

The dark side of globalisation

A migrant, who was rescued after their boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the Tunisian Coast after they had left Libya, is seen inside a local Red Crescent chapter in Zarzis, Tunisia, May 11, 2019. Photo: Reuters

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The project of globalisation remains as contested as ever. In *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2001), Joseph Stiglitz criticised international monetary organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for advancing ideologically driven, market-based development mantras around the globe, often at the expense of poorer nations. Then there was Thomas Friedman's *flat world*—a contentious metaphor for a level playing field across the globe, meaning access to opportunities and decision-making is levelling out. One could question whether Friedman's flat world is inhabited only by multinational companies and their power-wielding CEOs. But is the world really flat for the little guys? Or, does the world consist of a series of insurmountable pyramids or rough seas for the people at the bottom of the food chain?

The world seems increasingly oblivious of some of the tragic protagonists of globalisation: the “illegal” migrants, who cross national boundaries without papers or undertake perilous journeys in search of better lives. A few days ago, at least 37 Bangladeshi migrants drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, on their way to Italy from Libya. It has been a heart-breaking spectacle. Their overloaded, inflatable boat was no match for the rough waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The project of globalisation is riddled with black holes that tend to swallow the little guys of the world. They are rarely mourned because they don't seem to matter. They are quickly forgotten as the dispensable, collateral damage of globalisation.

Recently, I came to know about a Bangladeshi who was arrested in Monterey in Mexico and was brought to Houston by the US Department of Homeland Security agents on charge of trafficking people to the US. Thirty-one-year-old Selim (not his real name) hails from a low-income family in Sylhet, in northeastern Bangladesh.

This is his globalisation: a journey from Bangladesh to Mexico, with the dream of coming to the US one day. At the age of 23, he first came to Saudi Arabia and worked there for a year. Then he embarked on a southward, overland journey to South Africa, where he stayed for a year or two. Next came a dangerous sea voyage from South Africa to Brazil on a cargo ship. He then spent four years in Brazil, working in different areas and developing a sound geographic understanding of the northbound land route to Mexico via Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala.

The terminus of that journey was the southernmost Mexican town named Tapachula, located in the southeast state of Chiapas in Mexico, near the Guatemalan border and the Pacific Ocean. He knew that there were other Bangladeshis in Tapachula. One of them owned a restaurant, which was also used as a “station” for Bangladeshi migrants on their way to Monterrey, capital of the northeastern Mexican state of Nuevo León and the third largest city in Mexico. Monterrey is an industrial centre hemmed in by mountains, about 230 kilometres from the US border.

Selim made Mexico City his base and claimed to have started a mobile business, specialising in selling brand-name clothing to department stores in both the Mexican capital and Monterrey. He married a Mexican woman soon thereafter, and learned to speak Spanish. He quickly developed another specialty, helping his compatriots to travel from Monterrey to Nuevo Laredo, a small border town on the banks of the Rio Grande, across from the US city of Laredo in Texas. For the migrants, this is the final destination before they “entered” Texas.

Soon, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA is an agency of the US Department of Homeland Security) staff, in collaboration with Mexican law-enforcement agencies, began to monitor Selim’s activities in Monterrey and Laredo. They amassed data on him. Finally, late last year he was picked up from a hotel in Monterrey and flown to Houston for interrogation. He was charged with human trafficking and is now undergoing trial in a US court.

When I learned about Selim’s story, I was both saddened and fascinated. Without making any value judgement on his alleged complicity in human trafficking, I was thinking more about the dark side of globalisation and how industrious young men like Selim inadvertently become sacrificial goats at the altar of transnational movement and prosperity that globalisation had promised to all. In his imagination, Selim most possibly tried to make the world flat but it ultimately proved to be not-so-flat. The life of illegal migrants is perpetually sad, desperate, and insecure.

I was also fascinated because Selim, in many ways, exemplified the migratory history of globalisation. From ancient times, people moved from place to place in search of better opportunities. This has always been a fundamental human trait. The invention of nation-state and their political boundaries in the modern era restricted human movement and introduced the illegality of unauthorised national border crossing. While the neoliberal policies of globalisation promised unlimited movement of capital and labour across the globe, with a view to advancing free trade, the poor and the disenfranchised of the Global South increasingly faced a restrictive and xenophobic world.

The stories of young men from poorer countries embarking on dangerous journeys to reach the shores of Europe or the border of the US have become a quintessential narrative of the contemporary form of globalisation. The boat that capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Tunisia, killing at least 37 Bangladeshi migrants, included four brothers. Only one survived, who was seen on Al Jazeera television news wailing, as he informed his parents about the tragedy that had just struck his family.

For the viewer, it is an impossible moment. On the one hand, you ask, why take such a deadly risk; you almost feel like blaming the undocumented migrants for their uninformed, poor decision that puts them in harm's way. On the other hand, you are tempted to feel empathy for these young men who just want a better life for themselves and their families. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2,262 migrants died trying to reach the shores of southern European countries in 2018. Of course, Italy and Spain can't take in migrants *ad infinitum*. But what can we do to create a just world with less income inequality? How do we reign in predatory capitalism that seeks to pigeonhole cheap labour in their blighted areas as the very ideology of its economic asymmetry?

When Selim was arrested in Monterrey, his parents were performing *umrah* in Mecca. They were unaware of what was happening to their son, who most likely financed their pilgrimage to the holy site (he reportedly charged each migrant USD 200 for reaching Nuevo Laredo). His younger brother was already in Brazil, hoping to reach Monterrey one day soon. Selim expressed regrets to the security officers who interrogated him for what he had done and asked them when he could possibly return to Bangladesh. He appeared unaware of the long prison sentence that awaits him. What is the state's responsibility to better inform its citizens about the perils of unlawful migration in a world that doesn't tolerate it?

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