absence of humanitarian assistance pose greater challenges.

### **Role you can play as educational actors**

As educationists, we need to realise that the stigma of being a refugee is often associated with the prime actors in the conflict, resulting in rejection.

The College strives to enable students make meaningful connections between academics and the real world and extend their learning so as to respond in a relevant and concrete manner to the reality of refugee and migrant populations and other human rights issues that beset them. It encourages students to reach out to the

communities through social awareness programmes/ service learning and experiential learning.

The College has encouraged students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels to engage in research and project work. The College also networks through the Department of Social Work with UNHCR where students have the experience of working with Rohingya families. As a priority in our admission policy every year refugee students are admitted in their desired discipline of study with a fee waiver.

It is a proud moment for me to share with you a recent doctoral thesis of one of our faculty members, Dr. Lora Deva Prasana, whose study was titled 'Quality of life and Psychological Wellbeing of Spouses of Migrants,' in which she shows how the patriarchal structures of family life in a small village near Chennai have changed drastically, with the influence of migration.

I also acknowledge with great admiration, the work and contribution of our former students of Social Work. Ms. Asuntha Dorathy, who is the Head of Missions at Intersos – Iraq and Country Director at Johanniter International, Ms. Amita Krishnamoorthi, who works as a Resettlement Case Advisor, at the National Refugee Resettlement Centre, Ministry of Business, New Zealand, and Dr. Florina Xavier who currently serves in an NGO at Afghanistan working with the IDPs. She also worked with the Pashtuns in Kyrgyzstan for the UNHCR. Her husband, Dr. Gladston, works tirelessly with the Sri Lankan refugees and currently coordinates around 300 NGOs in the Asian region which work with the refugees.

### **Suggestions for a Proactive Response**

As educators at the International, national and regional levels we can provide services in FIVE broad areas.

1. Providing **access to higher education**. Make it a point of discussion in the respective deaneries.

2. **Enabling cutting edge research** on issues concerning refugees leading to advocacy and both direct and indirect intervention
3. **Providing informal vocational and life skill training** to help refugees cope with difficult and dangerous situations. Increasing their capacity to reduce their vulnerability
4. **Conducting short and long term courses** on refugee studies to create a band of professionals who can dedicate themselves to the cause of the refugees.
5. **Establishment of a Refugee Chair** that can be sponsored by organisations such as the CRI, CBCI, Universities and organise programmes such as :
  - a. Publishing occasional papers on pressing issues of refugee
  - b. Be a clearing house with information on refugees
  - c. Collaborate with CBCI recognized organisations like the AICUF (All India Catholic University Federation), YSM (Young Student Movement) etc., to spread awareness among refugees
  - d. Network with regional organizations such as the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (this is a network of 450 refugee organizations in the Asia and pacific region) to expand the scope of learning and development.
  - e. Encourage interaction with local branches of The Jesuit Refugee Services, International Catholic Migration Commission, Organisation for Elankai Refugees Rehabilitation, and many other grass roots organisations.
  - f. Document and publicise good practices in the region.

### **Positive Directions**

There is a dearth of research in this area. Refugee and migrant issues are under-addressed with very little academic interest and awareness on this issue in several universities. Hence **collaborative, cross- cultural research studies** can be

undertaken to understand socio-economic and cultural problems of refugees and migrants of different regions.

**Strong intervention models** can make education an investment for refugees.

**Multidisciplinary approach** in the field of refugee and forced migration studies, introducing key debates, trends, and challenges which characterize this dynamic area of research, policy, and practice can be developed to bring positive well-being.

Universities can effectively **influence policies** in this issue by providing evidence based research. This can be realised through **undertaking research** and **lobbying with the concerned authorities in different forums**. **Regional cooperation** can be strengthened, in order to affect culturally relevant peace building strategies.

Stronger **advocacy networks** are to be created among the participating universities so as to create a uniform platform to address the needs and issues of people in such situations.

Refugees and migrant issues are undoubtedly a growing phenomenon. There is a larger role to be adopted by universities in upholding the dignity and safety of the voices which have a far unrealised cry. Therefore it is important to respond pro-actively and prepare a generation of students, academicians and institutions who will be able to recognize, who that unclothed, hungry, homeless stranger is.

“Athithi Devo Bhava.” These refugees and migrant strangers are our guests. Let us welcome them into our midst.

I would like to end with the quote of Pope Francis, “**We have a duty towards our brothers and sisters who, for various reasons, have been forced to leave their homeland: a duty of justice, of civility and of solidarity.**”

We have a long way to go. Thank you for your attention.