70
NAVIGATING PRECARITY: (RE)MEDIATION, AGENCY, AND HUMAN SECURITY IN *AIRLIFT*

Ajit K. Mishra, *Associate Professor, Department of Humanistic Studies,*
Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi, India

Abstract:
Issues related to human precarity and human security have captured considerable global attention in the past two decades. Since the declaration of its concern for human security by the United Nation's Development Programme in 1994, academicians have started to consider the need to protect and preserve the most precious species on earth. A major engagement for most researchers of human security has been the effort to comprehend human precarity against the backdrop of violence, trauma, and fear resulting from war and the simultaneous civilian struggles for survival in the face of mass extermination. Informed by these problematic categories, this paper attempts a critical discourse analysis of the Bollywood film Airlift (2016) to reveal how the issue of human precarity has been negotiated through alternative modes of civilian survival strategies leading to (re)mediation and agentive discourse.

Keywords: Human precarity, human security, (re)mediation, agency, civilian survival.

I

It is no mere coincidence that almost all contemporary research into human development have invariably concerned themselves with the issues of human precarity and human security. This paradigm shift from national security to human security is replete with significances for our understanding and preservation of the most valuable species on earth. Human security has been defined as "an emerging paradigm for understanding global vulnerabilities whose proponents challenge the traditional notion of national security by arguing that the proper referent for security should be the individual rather than the state." Issues related to human security gained considerable ground with the publication of Human Development Report (1994) by the United Nations Development programme focussing on the human need for "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want." This insistence on human security follows from the rising incidences of immeasurable loss of human lives resulting largely from military aggression. Another reason for this paradigm shift in human security is the greater demand for human rights and humanitarian interventions in landscapes of crisis.

The question of human security is invariably associated with the problem of human precarity which assumes ontological implications as it involves questions related to the 'being' of life. However, it will be practical to suggest that the problematic of 'being' I am concerned about in this article has to do with its political and cultural implications rather than its biological entities. To be more specific, the principal focus of this paper is on human precarity emanating from armed aggressions, especially war. The precarity of life raises several questions about the conditions and the actors that make it less possible, or impossible. The conditions under which lives are rendered precarious call for serious scholarly intervention. To do so, we need to first develop an alternative ontology towards the rethinking of precarity, vulnerability, and civilian protection. Judith Butler (2009), one of the major exponents of human precarity and vulnerability suggests that we need to ask "what would it take not only to apprehend the precarious character of lives lost in war, but to have that apprehension coincide with an ethical and political opposition to the losses war entails" (p. 13)? She further adds that

> It does not suffice to say that since life is precarious, therefore it must be preserved. At stake are the conditions that render life sustainable, and thus moral disagreements invariably center on how or whether these conditions of life can be improved and precarity ameliorated. (p. 33)

The degree of precarity characteristic of armed conflicts is subject to the conditions into which human lives are forced. The amount of precarity experienced in everyday life is certainly lesser than that experienced during violent exchanges. The suggestion is that the true form of precarity is deducible in conditions of violence and trauma, which are the most deterministic offspring of war.

There is hardly any disagreement with the proposition that the impact of violence and trauma on societies during wartime is severe. The World Health Organization in its *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary* (2002) has expressed serious concerns over the pervading nature of violence:

> No country or community is untouched by violence. Images and accounts of violence pervade the media; it is on our streets, in our homes, schools, workplaces and institutions. Violence is a universal scourge that tears at the fabric of communities and threatens the life, health and happiness of us all. (p. 1)

Violence and trauma undeniably configure the social structures both during and after armed aggressions. While severely denting the larger social universe people live in, violence and trauma also heighten the precarity of human existence. These conditions leave such a lasting impression of horror and fear on the psyche of the civilians, that they become part and parcel of a cultural anomie. In the words of Nordstorm (2004), "we are finding that violence is not only enacted in the presentthe immediacy of an act of harmbut violence has a tomorrow" (p. 224). The perpetration of violence in armed aggression is an intentional act of destruction with a view to sustain one's power over the other. Violence during war is unleashed in two distinct ways: actual and symbolic. While actual violence is proportional to the measure of devastation, symbolic violence is more widespread as it trickles down structural layers in the form of fear. Consequently, the fear of loss and suffering turns out to be the real perpetrator. The impact of war is so penetrative that even before anyone is aware, it is already inside them. Life during wartime violence, thus becomes an inescapable site that entails pain, dismemberment, death, and politics of force.

While pointing out the lethal implications of violence for humanity The World Health Organization in its *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary* has also stressed upon the need to devise response mechanisms to ward off the devastating effects of violence. The report hints that "it is so pervasive, violence is often seen as an inevitable part of the human condition a fact of life to respond to, rather than to prevent" (p. 1). This insistence on response to violence is a significant starting point for the rethinking of survival strategies by those affected by unforeseen suffering. This also hints upon the possibility of looking towards civilian protection strategies as an alternative for state intervention. The problem with state intervention in armed conflicts is that it is primarily driven by matters of policy and thus, is a delayed response. This is also one big reason why state interventions have failed to check the initial casualties in armed conflicts. On the other hand, survival strategies developed by conflict-affected people who are better equipped to assess their environment, prove to be useful in adapting coping strategies, and navigate violence. This alternative interventionist discourse is premised on the supposition that individuals are best positioned to ensure their own safety during times of armed violence. So, individual survival efforts can be visualised as counter-strategies to negotiate and overcome adversarial forces during armed conflict (Gorur, 2013). A clear understanding of civilian survival strategies thus enables us to not only conceptualize civilian agency during armed conflicts, but also to comprehend the ramifications of altruist behaviour.

Researchers have found a significant link between violence and the need to help during armed conflicts. Developing empathy for fellow sufferers is now seen as an integral part of individual interventionist strategies. Violent conflict causes hardship and trauma among affected individuals and

populations. When individuals experience hardship and trauma, their capacity to empathize with others increases, especially for those in need or suffering from similar afflictions. Theories of empathy suggest that the need to help becomes symptomatic of an emotional contagion in which an individual is empathetically drawn towards people experiencing similar distress (De Waal, 2008, p. 285). By helping others, an individual thus finds a channel for the release of emotional discomfort.   Such humanitarian individual intervention can be termed as performative, enacting paradigmatic forms of feeling and acting towards suffering, ... (that) does not simply address the public as a pre-existing collectivity that awaits to engage in action, but it has the power to constitute this collectivity as a body of action in the process of visualising and narrating its cause (Boltanski, 1999, p. 35-54).

The issues of ensuring human security by overcoming wartime precarity, violence, and trauma through individual intervention tinged with an altruistic humanitarian vision are some of the most important questions raised by the Bollywood film *Airlift* (2016), directed by Raja Krishna Menon with Akshay Kumar and Nimrat Kaur in the lead. The film reproduces the historic and the greatest ever evacuation leading to the safe airlifting of 170000 Indians stuck in the war hit Kuwait post the attack by Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army. *Airlift* treats with concern the questions of human precarity stemming from unimaginable violence and leading to irreversible trauma in warzone, and the need to respond to the chaos individually through one's knowledge and assessment of the prevailing conditions. The narrative in *Airlift* revolves around Ranjit Katyal (played by Akshay Kumar), a powerful Indian businessman who takes pride in calling himself a Kuwaiti, is trapped in a quagmire of devastation brought about by a sudden armed aggression by Iraq. From here the film is all about how Ranjit becomes instrumental in ensuring the safe passage of his fellow countrymen to their motherland from Kuwait, converted into a veritable hell. *Airlift* is the story of how the stranded Indians, with the help of Ranjit Katyal, manage to survive the Iraqi invasion, and against all odds travel a thousand kilometers across the border into Amman, Jordan. From Amman, 170,000 Indians were brought home by the largest and the most successful evacuation ever attempted by any country in the history of the world. Over 59 days, the Indian government systematically flew over 488 Air India commercial flights into a war zone to evacuate all 170,000 Indians and safely bring them home.

In *Airlift,* we encounter the cinematic representation of violence and trauma perpetrated on humans on dismembered emotional planes. The fear emanating from violence is a pointer to how human existence can suddenly turn into an inexplicable precarity. Through the (re)mediation of the narratives of the evacuation, *Airlift* acts as an agent of memory while problematizing the issues of human security in the face of callousness. Informed by the assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper studies the various discursive strategies adopted in *Airlift* to present it as both a performative and a communicative event. The principal objective of the paper is to unravel how the film, while problematizing the issue of human security, also succeeds in mediating an alternative narrative of possibility through agency.

<p style="text-align:center">II</p>

The world depicted in *Airlift* is dominated by an inexplicable sense of precarity, for the apparent order prevailing at the beginning seems to be deceptive. The film begins with a frame showing the Indian-Kuwati business tycoon Ranjit katyal's aura which gives him complete access to the Kuwati power structure. Ranjit's proximity to the power relations helps him, although ironically, keep at bay his apprehensions about the Iraqi military excess in Kuwait. However, this apparent sense of order proves to be inadequate as Ranjit's world stands shattered by an unexpected Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This sudden military attack exposes not only the fragility of state support, but also the inadequacies of civilian enterprises in the face of military power. Human precarity looms large over the narrative rubric of *Airlift*. The problematic of precarity so crucial to the narrative design of *Airlift* is, in fact, indicative of a plague that has engulfed the entire humanity. The feeling of sudden extermination by an external diabolical agency is key to the everyday human existence ranging from the most powerful to the most powerless. Numerous

Hollywood films have taken up this problematic of human precarity by creating narratives of supreme human struggles and victory against massive external threats. *The Jurassic Park*, *Jaws*, and the *Terminator* series are some of the most noteworthy enterprises in this league. Human precarity is primarily the result of an uncontrollable fear of violent and traumatic perpetration which is unleashed on civilians by the power hegemony. Even the United Nation's Development Programme in its *Human Development Report* (1994) has emphasised the need to reduce global insecurity and human precarity through achievement of 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want'. Fear, which results from armed aggressions including war and terror attacks, sets the tone of *Airlift*. More than the actual violence, it's the fear of violence and subsequent traumatic experiences keep all the characters in the film in a state of precarity. Ranjit's tribulations entailing fear begin one late night when he learns about the Iraqi attack on Kuwait. At the beginning, he is unable to measure the intensity of the aggression as he shrugs off the invasion as just another warning served upon Kuwait by Iraq. However, his first and the most devastating encounter with violence happens soon when on his way to the Indian embassy he witnesses the brutal killing of his driver by the Iraqi invaders. This devastating incident begins his trail of fear of losing his family; losing his people; and most importantly, losing his identity. The impact of actual and symbolic violence on Ranjit and other civilians can be measured by the multiple frames narrating immeasurable trauma bursting out of devastation and killings. These frames of fear pose a serious challenge to researchers who attempt to critically appreciate the depth of these traumatic experiences. Mollica (2000) has made a significant observation into such plights of war-traumatized people:

> My feeling was an example of what novelist Herman Wouk has called "the will not to believe." Such a response is a common reaction to accounts of human cruelty and emotional suffering, and it is one of the reasons that political leaders, humanitarian aid workers and even psychiatrists have failed to appreciate the depth of war's trauma. The model used to be a rubber band. War is hell, ... (p. 54)

Mollica's insight holds good in *Airlift* as the civilian's world in it is subjected to unbelievably nightmarish experiences. Violence and trauma have crept into every inch of the life of the civilians. On the other hand, all attempts by Ranjit to manage a safe passage for his and the driver's family prove to be futile, thus adding to his agony. So, what we witness in the first segment of *Airlift* is a depiction of shattered lives as the first and foremost front of violence's legacy.

The questions of violence and trauma on one hand and the need for survival through various strategies on the other, are of seminal importance in our understanding of war narratives of suffering and loss. The question is whether to silently allow oneself to be tortured by the aggressors, or to devise strategies of survival. *Airlift* successfully draws scholarly attention towards civilian protection strategies not as activities conducted by international organisations, but as a strategic move devised by the civilians to ensure their safety. Trapped in the quagmire of the Iraqi attack, Ranjit not only passes through a transformative phase in his life, but also deploys and adapts his coping strategies to counter military confinement. So, what follows his accidental meeting with Major Khalaf Bin Zayd, is the various self-protection strategies undertaken by him to negotiate lives affected by mass violence and atrocities.

In their research article on surviving violence, Suarez and Black (2014) have categorised four distinct repertoires of self-protection on the basis of several typoplogies offered by various scholars. The strategies are: *hiding and fleeing* temporarily or permanently leaving an insecure area; *submission and/or cooperation* collaborating by providing information, supplies or other types of assistance to an armed group, either out of duress or support; *contestation and witnessing* mobilizing public opinion to challenge an armed group, through human rights monitoring, reporting and advocacy; and *confrontation* forming a community-led group that will deter and confront armed groups or join one of the fighting parties. The survival strategies adopted by Ranjit in *Airlift* are, more or less akin to the repertoires described above. The first strategic move by Ranjit was to flee along with his wife and daughter. However, owing to the moral

obligation towards his slain driver; the seizure of the airport by the Iraqi soldiers; and delayed policy decisions by the Indian Government act as deterrents in his attempts to flee. Ranjit's knowledge of the workings of power structures helps him negotiate the capriciousness of Major Zayd through mimics of submission and cooperation, and thus buy time to rethink his strategies to flee.

While Ranjit is trying to flee along with his people, an interesting development is taking place in the narrative structure. The frames which have been projecting Ranjit, his family, and his acquaintances suddenly become larger as they are gradually crowded by more entrants. This is a very significant development in the film's discursive structures as it entails a completely radical repertoire of civilian protection. Two important developments make it possible. First, Ranjit learns from his friend in the Indian Embassy that there are one lakh seventy thousand Indians who are passing through the same tribulations as his. Secondly, and more importantly, Ranjit's realization that sans his debilitated aura he is nothing but just an Indian. Ranjit's metamorphic altruistic behaviour can be decoded with the help of three important components of empathy. The first of these is emotional contagion or vicarious arousal leading to a person's emotional identification with others in distress. By extending help to the other in need, the person overcomes emotional discomfort. The second component is driven by sympathy in which a person is driven by feelings of sorrow for the other in need. The third is driven by a cognitive ability to perceive the other's internal state thus increasing the possibility of concerted sympathetic concerns. Be it in the tribulation of his driver's family; the pain in the hollow eyes of his employees; or the reflection of terror in the eyes of the Kuwati woman in the Indian camp, Ranjit seeks a vent to release his emotional discomfort by extending a hand of help.

Ranjit's resilient and altruistic approach brings about one of the greatest community mobilizations helping civilians recover from mass violence and atrocities. In his mobilizing strategies we can very well notice what Veena Das (2007) suggests that agency is something that escapes from, rather than descends into the ordinary life. Ranjit's humanitarian intervention in the lives of the stranded fellow Indians assign to him an agency which, in the words of Henrik Vigh (2008), "is not a question of capacity we all have the ability to act but of possibility; that is, to what extent we are able to act within a given context' (p. 1011). Despite his wife's objections, Ranjit's decision to guide the entire community of one lakh seventy thousand Indians out of the veritable hell gives birth to the possibility agency. His humanitarian interventions range from setting up the relief camp, managing food for the huge group, and warding off interpersonal hatred, to incessantly trying for support from India.

An interesting aspect of survival strategies is the difficult decisions civilians make to negotiate the imminent danger of armed conflict. Most often, the decisions escape moral categorizations. Henrik Vigh (2008) insists that while Studying survival therefore requires that we look not only at how individuals and communities move within their social environments, but also how their social environments move them. Ranjit's attempts to deceive Major Zayd, his secret arrangement with the Iraqi foreign minister, his deal with the scrap procurer ship are among some of the decisions which cannot be categorized as right or wrong, for his environment moves him so. The last segment of the film entails a huge exodus of about one lakh seventy thousand Indians from Kuwait City to the Jordanian borders over a thousand kilometres away. This exodus is particularly significant for Ranjit's remarkable resilience, creativity, and humanitarianism. Despite several odds, he finally succeeds in opening the gates for his fellow Indians at the Jordanian border and thus sends them off to a world of security.

Airlift is a classic example of how (re)mediation of suffering and crisis can lead to cosmopolitan values through witnessing and participatory action. The film borders on the notions of Precarity, crisis, and fear emanating from violence and trauma on one hand and solidarity through (re)membering on the other. Trauma plays an important role in the film's narrative, for it envisages the need to help as a viable mode of overcoming emotional discomfort. The need to help presupposes a basic human tendency to make a strong case for the victimized as a group. Besides, the need to help is also widely perceived as a redemptive

strategy to counter the aftermath of trauma. The (re)mediation strategies adopted in *Airlift* carry out three distinct functions. First, they mediate the process by which technologically articulated discursive resources, namely language and image, produce meaning about suffering and, in so doing, propose to media audiences' specific ways of engaging with distant sufferers. Secondly, they remediate stories extant in other forms by erasing the memory of this reproduction so that the remediated story becomes the approved reality. Thirdly, they remediate through a distinct process of engagement both within and without the cinematic boundary.

     Airlift is a pathbreaking Indian film which successfully attempts to problematize issues related to humanitarianism, individual agentive intervention, remediation of suffering, and human security in an era of precarity. The film presents in its own way a strong case for the values of humanitarianism which has lately been written off as the "crisis of pity." The film insists that humanitarianism can provide insights into the moral proposals to action. So, the brand of humanitarianism promoted in the film escapes the charges of political exhibitionism. By showing the consequences of compromising human security, the film suggests, through Ranjit's exploits to protect the lives of one lakh seventy thousand Indians, that most it is the collective responsibility of the entire globe to protect and preserve the most precious species on this planet.

References
1. Advani, N. (Producer), & Menon, R. K. (Director). (2016). *Airlift* [Motion Picture]. India: Abundantia Entertainment.
2. Boltanski, L. (1999). *Distant suffering. Morality, media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* New York: Verso.
4. Das, V. (2007). *Life and Words. Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
5. De Waal, F. (2008). Putting the altruism back into altruism: The evolution of empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 279-300.
6. Gorur, A. (2013). Community self-protection strategies. How peacekeepers can help or harm. *Civilians in Conflict*, 1(7). Retrieved from https://www.stimson.org/content/community-self-protection-strategies-how-peacekeepers-can-help-or-harm-0
7. Human security. (2017, April 20). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Human_security&oldid=776402565
8. Mollica, R. F. (2000). *Invisible Wounds*. New York: Scientific American, Incorporated
9. Nordstorm, C. (2004). The tomorrow of violence." in N. L. Whitehead (Ed.), *Violence* (pp. 223-242). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
10. Suarez, C. & Black, D. (2014). Surviving violence: Transgressing categories and boundaries in armed conflicts. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 3.1, 1-12.
11. United Nations Development Programme. (1994). *Human Development Report 1994*. New York: Oxford University Press for UNDP
12. Vigh, H. (2008). Crisis and chronicity: Anthropological perspectives on contenuous conflict and decline."*Ethnos*, 73.1, 524.
13. World Health Organization. (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary* Geneva: WHO