Chakra

Articulations of a Pandemic
Researching and Navigating South Asia in the Times of Covid-19

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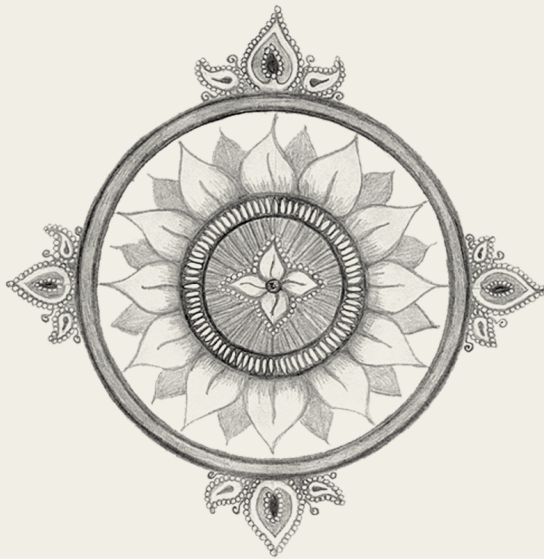
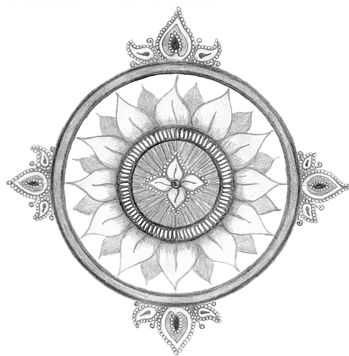ARTICULATIONS OF A PANDEMIC

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Researching and Navigating South Asia in
the Times of Covid-19

Edited by Isha Dubey

Innehåll

Contributors

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Bani Gill is a researcher at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford. An anthropologist with a keen interest in migration and mobility, her research engages with issues of urbanism, race, gender and the violence of law and bureaucracy from a global south perspective. She received her PhD from the University of Copenhagen in 2019, where her dissertation focused on contemporary patterns of transnational mobility from the African continent to India. She currently serves as Executive

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Introduction

Isha Dubey

On December 9, 2019, I set out for India for what was, at that time going, to be a three-and-a-half-month-long fieldwork trip in South Asia, spread across Jamshedpur, Delhi, Amritsar and Dhaka. Over this period, a gradually escalating metamorphosis of the narrative surrounding what we now know as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded. Towards the end of December news emerged from China of people getting infected by a pneumonia-like illness. On December 31 the government of Wuhan province confirmed that it was treating at least a dozen cases, all with similar symptoms. Things moved swiftly from there as scientists identified and named the virus causing the illness, followed shortly by reports of the first death, just before one of the biggest Chinese holidays of the year. At this point, this increasingly grim news coming out of China was met with everything ranging from scepticism to optimistic complacence, concern to prompt action. Particularly in the West, the early responses to the virus embodied an attitude that this was something unfolding in a part of the world far away from them and that it would not pose much of a problem elsewhere. And then the world, as we knew it, changed forever. Cases of the infection from the virus were soon registered all over the globe and began mounting at an alarming rate. New hotspots and epicentres emerged, and the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. In just a matter of days, nations announced lockdowns, self-quarantine and shelter at home orders were imposed, borders were sealed, and life came to a grinding halt across the planet.

While this was all happening, I still prepared to carry on with my field-

work in India and Bangladesh though observing, with growing concern, this seemingly dystopian descent of the world into greater and greater uncertainty brought on by the virus. It appeared, at the time at least, as if South Asia had been spared the worst of it. India registered its first case on January 30, 2020 in Kerala from a student returning from Wuhan. Then and over the course of the next few months, the rate of spread and infection in India and South Asia in general appeared generally lower than elsewhere in the world where things were spiralling rapidly out of control. The public discourse in India was then still dominated by the anti-CAA and NRC protests that had erupted all over the country with their nerve centre in Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi.[1] I reached Dhaka on February 19, just a couple of days before *Ekushay*[2] and counting down to the centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth. Striking up a conversation with my taxi driver on the way from the airport to the Dhaka University where I was going to be based out of for the duration of my stay, I asked him if he was worried about catching the virus given his line of work. He replied with cheerful nonchalance: 'This is a Muslim country madam. The Quran resides inside everybody. The Coronavirus cannot do anything to us … it cannot dare enter Bangladesh. In China they eat haram food – pig, dog. No wonder they got this virus.'[3] And yet, in less than a month from then, as I returned from my trip, both India and Bangladesh had responded to the pandemic and the threat it posed with far more concrete measures. India closed its borders and imposed a nation-wide lockdown. In Bangladesh, the events planned around Mujibur Rahman's centenary celebrations were postponed and a 'general holiday' amounting to a lockdown was announced. Other South Asian nations followed a similar tra-

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1 CAA stands for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the NPR is the National Register of Citizens. The CAA allows Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh and Parsi migrants who have entered India illegally-that is, without a visa-on or before December 31, 2014 from the Muslim-majority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and have stayed in the country for five years, to apply for Indian citizenship. The NRC is a count of legitimate Indian citizens.

2 Ekushay (February, 21) is an annual memorial-day for remembering and honouring the martyrs of the Language Movement of 1952 in Bangladesh. It has now been declared and celebrated as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO.

3 Fieldnotes, February 19, 2020, Dhaka, Bangladesh

jectory and in a matter of days, the entire region had locked itself away from the rest of the world.

Soon enough, all regular domestic and international modes of travel were suspended, stranding multitudes of people with varying degrees of accompanying hardships and differential levels of economic and psychological needs. However, across the board, an unprecedented constraint on mobility and an increasingly daunting realization of the total lack of control or agency to be had in navigating this situation was felt. And so, as my intended plans for further fieldwork in Delhi and Amritsar dissolved and an impending return to Sweden indefinitely postponed, the news cycle was flooded with haunting images of migrant labourers, dependent primarily on a daily wage for their livelihood, literally walking home from metropolitan cities in the tragic and horrific fallout from the lockdown.

The idea for this special issue comes from a space of simultaneously experiencing and witnessing a pandemic. As we attempt to make sense of this time – as we are trained to do as researchers and academics – while also just living through it on a day-to-day basis, the professional and the personal interact and impinge on each other in complex yet meaningful ways. It is this overlapping subject position and its articulations that that this special issue aims to explore in the context of researching and navigating the pandemic in South Asia.

Academic research in the humanities and the social sciences has come to be built and structured heavily around the possibilities for mobility and movement created by globalisation. We travel all the time – for fieldwork, for conferences, for accessing distant sources in distant libraries and other research related pursuits or for relocating to new/foreign cities and countries for our careers. This often involves frequent border-crossings, circuitous travel routes and long stays in countries that form our research focus and applications for visas of different kinds depending on the particular travels and journeys we are embarking on. And so, a constant navigation of and negotiation with the structures and systems of control and mobility that limit as well as allow people to be on the move is an integral part of the 'academic' life. As the world grapples with an environmental crisis created by centuries of human misuse and overuse of its resources, the debate around how academia needs to reconfigure itself in order to mitigate its

carbon footprint has been ongoing for some time now. And yet, mobility and research remain enmeshed into each other in complex ways.

The Covid-19 pandemic has plunged the world into a catastrophe for which there exists no precedent and is certain to alter life as we know it, long after it has 'passed'. A virus that spread across the globe by simply attaching itself to people in transit now holds the world hostage. It has irreversibly transformed how we will henceforth move from one place to another, cross national borders, even venture out of our homes. As the pandemic unleashes illness and death upon millions, wreaks havoc on economies, lays bare the entrenched inequalities fostered by unfettered capitalism, and devastates and displaces the most vulnerable groups of people across nations, the need to examine, analyse and document the nature and impact on what human civilization has gone through shall be central to making sense of all that lies on the other side of this crisis. However, as academia in the humanities and the social sciences attempts to explain the forward and backward linkages of Covid-19, it is also necessary to apprehend the ways in which the academy and academic research itself stands to be affected and altered by the pandemic.

This issue of *Chakra: A Nordic Journal of South Asian Studies,* published by the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET) presents an insightful collection of articles that bring out, from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives, its dual focus on this need to study the social-political, cultural, economic, and psychological cost of Covid-19, with the simultaneous study of how it in turn transforms and impacts the modes, means and methods of research and dissemination in the first place. The call for papers at the beginning of May allowed us to collect the articles that appear in this volume by the middle of June 2020. Hence, it needs to be qualified that the reflections and research presented in them is in part contextual and to the specific moment of the pandemic in which they were written. However, the insights, experiences and observations within them hold wider significance and cut across and beyond the temporal contingencies of a rapidly changing and flux-ridden situation.

Thematically, the articles in the issue individually and cumulatively bring out its larger overarching focus on the ways and means of navigating the pandemic as researchers of/in South Asia. The idea is to engage with

the dual but related questions of how the pandemic has impacted the methods we employ to carry out our work as well as the specific insights this period has produced with regard to our respective fields of research. Within this larger premise, the contributions also touch upon other common and interconnected themes, such as the need for empathy and its manifestations, the digital space as both an arena of new possibilities as well as greater precarities, migrant subjectivities, the entanglements and contestations among science, reason and irrationality (and their own inherent politics) and scrutiny of the forces of continuity and change at play in macro processes such globalization and environmental changes vis-à-vis the pandemic.

The volume opens with Amrita Ghosh's article, 'Social media and commodifying empathy in the Covid-19 era'. Ghosh reflects upon the fallout from the gradual, unfamiliar and uncomfortable shift of entire populations across the globe as they move from physical, tangible spaces to virtual, online ones in the wake of the pandemic. How does this move impact, affect and influence our capacity to show empathy and compassion, and what meanings get attached to expressions of these emotions in the current context. The theme of empathy also figures prominently in Thube's article, which calls for a radical reimagining of social history, entailing a major re-calibration of the field's methodological landscape, in the face of the constraints on mobility and access imposed by the pandemic. However, Thube argues, the limitations imposed on the scope of historical research – itself intrinsically tied to institutional archives – also open up possibilities to write more empathetic and inclusive subaltern histories focused on storytelling, rather than performing historiographical 'gap-filling'.

The Kerala model presents a tremendous success story in India's fight against Covid-19. This makes it important to be analysed and deconstructed as much as possible as we continue to battle with the virus. Three articles focus on Kerala, its response to the crisis and how it has played out and factored into the everyday lived reality of mitigating and living through the pandemic in the state. Naz and Joseph take up Kerala as a case study to look at the ways in which a more localised and context-specific handling of the pandemic has proved to be an effective when navigating

its seemingly unmanageable proportions. Their article provides a useful insight into the Kerala model for coping with Covid-19 and the applicability of the human security partnership framework to it. It brings out the various ways in which the framework was deployed in Kerala through the use of technology and across the board inclusive and participatory policy making. Rajayyan provides a detailed account of the Kerala state government's response to the pandemic with regard to the ways in which it regulated and facilitated movement into and across its borders in the midst of a country-wide lockdown. Filtered through the author's own subjectivity and experience of working as a volunteer with the Covid-19 Outbreak Management Team in Trivandrum, the article provides a close insight into the workings of the inter-state border control and the role it played in keeping mobility in check so as to control the spread of the virus. At the same time, in showing how a system, so carefully put in place by the authorities actually played out on the ground, Rajayyan brings out the human dimensions and cost of traversing the region on an everyday basis during the lockdown. Finally, Nair and Raja's contribution to the issue, while still located in Kerala, places the field of inquiry in a college of architecture. Nair and Raja explore how the college grapples with the challenges posed by the move to an online/virtual pedagogy, especially for female educators who are juggling the roles of caregivers and mentors both within and without the academy.

The articles by Mortensen and Majumder both centre the dilemma of doing fieldwork in the time of Covid-19. This has demanded a thorough re-imagining of the 'field' itself and what it means to carry out an ethnography both in and out of the pandemic. Mortensen shows how child-rights advocacy has adapted to online work during the lockdown in India, while simultaneously reflecting on the ways in she herself has responded to the online transition and its implications for research in the field. Majumder focuses on the ongoing everyday struggles of nurses and primary care workers integral to India's Covid-19 response as they simultaneously manage and make sense of the crisis at hand. Majumder's narrative alternates highlighting the challenges faced by the health care workers with considering the methodological, ethical and logistical choices faced as a researcher. Together, these pieces reflect upon the possibilities and effecti-

veness of a remotely conducted immersive ethnography of and amidst a pandemic that spreads through physical proximity.

Hasan, Sinha Palit and Datta and Raju, in their respective contributions to this issue, grapple with the common theme of the ways in which the pandemic has unleashed a parallel tussle over what constitutes knowledge about the disease, who gets to 'produce', control and legitimize this knowledge and how this knowledge is disseminated and made sense of by those consuming it at large. In Hasan's article on the measures that the Bangladeshi state took to contain Covid-19, and popular perceptions of it, Hasan explores the meanings Bangladeshis attached to their situation in what he calls the 'realm of unreason'. To dismiss as aberrant irrationality these perceivably 'unreasonable' responses would be to claim that Bangladeshis possess no agency in how to comprehend and make sense of their new circumstances. Sinha Palit focuses on the ways in which the proliferation of fake news and the mechanisms deployed to disseminate it have undermined democracy and impacted diplomacy in India in the wake of the pandemic. The article touches upon important points about the use of technology to spread hate and prejudice against Muslims in a time of crisis, and how this impacts India's strategic relationships with the Muslim world, immediate neighbours and its global reputation as a secular nation. The 'infodemic' running parallel to the pandemic and its 'battle' with science is what Datta and Raju take up in their article. They provide a critical commentary on how the pandemic has been managed by the current ruling party in India, emphasising the silence following a spate of problematic, misleading and sometimes violence-inducing pieces of misinformation on the virus, its sources, its spread and cure, concluding with a call for the dissemination of information rooted in and verified by science. The structures that utilise the digital/online space to propagate and circulate opinions and information that carry within them divisive tendencies existed in the pre-Covid world. The pandemic, as these articles show, has only further exposed and highlighted our vulnerabilities against them.

The articles by Gill and Paul both deal with the manifestation of migrant subjectivities in their encounter with the pandemic. Gill examines the impact of the sudden restrictions on mobility due to Covid-19 imposed uniformly and hurriedly across an unequal population in India. Through

glimpses of the experiences of a Nigerian migrant in Delhi, Gill highlights how a complete disruption of the informal arrangements and networks of work, finance and residence – made necessary due to undocumented migrants' illegal, criminal status – means communities have found themselves in extremely precarious situations during the lockdown. Paul's article on the nature of the migrant crisis unleashed in the wake of the pandemic and the lockdown in India shares common ground with Gill's. The author skilfully builds the premise of her work on migrant subjectivities through the analytical category of citizenship, then goes on to discuss the very futility of citizenship as a useful framework in the fallout from the pandemic. This is a sentiment is shared by Gill, alerting us to the dangers of single-handedly claiming citizenship to counter discriminatory outcomes from uniformly imposed conditions during the pandemic. Such an endeavour only excludes the non-citizen migrant and obscures the historical oppression of certain communities.

The final two articles in this issue deal with two macro spheres of critical analysis and the ways in which they stand to be impacted by the pandemic, the economy and the environment. What unites these two pieces is two questions: To what extent does Covid-19 present a dramatic rupture from the existing patterns of economic activity and human-nature interactions in South Asia? Might there be continuities with the pre-pandemic world that have only been accelerated and made more visible by the onslaught of the virus? Barua's article, 'South Asia and Globalization during the Covid-19 pandemic', looks at how globalization has impacted the spread of the novel Coronavirus and how the resultant pandemic stands to transform globalization, in general, and specifically in South Asia. Though the pandemic is bound to have a profound impact on globalization's many dimensions, these were already in crisis well before Covid-19 hit. In the context of South Asia, even as the nations in the region have reaped the benefits of globalization, a discernible economic downturn was apparent much before the pandemic. Finally, Tiwari discusses the issue of wildlife protection and conservation in the context of Covid-19, an important, yet inadequately addressed issue that is often treated in a dangerously misleading way. Tiwari clarifies some of these misleading projections, such as the notion that wild animals claiming urban spaces signals an environme-

ntal revival of sorts. Animals, wild or otherwise, have always occupied spaces in urban settings, adapting to the adverse conditions that human actions create. Their appearance during the pandemic, therefore, is nothing new, revivalist or necessarily a positive outcome. Countering the narrative of positive environmental effects of the pandemic, Tiwari argues that the pandemic has in fact led to an increase in poaching and trade in wild animal meats, which in turn can cause further threats of pandemics.

SASNET operates as a network for facilitating, disseminating and hosting research on South Asia in and beyond the Nordic region. This special issue is rooted in recent conversations with and reflections of colleagues on the function of a research network such as this and how best it can continue to operate when those constituting it can no longer be 'on the move' for the foreseeable future. These are of course not unique concerns and are shared by universities and institutions of research across the globe. Hence, an exploration of how we do research built around a certain idea of mobility and access in the times of Covid-19 and beyond is a timely one. Through the assortment of reflections and research across the diverse set of articles brought together in this issue, we hope to take this conversation forward, internalise the insights from this extraordinary time and mitigate their impact, while shaping both the 'how' and the 'what' of researching South Asia from this point onward.

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Social Media and Commodifying Empathy in the Covid-era

Amrita Ghosh

Abstract

This article traces various social media expressions during the ongoing pandemic and asks the overarching question: how one should understand, express and practice compassion and empathy in this new context of global – yet differential and graded – uncertainty, loss and suffering? It focuses on the unfamiliar shift of entire populations across the globe from physical, tangible spaces to a virtual, online presence and the consequent issue of what norms, rules and ethics govern this online area of expression and action during a pandemic. Caught between an either-or narrative between a display of privileged quarantine living, a sense of empathy for the marginalized or a downright lack of it, the article observes that social media responses to the pandemic produce a 'competitive performative compassion.' It argues that such compassion becomes fetishist and results in the very thing that the expressed compassion was meant to counter, that is, continued unequal suffering.

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In early March 2020, when the world was awakening to steady news of a virus causing havoc in Wuhan, China, I embarked on a three-week trip from Sweden to the United States to visit home. The Covid-19 panic had not set in yet fully. Still, the sight of the usually swarming, yet now sparsely-peopled Copenhagen airport, felt ominous. A Danish immigration officer joked as he stamped my passport, 'We Vikings are not scared of this virus! Have a safe trip home, see you when you are back!' The flight to New York was far from full, but flying without a co-passenger beside me, the access to all three seats (almost a bed) felt more like a stroke of luck than an eerie premonition.

Within a week, America closed its borders. The whole world followed, shutting down bit by bit, borders first, and then with increasing devastation came the schisms of religion, class, race and xenophobia. The virus disrupted us corporeally from the self in extraordinary and unprecedented ways. As human subjects we found ourselves dismembered from our own touch – our hands, human breath, spaces and surfaces, everything around us became potentially dangerous. Increasingly grim news emerged of rising deaths in Italy, the lockdown in China spread, and incessant rumours of quack cures never kept the virus at bay. People who could, took to social media to understand and express what life in quarantine looked like. Grappling with spreading gloom and fear, social media became the predominant means by which millions now inhabited 'public' spaces and maintained psycho-social contacts. And then burst a new trend: policing how to behave online during the pandemic. In this essay, I review this phenomenon and explore the intersections of the rhetoric of empathy and social media during Covid-19.

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, adjusting to isolation and quarantine globally, people both participated in and fed on steady cycles of online representation of life with fetishized objects, riding and documenting wave upon wave of popularized fads. The initial delirium came with paper rolls. Then Dalgona coffee. The hunt for yeast and homemade bread. Pictures of sourdough were uploaded, some amateur, some with fancies, frills, and elaborate décor. An effort at 'normalcy' manifested in a flurry of cooking photos, drawing on unused recipes as part of nostalgia for times gone by, and of traditions and celebrations that inform the texture of human

identities. Next came post after post of nature photography, flowers and birds; artfully edited videos of people singing or dancing, snatched moments of joy in quarantine; photographs from when 'we' were twenty, celebrating beauty, youth, vigour and hope – all determined efforts to affirm that life continued, as a death ticker haunted us on news channels, relentlessly reminding us of the thousands of deaths in countries far away, and then closer, right there in our own cities and neighbourhoods.

At the same time, socio-political structures of inequality began to implode around us. Social media channelled a hope for solidarity and concern – dare one say global compassion – as, rightfully so, growing critiques began of governments' mishandling of the pandemic, whether Trump's response in the US, or the horrifying news of migrant workers' plight in India. There came a cry for connectivity as we became intensely, helplessly aware of our own mortality. We turned more and more towards symbols and activities of social habit in an attempt to construct a semblance of meaning during an experience that questioned and threatened both materialist and ontological ways of being.

Soon, however, something differently virulent was unleashed: an untrammelled critique of people's online representation of their everyday lived experience during Covid-19, framed as an erasure of the reality of the pandemic. Commentary ensued about the lack of compassion shown by the apparent flaunting of elite, neoliberal lifestyles via social media posts of food, flowers and nature. Observing this critique, I found myself secretly chiding my growing obsession with my bougainvillea plant (blooming well despite Covid-19) and stopped myself from posting a photo of the flowers, concerned that it was uncompassionate to do so while we inhabited this moment of massive grief and collective trauma.

This binary thinking finally brings me to the question of how concepts like empathy became embroiled in conversations around social media as both a source of hope and proof of neoliberal non-sentience? At a time when empathy has become a catch-all word, what does it mean to be 'compassionate' when all activity on social media is open to policing of standards of behaviour as 'too little,' 'too vain,' 'too elite'? Does the distress of others on a large global scale require continuous visual proof of our collective and individual grief such that we stop expressing our daily stri-

vings towards a modicum of hope and signs of normalcy? Or does the latter mean we are flaunting privileged existences that nullify the hardships of certain communities? How does one really 'behave' in the daunting new reality of the pandemic that makes us 'rightfully' human?

Lauren Berlant, in her book, Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion (2004) cautions against the use of empathy in ways that create hypocritical politics, one which reifies the same objects that it wants to critique. Berlant studies different kinds of compassion and its politics that demand a certain kind of sociocultural obligation from people. She concludes that 'there is nothing simple about compassion, apart from the desire for it to be taken to be simple' (7). Her book is a cautionary reminder to understand compassion in political and cultural contexts and not reductively sever the emotion from complex dynamics of power, suffering, witnessing and privilege. The question of ethical practice of compassion on social media has always been relevant. Social media spaces have been used to mute, debate or mobilize people towards certain causes and raise awareness of structural inequalities that demand social justice well before the pandemic. In this moment, we are left with similar questions about how to grapple with unmitigated suffering around us. But something unique has taken over social media during these unsettling months. We are participants in a rapid discourse of affect that often tilts to a phenomena of performative compassion, 'a thrilled vindication' as Yogesh Parmar states about social media posts, where everyone, at all times, is on high alert to find fault in others and vie for the position of 'most compassionate' ('Life Lessons on the Road'). Ironically, there is a clickbaity, sterile race towards 'competitive performative compassion,' as one's response to the pandemic plays out on an affective plane, assessed to be more valuable than some others.

Mette Mortensen and Hans-Jörg Trenz also investigate a phenomena of social media morality culture in a study that explores the dynamics of social media 'which can constitute a significant site for the construction of a moral order' (344), one that leads to a 'collective process of generating meaning, constructing casual chains and calling for action' (Mortensen, Trenz 344). Using Luc Boltanski's work on 'moral spectatorship,' Mortensen and Trenz point to an emergence of what they call a new 'publics of

moral spectatorship' and 'impromptu publics' in social media, framed by a morality that is 'mediated by public discourse' (345) online. These 'impromptu publics' work towards creating awareness, a concern towards and for others and sets a context for global justice, belonging and solidarity in the space of social media (345–46). Their work is important and laudatory in ways that inform how social media can inspire or mobilise commitment or taking action towards an ethical worldview, even if the concept of 'action' may not be defined in the traditional understanding of the word. While this is a powerful way of building transnational solidarity in times like the present, I am somewhat concerned that the limits of this code of online ethics can also become a dubious spectacle if they solely reside in a vindictive either-or space during this pandemic time.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a surreal, dystopic time for most people, and what we are finding, increasingly, is, perhaps, a commodified limit of compassion – a strange evocation towards establishing a social media morality, a moral universe where one size fits all. Dire charges await, at best of an elitist lack of concern and at worst, of privileged escapism. And yet again, as Berlant reminds us, we shouldn't readily do away with registers of compassion as responses of self-worth or righteousness, because 'sentiments of compassion are [not] at root ethically false, destructive or sadistic' (Compassion 7); rather, she critiques the 'honourable sociality of response' where there is a compulsion of ethicality produced (7).

It is rather tragic that during this pandemic, the urge towards an ethical practice of compassion contrarily becomes the virulent judging of social media posts, how to emote, how to behave online, and what is supposed to be the 'right' kind of post. The inexorable fear and dread of the virus slowly coming closer and closer is a real one. So is the feeling of intense vulnerability when colossal changes are taking place rapidly and breaking down most of what 'we' knew as 'normal.' The pandemic has produced a moral universe within social media frames, in which compassion is a superficial, fetishized category, when only card-carrying expressions of affect signal to 'rightful behaviour' that one has to produce to be a part of this universe. As the pandemic rages on and structures of inequality burst open in every space, the treatment of compassion on social media results in the very thing that the expressed compassion was meant to counter.

Once again, as I prepared to cross borders to return to Sweden after a two-month lockdown in the epicentre of the pandemic in the US, a friend drove through the night just to leave a sealed mask outside my door; another gave away a bottle of sanitizer and a pack of medical masks – rare commodities at the time, to ensure I could travel safely. I was reminded of the value of hope and real compassion, one that does not need advertising on social media posts or demand an automatic initiation of guilt for 'counterintuitive' posts.

Perhaps, there is a lesson here for us in belonging, outside of constant manufactured connectivity or guilt. To be sure, this is not a call towards being insentient, or supporting lack of compassion or erasure of the suffering of others. Social media posts requesting help for those affected by the cyclone that devastated West Bengal, India and parts of Sundarbans, or posts on understanding and reflecting on the Black Lives Matter movement (and why it must not be framed as the old and weary All Lives Matter), and the need to rethink gendered spaces and the home during the lockdown, are only few examples that are undeniably vital. They help us in rethinking the status quo when the old normal has failed us in myriad ways. But one wonders if this pandemic is the best time for that, when vindication becomes the go-to affect, when demands for same affect (online) are not met. Perhaps, there is a compassionate space on social media for posts both of one's culinary experiments and activism that helps move hearts towards social justice.

Compassion is dead, long live compassion!

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Navigating Past Struggles through the Current Nightmare: Dovetailing ambition with empathy

Surajkumar Thube

Abstract

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to throw up new challenges, early career researchers need to keep discovering newer ways of acclimatizing to its uncertainties. This essay seeks to emphasise the importance of using this moment of uncertainty to creatively reimagine the field of social history. I attempt to show this by focusing on how my own experiences of working on Non-Brahmin writings from Western India have helped me navigate the principal constraint - lack of access to vernacular resources. Furthermore, I propose that social history demands a renewed injection of storytelling, imagination and empathy, without losing sight of the significance of the original writings from groups and communities who have perpetually found themselves on the margins of society.

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Introduction

Robust archival research work is the archetypal lynchpin of a meaningful contribution to social history. Amidst the Covid-19 crisis, there is profound uncertainty over mobility, everyday interactions and relatability with fellow citizens, all of which has threatened to become the norm rather than a passing blip. Social history, which relies so heavily on *doing* history, with its primary emphasis on digging into the archive, therefore needs to be radically reimagined as its very entry point itself into the world of knowledge-making demands significant alteration. Storytelling, infused with critical inference, may prove useful while we struggle to capture the facts-based certainty of the past.

My own research investigates the idea of a Marathi public sphere in early twentieth century western India. I want to argue that alternative communities, comprising of lower-castes, Dalits and even the dominant Marathas, imagined themselves as 'counterpublics'. They used the medium of print, along with their prowess of distinct Marathi linguistic registers to resist the social domination of urban, upper caste Brahmin elites. Decentering the focus from 'meta-nationalists' driven narratives allows us to uncover previously buried alternative voices, giving regional histories their much-needed greater meaning and importance. As the archives of these social profiles are difficult to locate and access to in our current situation, any attempt to bring forth the voices of resistance publics requires imagination and storytelling to be ingrained in the very framing and conceptualizing of its narrative. Imagining and reimaging must become the constant habit of the researcher rather than merely periodic punctuation for superficial aesthetic effect. Furthermore, for a social history that seeks to unearth alternative pasts, retaining the element of criticality while focusing on the accessibility of the storytelling format remains crucial. By connecting the 'before' to our 'possible futures', any material available on vital inflection points need to be expanded and explored as the actual material on the period remains minimum.

Reconstructing the vibrant public sphere and the quotidian life of the past amidst the immobility of the present demands a shift away from

conventional storytelling. The homogeneity and rigidity of a 'society' driven narrative needs to give way to the constant manoeuvring, locating and dislocating of 'sociability'. The sociable nature of everyday forms of communication needs to be juxtaposed then with 'sociality' to map the associational bonds between social communities that find themselves connected to each other to varying degrees in a larger constellation of alternative politics. In this way, the primal act of deep diving into archives can be channelled into gauging the radical potential of our now limited source material through multiple philosophical and intellectual vantage points. A forced situation of limited access to archives must elevate the centrality of logical derivations and critical inferences. This may force us to think in directions which were hitherto unseeable and unthinkable. Perhaps we need more deliberation into our conventional reliance on mobility and privilege that has merely inflated our already phantasmagoric perception of unending archival mines.

Meandering through the research rigmarole

My principal question during this period for my research has been, 'what should be the central locus of my research analysis?' Should I be more concerned with a vertical dissection of categories that involves less material and more critical interpretations or should the analytical gaze shift horizontally and tap into ambiguous and overlapping notions of time and space, across personalities, cultures and geographies? The latter naturally demands an uninhibited access to a variety of source material. In the absence of realizing this option, then, our locus of analysis shifts radically in the ideational realm.

In order to strike a balance between the two, I decided to rely upon the conceptual framework of 'prosopography'. This is a research method wherein a study is undertaken of the biographical data of individuals who belong to well-defined groups with converging and diverging social traits. This, coupled with analysis of the hermeneutics of their different forms of Marathi offers me a wide perspective of early twentieth century everyday

life. In my own research, identifying relevant groups became crucial, and I was able to rely on the Maharashtra State government's digitalization of some of the most important writings from early twentieth century on their website called *Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya and Sanskriti Mandal*. This website included writings from reformers and leaders across the political spectrum, while collaborative ventures like *Prabodhankar.org*, a website containing all the writings of Prabodhankar Thackeray (Bal Thackeray's father and an extremely influential figure in early twentieth century western India) have been helpful in giving access to a figure whose paradoxes and complications have been severely underexplored.

In my experience at the University of Oxford so far, I have sensed a predominant focus - both in terms of research areas and in archival material - on personalities and writings which have had pan-Indian resonance. As far as archives are concerned, 'nationalist' centric issues/events/figures naturally dominate, as compared to material that focus on 'regionalist' or 'hinterland politics'. Even if the available material concerns subaltern worldviews, it tends to be, more often than not, in the English language. Furthermore, a linguistic study of vernacular languages cannot be restricted only to ancient and medieval manuscripts. Modern day editorials of local newspapers coming from all sections of the society also provide intriguing results in terms of different forms of writing styles and spoken tongues. The challenge has been to try and retrieve useful available documentation for further analysis from the above-mentioned binaries.

If these were the institutional hurdles, reaching out to potential sources within India has been an even bigger challenge. As my work deals with material written by Non-Brahmins in early twentieth century, I need to contact descendants within the Non-Brahmin family tree. I realised that many of them have migrated from orality directly to the realm of digitality. The otherwise linear equation of passing from orality to textuality and then to digitality had witnessed a radical reordering. Building threads of communications with these descendants, especially if they and their archival trust is located in a fairly isolated village, leads me to weave a network of 'millennial intermediaries'. This group of friends, colleagues and cousins have been crucial in straddling the rural-urban divide, in mitigating the technological gaps between them and their grandparents and, most im-

portantly, in cultivating a perceptible sense of how the politics of language works at the local level - essential if they are to understand my research concerns.

Along with building networks on the ground, online forums built over decades are extremely helpful in maintaining a healthy discussion on the locationality and availability of niche sources. In my case, *Maharashtra Study Group* (MSG) has been one such online group where researchers working on varied aspects of Maharashtra's socio-cultural pasts help each other with archival suggestions and recommendations. Realising the privilege of being only in the first year of my research during the pandemic, I have had the liberty to make both minor tweaks and major alterations wherever necessary. Moreover, my supervisor's magnanimity in offering all the primary books on my topic from her personal collection has been enormously beneficial.

Identifying methodological traps and seizing fortuitous opportunities

There is a broad historiographical trend that distinguishes the two main categories of history making as 'social history' and 'intellectual history'. Attaching such specificities to categories merely creates an illusion of having had already exhausted the possible potentialities of History making. Furthermore, it assigns certain historical tools and peculiar modes of analysis to these two groups of thinking. If prominent historical personalities seem to augur well for intellectual output, a broad societal, material exposition gets addressed by the social output.

Assigning 'facts' to social history and 'ideas' to intellectual history, History as a discipline is robbed of the endless possibilities of paradoxes, ironies and ambiguities. My hypothesis is that for social history in particular, deep diving into archives must be complimented by thinking about specific, micro-issues anew from fresh conceptual deployments to begin with. More often than not, a multi-faceted approach toward hitherto under-researched areas can transport our minds to generate even more creative,

intellectual outputs. This is even more striking when the pursuit to retrieve old documents tantalizingly hangs on the ropes as the chances of managing to access them are bare minimum even under normal circumstances. However, the temptation to shift the field of research overwhelmingly in the direction of ideas and thought can be counterpoised with maintaining the vibrancy of the local or regional specificities.

Our spontaneous sensory perceptions are quick to map out how the research work is going to unfold till its conclusion. One of the measures that we can try as early researchers is to resist falling in this trap of bringing a finality to our imaginations. This, especially in the present situation as the creative journey of our research will carry the risk of degenerating into a bland formality. Our physical proximity too in many cases to these archives amplifies how we bureaucratize our minds to follow a certain blueprint in the near future. The micro-detailing of this research plan that more or less gets accomplished over the course of time probably, inevitably perhaps, ends up having a veneer of ordinariness attached to it. The privilege to chalk out an easy and mechanistic path for the immediate future reflects the paucity of the urge to break through the bounds of conventional historical thinking itself.

Our limited access to resources may stand a better chance at being productive if we keep our conceptual frameworks malleable and become bold and ambitious in interpreting the reciprocal largesse of the material easily accessible to us. Buried histories can be traced from in-depth footnotes, passing anecdotes and serendipitous discoveries from the world of internet. We seldom acknowledge the importance of footnotes while we are overwhelmed with an easy access to archives under normal circumstances. With the internet becoming a mainstay of everyday lives, it has managed to make significant inroads in the world of archives and documents as well. Archival enthusiasts, either driven by self-funding or with the help of a generous trust, have taken up upon themselves to expand the logic of a free public library to the virtual world. Now is the time to monetarily support such individual and group driven initiatives, especially on the part of researchers who are privileged by their association to resource rich universities of the developed world. We must realize that the act of researching on what may get termed as 'obscure' or 'esoteric' topics by the general

public must not remain a self-gratifying exercise. Only a sound network of reciprocity will ensure the longevity of the social web of researchers, sources and people.

The onus to persistently engage with this incessant rise of new research related websites lies with both established and budding researchers. If the challenge for the previous generation of scholars was to make themselves more tuned in with modern ways of researching, the budding researchers need to hone the craft of complimenting their expertise of modern technology without losing the basic skills to read a primary text.

Navigating socio-psychological blocks

In order to diverge from the trend of mere gap-filling in the existing abundance of literature, we need to start looking at our areas of interest as storytellers. This aspect will only get explored if there is an awareness across the research world to acknowledge the virtues of empathy in such times. If bureaucratic records or some obscure archives from a dusty old institute in rural India are unreachable, the barriers of physical distancing must be resisted by confronting the stigma of 'social distancing'. Researching on the margins of the society must entail a reimagining of both our everyday vocabulary and their innate caste-ist underpinnings. Moving beyond the superfluous semantics, a genuine pledge toward accepting of responsibility towards the betterment of the society on the margins is the least we can do to expect any help in return. Gaining access to personal archives or getting interviews of helpless, faceless migrants, farmers and everyone from the society's margins needs to be complimented with tangible, material support in return.

The quest for intellectual pursuits, especially during a pandemic, needs to seamlessly mesh with the idea of an 'activist-researcher'. A strong element of reciprocity is crucial if we have to imagine doing research beyond formal institutional frameworks in a sustainable manner. If we have to get into the headspace of the past wrongs, being mindful of the psychological traumas suffered by the marginalized of the present must be seen as inevi-

table. My hypothesis is that psychological traumas expressed in the vernacular languages of the present can prove to be insightful markers in making sense of why a particular group felt the collective need to resist a particular wrongdoing in the past. Moreover, the psychological dimensions of anguish and suffering expressed in a particular idiomatic language will guide us to attempt an exploration of even the mundanity of everyday life of the past. In order to make a meaningful contribution particularly to this section of the society, we need to move away from the notion of a transactional treatment of 'sources on the ground' and towards long-term, sustained engagements.

The ongoing pandemic has already started altering our everyday routines and habits. The modes of research, methods of framing questions and deriving analytical results will have to have to undergo a churning of ideas, by both the old and the new groups of researchers.

Human Security Framework for COVID-19 Management:

Lessons from the Kerala Model

Farhat Naz & George Kodimattam Joseph

Abstract

Pandemics become disastrous when the population is not prepared to respond. With Covid-19 becoming a global health security crisis, local machineries are forced to explore their own ways to protect citizens. In this paper, we present the 'human security approach' and its successful application by the state of Kerala in India in managing Covid-19 by making the fight people-centred, context-specific, localised, inclusive, and ensuring expertise and partnership of diverse stakeholders. The discussion establishes the prospect of containing the impact of pandemics and similar hazards through collective engagement, and points to the possibility of greater harms when the spirit of partnership is found missing. We argue that the human security approach is promising for the management of the present crisis.

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Covid-19 Situation in South Asia: Brief overview

Most nations were ill equipped when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. In South Asia, the lack of preparedness presented a clear failure, as state machineries were caught off-guard and clueless in the face of the outbreak. However, since the start of the twenty-first century, there have been seven pandemics. Factors such as human overpopulation, climate change, deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices, tourism, and unplanned urbanization are considered reasons behind the emergence of pandemic diseases (Commission for the Human Future, 2020). In the South Asian context, pandemic conditions are aggravated by the unparalleled hike in connectivity brought about through mass transit systems within and among megacities, an unprecedented preference for a faster travel through air, and ever-increasing rates of commutes across continents.

Human security framework: Relevance

Pandemics and natural calamities do not differentiate people in their spread. Despite this, they do not have an even effect across different sections of society. Covid-19 has affected most, if not all, countries in the world. As the Commission for the Human Future notes, 'This pandemic, in particular, highlights the devastating combination of an intertwined global economy, unpreparedness, belated action, social disconnection, and hyper-individualism" (2020: 11).

The failure of any leading nation or union of nations to lead the battle against the pandemic emphasises the weight of responsibility left with each country. As Covid-19 has become a global health security crisis, local machineries were forced to seek out their own ways to protect citizens. South Asian nations, including India, have responded to Covid-19 through lockdowns, travel restrictions, and border closure. Beyond this, Covid-19 signifies an extraordinary chance to rethink human society, the human

impact on the planet, and our human future. This is especially in the context of human security, wherein the safety and wellbeing of everyone matters. It necessitates the formulation of policies that listen to diverse voices on socio-ecological resilience, response strategies, and the intricacy of the global aftermath; any major failure may well produce effects that trickle down multiple chains.

A human security framework offers a robust and cohesive pathway to form alliances to tackle existing and emerging challenges in a superior manner. It explores localised pathways by unlocking organisational barriers, advancing joint analysis, planning, and implementation that combine the expertise of diverse stakeholders towards concrete and tangible improvements in people's daily lives (UNTFHS, 2020).

The Framework: A brief exposition

The concept 'human security' was first adopted by the United Nations Development Programme in 1994, and was designed to address seven themes: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Human security is an approach which calls for people-centred, context-specific, comprehensive and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people (UNTFHS, 2020). It aims at promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships for the best use of resources by participating people in governmental and non-governmental organizations, diverse communities, and international institutions. It inherently involves multiple issues and diverse players.

A human security approach focuses on managing and minimizing risks, therefore averting apparently insignificant challenges. With proactive and inclusive foundations, it helps societies solve problems of hunger, unemployment, injustice, and stigmas, and restores communities for a better future. Since challenges are manifold, a human security approach demands cooperation and social cohesion to curb threats that people may plot against each other. This participatory framework manifests virtues of decentralisation, partnership, diverse expertise, and optimality, and is there-

fore an effective tool to meet 2030 agenda for sustainable development and a promising candidate for Covid-19 management.

The magnitude of the impact of Covid-19 varies among different nations in South Asia, and among different states within each nation. Evaluating this variation and focusing on Indian context we argue that a human security partnership has a major role to play in making a difference. Two major blocks in pandemics management are the absence of efficient mechanisms and the overcentralisation of powers retained by the federal political structure (Guru, 2020). The national machinery lacks the adequate tools to coordinate actions at the state level, unable to provide resources that cater to the needs of a huge population, and unsuccessful to make the best use of available expertise. The government relies mostly on clinical establishments, external consulting firms, and bureaucrats for technical inputs, and pays insufficient attention to ensure the involvement of public health and epidemiological expertise within the country (Priya et al., 2020). Additionally, pandemic management decisions, including lockdown, are reserved to the central government under Disaster Management Act, 2005 (Guru 2020).

A human security framework, contrary to such a centralized structure, focuses on empowering people to take care of themselves, formulate decisions that are binding to their collective existence, and mould social structure that they envision (UNESCO, 2008). In addition to giving basic capabilities to people, the framework promotes partnership among international community, national governments, regional administrations, public and private institutions, civil societies, and local communities, and thereby facilitates exchanging best practices for collective welfare (ibid). Attention to the principles proposed by the framework has made a real difference in some regional societies irrespective of the institutional barriers imposed by the federal political structure.

South Asian context: Models of great success and massive failure

The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic are unique, exemplified in the limitations it imposes on twenty-first century lives, its paramount human toll and its threat to the stability of societies. Pandemics gather unstoppable momentum and produce large scale disasters when strategic planning is missing; in contrast, the impact can be contained if there is a prompt response, proper planning, partnership spirit, and regular reviews. While India stands as one of the ten-most Covid-19 affected countries, the state of Maharashtra claims one third of the total number of cases (Government of India, 2020) – a clear example of the failures mentioned above. However, the robust human security partnership framework adopted by the state of Kerala has allowed the state to become a global model for facing the threat of Covid-19.

Ever since its first case reported on 30 January 2020 – one of the earliest cases in India and much before Covid-19 was declared a pandemic – Kerala successfully kept the curve flattened and cultivated domestic resilience. This success validates the argument that the pandemic can be managed effectively through the support and faith that citizens have in governance systems, which is significantly dependent on the ability of the state machinery to instil confidence in its institutions (Guru, 2020). Furthermore, as listed in the dashboard (Government of Kerala, 2020), the pandemic management strategy adopted by the state vindicates its commitment to the basic principles of the human security framework, though the state does not explicitly specify this.

This thesis, that the success on pandemics significantly depends on the availability of healthcare facilities and affluence, seems wrong by Covid-19 when viewed holistically. If the thesis were true, the state of Maharashtra – located in Mumbai, the financial capital of India – and Pune – one of the richest cities in India – would not have fallen victim to the pandemic nor have claimed a one-third share of the total number of cases. Likewise, the state of New York or Greater London could have saved themselves from the clutches of Covid-19. The state of New York has a population of

19,453,561 with an affluent social environment of a per capita income of 88,981 USD and a good healthcare infrastructure of 3.75 physicians per 1000 people and 3.06 hospital beds for 1000 patients (Thummarukudy, 2020). However, to 5 May 2020, 24,988 deaths were reported, despite the first case arriving as late as 1 March 2020 (ibid). Similarly, Greater London hosts a population of 8,174,000, with a per capita income of 68,108 USD, 3.3 physicians per 1000 people and 2.92 hospital beds for 1000 patients (ibid). The first case was reported on 12 February 2020, with deaths until May reaching 5,178 (ibid). Meanwhile, the State of Kerala has a huge population (33,406,000), lower per capita income (2,937 USD), 1.7 physicians for 1000 people, 1.8 hospital beds for 1000 patients, and the first case was reported on 30 January 2020 (ibid). Despite this, the total number of deaths is merely 3 as of 25 May 2020. We believe that the success of Kerala substantiates the significance of a human security framework in facing challenges raised by Covid-19.

The Kerala Model

It is quite interesting to explore how the state of Kerala navigated the fight of the nation against Covid-19. A seamless assemblage of both the political machinery and social attributes helped the state to identify the most appropriate way to gain public confidence and compliance to manage the threat. Factors such as the democratic political framework, participatory decision-making procedure, decentralized power structure, collectivist value framework, commitment of media and communication systems, higher rate of public awareness, and transparency in policy formulation and governance have played significant roles in the process. The dashboard of the Government of Kerala substantiates this argument. As the dashboard (Government of Kerala, 2020) demonstrates, in addition to the state machinery, a task force team, comprising experts within the state and from outside, was constituted to lead the battle against Covid-19. A complete set of information – including cases reported each day, test results, hotspots identified, quarantine status at each district, and real time data on the

pandemic along with advisory notes – is released daily.

The dashboard speaks about the unique community kitchens initiated by the state to fight hunger and to feed the destitute, guest labourers, and those in quarantine. These kitchens are run by local bodies and partnership organizations, and most of these kitchens are managed by *Kudumbashree, a*n organisation that works for women's empowerment. Since poverty, famine, and hunger are corollaries of the pandemic, this unique human security partnership initiative is of great significance. The data demonstrates that the number of beneficiaries of community kitchens is gradually reducing, indicating the progress to resilience. The dashboard further presents the details of destitute rehabilitation through the partnership of local bodies and voluntary organizations. To meet this goal, a social volunteer force leaves no one aside, instead accommodating people from all groups. This social volunteer force comprises people aged 16 to 65, though the majority falls within the range of 20 to 30 (ibid). Major tasks of the force include identifying the needy, delivering essential items, exploring locally available goods, making house visits, conducting data collection, doing area surveillance, managing movement controls, communicating alerts, providing medical support, and running call centre and control rooms. Additionally, the partnership framework provides psychosocial support to the victims of Covid-19 by facilitating more than 1,100 counsellors, who have already supported around 3,00,000 people and held approximately 9,00,000 counselling interactions (ibid).

Among other reasons, one dominant factor which underpins this partnership's aggressively united fight against Covid-19 is the high rate of health awareness among Kerala population. This produces a mindset in both the public and the government that is prepared to face challenges. High rate of health awareness, however, manifest a positive correlation with morbidity rates. Though the state of Kerala has the longest life expectancy, and therefore the lowest mortality rate (owing to higher rate of literacy and extensive public health services) the state reports the highest rates of self-perceived morbidity, motivating the population to seek medical remedies and to undertake preventive measures (Sen, 1993). How one decides to act relates to one's positionally dependent beliefs (ibid). Stated otherwise, the response of any population to pandemics and similar health

hazards significantly depends on positional – group specific – variables such as the nature of the public governing machinery, dominant ideologies, level of social inclusion, degree of awareness, and previous exposure to similar hazardous situations.

The democratic and socialist political environment in Kerala appears to be conducive to collective engagement in containment tasks. Likewise, the collectivist ideological structure helps people prioritizing public welfare and safety over individual rights such as freedom of movement, liberty to practice the faith, and the right to leisure. The decentralised and inclusive governing structure facilitates the work of the voluntary taskforce through links between the state headquarters, districts, and each village at the bottom. The high rate of literacy, specifically health literacy, unites support from the media, and the presence of electronic channels such as the state dashboard and live data boards, and the unique strategy to release complete route map of the confirmed patients prompts people to be alert, and furthermore, to be willing to report cases voluntarily.

Finally, prior exposure to similar hazards has a negative correlation with the susceptibility of the population to new pandemics. On 19 May 2018, an outbreak of Nipah virus encephalitis (NiV) was reported in Kerala and there have been seventeen deaths and eighteen confirmed cases to date by May 2020 (WHO, 2020). The entire situation was entirely as frightening as the current Covid-19 one. However, the outbreak was managed by the society and has been 'acknowledged as a success story' (ibid). Furthermore, to ensure its society is prepared for future pandemics, the government approached WHO to conduct an external review and document a public health response focusing on three factors: coordination structure and mechanisms, surveillance and intervention strategies, and reduction of transmission and impacts of interventions. WHO praised the state for 'achieving impressive health outcomes at modest incomes' (ibid). Even earlier, in 2014, the state experienced another exposure to a similarly hazardous situation during an outbreak of Ebola, which was also contained through quick response strategies.

The human security framework adopted by Kerala in pandemic management is found yielding similar results in other places as well. The model has helped Dharavi (the largest slum in Asia, located in Mumbai in the

state of Maharashtra) to bring down its alarming rate of Covid-19. In doing so, the state of Maharashtra formed a task force to manage the pandemic, encouraged public involvement in preventive measures, initiated a public kitchen and other basic facilities to support the afflicted, and incorporated a public-private partnership in treatment and isolation services. These adopted Covid-19 management protocols and preventive measures made it possible to reduce the growth rate of the pandemic significantly. The data for June 2020 reveal that the growth rate is about one percent, having been 12 percent in the month of April (Bose, 2020). Similarly, the state of Odisha presents promising results by adopting the framework.

To conclude, the successful application of a human security approach has made the state of Kerala a global model for containing pandemics. It is clearly necessary to turn to a human security approach in our fight against Covid-19 as we continue to learn from the Kerala model.

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Crossing State Borders in Kerala During Covid-19: A South Indian experience

Jyothi Basu Rajayyan

Abstract

The unforeseen Covid-19 crisis has turned the world upside down and disrupted the normal functioning of all nations. This pandemic has resulted in measures including travel bans and lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus. These initiatives taken to address the health emergency have put many countries and their population in a dilemma. This article provides an account of the hardships experienced by one such population, and examines the human dimensions that pandemic-imposed limited mobility produce by studying the measures of one southern Indian state – Kerala. The author's own experience is used to provide an overview of the inter-state border management system and mobility control expedients in Kerala. The article also provides a glimpse into past experience, pandemic preparedness and public health infrastructure attributes of the state, all of which helped Kerala to respond to the present health emergency.

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Evolution of Covid-19 as an international health emergency and global crisis

At the end of 2019, the World Health Organization's (WHO) country office in China was informed that a pneumonia of unknown cause had been detected in the city of Wuhan in Hubei. Annoucning this one its social media platforms, WHO stated that there had been no deaths and investigations were underway to ascertain the pneumonia's cause. On the 11th and 12th of January 2020, WHO received further information regarding the outbreak, when China shared the genetic sequence of the novel Coronavirus. By that point, there were 41 confirmed cases and one death, though the deceased person had severe underlying medical conditions. Things took a turn in a new direction the following day, on 13 January 2020, when Thailand's Public Health Ministry officially confirmed a case of Coronavirus in the country – the first outside China.[4] Following a subsequent meeting of the Emergency Committee under International Health Regulations, the Director-General of WHO declared the 2019-nCoV outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern. In this statement, he acknowledged, 'there are cases in 18 countries outside China, including eight cases of human-to-human transmission in four countries: Germany, Japan, Vietnam and the United States of America'.

Within weeks, the disease that the Coronavirus caused was named Covid-19. It altered the regular functioning of the global community substantially. The whole world was affected by the outbreak and its rapid spread across the globe, right down to regional and local levels. In many countries, curfews and lockdowns were introduced to keep the virus under control and prevent its spread. These lockdowns and travel bans were introduced as there is currently no cure or vaccine for this disease. In some countries, the number of cases increased rapidly, with the death toll mounting in a matter of weeks. Even the most developed countries, such as the United States, were unable to manage the situation and recorded the highest num-

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4 WHO shared information through its official Twitter account, available here: https://twitter.com/WHO/status/1217151178884222976

ber of Covid-19 deaths. On 28th of May, WHO recorded 1,634,010 confirmed cases and 97,529 deaths in the United States of America.[5] The world became into an almost solely virtual space, as the outbreak compelled people to interact and connect with others online, due to social distancing measures.

Crisis management measures adopted by different countries and stranded people

Countries have come up with different ways to tackle the Covd-19 crisis, most of which have included travel bans, curfews, and restricted movement of the population. Many people have experienced the difficulties of travel bans and border crossing restrictions that limit their free movement. People who have travelled to contaminated zones are quarantined and asked to self-isolate in some countries, for example, the US issued a mandatory 14-day quarantine for citizens entering the country from China, while other countries have denied or restricted entry to foreigners coming from China and some other regions. This has left people stranded in different countries, unable to leave and return to their homes. In some cases, people were unable to travel within the same country, for example to a different state. Countries like India closed their borders through a full lockdown and travel ban. In this context, food shortages and the non-availability of other necessary commodities made stranded populations even more vulnerable. The pandemic experience has been different in each country, resulting in different experiences for those stranded: some starved, while others found volunteers and other organisations were there to help.

In India, stranded migrant families and workers faced these struggles. The pandemic brought about a severe humanitarian crisis as people ran out of food, money, and patience. Some migrant workers in Madhya Pradesh faced police violence when they stepped out to find food during the

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5 As on May 28th WHO reported 1,634,010 confirmed cases with 97,529 death in the Unites States of America. https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us

lockdown.[6] In other places, civil society organizations and other voluntary organizations started initiatives to help the vulnerable, with meals, ration kits, groceries, medicines, and food items. In some states across the country, a lack of proper management and monitoring systems left more people in a vulnerable position, while in others, the situation was more under control. This left some states and cities witnessing a dramatic rise in coronavirus cases. For example, there was an unabated rise in the number of patients in cities like Mumbai and Delhi, which then recorded a high number of deaths. The central government of India issued several circulars and notifications to state governments to help them to manage the situation, including health advisories and instructions. The majority came from civil servants or ministries and departments in consultation with these bureaucrats. However, the huge number of these – there is evidence of more than 4,000 – created chaos in the chain of decision making and prevented effective management of the crisis.[7] In short, the efficient and centralized management system required to tackle the pandemic has not emerged, and the needs and capabilities of each state needs greater attention.

The lack of support provided to migrants offers the clearest example of improper and inadequate crisis management. Amid multiple lockdowns and travel restrictions – inter-state and inter-district, as well as international – some migrants were forced to return home on food, sometimes more than 1,000 km. Later, each state produced different initiatives and monitoring systems to allow their own residents to return. These include screenings and testing, as well as quarantine according to the local regulations. This paper examines the specific initiatives from the Government of Kerala. It also delineates how Kerala state stands out for its capabilities in this regard. Having worked as a volunteer with the Covid-19 Outbreak Management Team, I draw on my own experience to provide a detailed discussion of the inter-state border process in the Trivandrum district of Kerala.

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6 https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/citizens-helping-migrants-stranded-coronaviruslock-down-6412617/

7 PRS Legislative Research, based in New Delhi, India is an independent research institute works to make the Indian legislative process better informed, more transparent and participatory. https://prsindia.org/covid-19/notifications

Kerala and Covid-19 outbreak management system

Compared to other Indian states, and even other countries, Kerala state has been proactive in its management of the Covid-19 pandemic. The small southern Indian state was well-prepared to face an upcoming and unpredictable outbreak. According to a government source, a meeting was held by Kerala's Health Minister, KK Shailaja, to understand the situation with a rapid response team. On 24 January 2020, they established a control room and instructed District Medical Officers (DMO) to set up a control room in each district of Kerala. *The Guardian* reported that, 'by the time the first case arrived, on 27 January, via a plane from Wuhan, the state had already adopted the World Health Organization's protocol of test, trace, isolate and support.'[8] Shailaja has been hailed as a rockstar and the 'Coronavirus slayer' in Indian and international media for her preparedness and excellent crisis supervision. While Kerala was the first Indian state to report a case and went on to experience the highest number of cases in the country at one point, it became the leader in its management thanks to its reliable, effective monitoring and management system. By the 28 May, the state had just 445 active cases. There had been only six deaths, with a 0.6% mortality rate.[9]

To achieve this, the state established an efficient border crossing and travel management system, with six interstate border posts to monitor the entry of Keralites from different states: these were in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Idukki, Palakkad, Wayanad, and Kasaragod. Covid Care Centres (CCC) were also established in each district to facilitate institutional quarantine of the incoming people. The Health Department appointed a Nodal Officer for each CCC to oversee both the quarantine, the population's health, and any required treatment. A web portal, 'Covid19jagratha', was developed by the Kozhikode District Administration incorporation with

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8 Spinney, L. (2020). The coronavirus slayer! How Kerala's rock star health minister helped save it from Covid-19. [online] the Guardian.

9 Statistics are collected from GoK (Government of Kerala) official website updated daily https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/index.php

the District NIC and IT Mission Teams to manage this entire process. [10] It runs as a platform to monitor and report the inward travel movement of people coming from other states, and provides the public with access to required services, including the emergency pass, domestic returnee pass, vehicle permit, and the ability to register complaints. Within all of this, the state has issued specific guidelines to facilitate border crossing in this pandemic. A person stranded in another state must apply for an online pass through the portal. The relevant district administration will receive information regarding the applicant, and the details of the returnees will be made available to the local self-government institutions' Rapid Response Teams (LSGI RRT) and ward RRT (JPHN/JHI/Asha). [11] These teams include junior public heath nurses, junior health inspectors and accredited social health activists. They verify:

a) facilities for home quarantine, with a single room and attached bathroom.
b) information regarding the presence of elderly people or children in the home.
c) any other relevant information, including food requirements or other needs.

This information is stored in the portal to be approved by the district administration. The pass will be issued to the domestic returnees and made available as a document via the person's registered mobile number. When a Keralite reaches the border check post, they will be directed to show their pass and asked to undergo the Covid screening process. This includes leaving their vehicles, a thermal scan, with the use of hand sanitizer and wearing of masks. A token system is used to manage the queue, and people need to fill out a self-declaration form to collect personal information, including their journey and vehicle details. If the returnee comes from a Covid 'hotspot', this is marked as a Red Zone. The IT support team can

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10 https://covid19jagratha.kerala.nic.in/
11 Local Self Government Institutions (LSGI), Rapid Response Team (RRT) includes Junior Public Health Nurses (JPHNs), Junior Health Inspectors (JHIs) and ASHA (Accredited Social Heath Activists) workers.

then check their passes and ID cards. The individual then undergoes a preliminary check-up from a doctor to diagnose any Covid symptoms. Finally, each passenger receives a certificate detailing their quarantine requirements: either at home or institutional at a CCC. Fourteen-day home quarantine is mandatory for all returnees, while institutional quarantine is recommended to people found to have Covid symptoms or if they come from a Red Zone. All vehicles will be sanitized at the check posts, and district control rooms along with motor vehile departments will arrange safe transportattion for those going to the CCC. This information is all recorded in the portal, allowing all authorities to access all necessary details, including quarantine requirements. Individuals are monitored on a local level during their quarantine, and further instructions and guidelines will be provided to them.

Chaos on the borders and unheard problems of common people

The border control measures adopted by Kerala to curb the spread of Covid-19 experienced some setbacks due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. Even though the state planned its mobility controls and border management system, it was not completely foolproof. People in the state and those returning from other places faced hardships due to the mobility restrictions. Both authorities and ordinary people had to face the messiness inherent in the border management system established to regulate the crisis.

Border closures and checkpoints imposed to control mobility were established without giving residents a proper idea of what is happening in the country. In Kerala, many people were unaware of the lockdown regulations and unable to access information properly. The measures were imposed with little warning, before ensuring there was proper awareness meaning the local populations were taken by surprise. The migrant population were the most affected, requiring passes from both the state they work in and their destination or native state. They have to complete an

online application and wait for the approval from both states. Once approved, they needed to make travel arrangements, with all the associated financial implications of the crisis.

There were problems in the issuing of border-crossing passes, and some people complained about the long wait for approval. Many people were unable to enter Kerala or return to their home destinations, forced instead to wait at the border for hours or even days. The entry of incoming people was regulated by symptom screenings and temperature checking, followed by home or institutional quarantine and hospitalization if necessary. In some places, rapid testing for Covid-19 was carried out only on symptomatic people, leaving the risk of asymptomatic people going home to quarantine. This would make the situation worse, as there is a high possibility of virus transmission between people, especially if there is no proper self-isolation and physical distancing in the home.

At a certain point, the government of Kerala put a temporary hold on issuing border passes to the people coming from Red Zones, as some people were not willing to go into institutional quarantine, leading to the possibility of infection among many in Kerala. As a result, district collectors were given the responsibility of tracking these people and making any necessary arrangements for institutional quarantine followed by a PCR test after seven days of quarantine.[12]

The incoming regulations contributed to fear among ordinary people and interrupted cross-border trade between different states. The crisis control measures worsened the informal trade widely practiced in the Kerala and Tamil Nadu regions across the borders. Many people lost their livelihoods and were unable to find a new or alternative source of survival. Absence of income for several days had detrimental consequences on poverty and food security in many families. This, in turn, created significant problems as border crossing became an illegal act overnight. It resulted in human smuggling, most commonly at international boundaries, though many states in India also reported illegal border crossing across river or smuggled in milk tankers. In Kerala, people sought to avoid border check-

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12 Polymerase Chain Reaction Test (usually carried out after seven days of institutional quarantine at Kerala)

points by travelling along small roads, making illegal entries at unmanned spots. In other areas, fishermen who went fishing in other states used their boats to return to their native states under the radar. These incidents were a drawback of the system, and demonstrated a failure in the lockdown and border control policies of public authorities.

Learnings from the past: Overview of Kerala's pandemic preparedness

The response of the state to the Covid-19 crisis has been much discussed in recent times. Kerala's healthcare system has attracted attention thanks to its impressive health outcomes despite modest incomes compared to other states in India. In order to understand the way Kerala responded to this crisis, one must be aware of the socio-economic foundations and healthcare infrastructure of the state. The state has the country's highest literacy rate and has made significant accomplishments in health, education and social welfare policies. The decentralized public healthcare system plays a major role in coordinating pandemic related facilities and strategies at state, district, panchayath and ward levels. It helps to manage everything from primary health centres to medical colleges in the state by assigning clear responsibilities and guidelines.

In Kerala, this system has always been highly valued. It has increased in strength over time, introduced by the princely rulers of the early nineteenth century and nurtured over time by successive post-independence governments. A vigilant civil society ensures its continuity, which is supported and monitored by the local governments. According to Dr B. Ekbal, decentralization of governance in 1996 was a game-changer for Kerala's public healthcare infrastructure.[13] It helped to transform the social capital of the state and empower local government structure to enhance a robust healthcare system. The communist-led left-wing government, under the

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13 He is a neurosurgeon and public health expert, serving member of Kerala State Planning Board and Chairman of expert committee on Covid-19 management, Kerala.

leadership of Mr E K Nayanar, was in power from 1996 to 2001. During this time, the governance of everything from primary health centres up to district hospitals was handed over to local bodies. Since then, infrastructure leapfrogged under changing governments, and people relied more on government healthcare facilities as never before.

The government's proactive approach to Covid-19 can be attributed to its experience and investment in disaster response during Kerala floods and the Nipah outbreak. The experience of Nipah in Kerala provided the government with experience, giving them training and confidence to deal with the later Covid-19 crisis. The contact-tracing and isolation of affected people to intensive care facilities were widely practiced during the Nipah outbreak. A group of doctors received special training to handle emergencies, helping the state to adopt an innovative approach to disaster management and make timely interventions in collaboration with all stakeholders. The capacity building of health workers, community engagement and active surveillance with comprehensive monitoring system kept the crisis under control. The state relied mostly on its available resources and social capital to contain the Nipah outbreak. Integration of the public health system with local self-government brought together key stakeholders and ensure high standards of civilian participation in disaster response.

The Covid-19 outbreak's monitoring and management are carried out by incorporating different departments under the District Administration headed by District Collectors. Each officer and department are assigned specific duties, following protocols established by the state. The effective management of the pandemic is visible through the well-organized system, the high recovery rate and the low number of fatilities. The public healthcare system, the timely intervention of the Health Department, and the decentralized planning and monitoring system helped with the crisis management. It is untimely to predict the state's victory in controlling the pandemic. However, in managing and monitoring this health emergency, Kerala offers a model for the entire country and demonstrates its resilience in complex health situations.

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"We Are Just Stuck": Teaching and learning architecture during a pandemic in Kerala, India

Sumitra Nair and Soumini Raja

Abstract

This paper examines pedagogical experiences in architecture programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic in the state of Kerala, India. Kerala was one of the first Indian states to encounter the pandemic and its' response has attracted global attention. Architecture education presents a unique case: the physical space of the studio includes tactile objects, and face-to-face peer and mentor feedback are critical to the teaching-learning process. As such, the sudden online transition presents unique cognitive and functional challenges for both learner and educator. These are compounded by false assumptions of seamless, universal access to digital technologies, and the heightened responsibilities of domestic caregiving that fall on both women educators and young students. Drawing on the authors' own subjectivities as women academics, the study deliberately focuses on women educators in architecture. Reflecting on a survey of 29 women educators and 48 students of architecture, this paper sits within a larger examination that speculates on the pedagogic world that emerges from the pandemic.

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Introduction

Writing this piece on 19th June 2020, from Trivandrum, the capital of the state of Kerala India, the city was put on Covid-19 Red Alert by the district administration (District Information Office Trivandrum 2020). This comes almost three months to the date of the national lockdown, declared on 23rd March 2020. However, the state of Kerala began taking precautions as early as 4th February, after the first confirmed case was identified on 30th January. This early start was made possible due to the combination of a robust health administration kept on its toes by a highly aware public – both factors themselves drawing on a long history of progressive governance focused on public health, education, and now internet penetration. It has since brought this one state's efforts to address the pandemic to global attention (El Alaoui 2020). The unique socio-politico-economic history of Kerala that diverges sharply from that of the larger Indian narrative is worthy of its own discussion (Véron 2001). Given this context, we turn to examine the experience of learning and teaching in an undergraduate architecture programme in Kerala during this pandemic.

The government of Kerala directed educational institutions to close on 10th March 2020 (The Hindu, 2020). Transport, though highly limited, was still permitted, allowing students and staff to reach spaces deemed safe. Over the past three months, we have stumbled – occasionally coped, but mostly stumbled – when finding ways to keep teaching and learning in this new state of physical and emotional lockdown, while we are held siege by 'the humblest of things that God, in his wisdom, put upon this earth.' (*Žižek* 2020).

The study

As educators and researchers, we agreed that one of the best ways for us to process this phenomenon is to study it as experienced by our fellow travellers in architecture education. We conducted two independent online

surveys to map the separate experience of both teachers and students. Both survey designs were informed by our own subjectivities: we are both women professionals, teaching advanced undergraduate courses in architecture and design. Along with our students, we had been suddenly called upon to move our teaching and learning practice online,[14] (Archinect 2020) in a discipline where studio (Gross & Do 1997) and laboratory interactions are privileged learnings paces. We had little or no preparedness to make this shift, and certainly no prior experience of a global health emergency. Additionally, there was growing evidence that the discourse on "safety" vis-à-vis the pandemic and the lockdown was undercut by a very diverse set of variables: gender (McLaren et al. 2020) (Dixit & Chavan 2020), class (Samaddar 2020), and digital divide (New Indian Express 2020). Both surveys were created using the Google Form platform and distributed via our networks of students and teachers, as well as through social media. As such, the first survey focused on women educators in architecture. The second survey invited students in architecture colleges. We present below a discussion based on responses from 29 educators and 48 students.

Teaching architecture during a pandemic

As educators, the lockdown posed several challenges: treading the unfamiliar domains of online education, balancing work and domestic life inside four walls, and staying safe/sane within the body. We were forced to constantly straddled these virtual and physical spaces, without clarity regarding the future.

The initial lockdown days were exciting: Like children exploring new toys, we embraced the novel. We devised exercises, prepared PowerPoint presentations, recorded videos and held online classes. This excitement did not last. Architectural Design Studios demand physical space and bodily

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14 Though educational institutions were placed on lockdown on March 10th, The government directive on moving classes online came only by 15 June 2020. However, institutions, anticipating such a direction, almost immediately took steps to start online classes with the very first lockdown call.

engagement as quintessential for the act of learning to take place through drawing, peer discussions and seeing.

Moreover, as women educators, our challenges during the lockdown were multi-dimensional. We juggled housekeeping, care giving, online classes, lecture recording, meetings, washing, and studio mentoring (Minello 2020). Confounded by our mental and physical exhaustion, we sought out our colleagues from different parts of Kerala in order to understand ourselves and our academic practices in a society affected by a virus that seemed to be sensitive to gender, class and technology. This section of the study draws on 29 such respondents.

Teaching in Architecture includes a combination of design studios and theoretical subjects. All 29 respondents were engaged in at least one studio and one or two theory classes for an average cohort of 40–80. From an average of 10 hours per week for studio and 8 hours per week for lectures and preparations, working hours shot to an average of 35 hours a week under lockdown, with design alone taking up to 6 hours per day. An image is not immediately translatable into words: 'Drawing one line in the architectural studio is now replaced by a thousand words; a minute replaced by hours, like an entire world has come to a standstill.' (Strassler 2020). These women educators play the roles of mentors, guides and counsellors for their students, while juggling their own household chores and caregiving responsibilities for children and older family members.

Through unstable networks, and little to no training or institutional technical support, these educators continued to support and handhold students' design ideas and concepts. With little direction or experience, each respondent had devised their own way to help students: Some record sessions, while 30% prefer face to face sessions through Zoom or Google meet. While 70% of the respondents believe that an online mode of education is ineffective for architectural design studios, the other 30% believe that online design studios have made students not only more self-reliant but also more responsible for their own education.

Eighty percent of the respondents indicate that access to internet posed a major challenge: Migrating the offline studio online involves prolonged hours of talking, uploading videos and accessing submissions online, all of which are data heavy. Mentoring during lockdown has expanded to in-

clude the emotional work of dealing with students' challenges: non-attendance, poor internet connectivity, depression, students gearing up to drop out due to financial reasons, lack of sufficient drawing materials. For all 29 respondents, design studios have moved from dedicated physical spaces into the domestic world into their dining rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and sometimes even bathrooms – this is the new normal.

Studying architecture during a pandemic

The student survey aimed to understand how architecture students experienced the new mode of online learning during the lockdown. It must be noted that seven students had at least one immediate or extended family member (living with them or not) who had entered quarantine as a precautionary measure.

At the time of filling out the survey, only about half of the respondents had reached their permanent residence to be with their parents/primary guardians. These students were staying with an immediate or extended family member. We found that this unplanned time away from college was perceived both as challenge and an opportunity. More than 70% of the respondents took on a new hobby, skill or interest, and all mentioned the psychological relief or comfort in the fact of being able to spend time with a loved one during these uncertain times.

However, this relief did not automatically translate into a smooth transition to learning online. While some students outline benefits such as the flexibility offered by asynchronous learning, the overwhelming majority indicate at least three key challenges with these new circumstances: first, while all respondents in this sample had access to internet, 85% of this being via mobile phone data, 46% lacked steady connectivity. Though empathetic to their educator's lack of experience teaching online, 86% respondents mention this unfamiliarity as impeding their learning. A third challenge was a lack of clarity from their institution, university or the government on the future road map. Together, these lead to some challenging learning conditions.

The first aspect that comes into especially sharp focus in design education is the absence of peer-to-peer-learning and engagement with processual learning: 73% students identify this as a major handicap. The bulk of design learning occurs within a studio, a physically and temporally demarcated 'sacred' space entirely dedicated to learning by doing, observation, peer- and instructor-driven feedback. An average studio involves 5–6 dedicated hours in a day. As young adults at home, all respondents report being called upon to contribute to housework and caregiving. Students report challenges in accessing the physical and temporal space to learn, 'It is hard to realize and set up a workstation at home in the middle of so many pressures. I can't hog the dining table or the data.' The life of a student on campus is a privilege that affords some distance from their worldly circumstances. The presumption that students at place of residence are in a state of unending and unaccounted-for time at their disposal is a fallacy (Bhattacharya 2020).

A second aspect is the dissonance of having to learn design online in a mode where, 'We are asked to cut off the video and mute the mic to avoid "distractions." So, does it matter if I am there or not?' There is tedium in navigating online platforms, following instructions and finding class material with no teacher present. This means that 'something that should take four minutes in class, takes forty minutes to just find.' The combined effect of such anomie is reflected in the fact that students reported spending less than 5% of their time in a week on course work.

Towards the uncertain interrupted future

Anticipating an interrupted season of teaching and learning, institutions are scrambling to find ways to continue their work. Drawing on the experience of architecture students and women educators in Kerala, we suggest that the Indian academy would do well to consider the following: that transitioning online implies more than transliteration. It involves the creative work of translation by retaining meanings across mediums. Alongside new tools and skills, new modes of learning produce new artifacts that

demand new modes of evaluation, giving an opportunity to produce reflective, reflexive and resilient learning and teaching practices. The pandemic poses a serious risk to the academy resorting to heavy structural, homogenous standardization and regulation of "new ways of doing work". It can either chose to ignore this opportunity or enable the emergence of agile spaces for new ways of teaching and learning that has the farsightedness to reward new kinds of knowledge production. This study sits within a larger examination currently underway by the authors that explores exactly this question: what these new forms are, and what hybridities emerge from these new ways of teaching and learning practice.

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Digitalising the Ethnographic Field in and Post Covid-19:

How (a study of) child rights activism in India moved online

Therese Boje Mortensen

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us all to adapt. For ethnographic area studies, such adaptations take place both at the level of the researcher and the researched. This essay reflects on how the study of an Indian child rights advocacy network adapted to 'going online' as a consequence of the pandemic and lockdown in India. Although the researcher could no longer be physically present in the studied situations, it offered an opportunity to combine 'traditional' and digital ethnography to study new types of interactions. In the case explored here, activists' knowledge sharing and direct advocacy with authorities moved to Zoom webinars, and NGO workers' communication with the village-based 'field' took place on WhatsApp groups. The essay thus documents a rapidly changing child rights advocacy landscape in India, as well as reflects upon methodological challenges and opportunities when it comes to both studying online activism and studying activism while online.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned field sites, originally defined in terms of the anthropological virtue of 'being there', into almost digital ethnographies. In this essay, I discuss how one such ethnographic research project swiftly had to adapt to new digital realities. My aim is to provide non-conclusive reflections on two related questions: First, at the level of research findings, how is child rights activism in India adapting to the pandemic and consequential lockdown? Second, at a methodological level, how is ethnography adapting to both the pandemic and to the changed 'behaviour' of the studied situation?

It is not my intention to discuss whether ethnography can be done digitally or claim that this is a new tendency. It has long been recognised in anthropology that a field site does not need to be defined in terms of a physical space (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Field sites can be multi-sited or deterritorialised (Merry, 2017) and indeed digital or 'cyber' (Bell et al., 2017) (Miller and Horst, 2012) (Madden, 2017). While acknowledging the contributions of such literature concerned with ethnographies *designed* to be conducted digitally, this essay has the different scope of discussing the methodological implications of being compelled to rapidly *change* one's ethnography from being primarily physical to primarily digital. Such changes have been abrupt due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I suggest that they feed into and have accelerated an already on-going transition towards incorporating online aspects into otherwise 'physical' ethnographies. The same goes for the subject of study, activism and advocacy, which increasingly has taken on hybrid forms between the digital and the non-digital. We can thus learn from these changes when adapting to a 'new normal' with more hybrid digital-physical ethnography in and post theCovid-19 era.

An Indian child rights advocacy network

The example I draw on in this essay is an ongoing ethnographic case study of the Indian national emergency helpline for children, CHILDLINE. CHILDLINE is a state-civil society partnership sponsored primarily by a central government scheme, managed by a 'mother' non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Mumbai, and implemented by a diverse network of NGOs across India. The programme prides itself in engaging with multiple public and private stakeholders from the local to the national level, seeking to make child rights 'everybody's business.' Studying CHILDLINE therefore means to a study a national network of child rights activists and social workers. Due to the limited scope of this essay, here I focus on a small part of the project that is concerned with how Indian NGOs within this network conduct advocacy and awareness activities.

The research project was originally designed as consisting of two field studies: a more traditional place-based ethnography of one of CHILDLINE's implementing NGOs in the state Madhya Pradesh in 2019; and a multi-sited ethnography of CHILDLINE's management and networks in 2020. This second field study was interrupted almost before it could begin, as I was strongly encouraged by my affiliated university in Mumbai to return to my home country because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the following months during which I was physically away from the field, I was able to observe from a distance how the CHILDLINE network coped with the pandemic through digital tools. It has been fascinating to see how quickly activism moved to online spaces; but also, as a researcher, frustrating to feel only partially present in witnessing this transformation. The pandemic's effect on this kind of research is thus dual: the researcher is unable to be physically present in the situation under study, but the studied situation has also in itself ceased to be physical and forced to take on creative online strategies to continue its work.

Studying online activism

Many digital field sites emerged from the lockdown in India, such as CHILDLINE's increased Instagram presence with hygiene advice for children, and formal interviews on Skype instead of in person. For the sake of brevity, I here focus on two digital field sites: an advocacy and knowledge-sharing webinar; and NGO workers' communication with the village-based 'field' through WhatsApp groups.

The advocacy and knowledge sharing webinar

Advocacy is strategic action seeking to influence policy change, often with a long-term goal of improving the lives of a group of people. I focus on how NGOs conduct advocacy for children's rights India. This normally takes place in physical spaces, such as formal and informal meetings between NGOs and authorities, the preparation of pilot projects to demonstrate to the state how a problem can be tackled, or mobilisation of citizens to demand rights. To study advocacy ethnographically means to observe and analyse such interactions between two main actors: activists on the one hand, and state representatives on the other.

During the lockdown, however, much advocacy moved online, as NGO workers could no longer physically go to government offices or arrange rallies. The issues to advocate for also changed, as the lockdown imposed critical social and economic situations for many children. I observed one such incidence of online advocacy, namely a Zoom webinar on how the pandemic affects child rights, arranged by Jindal Global Law School.[15] The law school had invited two experts (an academic child rights specialist, and a representative from a national government department), and participants (primarily social workers, NGO representatives, and students). I had myself been invited by my academic guide from the Indian university I am

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15 I am thankful to the O.P. Jindal Global University for allowing me to use material from their webinar 'Protecting the Rights of Children in the Times of Covid-19' in this article. In order to protect the identity of the participants, I have left out all their identifiable information, including institutional affiliations.

affiliated with.

The experts and host participated with video, whereas the rest were muted without video and asked to only write comments or questions in the chat. It was therefore not an open discussion between the civil society actors and the state actor, but still a significant advocacy opportunity for NGO representatives from around India (with little finances for travel, many of them would not otherwise have made it to a physical meeting in a state capital) to have almost direct access to a high-level government representative who read and engaged with their questions and comments.

After one expert had outlined the legal landscape for child rights in India – including developments regarding child rights and the pandemic, such as a recent Supreme Court *suo moto* directive regarding protecting children in institutions during the lockdown – the participants wrote lengthy expressions of thanks in the chat box. Some also brought specific examples of the problems they considered important for children during the lockdown: increase in domestic violence, what would happen to the mid-day meal scheme when children were not in school, and the lack of possibility for online teaching in rural government schools. The webinar thus functioned as a forum for training and knowledge sharing.

When the government representative presented the initiatives of his department, participants wrote direct critique in the chat box, such as pointing out that despite his praises, the department in question was not at all effective in their district. Another type of advocacy came from the child rights expert, who argued that child protection should be recognised as an essential service during the pandemic. She was the only one who was able to talk – as opposed to write – directly to the government representative, and indeed took many opportunities to do so.

The example of this webinar demonstrates how activists adapt to new realities: they use online meeting tools to share knowledge about which rights issues are imminent for children due to the pandemic and lockdown, and best practices in dealing with them. By connecting state, academia, and NGO workers, it was possible for the latter two to conduct direct advocacy with a government authority. If this shift to online platforms of advocacy continues as we move towards a 'new normal' with restrictions on in-person meetings, it has implications for the 'new normal'

of advocacy practices. While it may increase access to higher level bureaucracies for NGOs and bring civil society actors from across India together more often than before, there are also many ways in which existing hierarchies between 'remote' and 'urban' or 'elite' NGOs would be reinforced: NGOs would still need to be informed of digital advocacy opportunities, which will rely on their existing network and therefore exclude many already (physically and digitally) remote NGOs. Furthermore, in a linguistically diverse country, there is also the issue of linguistic accessibility: convening NGOs from across the country in a national advocacy webinar means speaking English, which rules out participation of most sub-district and district-level NGOs, or requires the participation of only an NGO director (often the one with English language knowledge) and staff in access to advocacy opportunities.

Reaching 'the field' during lockdown

Social workers in India normally spend a considerable amount of their time in 'the field'. Just as the ethnographic field is defined in opposition to the physical limits of the university, an NGO worker's field is defined in opposition to the organisation's office. For the NGO that I spent three months with in a district capital in Madhya Pradesh (before the pandemic), the 'field' was primarily villages and people's homes – places where the NGO staff engaged with 'the community' or did case work for CHILD-LINE.

The nationwide lockdown imposed in India limited the ability of NGO workers to go to their field. As a national emergency service, CHILDLINE was allowed to conduct some of its essential work, but much was moved to employees' smartphones. One NGO worker told me (on a WhatsApp call across continents) how she spent her working days during lockdown in her house with her phone, coordinating with *sarpanches, sachivs* and *anganwadi* workers[16] and guiding them in how to conduct village-level

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16 A Sarpanch is a village's elected leader, presiding the village council (Panchayat) which is part of a decentralised governance system in rural India. Sachivs are secretaries of the Panchayat; anganwadi workers are local women hired by a central scheme, Integrated Child Development Services, to provide health and education services for the village's

awareness activities. This NGO worker regularly sends me the 'toll' of corona patients in their town, and photos of relevant newspaper clips about the corona situation or children's cases they deal with. From another CHILDLINE-implementing NGO in Tamil Nadu, I learnt that they moved most of their work to phones and stayed in constant touch with various village committees and local authorities in order to continue their awareness and advocacy work. This was also the case for many of the NGO representatives in the above-mentioned webinar, who wrote that WhatsApp groups were a good medium to engage the most 'remote' and 'deprived' during the lockdown.

In sum, NGOs find creative ways to continue to play their well-recognised roles as mediators between citizens and state (see (Sheth and Sethi, 1991); (Jakimow, 2012); (Carroll, 1992)) albeit now through online media. Just as with the online advocacy treated above, this has both promising and potentially harmful implications if it becomes the 'new normal'. To the first point, WhatsApp communication between NGOs workers and citizens enhance speediness of communication and, in the case of CHILD-LINE, allows faster intervention of a service that already promotes itself on being quick, efficient, and in opposition to a slow state bureaucracy (a potential also recognised in Bhuvana and Arul Aram (Bhuvana and Arul Aram, 2019) in relation to responding to the floods in Tamil Nadu in 2015). However, to the second point, the use of WhatsApp and other social media also has well-known potential dangers of misinformation, especially if the topic is political (see for instance (Sunstein, 2018) and (Garimella and Eckles, 2020)). This is of course a general tendency that comes with the increased use of social media – it is not specific to the pandemic – but a move to a 'new normal' after the pandemic makes the issue salient. The tendency was visible already in 2019, when I was conducting fieldwork at a CHILDLINE office in Madhya Pradesh. A trainee showed me a photo she had received on WhatsApp of a young boy with a sad face and a text along the lines of, 'please spread this photo, the child was found and is at the police station, share it so we can find his parents'. 'Could it be fake?' the trainee asked me. 'It could be,' I said. 'But it could also be work,' she

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babies, toddlers, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and adolescent girls.

reflected with uncertainty (field notes, 19 April 2019). This is an example of how WhatsApp and its unknown message forwarders acted as new mediators between citizens and social workers already before Covid-19, which however has accelerated its use.

Studying activism online

As activists and social workers 'go online' as a consequence of the pandemic, so do studies of these groups. In my case, I had to re-map my field to consist of both digital and non-digital data, leaving me constantly and never in 'the field'. The increase of digital data does not, however, mean that physical presence has become irrelevant. My access to the digital spaces I describe here all relied on previous physical presence: I worked for the NGO whose employees I am now in touch with over WhatsApp; and I physically met my academic guide in Mumbai before she invited me to the civil society webinars. However, once in the digital spaces, I had a level of access I could only have hoped for in physical situations. In the webinar, I could simply be a name on a screen, not significantly altering the situation, but having a look into interactions that would most likely have been exactly the same if I had not 'been' there.

Some digital ethnographic practice remains strikingly similar to physical ethnographies, such as observing interactions, noting down and writing up field notes at the end of the day. However, the gaze with which we do this is now fixed on a screen, noting distinct digital behaviour: 'he turned off his video as soon as he saw that no one else had it on'; 'she video called me from a village to show me the Covid-empty streets'. Another example is the management of endless amounts of potential data: in a physical field, all experiences can be used as ethnographic data; in a digital field, any online event, post or message is potentially data. Now, the digital data that I before considered supplementary – such as pictures sent by an informant on WhatsApp of how CHILDLINE stopped a child marriage – can in fact be used as a core part of the ethnographic data.

The pandemic and lockdown have forced ethnographic area studies to

adapt to digital situations quickly. However, these adaptations will be useful in the post-Covid world, especially as many of the groups and situations we study increasingly move online as it becomes the 'new normal'. Ethnographic practice would benefit from analysing digital and non-digital spaces simultaneously, since they together – as hybrid spaces – reflect our social reality more accurately than any separation of the two. 'Digital ethnography' need not be only a specialisation or the consequence of a crisis; instead, a 'hybrid digital-physical ethnography' should be considered the 'new normal.

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Reimagining Fieldwork: Study of care workers during Covid-19

Madhurima Majumder

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has taken away our mobility and confined us inside our homes, creating a strange new world that demands entirely new methods of doing research. This essay outlines different strategies used to study the challenges faced by nurses and primary care workers in India. It reflects on the methodological and logistical dilemmas of doing research remotely. It then situates these issues against some of the collected narratives of healthcare workers to discuss the challenges and possibilities of the methods used. This questions the traditional assumption that physical proximity is necessary for immersive ethnography.

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Introduction

As we face a virus that spreads undetected between humans, it has become irresponsible to have non-essential contact with others. Health workers reiterate their message loud and clear: the way we can help both them and us is by staying home and 'flattening the curve'. These health workers are operating under trying circumstances; some are even being pushed to make impossible choices around who to prioritize for lifesaving procedures. It has become imperative more than ever to document their experiences, lest we ever return to denying the importance of care work and invisibilising women's contribution within it. As a researcher focused on health care workers, I felt compelled to document their narratives of everyday life in the initial months of the pandemic and how they felt about this moment in history – their micro experiences, memories of which might erode with time. This study was particularly challenging as it attempted to capture something time-sensitive, without face-to-face meetings. The focus of this essay is twofold. Firstly, it reflects on strategies of doing fieldwork under a lockdown, including methodological and logistical dilemmas. It then tries to situate these issues against some of the collected narratives of health workers in order to make sense of the whole process.

   The first challenge I faced was finding care workers with Covid-19 duties who were willing to share their experiences. The only method available to me was snowball sampling as I was confined to my house due to a lockdown.[17] While I found nurses in quarantine who had both the time and the will to talk to me, finding community health care workers[18] proved more challenging. I had to resort to connecting with acquaintances in student unions who then put me in touch with the union leader of

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17 India imposed one of the strictest country wide lockdowns from 25 March to 31 May 2020. Police personnel were posted in large numbers, transportation completely halted, and curfews imposed to make sure everyone stayed at home.

18 Community health care workers: There is a shortage of doctors, nurses and hospital services in rural India. Thus, women from within the community are trained to become axillary healthcare providers functioning at a grassroot level.

ASHA.19 From there, I got in touch with other ASHA workers, some unionised and some not. It was fortunate that all of them (or a member of their family) had working mobile connections, allowing us to communicate freely.

Experiences of fear and uncertainty

> Some days I am not so sure I will be able to leave this place alive if I keep working. But I can't leave my job, because then I am certain I will be responsible for the death of my patients.[20]

These were the parting words of Susmita,[21] a head nurse. She works in the Covid-19 ward at a government hospital in Nadia district of West Bengal. Our telephone conversation had originally started on a very different note. I stated that I was trying to make sense of how the Covid-19 crisis affected care workers. She said she did not have much time as she would have to resume work in a few hours. But nonetheless she started categorically listing how her duties had changed and the protocols that she had to follow as a head nurse. She told me about how she is privileged enough to leave her children in the care of her husband and in-laws and take up temporary residency in an apartment she owns.22 She travels by her own car, unlike many of her colleagues who still have to live with their families in small spaces and depend on favours to travel to work. If they can manage, how could she even complain? She reserved all her complaints for the long waiting period required for healthcare workers to get approval for testing,

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19 Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA): They form a sizable part of India's community healthcare providers with nearly 900000 women working across India.

20 Interview with Susmita on 3 April 2020.

21 All names of the names of respondents have been changed.

22 Unlike health care professionals in Tier 1 cities, those working in smaller cities, towns and mufassils were not provided with quarantine facilities or leaves to go under self-isolation. This meant they had to continuously work while living with their respective families.

even when they had symptoms. She talked about how every other health-care facility was on standby and the catastrophic effects it would have in future. Without much prompting from my end, the conversation went on for nearly an hour. Feeling guilty by the end, I apologized for wasting her time and wished her well. It is at this point that a distinct note of anxiety replaced her previous calm. She confessed she is disturbed by the disease that has no cure and she is scared for herself and her colleagues. But above all she is scared that the system does not care about them.

Is this a good time to talk?

My interview with Susmita left me questioning if I was being a nuisance and taking up my respondents' precious time. I expressed this concern while reaching out to other nurses. One of them suggested I talk to those placed under routine quarantine. She added that some of them might welcome a seemingly pesky call for an interview as a happy distraction. And so it was!

   One of these nurses was Rati, who worked at a government hospital in Delhi. She had been working in a Covid-19 ward since March. She shared her troubles without reservation as she could not talk about it with her family. They were already fearful for her well-being and she did not want to burden them any further. After our initial conversation, we kept in touch through texts along with audio and video messages. Soon, I had given up on the role of an interviewer and instead took on the role of a listener. Most of our communication focused on enquiring about each other's well-being. At some point in the process I thought that it would no longer be part of my fieldwork. Little did I realize that through these messages I could piece together a complex narrative of her experience, especially the hurt she felt at being treated differentially.

   Nurses at government hospitals in Delhi since March have been required to work a minimum of twelve hours a day for fifteen days in a row, and then to quarantine for another fifteen days before they can return to their homes. They are mandated to stay in the premises of the hospital or in

designated quarantine facilities for this duration. Rati said she did not mind adjusting to the long shifts and wearing PPE, despite the 45°C temperatures in her non-air conditioned ward.[23] What did not agree with her was the fact that she was absolutely dependent on the hospital for her accommodation, food and transport during these thirty days and that they treated her as dispensable labour.

Nurses and para-medical staff were asked to stay in a special wing inside the hospital that was far from being fit for residence. The bathrooms were unsanitary, and the rooms were very crowded, with no space for storage. When the staff demanded transportation, they were carpooled in unsanitised ambulances. Meanwhile, doctors were provided with individual rooms in upscale hotels and their own cars for transportation. It took three weeks of agitation for the nurses and other staff to get hotel accommodation. However, in certain cases, due to a paucity of space, double bedrooms were shared by several nurses, defeating the purpose of the quarantine. To add to these grievances, the food was low nutrition and followed no fixed schedule. The situation in other places, especially places with little or no news coverage was remarkably worse off than the urban centres.

Researched becomes the researcher

ASHA workers are employed as 'volunteer workers' rather than as 'contract workers. In West Bengal, they have no benefits and receive a monthly income of 3000 rupees.[24] They are not entitled to weekly leave but have to conduct door to door Covid-19 surveys, monitor those in quarantine for symptoms and report to their assigned health sub-centre.[25] They are also

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23 Since many hospitals do not have the resources to create a negative pressure room, they are forced to turn non-air-conditioned rooms into COVID-19 ward.

24 ASHA workers' monthly honorarium varies state to state. The average lies between 3000-4500 Rupees.

25 Health Sub centres are the peripheral most unit available at the village level to take care of the health needs of the community. They are equipped to deal with basic maternal and childcare, communicable diseases surveillance, health education, checking of births and deaths registration, etc.

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required to be available for health emergencies around the clock.

Given the level of precarity, it was extremely difficult to arrange for a telephone conversation and have a meaningful interaction with community health care workers. It was at this point that I got in touch with Raazi, a leader of ASHA worker's union in West Bengal. I shared my research intention with her, rather than asking specific questions. This allowed me to make her an insider to this project and give her space to present herself. This proved especially helpful as I had limited time and space to build a connection. Barley hiding anger beneath her humour, she said:

> They gave us four disposable masks, a pair of gloves and half a bottle of sanitizer in the beginning of March. So, I made a shrine of them at home and pray before it when I leave for my field every day. Clearly, they don't want us to actually use it. Then they would have given more and better-quality PPE. And remember I am a union leader and have a big mouth. I am sure other workers have not even received these token PPE.[26]

Raazi surmised that ASHA workers were the strongest link in India's approach to tackling the pandemic through tracing. Yet, they fall under the 'least-risk' category for protective gear distribution. They were told a scarf is all they need for their protection. In fact, since there was no hope of receiving PPE's anytime, YouTube got populated by tutorials by ASHA workers. These tutorials show fellow ASHA workers the best ways to wrap and secure a scarf to cover their nose and mouth despite being aware that scarves are largely ineffective.

Most of the ASHA workers were overworked and so my interaction with Raazi was short. This gave momentum to and sharpened the focus of this interaction. Very succinctly, Raazi outlined the policy oversights that would prove crucial in India's fight against the spread of Covid-19 as well as their response to community care workers. She narrated her personal experience as embedded within a larger criticism of India's public health system owing to her long engagement with the union.

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26 Interview with Raazi on 26 April 2020.

Battling hierarchy

Historically speaking, in India, hierarchy between doctors and nurses is not just based on gender but also on caste. This can be traced to India's colonial past as well as the practise of untouchability. Care work was rooted within the workings of Christian missionary making it unfit for 'respectable' Hindu and Muslim women. Moreover, it was seen as 'impure' work as it requires touching bodies across genders and dealing with bodily fluid. Thus, women from minority communities have traditionally dominated the profession. These factors had a lasting impact on the status of care work. (Nair and Madelaine, 2009)

A disproportionate burden of the present crisis is being shouldered by ASHA workers and nurses. Every day they struggle to do their job in a system that does not value them. They are left to navigate the present crisis with failing infrastructure and burdens of inherent hierarchy that resulted in policy oversights. In fact, the Covid-19 taskforce has no representation of nurses or primary health workers despite their significance in providing healthcare. However, the pandemic affects them not only in the present moment but will have a lasting impact. Care workers were already working long shifts without being compensated. At present their rights as workers have been further rolled back leading to several protests among nurses and ASHA workers across India. These rights may remain suspended even after we recover from Covid-19.

In the face of these compounding challenges, care workers stay afloat only through ingenuity, creative problem solving, and sheer will power. But in this narrative of survival, what remains unspoken are the tremendous personal, physical and mental costs they have paid and continue to pay in their line of duty. As researchers, the onus lies on us to document their lives and carefully unpack these silences.

Reconciling methodological dilemmas

Present restrictions meant that I could not fall back on the established procedure of finding a research question, defining the scope of the study, building a questionnaire and choosing a sampling method. The situation was changing drastically, and my research methods needed to evolve with it. When I started my study on March 27th a handful of nurses had contracted Covid-19. Within a month, a large number of health workers had been infected and several protests had taken place. The research questions needed to respond to the escalating situations. I could no longer use the traditional methods of ethnography where great significance is placed on immersive fieldwork based on physical proximity.

The interviews had to take place entirely over the telephone. It was harder to connect and at times left us at the mercy of bad network connections. I had to call back to clarify several things that I misheard or only partially heard the first time. This also meant that I had much less information on my respondents' place of work, their level of comfort with certain questions and little access to their emotional state. All of our communication was dependent on what was expressed verbally. It took away from building a connection with the interviewee. Quite a few of them did not feel comfortable to speak freely as I was just a voice on the phone. This resulted in some of the interviews being limited to a customary 'yes' or 'no' rather than a conversation.

Replacing physical presence with telephone calls brought with it a host of limitations. However, it also proved rewarding in unexpected ways. It allowed me to call my respondents back and check on their well-being and vice versa. The flexibility of time and duration of phone communication allowed the respondents to have a certain degree of control over our contact. Though our initial exchanges were not as meaningful as an in-personal interaction, there was a degree of connectedness that grew over time through calls and text messages.

Many respondents, though unsure in the beginning, opened up after I shared the intention of the project. Instead of approaching them with specific areas of inquiry, I tried to create a space for them to respond whi-

chever way they saw fit, even if it did not align with my research focus. It encouraged them to share what was important to them. Some spoke about personal experience and some about larger structures. It allowed us to blur the boundaries between the role of the researcher and subject; between formal interview and personal conversation.

Once perceived as alternate methods, online interviews – along with other kinds of materials such as texts, WhatsApp forwards, social media posts or choosing interview subjects who are themselves mobile or experts – are the only modes of conducting this fieldwork. This is not to encourage short-term extractive research or exploitation of unequal power dynamics to gather data from interview subjects. Instead, these different modes of doing research should democratize knowledge production by using fragmented but diverse sets of data to build narratives embedded within their specific spatial and temporal location. (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe; 2020)

Adopting remote methods of doing fieldwork has the potential to not only democratize knowledge production but also who gets to be a researcher. The ableist masculine assumption of a researcher being able to visit and navigate their field with a certain degree of ease puts undue burden on researchers who have to negotiate different constraints. Women, queer and disabled researchers, those within conflict zones or perhaps those without financial means may have different travel or time constrains. Perhaps the pandemic has pushed ethnographers towards a question that is long overdue – what does 'visiting the field' really mean?

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Pandemic and the Realm of 'Unreason' in Bangladesh

Mohammad Tareq Hasan

Abstract

Many apparently 'irrational' views, rumours, and practices have accompanied the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. When these actions and reactions of people during a time of uncertainty like a pandemic are exoticised, it neglects the socio-historical context – people's differential experiences of social structures – that differences in perspective are rooted in. Hence, during the height of the pandemic, the formation of violent mobs or other overriding of 'prescribed behaviour' – moments of 'unreason' – can be considered as a form *agency*, *exercised* by those who otherwise feel left behind while the country is 'developing' and a *few* are getting richer economically. This unreason does not simply betray miscomprehension or a retreat into irrationality; rather, it is an expression of discontent and a dynamic negation of the dominant structures of society. The paper thus asserts that while a pandemic confers physiological ailments, it is also experienced socio-culturally, surfacing the infrastructure of divisions in society.

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One evening, almost two months into the lockdown, I went to a small medicine shop. While waiting in line, I overheard the conversation between the seller and a customer. 'You look sick', said the medicine seller. The customer replied, 'I have overcome, and I am alright now.' Subsequently, despite the customer wearing a mask, the medicine seller told him, 'You might had overcome, but you are looking sick again'. Once he left, it was my turn and as I started asking for the medicines I needed, the seller told, 'Have you seen the guy from lane no. 6? He is Corona positive. He brought a Corona test result from somewhere stating that he is not infected and not maintaining isolation anymore.' This incident represents the way people perceive and are living the pandemic.

Since the pandemic reached Bangladesh, many apparently 'irrational' views, rumours, and practices have surfaced. Many people do not follow the health guidelines suggested by the government. Initially, people perceived Covid-19 as a Chinese disease; later, as it spread across Europe, it was attributed to returning migrants. Subsequently, a prominent division between 'infected' and 'not infected' emerged, with stigmatisation and even mob protests.

The way people in Bangladesh responded to the pandemic exhibits many contradictions. In a rapid research response, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development has termed this an 'infodemic' (see Zaman et al. 2020). Their report attributes contradictions that appeared in people's attitudes and practices to a lack of correct information or miscomprehension. They argue wide circulation of easily comprehensible instructions about what people can do will reduce spread of rumours or increase adherence to the rational practices. This claim implies that Bangladeshi people lack agency, are irrational, and need easily comprehensible messages. I contend, instead, that this treats the issue at hand in a piecemeal manner. More insights can be gained by exploring the realm of unreason: the apparent irrational worldviews (cf. Kapferer 2002).

I hold that a perspective often appears exotic when it is seen from an 'other' perspective. Such exoticisation misses the socio-historical context driving difference (see Kapferer 2001 and 1997). In other words, people's responses are shaped by their experience of the social structure (see Dou-

glas 1973 and 1966). Overall, posturing illogicality reveals its logic with specific social circumstances (see Evans-Pritchard 1937). In the phenomenological terminology of Husserl (1960) and Schutz (1970), 'obvious unreasons' can be termed as 'natural attitudes' – ordinary experiences mediated through cultural categories.

Here, I explore the realm of unreason associated with the pandemic in three parts. Firstly, I provide an explanation of people's violation of the health guidelines during the pandemic. Secondly, I write about the increasing panic and stigma associated with Covid-19. Finally, I explain why 'rumours' and mob protests/attacks have become a recurrent phenomenon in Bangladesh. The analysis leads us into the uneasy terrain of the relationship between the state/authority and the people, as well as the intermingling of hope and despair in our current state of affairs.

Distrust and socio-religious positioning of the pandemic

Initial responses to the pandemic and lockdown in March indicate that many did not trust what was being said about the possible effect of the virus. People attended huge social gatherings despite government advice to maintain social distance. Many took the opportunity of class suspension at educational institutions and went for family vacations. Many returnee migrants visited relatives and joined social events that violated quarantine protocols. Generally, people sensed and expressed a feeling of immunity to Covid-19. These indicate gross variances in perception about the pandemic.

One example to explain my point: when the government tried to keep people coming from abroad in the quarantine centre in order to do further health check-ups, one person travelling from Italy did not want to remain there. In a viral video clip, he was seen arguing with the authorities. He claimed, 'Coronavirus does not affect Bangalee people as we do not eat pork or drink alcohol.' He was not alone in this. Similar communal explanations of Covid-19 flooded social media, including possible remedies such

as mass prayers, sanctified water, religious hymns, or usage of cow dung and/or urine. Many people became frustrated about the policies restricting movements. Such distrust in government policies during pandemic is not novel and there are historically comparable incidents. David Arnold (1987) and Ian J. Catanach (1983 [1993]) reveal that during the Indian Plague of 1897–1898 there was a similar distrust to the British policies. People were dissatisfied being forcefully admitted into hospitals and about restrictions on pilgrims' movements. When pilgrims were restricted, locals interpreted the isolation policy as intended to restrict them from joining the Sultan's army to overthrow the British rule (see Chakrabarty 2012).

One could claim, therefore, that people in Bangladesh perceived Covid-19 through a socio-religious lens. The circulated rumours traced the origin of Covid-19 to the food habits of Chinese people. Many explained the spread of the virus as the outcome of sins committed by the Chinese and European states. China and Europe suffered because China treats the Uyghur Muslims inhumanely and Europe is accomplice of the massacres in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. Thus, socio-religious positioning of Covid-19 was one of the seedbeds of rumours and unreasons.

The pandemic and the 'irrationalities'

Once the pandemic had affected Bangladeshi people, by late March and April, novel forms of stigmatisation and mob attacks emerged across the country. On March 28, local inhabitants of Tejgaon vandalised the construction site of a proposed temporary hospital intended to treat Covid-19 patients. Previously, all had appreciated the news of a makeshift hospital construction in Wuhan, but locals perceived it differently when something similar was supposed to happen in Dhaka. As seen in television reports, locals expressed their fear about the hospital itself turning into a site of contamination and possibly infecting them all. Similar protest sparked in Uttara, Dhaka when the government planned to operate a quarantine centre in Diyabari.

Fear of possible infection took an extreme form when people started

dying in large numbers every day. A banner on the entrance of a graveyard in Khilgaon, Dhaka expressed the local inhabitants' unwillingness to let anyone be buried there if they had died of Covid-19. To ensure safety in the locality, they also requested government authorities to take necessary measures. In Bogura, police had to face many protests when burying a person who apparently died of Covid-19 complications. Fear of possible contagion even led to the stigmatisation of people with any flu symptoms for implicating others. These acts of protests across the country, I argue, were instigated by a form of panic – a psychological state or an emotionally charged group response/collective fight (see Peckham 2015, Smelser 1962 [2011], see also Le Bon 1895 [2016]).

Certain rumours triggered panic about Covid-19. To mention a few: people considered any flu symptoms as signs of Covid-19; many believed that the virus would kill every infected person, or that Covid-19 was an airborne disease. Consequently, the locals in Tejgaon claimed that a hospital for treating Covid-19 patients would pose a threat to the local residents. However, better communication of information alone will not eliminate the panic and stigmatisation. We need an analysis of the socio-economic circumstances that were conducive for such panic and stigmatisation.

I find a co-occurring association between rumours, mass panic, and stigma with government's initiatives (cf. Guha 1983). In January and February, some people began to avoid Chinese-looking people after Covid-19 was first identified in China and the government instigated mandatory health screening of people arriving from China. Moreover, authorities sent Chinese workers on government construction projects into obligatory leave. As a result, people became fearful or suspicious of all people who looked Chinese, regardless of their nationality or any actual risk factors. Later, as the government started health screens for every inbound passenger, the stigma of being a possible virus-carrier expanded to all coming from abroad. At present, people do not even want to meet or greet anyone returned from abroad even after 14 days quarantine. Here, one can make sense of why the medicine seller described in the introduction did not trust the person who claimed to have overcome Covid-19. Lately, in many parts of the country, local government officials mark houses of foreign returnees with red flags, causing widespread stigma and marginalisation.

The logic of *unreasons*

Rumours and panic associated with the pandemic has sparked some mob incidents. This is not an entirely new feature. Back in July 2019, a spree of mob attacks took place against people accused of kidnapping and murdering children. A rumour that the Padma Bridge requires 'human heads' for its completion by December 2020 sparked off attacks that injured many and killed at least 10 people (see Hasan 2019). While some claim that internal political conspiracies instigated the rumours and mob attacks, it is nevertheless perplexing to see thousands of people believing in them and taking part in the attacks.

To explain why people do believe in apparent unreason, such as rumours, despite unprecedented economic development – Bangladesh experienced an averaged GDP growth of more than 6 percent over the last decade – one can point to rising inequality over the last 50 years. Gini, a measure of income inequality rose from 0.36 in 1963 to 0.482 in 2016 (BBS 2019). Furthermore, fundamental unequal access to opportunities has exacerbated 'geographical, gender-based, and group-based inequalities' (Mujeri 2018). For instance, even though the national unemployment rate is 4.2 percent, youth (18–35 years) unemployment stands at 10.6 percent (BBS 2018). Strikingly, youth unemployment has increased consecutively since 2000 (see Khatun 2018). This social phenomenon produces multidimensional stress, depression, and feelings of futility among the youth, which increases their susceptibility to rumours and, eventually, a mob mentality.

Considering this socio-economic scenario, cases of rumours and responses to them can be seen in a different light. There are two distinct features to notice in the circulated videos of the mob attacks: firstly, hundreds of people spontaneously participate, and secondly, people take pride in the acts. These attest that people believe the rumours and perceive their actions as a way to achieve *social justice*. I found strikingly similar tendencies among the people violating health guidelines of the government during the pandemic – many took selfies and posted them on social media.

I suggest that forming violent mobs or overriding prescribed behaviour

gives people an opportunity to exercise some degree of *agency* and control over their lives, when they otherwise feel left behind in a country that is 'developing', though just a *few* get richer economically. Despair among the population makes them vulnerable to believing in rumours, as they already widely see the rich benefitting at their expense. This was reinforced by panic buying at the start of the pandemic and subsequent price hikes for masks, medicines, and daily necessary goods. Thus, residents of Tejgaon might have perceived the establishment of a hospital as something only for the rich, yet at their expense once again. The existing social structures and people's experience within them produce these perceptions and thus people's actions (cf. Douglas 1973 and 1966).

Insights derived from 'de-exoticisation of unreason' offer better frameworks to understand both the pandemic and the contagion that spreads from one person to another in the social atmosphere through 'words, suspicions and chance encounters,' (Chowdhury 2020) before and beside the biological transmission (see Sampson 2012). This approach has the potential for wide application as 'irrational' actions, conspiracy theories, and rumours proliferate during times of uncertainty. For instance, in India, a laundry store was vandalised by the public because the owner was an Indian citizen of Chinese descent, accused of spreading Covid-19 (see Nasreen and Caesar 2020).

Varied responses to the 'unprecedented' or seemingly 'unmanageable' situation emerge from infrastructurally linked divisions such as class, religion, ethnicity, geography, occupations, gender, etc. While agential 'irrationalities' across the globe share many similarities, it is important to understand their regional specificities as well. For instance, after it was discovered that many Muslim attendees of a *Tablighi Jamaat* congregation in Delhi were infected by Covid-19, the term 'Corona jihad' appeared in India to refer to what was perceived as a form of 'religious attack' on Hindus. The hatred it espoused has origins in historical religious divisions (see Ellis-Peterson and Rahman 2020, Perrigo 2020, Nizaruddin 2020, Gettleman, Schultz, and Raj 2020), while in Bangladesh the roots of the vigilante-esque acts of social justice can be found in years of growing economic disparity.

The essence of my argument is therefore as follows: The unreason during

the pandemic does not imply only miscomprehension or a retreat into irrationality; rather it is an expression of discontent and a way of dealing with despair, as well as a reflection of dominant divisions in society. Rumours spread and mobs form, and many accept these as 'normal,' remaining reluctant to intervene (cf. Kapferer 2001 and 1997). These apparently unreasonable ideas and practices are everyday practical knowledge – sites of social actions, so to speak (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937).

Concluding remarks

As the 'realm of unreason' shows, even though a pandemic disease produces physiological ailments, people also experience it socio-culturally. In popular explanations (e.g., Zaman et al. 2020), what generally remains out of focus is the polarisation of the society; the unique features of developing economies like Bangladesh. Through moments of unreason – e.g., rumours, panic, or alternative explanations – people establish their own version of the existential reality and/or attempt to orient themselves into the surrounding circumstances. This leads to a dynamic negation or reflection of the dominant structure of the society. Nonetheless, by exploring this unreason, we can map a way towards reassessing the fundamental categories of our own worldviews.

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Fake News and Covid-19: India's diplomatic challenges

Parama Sinha Palit

Abstract

Digital platforms like Twitter have fundamentally altered our information system paradigm while threatening democracies across the world. By exposing the dark underside of modern technology, networking has revealed the vulnerabilities of modern digitized states like India where an 'infodemic' of fake news circulates, particularly during the Covid-19. A surge of this, during the pandemic, has not only impacted India's relations with its Muslim neighbours, but has also further damaged the country's global reputation. This paper examines the impact of online Islamophobic campaigns in disrupting India's relational Public Diplomacy during the pandemic with the Hindutva agenda deeply embedded in the discourse.

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New communication technologies and the proliferation of digital tools – heralded in its early days as a democratic advance that held promise for a more informed and engaged public in general and with respect to matters of foreign policy in particular (Baum, Potter 2019) – is increasingly threatening contemporary democracies. A new information system with an entirely new paradigm is fast shaping up. While promising to promote and strengthen diplomatic relations between states on the one hand and rendering Public Diplomacy (PD) more public-centred[27] on the other, the new media platforms are fundamentally altering the communication landscape. Modern PD, after all, is expected to be more 'about building relationships, starting from understanding other countries' needs, cultures, and peoples and then looking for areas to make common cause' (Leonard 2002: 48). However, with many new information niches, algorithms and political bots, they are equally held responsible for gradually limiting the exposure of audiences to opposing viewpoints and diverse arguments – even straining foreign relations. Online disinformation[28] and fake news[29] are not only dividing the publics but redefining contemporary states too by empowering both the public and the leaders alike. While technology and networking has increasingly benefited modern diplomacy, there is indeed a dark underside to modernity and democracy as well.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 has particularly exposed the vulnerabilities of modern digitized states by bringing in new challenges, confusion, manipulation and power inequalities. As the pandemic has raged across borders in an unprecedented way, and states are still struggling to control its impact, there has been an upsurge in disinformation and fake news around the virus. Both have been magnifying national anxieties around the infection, upon being shared and circulated on WhatsApp and other digital platforms, at a rapid pace. This new kind of digital propaganda – appearing ambiguous and including both 'disinformation' and 'fake news' – charac-

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27 Contemporary states also pursue policies to strengthen its relations with the foreign publics, thereby practising relational approach to Public Diplomacy which is gaining enormous traction in the new media-enabled communication system (Zaharna, Uysal 2019).

28 Disinformation is the deliberate spread of inaccurate information.

29 Online fake news refers to false, manufactured stories circulated on the internet, both political and otherwise, aiming to influence views and perceptions.

terise the current global information milieu. India has been no exception, witnessing an explosion of fake news and divisive propaganda, not only disrupting age-old relations it has historically cultivated, but also threatening its democratic credentials.

India and Fake news

In 2017, a report discovered that 'the lies, the junk, the misinformation' of traditional propaganda is widespread online and 'supported by Facebook or Twitter's algorithms' ('Facebook and Twitter are being used to manipulate public opinion' 2017), further amplifying the concern that fake news travels as fast as real news (Pamment et al 2018). These sites are equally responsible for deliberately biasing the public against certain communities, countries and leaders, with disinformation becoming a 'new normal' in India. Indeed, this dimension of social media has drawn immense global attention. Fast circulating hate-driven speeches, extreme and exclusionary ideologies, and growing intolerance has made the discourse of digital technology as a force equaliser. Despite heralding 'democracy' and 'openness', these have been heavily compromised, particularly in the Indian case. The spread of fake news has serious implications for India given its deep economic, religious and caste divides on the one hand, and low literacy rate on the other, making 'it hard to implement the true spirit of democratic decision-making' while threatening its 'democratic fabric' (Diwanji 2020). The consequences are aggravated by nationalism[30] and complemented by online extremism,[31] which together are becoming prominent in India's socio-political narrative, tarnishing India's global reputation. The 'idea of India', specifically attributed to India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, appears to have been traded off in favour of subordination of the

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30 Merriam-Webster defines nationalism as 'loyalty' and 'devotion', both of which tend to imply the placing of that nation above the others.

31 Extremism seeks 'to conquer society by creating fear of enemies within and outside society, dividing fellow citizens into friends and foes, with no room for diversity, making it dogmatic and intolerant' (Botticher 2017)

'other'.

A new global culture of nationalism and 'emotional antagonism' diffused through social networks is pervading international communication (Evolvi 2019) while calibrating India's online political and religious communication. India's ranking as the fourth lowest (out of 198) globally in terms of religious tolerance ('Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend' 2017) damages the country's image as the world's largest religiously pluralistic and multi-ethnic democracy. Such religious intolerance has become distinctly noticeable during the spread of the Coronavirus. India's online space, similar to other countries, has witnessed an 'infodemic' of fake news, along with communally charged disinformation, pushed by a fragmented and polarized public with pernicious effects on foreign policy (Baum, Potter 2019). These developments have even constrained the leaders' capacity to control the framing of events in keeping with national interests, sometimes even discouraging them for achieving narrow political objectives. In fact, India's provocative online posts, including anti-Muslim tweets, were proliferating even before the outbreak of the pandemic: 'India has a public health crisis. It's called fake news' (Patil 2019). The online hate around the National Register of Citizens (NRC),[32] for example, has been a major polarizing issue, even disturbing India's relations with Muslim majority Bangladesh – a country that has historically been India's friendliest eastern neighbour under an Awami League-led government at Dhaka – but now being pushed away and getting closer to China.

The ruling BJP turned the registry into a predominantly anti-Muslim exercise: ultimately, a major portion of the two million residents of Assam who were excluded from the list were Muslims (Shankar 2020). Several videos and inflammatory tweets were responsible for 'othering' the Muslim community with the Facebook 'used as a megaphone for hate', pointing

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32 The NRC is a register maintained by the Government of India containing names and certain relevant information for identification of Indian citizens of Assam, a northeast state which is also home to a large population of Bengali Muslims. The register was first prepared after the 1951 Census of India and in 2013, after several years, the Indian Supreme Court ordered its update. The final updated NRC for Assam was published in August 2019.

'directly at vulnerable minorities in Assam, many of whom could be made stateless within months' (Newton 2019). A particular post of burqa-clad Muslim women standing in a queue apparently outside a polling station in New Delhi, to cast their votes, with a caption: "'*Kaagaz Nahi Dikayenge Hum*' !!!"[33] Keep the documents safe, you will need to show them again during NPR[34] exercise' was not only tweeted by the BJP Karnataka unit, but it also gained over 31,000 likes and retweeted more than 10,000 times (Kuchay 2020), demonstrating the ruling Party's Hindu nationalist agenda: 'the continued salience of Hindu nationalism in new millennium India presents the paradox of transnational internet media technologies aiding a staunchly chauvinistic nationalist ideology' (Udupa 2018), adversely influencing India's PD.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. With a spike witnessed in the online spread of communal vitriol, analysis by *BOOM*[35] confirms that as India was battling the virus in April 2020, communally charged disinformation targeting Muslims, became more frequent ('Maximum Covid-19-related fact checks in April related to communal rumours 2020). Thereafter, a selective bias against the community began to take shape after the Centre declared that the Tablighi meet,[36] held early this year, was 'not a national trend' (Jain 2020). The government's religious profiling for contact tracing sparked abuse against its minority with the *Media Scanner*, another indigenous fact-checking platform, compiling a list of almost 70 fake videos against Muslims, and nearly 30 attacks prompted by online abuse ('India: Aftermath of hateful Islamophobic campaign' 2020). Another study revealed the progression of events that followed the religious profiling: 'A key 30-day period', from 14 March - 12

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33 Translated in English: 'We will not show the documents'.

34 NPR (National Population Register)

35 BOOM is India's first dedicated Fact-Check initiative which has been combating disinformation and misinformation (undeliberate spread of false information) during the last few years.

36 The Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation – an orthodox missionary movement encouraging Muslims to return to the faith as originally conceived – in Delhi's Nizamuddin Markaz Mosque (between March 13 -15, 2020) was a Coronavirus super-spreader event, with more than 4,000 confirmed cases, and at least 27 deaths linked to the event reported across the country.

April, 'was dominated by discussions of a possible lockdown and about infections' which *gradually shifted* 'to Muslims and religion more significantly' (Pal 2020). This kind of rabid sectarianism, designed to stoke communal tensions, unfailingly, has further polarized religious divisions, with Hindu majoritarianism being equated to nationalism, resulting in social and religious disorder across the country.

However, the pandemic-related disinformation campaigns stoking Islamophobia as well as an uptick in hate attacks targeting the Muslim community is not India-specific, but instead an emerging global concern. For example, a study by *Equality Labs*, a South Asian digital human rights group, revealed that a 'Corona jihad' hashtag was used around 300,000 times between 29 March and 3 April 2020, and viewed by as many as 165 million people. There were similar other prominent hashtags such as #BioJihad, #Coronaterrorism, #MuslimsSpreadingCorona, which, when translated into local languages, gained phenomenal online traction (Mahzam 2020) during the same period.

Fake news and foreign policy

The disruptive effects of fake news and its propensity to worsen the collateral damage of any given crisis underlines the potential severity of the problem during a crisis like the current pandemic. The paranoia around Muslims, both online and offline, was of such a magnitude that it disconcerted the international community, particularly India's Muslim-country partners. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), many of whose members are India's old strategic partners, tweeted: 'unrelenting vicious #Islamophobic campaign in #India maligning Muslims for spread of #Covid-19 as well as their negative profiling in media [is] subjecting them to discrimination & violence with impunity' (Ayub 2020). The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) also urged New Delhi to protect the country's nearly 200 million Muslims from Islamophobic campaigns (Aliyev 2020). In fact, the steady erosion of pluralistic values in India (which has the largest Muslim population outside Mus-

lim-majority countries and where Islam is the second largest religion) has been alarming during the last couple of years. The character of the current Indian government is perhaps such that it emboldens groups with over-powering commitment to Hindutva[37] to peddle fake news and disinformation for setting political and religious agendas, thereby affecting diplomacy.

These 'misinfodemics' have also provided India's Muslim neighbour Pakistan – a historical adversary – with enough ammunition to exploit the situation in its favour. By drawing global attention to India's 'vicious' and ongoing anti-Muslim campaign, the Pakistani leadership underlined India's abominable policies towards its Muslim minority. Taking to Twitter and deploying a video, Pakistan's Foreign Minister tweeted: 'The extremist state in India has created & executed a campaign of Islamophobia, vilifying Muslims […] We cannot stand by and let another Gujarat [massacre of Muslims in 2002] happen' (Sajid 2020).[38] India's anti-Muslim narrative was further amplified by unusually charged rhetoric from among the Hindu diaspora, particularly those living in the Arab nation,[39] who also targeted the minorities. A member of the royal family of United Arab Emirates (UAE), citing tweets by Hindus living there, denounced those who were arraigning Muslims in her country (Jaffrelot, Rizvi 2020).

As international pressure intensified, and concerns soared regarding India's grim treatment of its minorities, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to Twitter: 'Covid-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together: PM @narendramodi'. Modi's tweet was backed up by India's Ambassador to Oman cautioning Indians living in the country to

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37 Hindutva is an ideology which seeks to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life in India where 79.8 per cent of the population identifies themselves as Hindus.

38 India's western state of Gujarat witnessed the Godhra riots in 2002 – an inter-communal violence – when the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of the state.

39 The Arab world or the Arab nation consists of 22 nations, including the UAE and Oman.

steer clear from social media-driven fake news, while his counterpart in the UAE reached out to the Indian diaspora with a message of communal harmony, after several tweets quoted Hindus blaming Muslims for spreading the virus in India (Bagchi 2020). These Arab countries are not alone. India's illiberal turn to Hindu nationalism has also intimidated other South Asian neighbours like Bangladesh. In fact, India's relations with Bangladesh have notably dipped during the pandemic, hit hard not only by the Indian government's overarching Hindutva agenda but also because of policies like the NRC mentioned earlier.

With international attention on India's Islamophobia and anti-India sentiments building up internationally, India's regional and global reputation is at stake. With criticisms mounting against India's treatment of its minorities, Modi pushed for global cooperation and multilateralism in an attempt to divert global attention. He sought to communicate the message that 'India is a responsible and collaborative global player with the capacity to spearhead global cooperation to address shared threats' (Kugelman 2020). The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the G20 – all aimed to craft global responses to managing the virus together (Ibid) – with India positioning itself as a leader. Modi's recourse to spearhead global collaboration – apart from wanting to shift the global attention from these negative dimensions – also aimed to project India's strengths and abilities as a rising power. However, it is a matter of conjecture whether India's leadership will be able to collectivize regional and global responses to Covid-19. In the meantime, online Islamophobia continues to adversely affect India's diplomatic relations in the region, allowing enough room for extra-regional powers like China to play a critical role in tipping the regional balance of power in a direction that is not particularly favourable to India.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic is a Battle for Science

Anwesha Dutta & Emmanuel Raju

Abstract

The overload of (mis)information related to the spread of Covid-19 globally has been termed an 'infodemic'. Access to and uptake of accurate information on measures and policies during the pandemic is central to containing the spread of the virus, and therefore avoiding a collapse of health systems. The infodemic is particularly concerning for countries such as India, which has one of the highest numbers of social media (e.g. WhatsApp) users. There is a global need to tackle the propagation of fake information on different forms of social media.

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As the world responds to the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of misinformation is being circulated. The overload of information has been termed by the World health Organization (WHO) as an 'infodemic'(Zarocostas, 2020). During the pandemic, the access to and uptake of information on measures and policies is central to containing the spread of the virus and avoiding a collapse of health systems. Governments around the world need to focus as much on the management of people as to the management of information to contain the pandemic. In the initial stages of the pandemic, false and inaccurate information pertaining to the origins of the virus, its diagnosis, treatments, and the ways in which the virus spread was characterised by racism, xenophobia and communalism in many parts of the world. For example, people with Chinese or East Asian features were some of the first victims of virus-related racism in many parts of the world (Depoux et al.,2020). In a similar vein, Black communities in the United States were blamed for higher fatality rates among their own communities (Jaiswal et al., 2020). The spread of misinformation risks obscuring healthy behaviour, and also leads to propagation of erroneous practices that can increase the spread of the virus and eventually result in poor physical and mental health outcomes among individuals, across the globe.

Particularly in many developing countries, information uptake is affected by a general sense of distrust in state institutions, improper systems of communication, large informal sectors and a lack of social security and basic services. This makes it difficult to ensure adherence to severe limitations on movement, including home quarantine, physical distancing and the cessation of economic activities – some of the key measures that have been employed by governments across the world. Pandemic misinformation flourishes, as does disinformation propagated by silence at the institutional or federal government level in countries like the US, Brazil and India. The governments seek to preserve power, fragment social cleavages or even undermine already marginalized groups. We turn to the latter case study of India to reflect on the phenomenon of infodemic and how it continues to play out.

India provides an interesting case thanks to its lockdown of 1.3 billion people (Ray et al., 2020), 80% of whom work in the informal sector (ILO 2018). India is also the world's largest democracy and is in an especially

vulnerable situation to Covid-19 due to both its population density and inequality. Over 455 people live per square kilometre,[40] notwithstanding large urban slums, homeless populations and extended families (Raju & Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020). Studies demonstrate that people tend to prefer, are more convinced by, and are keener to accept information that confirms and is consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs (Pulido et al., 2020). This holds particularly true for India, where superstitions and myths are often embedded in everyday life. The Indian infodemic exacerbates this situation. The role of the scientific community and the need for their expertise and input is unquestionable, however, this must be facilitated by creating platforms where such a dialogue between scientists and policy makers can take place (Albris, Lauta & Raju, 2020)

On the 22nd of March, the Indian Prime Minister announced 'janata curfew', or a self-imposed curfew. The curfew, a step towards full lockdown, was followed by rounds of singing and dancing in huge numbers on the street – not a good outcome in times of much-needed physical distancing. To add to the Covid-19 misery, in March 2020, cow urine, herbs mixed with cow dung, yoga and homeopathy were falsely espoused as healing solutions to the virus in India (Caulfield, 2020; Purohit, 2020). This message was also circulated by elective representatives in power, indicative of the official tolerance of pseudoscience, as well as a growing politicization of health care. The Ministry of AYUSH similarly advocated treatments offered by alternative medicine systems like Ayurveda and homeopathy against Covid-19, without any supporting scientific evidence and or clinical testing data (Narayanan 2020).

It is also important to mention the more recent events in Indian universities as indicative of the current political environment. In early 2020, an editorial in Nature entitled 'Protect India's universities' highlighted the need for university spaces to be free of violence and be spaces for dissent. In recent elections, secularism debates have been very polarized (Chopra, 2017) to the extent of political silence on violence. It is worrying that the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has made marginal at-

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40 According to FAO and World Bank Population Estimates, 2018, see https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST

tempts to combat the misinformation spread through different forms and social media being a major contributor to this (for example, WhatsApp has come to be known as 'WhatsApp university'(Roy, 2018)). Messages on 'WhatsApp university' not only spread misinformation but also perpetuate hatred and majoritarianism.

On top of this, the Covid-19 situation is far from over. To fight the infodemic, a group of Indian scientists have come together to demystify and stop the spread of fake news all across the country (Dore, 2020). However, this could be extremely hard given a lot of damage is already done. Looking back over the last few years, the Indian government has made little attempt to reduce unscientific information including hate messages that are being circulated. The central and state governments must step up their taskforces and actions, taking the fight against fake news seriously. There needs to be a greater degree of collaboration between the government and different social media and technology agencies to ensure these messages do not spread as rapidly as the virus itself. India does have a history of fighting infectious diseases including polio, tuberculosis, malaria, dengue fever, swine flu and the recent Nipah virus. The state of Kerala, for example, has received enormous credit for their handling of Covid-19 situation as they were able to learn from the past (The Lancet, 2020). This knowledge must be shared and contextualized to other states to facilitate good collaboration between public health agencies, the government, the scientific communities and the society at large. Given the exponential spread of Covid-19, unless the prevailing superstitions and misinformation around it is dealt with, it will be extremely hard to manage the crisis.

As the pandemic continues to loom in India and many parts of the world, lessons must be learned rather than forgotten. Globally, there is a need to tackle fake health information that is propagated on different forms of social media. While governments across the board are taking serious measures to decrease the spread of the infection, there is a great need to study issues of disinformation, knowledge creation and power, and the impact of these on behaviour overall.

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Covid-19, Undocumented Migrants, and Race: A view from India[41]

Bani Gill

Abstract

In March 2020, India declared a sudden lockdown of the country in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In discussing the impact of the lockdown on undocumented African migrants in Delhi, this article highlights the disruptions caused on account of their informal livelihoods, legal status, and racialization. For African migrants with precarious legal statuses, the abrupt severance of informal banking systems in combination with a heightened state presence aimed specifically at the regulation of mobility, resulted in intensified economic and affective uncertainties. The pandemic, and the aftermath of its restrictions, including the risks and profiling it triggered, rendered bodies that were racialized as 'different' as highly conspicuous. In underlining the ways in which Covid-19 exacerbated intersectional and historically informed power hierarchies, this article argues that race and racialization remain a crucial lens for meaningful engagement with issues of hierarchy and inequality in contemporary India.

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On the night of 24th March 2020, Indian Prime Minister Modi announced a sudden three-week lockdown of the country in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This order sparked panic and chaos to varying degrees, with the 1.38 billion population of the country permitted a total of 4 hours to prepare for 21 days of stay-at-home orders. As the lockdown was extended in the months that followed, several accounts have documented the vulnerabilities faced by India's migrant workers (Roy, 2020), the crisis of governance that has inordinately affected poor and marginalized populations (HRW, 2020) and the rising spate of racist attacks against those who don't align with the 'physiognomic map' (Wouters and Subba, 2013) of India (Colney, 2020). Less visible have been the subtle ways in which the documentary, material and affective traces of state presence have materialized in and through the pandemic, as well as the differential degrees of dislocation that have subsequently cohered. Migrants from the African continent, several of whom have a precarious legal status in India, are currently negotiating such pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities on account of their informal livelihoods, legal status and racialization.

In this article, I discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on undocumented African migrants in Delhi through the analytical framework of mobility, highlighting the ways in which the lockdown has spelt an abrupt severance of informal banking systems. This exposure to economic vulnerability has intensified affective uncertainties for migrants, combined also with a dispersed, yet heightened state presence aimed specifically at the regulation of mobility through the techno-material apparatus of barricades, permits and paperwork. At the same time, fears and trepidations unleashed during the pandemic have further threatened to make hypervisible the migrant 'Other' through languages of difference. In this moment of contemplation then, I call attention to the racialized narratives that have accompanied the pandemic to argue that race and racialization remain a crucial lens for meaningful engagement with issues of hierarchy and inequality in contemporary India.

Informal livelihoods at risk

The turn of the twenty-first century has seen a rising trend of migration from the African continent to cities across India, for reasons ranging from business and education to asylum. Such contemporary mobility patterns reflect the diversification of migratory routes prompted, not least, by increasingly hostile immigration regimes of the global north (Haugen, 2012). While India's thriving educational and medical industries attract a diverse clientele, equally important are the opportunities for small scale trade and entrepreneurial ventures that India's manufacturing prowess offers. It is for these factors that India emerges as a mobility destination for a wide range of people from Africa (Gill, 2019). While precise numbers remain elusive, Nigerians constitute the largest presence amongst African migrants in India, several of whom self-identify as 'businesspeople' regardless of the visa category they may have arrived on. Sammy, for instance, is an Igbo Nigerian man who has lived in Delhi for six years, making a living through small scale trading activities as he procures commodities like garments, electronics and human hair from wholesale hubs in India and sends them to Nigeria for further resale. Like several other middlemen, traders and entrepreneurs participating in an economy of 'globalization from below' (Mathews, Ribeiro and Vega, 2012), the success of Sammy's informal and unregistered transnational business ventures is contingent upon a trusted network of local and transnational actors who facilitate the circulation of commodities through unofficial channels. Integral to these supply chains are informal value transfer systems that expediate inexpensive and fast modes of remittance transfers through non-regular financial institutions. As an undocumented migrant, Sammy does not have a bank account in India and depends instead on services offered by trusted agents, often migrants themselves, through whom he is able to transfer and receive funds to and from Nigeria. The lockdown has disrupted these channels, by immobilizing bodies as well as capital, leaving Sammy and others like him strapped for cash in India.

The four-hour window before the nationwide lockdown was imposed was neither time enough for Sammy to arrange for cash transfers from

Nigeria, nor to pick up any cash from his agent. While business had started to slow down in the days before, it was the abrupt news of the lockdown that made Sammy realize he had neither the cash resources to tide him through this period nor the time to borrow money from friends living in dispersed locations across the city. Stranded without cash and without the documentary, financial and logistical means to return to Nigeria, caused not least by the closure of airports and the suspension of international flights, Sammy describes his current condition as one with 'no options'.

Sammy's plight is shared by several migrants from the African continent who depend entirely upon informal remittance transfer systems for their daily subsistence and for whom the spectacle of Modi's announcement – sudden, drastic, and absolute – caught them off-guard. The rash showmanship of the executive order, the disruption to crucial cash supplies for those outside of formal banking systems and the abrupt immobilization of bodies simultaneously rendered mobility – and, by extension, mobile bodies racialized as 'different' – highly conspicuous. For undocumented migrants like Sammy, who negotiate the condition of migrant 'illegality' through carefully crafted manoeuvres vis-a-vis the 'sanctioning state' (Gandhi, 2017) that involve various interplay with in/formality, il/licitness and in/visibility in their everyday navigations in and of the cityscape, the hyper visibility of the racialized mobile body has specific resonance. First, such processes of visibilisation threaten to destabilize the 'grey space' of ambiguity and informal negotiations (Reeves, 2013) through which state practices of (il)legibility were earlier encountered, thereby heightening anxieties of migrants with a precarious legal status. In certain localities of Delhi declared containment zones, police barricades have been set up to monitor even points of entry and exit. For undocumented African migrants residing in these areas, the hardships of the pandemic are amplified by affective anxieties caused by such material reminders of state presence. Second, documentary prerequisites to regulate intra and interstate mobility pose an additional burden for foreign migrants who are legally dispossessed, for whom access to such forms of paperwork remain circumscribed. The renewed emphasis on bureaucratic paperwork constitutes yet another threat for migrants negotiating a precarious legal status. Third, at a time when mobility itself is being stigmatized, albeit to graded effects and consequen-

ces, the mobile body racialized as 'different' is at further risk of marginalization. The pandemic, and its aftermath of restrictions, risks and profiling then highlight the interrelationship between (im)mobility and race as mediated through legal status and paperwork that resonate in the everyday lives of African migrants in Delhi.

Precarious (im)mobilities

Earlier this year, Sammy had relocated from his shared residence in Delhi to another apartment located in the neighbouring state of Haryana. Sammy would have preferred relocating within Delhi's city limits but, due to both legal and financial hurdles, his choices were limited to what the property broker offered him: in this case, a derelict apartment in a peripheral and spatially marginalized housing sector in Haryana, with few markets and stores close to him. At the time, Sammy reasoned that only 14 kilometres separated his current apartment from his previous one. Ever since the lockdown suspended interstate travel, however, those 14 kilometres have never seemed longer. Cut off from his friends and network in Delhi, Sammy worries about his daily subsistence and how to support his family in Nigeria who he hasn't seen in the last six years.

The criminalization of migrant illegality in India, through legislation such as The Foreigners Act, 1946, which mandates up to five years of imprisonment for migrants found in violation of their legal status, has prevented Sammy from returning to or even visiting Nigeria. His international immobility is, however, at odds with his increased mobility within the city. Sammy frequently shuttles between residences and neighbourhoods to avoid detection on the one hand, and to reduce the financial and documentary burden of rent and contracts through flexible co-sharing agreements on the other. Within this context of interrelated scales of (im)mobility, what do 'stay at home' directives mean for migrants like Sammy who are not only locked down but also locked in, far away from what they may identify as 'home'?

This is a question as relevant for India's informal and migrant workers

as it is to its dispossessed foreign migrants, particularly women, for whom the experience of 'home' as well as mobility have specific resonances that are not easily quantifiable along paradigms of 'safety'. In institutional terms, however, where the category of the domestic 'worker' has been fixed in spatial and temporal designations that render illegible the circular movement of several rural-urban migrants (Parpiani, 2020), undocumented foreign migrants such as Sammy are either criminalized or remain entirely outside the purview of official as well as public discourse. Between stasis and movement, rights and dispossession, il/legibility and il/legality are then crafted the futures of migrants negotiating intersecting and hierarchical 'regimes of mobility' (Schiller and Salazar, 2012) that span across national, regional and international scales. At the same time, as Schiller and Salazar (2012, p. 13) remind us, the co-constitutive and relational definitions of mobility and immobility have necessarily to be understood within 'a theory of unequal globe-spanning relationships of power', of which race and racialization processes comprise an important factor.

Racialized (im)mobilities

A couple of days before the lockdown, a friend forwarded a WhatsApp message to me about an alleged Covid-19 case detected in their residential neighbourhood in Delhi. Accompanying the message were two short videos. In the first, we see an ambulance parked by the side of a busy road. Two men in white hazmat suits attempt to convince a man sitting on a chair by the pavement to get inside the ambulance, as a large crowd of curious onlookers gathers around. In the second video, taken from a different angle across the road, the camera zooms into the man sitting on the chair as a male voice provides running commentary in the background, 'Look at these people from Africa. They are sitting in our locality. And they are spreading Coronavirus sitting here. He is very ill. Even the ambulance has been called for him, but they can't take him away...', before the video is abruptly turned off. We are left wondering what the exact sequence of events may have been but, from the video, it appears that this man, pre-

sumably of African origin, is at the centre of the Covid-19 fuelled storm. Later in the day, my friend messages to say that the news of Covid-19 in their neighbourhood turned out to be false; rumours surrounding the African man's medical status were unsubstantiated.

While the proliferation of misinformation and fear mongering, especially through platforms like WhatsApp, is neither unprecedented nor unique to the context of Covid-19, this incident is reflective of the insidious ways in which foreigners and migrants are racialized through tropes of disease and contagion that allegedly threaten the social, political and epidemiological body of the nation (Benton, 2020). Several reports have documented the xenophobic targeting of East and South East Asian people worldwide fuelled by the typecasting of Covid-19 as 'Chinese Virus'. In India, a diverse range of people hailing from different states located in the north eastern part of the country have faced stigmatization and violence due to their presumed phenotypical likeness to the Mongoloid Other (Krishnan, 2020). In the analysis of Wouters and Subba (2013) and Haokip (2020), it is exclusion from the imagined construct of an 'Indian face' and the consequent 'withholding of equal recognition of 'Indianness' that spur cultures of discrimination against people from the north east of the country (Wouters and Subba 2013, p. 127), even prior to the Covid 19 pandemic. The fact that foreigners from the continent of Africa and from other parts of the globe (Purohit and Mukherjee, 2020) were also stigmatised in India on account of both their mobile and (differentially) racialized bodies would, at first glance, support the hypothesis of phenotypical exclusion as fuelling discriminatory attitudes and practices. Yet, the simultaneous vilification of Muslim minorities as 'superspreaders' and the rising spate of attacks and boycotts called against them (Mander, 2020) present before us a far more complex and insidious picture where notions of difference are themselves cohered and articulated through intersectional identities of race, caste, religion, class, ethnicity and gender that stand independent of normative framings of citizenship alone. The question of 'foreignness' then is informed by historically layered hierarchies that build upon more than phenotypical marginalization and encompass a range of sociocultural, political, economic, ideological and affective tropes of Othering. In this context, well intentioned digital antiracist campaigns against the violence fa-

ced by people from the north east of India that lobby for inclusion on account of shared citizenship – through hashtags such as #IamIndian, #IamNotCoronavirus (Haokip 2020, p. 10) – risk normalizing aggressions and violence directed at the non-citizen migrant while obscuring the contested histories and differential experiences of citizenship within India itself (Jayal, 2013). The racialization of Muslims, North Eastern ethnicities and black Africans as the threatening 'Other' during (as also before and beyond) the pandemic further reveal how the notion of race as an analytic, in its intersection with localised histories of caste, religion and ethnicity, is essential, rather than merely auxiliary, to tacking questions of social inequality in contemporary India. As Pierre (2013, p. xii) puts it, 'A modern postcolonial space is invariably a racialized one', where colonial legacies of race in combination with contemporary practices of racialization continue to inform, temper and (re)constitute institutional and interpersonal logics, relationships and experiences. In this reading, 'citizenship' as a framework obscures the potential of co-constitutive and transnational solidarity movements that draw upon shared, yet contextually embedded, histories, structures, and experiences of oppression.

Today, in India and elsewhere, we are all witnessing how affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) against migrants, foreigners as well as citizens who don't look, behave and believe like a supposedly homogenous 'us' transact in values of fear and paranoia, magnifying notions of difference at the expense of collective experiences of uncertainty. At the same time, differential experiences of the pandemic must be recognized and underlined as drawing upon intersectional and historically informed power hierarchies mediated, not least, through questions of mobility, legal status, and race.

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Ethnography of a Crisis: Changing contours of fieldwork amidst the pandemic

Maggie Paul

Abstract

In this essay, the author outlines the various conceptual and methodological churnings caused during her fieldwork when her 'field' seemed to be slipping away from her, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiple repercussions. She describes the travails of reformulating and redesigning her original ethnographic study on migrant citizenship claims in an Indian city. Amidst the unfolding migrant crisis in India and the shifting situation of her 'field', she had to let the changing 'field' be her guide. The resulting adjustment led her to modify the study on migrant citizenship claims to focus on the unfolding migrant 'crisis' in citizenship, framing crisis *as a context.* Furthermore, in view of the severe restrictions in mobility caused by the pandemic, the essay highlights how the researcher has had to 'bring the field home' as well as touches upon her subsequent learning and unlearning.

<div align="center">***</div>

I landed in Mumbai in February 2020 to conduct my fieldwork on migrant citizenship in the city. Having worked in the city previously in the realm of informal housing and labour struggles, I knew that the city of migrants was not a city *for* migrants. In my proposed study I was interested in how the migrant subject destabilises the concept of citizenship. One of my more glorious objectives was to examine 'the emergence of new 'sites', 'scales' and 'acts' through which 'actors' claim to transform themselves (and others) from subjects into citizens as claimants of rights' (Isin, 2009, p. 368). Why did I choose to focus on citizenship? Critically informed studies on citizenship (and the 'political') have increasingly started framing the concept as *contestation rather than merely its content* (Isin, 2002; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). There is a plethora of literature about 'citizenship from below' arguing essentially that *claiming* citizenship is equivalent to forging it or at least recasting it in a new light. It seemed to me that this particular understanding of citizenship offered a very *dynamic possibility* (Cooper, 2018).

In order to do so, I proposed to take an anthropological approach to examining citizenship wherein I would focus not just on formal status and access to rights, but also the set of *practices* associated with participation in multi-level politics and the associated political subjectivity that develops through these practices (Lazar, 2013). These practice-oriented interpretations of citizenship draw attention to the *informal*, unofficial, and/or illegal processes as much as the formal ones to highlight a wider diversity of forms of civic engagement than the purely legal or State-defined one. This kind of understanding displaces the State as the only critical site of struggle, therefore repositioning struggles over citizenship entitlements as geographically constituted and differentiated within multiple spaces of daily life and across several spatial scales (Cresswell, 2013). In using this approach, I wished to explore the many avenues, locales, agents and relations through which the migrant subjects constituted citizenship practices at the margins. Put simply, I wanted to examine the everyday engagement, negotiations and claims that the migrants make of the state, and not just the one with the capital S.

In doing so, I wanted to steer clear of two extremes that I noticed in the citizenship related literature around undocumented invisible migrants.

One wherein the State is given an inflated role as the sovereign with power to reduce the migrants to *bare life* with total rightlessness in a state of exception and the other wherein the migrant is valorised as an agentive actor with a subversive quality of undermining sovereign state concepts and testing the limits of state based legal statutes. By focusing on *practice,* I wished to highlight that the interaction between power, resistance and claims is far more contextual and relational than both the 'bare life' thesis or the 'migrant as autonomous political figure' theories assume. The idea instead was to account for the complex reality wherein the State still figures prominently in the categorical framing of the migrant presence that ultimately affects their daily life and interactive claims making.

Armed with a dense armoury of conceptual tools and braving multiple rounds of pointed questions from the ethics committee, I was ready for some heavy-duty ethnographical exploration, since no other methodology could justify the aims of my study. Acknowledging that the ethnographical 'truth' is a partial truth, I wanted to elicit this partial truth in the most authentic and reflexive manner possible. Utilising the networks and contacts from my previous experiences I was beginning to embed myself in the *field* – the many informal spaces of the city wherein the migrants would be going about their daily struggles.

I have to admit that I did not really see the pandemic and its imposed 'new normality' creep up because of the otherwise volatile situation in my field: the backdrop of countrywide people's protests against proposed legal changes to formal citizenship criteria. And then, *suddenly, l*ife as we lived it came to a standstill.

What ensued was weeks and weeks of churning. What I construed as 'my field' – over and over again, in PhD proposals, conference presentations and various review applications, with the rightful amount of blurriness but also a comfortable extent of fixity – seemed to be slipping away. It was literally walking away from me while I could only remain stationery, holed up inside the comfort of my temporary home. I began questioning the conceptual relevance of *citizenship* as a tool. I wanted to focus on everyday *engagements* and *contestations,* albeit informal or even 'illegal'. But what happens when there is mutual refusal to even acknowledge, let alone engage? Say for instance, if a woman refuses to acknowledge a man as her

husband and vice versa, does 'marriage' remain a relevant tool to examine their relationship? What is the relevance of conceptual categories when the basic assumptions sustaining them seem to disintegrate?

The crisis

I had barely settled in the city, when the three-week mass lockdown (later extended again, and then again, and then again) was imposed upon a mostly poor populace of over 1.3 billion people in the wake of the pandemic. Many commentators termed the mass lockdown in India as 'the most severe action' (Gettleman and Schultz, 2020) to manage the effects of the global Covid-19 situation undertaken anywhere in the world. Soon after though, indigent India started walking home. The secret on which the increasingly fudged growth story of India is based was revealed for the world to watch: the invisible underbelly of its cities, 'India's nowhere people' (Lal, 2020) as the migrant workers began to be rallied in newspaper articles and television shows. Dubbed the 'mass exodus' in popular accounts, and as the 'greatest manmade tragedy' since partition by historian Ramachandra Guha (The Telegraph, 2020), hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from the cities struggled to find the way back to their rural home. Facing potential starvation, and left without assured access to food or shelter, many of the workers decided to undertake arduously long journeys on foot or other measly means (SWAN, 2020)"author":[{"family":"Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN – *pedestrianizing* highways and roads otherwise meant only for vehicles. There were times that the migrants were painted as potential 'carriers of infection' and 'super spreaders', faced police brutality on their way, were sometimes detained at borders, sometimes turned away from their home states or forced into shelter homes en route. Upon being accepted in, they were doused in disinfectants or asked to produce 'health certificates'. They were put into mandatory quarantine for over several weeks without assurance of proper food, basic infrastructure or hygiene, resulting in many of them making attempts to slip away (Aajeevika Bureau, 2020). Many lost their lives

during their journey, due to dehydration, exhaustion and starvation, besides being run over by vehicles. Others died of hunger, due to denial of medical care, or by suicide due to lack of food or livelihood (Vij, 2020). But still they continued to walk in huge numbers.

What was intriguing in this crisis though was that both the state and the migrant subject refused to acknowledge the other. As early as the first week of the first lockdown the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) set up 11 empowered groups to coordinate emergency response but there was no group to look into the unfolding migrant worker crisis, which was gaining huge international press by the time. It was not until more than one month had passed and the crisis had peaked over that the MHA allowed inter-state travel for migrants. In his many public appearances, even the camera-friendly Prime Minister refused to acknowledge the ordeals of the migrants – let alone the severity of the crisis – waiting until the beginning of the third phase of the lockdown, more than 1.5 months after the first one, to mention the '*tyaag*' (sacrifice) of the migrant citizen. On their part, the migrant workers continued walking, even after schemes were announced, special trains were arranged, and assurances were made. Scholars argued very early on that their act of walking en masse 'conveys a deep distrust of the state, especially when it promises assistance. They act as if the offer is a diversionary tactic to make them relent by a wily state, which will go back to being its uncaring self, once they do' (Mukhopadhyay and Naik, 2020).

If the state refused to acknowledge the migrants and the migrants refused to acknowledge the state, can citizenship still remain relevant as a tool to understand their relationship? Does the mistrust of the migrants towards the government's measures to provide relief amount to a negation of citizenship by them and a total breakdown of their dynamic, transactional relationship with the state? If so, then how would one still engage with the question of migrant political subjectivities in a way that treads a middle ground between the discourses of 'bare life' and autonomous agency? Or could it be examined as a different formulation of citizenship practice?

Crisis in context, crisis as context

The pandemic has revealed a crisis in citizenship. Across the globe there have been calls to highlight the importance of 'community care' outside of state structures and community protection in the absence of state provisioning. This is true especially for those who are 'forgotten' by their states in times of a crisis (Kwek, 2020).

What happened with migrants in the Indian context along with being hailed as such a crisis has also been identified as a humanitarian crisis, perhaps greater or at least on par with the actual pandemic experience. Most of the popular discourse in the country though is framing the crisis through the lens of a catastrophe, an unfortunate tragedy. This conceptual and temporal formulation of the crisis is severely limited.

There is a tendency to view 'crisis' as a rupture (Das and Kumar, 2020); an event that hangs in isolation disrupting the order of our otherwise normal life. This point in time that is marked with instability is viewed as a 'temporary disorder, a momentary malformation in the flow of things' (Vigh, 2008). But anthropological explorations of crisis have stressed that among a great many 'structurally violated' (ibid) people across the world, crisis is as an ongoing occurrence, an everyday presence like a chronic disease. These studies have argued for understanding crisis as a context; 'a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration' (ibid: 8). This renders crises as bereft of the 'claim to socio-theoretical exceptionality' (Beck and Knecht, 2016).

It is the predominant inequalities, prolonged exclusion and chronicity of crisis faced by certain groups in ordinary circumstances that produce a 'structural blindness' towards them, making them slip through the cracks during extraordinary times, such as the present one (Kwek, 2020). The migrant 'crisis' therefore has long been in the making.

Bringing the field home

A day by day non-participant observation and critical reflection on the unpredictable flow of events in my 'field' propelled me to expand my understanding of the field itself. Letting the changing field conditions become my guide, I transformed my original project on ethnography of migrant citizenship claims to an ethnography of the unfolding migrant 'crisis' in citizenship, framing *crisis* as a context. Since I cannot venture out into my original field – many of the field locations are barricaded red zones and containment areas – I have tried to bring the field home. Becoming part of multiple civil society organisation networks that have organically formed to provide varying kinds of support to the stranded migrants in the city and along their ways home from the city, I am trying to engage in participant observation from home. I am focusing on the history and the experience of the crisis itself as well as the many stakeholders in the picture. In doing so, I have been drawing on the various online resources that were swiftly made available by many university spaces, including my own. Allaying the many misgivings associated with 'bringing the field home' for someone instinctually drawn to the importance of face-to-face interviews and physical presence for successful fieldwork, talks about 'virtual methods' (ECPRDigital, 2020) and 'remote ethnography' (Stanford University, 2020) have broadened the horizon of possibilities. The importance of focusing on what can be done instead of what cannot has sunk in.

A critical ethical issue that comes to the fore personally remains *radical sensitivity*. Migrants are still in the thick of the 'crisis', even if the larger crisis in itself may be chronic. This is where I am discovering the paramount ethical importance of 'sensitive reticence' in field work, something I have honed for my own work. What the experience is teaching me foremost though is the most valuable lesson for researchers in the coming uncertain times: flexibility.

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The Covid-19 Pandemic, Globalisation and Reflections on the South Asian Economy

Hoimonti Barua

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to the global economy. The virus spread rapidly and infected millions. It also momentarily stalled economic activity due to restrictions on movement that were imposed to curtail its spread, highlighting the extent of global inter-relations and dependencies. The health crisis therefore turned also into an economic crisis; one of the largest that the global community has experienced for decades. South Asian countries, whether agricultural, tourism-based or industrial have fallen victim to the global economic downturn. The impact of this financial debility is likely to affect years of development achievements by pushing millions of people back into poverty and economic uncertainty. In this context, the paper discusses globalisation, its importance in emerging economies and the sudden advent of a virus-induced pandemic in order to further elaborate on the economic downturns of the South Asian countries particularly due to the Covid-19 and the way forward for the region.

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It is possible to perceive health, economy, politics, climate, and conflict as isolated issues, conceivably unrelated to each other; hence the challenges arising for each are to be handled autonomously too. The reality, however, is a far cry from this. These apparently different areas are all profoundly related and our comprehension and cognizance of each should be defined correspondingly. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the extent of our global inter-relations in more ways than anticipated. It has caused large-scale difficulties for the global community, upon almost every aspect of life from the social and economic to political, with portentous ramifications. As a matter of fact, this is one of the most metamorphic phases of the last seven decades that the world is undergoing. Pandemics are conventionally deleterious in nature, therefore intimidating. The resulting precariousness thus might act as a mainspring of dissent and contestation. Furthermore, they lead governments to project their unpreparedness for a crisis and expose their laxity and fragility in public health and social security provisions, in both rich and poor nations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to the global economy. The virus spread rapidly, infecting millions of people worldwide and also bringing economic activity to a momentary standstill as countries imposed restrictions on movement to restrain its spread. As the health crisis still continues in many countries, the evident economic damage reveals the largest economic shock the world has experienced in decades. Economic shocks matter in the contemporary world because people are knitted together in global reciprocity; that is, the world economy and society are interconnected by global supply chains, communications technology, and travel. Ruptures in the supply chain of one country manifests its implication in a country located in another part of the world. In his book, *The Closing Circle*, Barry Commoner (1971) aptly explained the four laws of ecology, of which 'everything is connected to everything else', which resonates to the current global scenario. Even the Black Death, Spanish Flu or the Bubonic Plague, though decimating millions of lives, took several years to spread throughout Europe and other parts of the world. In contrast, the coronavirus reached most countries of the world within months.

Neoliberalism is the primary driver of globalisation. In the 1990s neoli-

beralism brought forth an exceptional level of global integration. It opened up the world economy, increased national economic integration leading to the genesis of global marketplace. South Asia began its phase of economic liberalisation during early 1990s. The economic sector transitioned rapidly, driven by trade, manufacturing, service sector, and technologies that accelerated and allowed global sourcing across geo-political boundaries, thus enabling economic freedom to people. Apropos to the transformations, Baldwin (2016) maintains:

> The new millennium has witnessed the emergence of a qualitatively new globalisation associated with   global organization of production involving construction of value chains that involve exchange of northern technology for less expensive southern inputs.

In South Asia, economic growth became achievable owing to inter-regional and inter-continental exchanges of trade, human resource, technology, and education and so forth. At this juncture, pandemic driven global recession is undesired for a growing South Asia. Prognoses from the World Bank, think tanks, and academics suggest the pandemic is likely to impel many countries into economic downturn in 2020, by contracting the per capita income of the largest section of countries globally since 1870. Advanced economies are predicted to reduce by 7% (World Bank, 2020). Economic growth and developmental objectives of developing nations essentially depend on the advanced economies; hence, this weakness or contraction will disturb the prospects of emerging and developing nations who were expecting a steady GDP growth but now predicted to reduce by 2.5% (Ibid.)

The twenty-first century is so far dominated by scientific advancements and technological innovations; we have vaccines to recourse diseases, provisions for advanced medical facilities and a more educated populace. It is ironic how the outspread of the virus has been possible due to the growing cross continental mobility fuelled by economic liberalization and globalisation. Interestingly, while the global death toll of the pandemic now ex-

ceeds 814,622,[42] the number of fatalities in South Asia has been relatively low compared to the countries in Europe and the United States; the cause of this, however, is subject to further investigation. Many South Asian countries, barring India, have recorded lower death counts despite their poor healthcare system and high population and poverty rates. The number of infected and mortalities may vary from region to region, but economic decline is a shared shock, felt across the globe, by small and big nations alike.

South Asian countries whether agriculture, tourism or industry based have fallen victim to the global economic downturn. According to the World Bank[43] (2020), 'every region is subject to substantial growth downgrades. East Asia and the Pacific will grow by a scant 0.5%. South Asia will contract by 2.7%, Sub-Saharan Africa by 2.8%, Middle East and North Africa by 4.2%, Europe and Central Asia by 4.7%, and Latin America by 7.2%'. The impact of this decline besides the economies will affect years of development achievements by pushing millions of people back to poverty and employment uncertainties. The past seven decades have witnessed the construction, proliferation and consolidation of a global liberal international economic order, which appears to be in the midst of a questionable future. In this context, the paper discusses the concept of globalisation, its importance on emerging economies and the sudden advent of a virus induced pandemic, to set the background of the study. The paper elaborates on the economic downturns of the South Asian countries particularly due to the Covid-19.

Globalisation and its changing trends

Before discussing globalisation and the changing trends it behoves us to remember that this liberal economic order post-Depression was a great

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42 This was the figure at the time the article was revised and submitted.

43 The World Bank, The Global Economic Outlook During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Changed World, Feature Story, June 8, 2020

success. Globalisation as a trend has been revolutionary in bringing intense integration among human civilisation. The trading system that came into being in the 1990s was unique as its progression and evolution expanded the farthest of all. Globalisation intensified trade and commerce across the world by reducing barriers and introducing the concept of borderless market through international movement. It is multi-dimensional; a 'dominant force' of the twentieth century, as noted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 1999:25) because it widened beyond the domain of economics and trade to enfold political, socio-cultural, lifestyle, educational, scientific, technological and even environmental actions within its realm. Anthony G. McGrew (1990) defined globalisation as:

> the forging of a multiplicity of linkages and interconnections between the states and societies which make up the modern world system, as well as the process by which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe.

McGrew's exposition is unerring because globalisation coalesced the world in a manner that 'what transpires in one part of the world has perspicuous and evident reverberations on the economic, socio-political or even environmental aspects of communities or people residing elsewhere'. This is precisely how the corona virus proliferated across national and international territories bringing the world to a standstill. The virus unfurled with ominous ramifications for the global communities. At this phase of our civilisation, it is reasonable to deduce that global travel has permitted to pass on the contagion to an international individual as well as expedited the virus's transnational outreach.

The unprecedented pandemic has overwhelmed the healthcare systems and devastated the economic solidities of the region. The disease unsympathetically reminds us that pandemics are biological, political and global in nature and have reverberations on all. And rightly said by Lee Jong-Wook, former Director-General of the World Health Organization 'pandemics do not respect international borders' (WHO, 2005), so the corona virus is as global as it could be. Its ubiquitous presence has not only cost

human lives but also engulfed the notion of integration and inter-relations in its totality causing damage to the globalised world.

Globalisation, however, was already in crisis much before the corona virus attacked but this phenomenon brought positive changes to the economy and development in most of the countries of the region is an undisputed truth. From being in the category of least developing countries (LDC) five of the eight South Asian countries are now in the upper-middle income (Maldives) or lower-middle income categories (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan), while Nepal and Afghanistan are low income countries.[44] The pandemic has ruptured the momentum of this progression, along with by various other unfavourable situations.

The Covid-19 or the novel Coronavirus, a highly contagious infectious disease originated from Wuhan, Hubei province of China, emerged in November 2019, first killing more than 3,000 people in the country. A rapid shift of epicentre from China to Southern Europe and the United States produced apprehension, and soon after, a worrying mortality rate. At this same time, in March 2020, the virus, though relatively sluggishly, set foot in the South Asian region. It stunned the world with its magnitude, posing massive health threats to humankind. To curtail the contagion or 'flatten the curve', many countries adopted a 'lockdown' policy: confining millions of people at home, shutting down businesses, suspending economic activities, banning international travel and closing international borders. These measures have impacted humans not only at individual, family and community level but also on national economies and global trade (PWC, 2020).

A critical overview of South Asian economy

The economic prognosis evaluates this to be the worst performance in all eight countries since the nineties that will bring impermanent diminution in trade and commerce. The transpiring economic disaster is significant in

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44 According to a World Bank list of lower to middle income countries.

various ways and has brought the countries at a crossroad. In all probabilities, according to *South Asia Economic Focus the regional growth will plummet from the 6.3% growth to a staggering 1.8-2.8% (South Asia Economic Forum, 2020), i.e. a negative growth rate this year. The World Bank (2020) presumes the status to persist through 2021 with a growth rate of 3.1-4.0%.*

The foreign policy dimensions of many countries underwent major transformations during the nineties; additionally, growth of the global financial market, expansion of corporate activities, and advancements in information, technology and research, communication and transport technology reduced the cost of telecommunication and transport leading to a growing global community (Khan and Larik, 2007). Hence, the emergence of globalisation in South Asia at the same timeframe was befitting for various reasons. Regionally, wide-ranging reforms, for instance political harmony among the countries about economic strategies; unilateral trade liberalisation, privatisation of industries, macro-economic stability and India's boom in IT sector brought some noteworthy changes in the region; when implemented, it changed the economic topography obliterating many hindrances that were impeding the growth (Hussain, 2000).

In the last forty years, countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka have done exceptionally well in reducing poverty, increasing GDP, etc. This development is undoubtedly pertaining to the increased interconnectedness, cross-border movements and economic interdependence. In the 1990s, South Asia grew at 5.6% which was a relatively fast rate for such low-income countries. Such fast growth permitted Bangladesh to hit the rank of lower-middle income country in 2015 reaching up to India and Sri Lanka that became lower-middle income nations in 2009 and 1997 respectively. Bangladesh was on track to grow its GDP 7.2% in 2020, second after Bhutan at 7.4%, and much ahead of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka or Afghanistan (see Table 1).

It is a fact that South Asian countries improved their socio-economic conditions by embracing wide-ranging opportunities; nonetheless, the region has been grappling with its economies even before the pandemic set in – a fact that cannot be excluded from consideration. The Indian economy was experiencing a slowdown and Pakistan was suffering from a 'balance of payment' crisis. Bangladesh was progressing steadily, but now that remains a bleak story

Table No. 1

Growth Forecast for South Asian countries

	Country	Growth (in %)
GROWTH FORECAST FOR FY2020 (in %)	Bhutan	7.4
	Bangladesh	7.2
	India	6.9
	Nepal	6.4
	Maldives	5.5
	Sri Lanka	3.3
	Afghanistan	3.0
	Pakistan	2.4

Source: World Bank, 2020

The economic depression has destabilized these countries. One of the world's most densely populated regions, with 1.9 billion people whose economies depend on external source of income. This includes trade, textile exports, remittance, tourism, foreign direct investments, developmental aid, loans and grants, through engagement with rich nations like the United States, the UK, European and Gulf countries, and developed Asian counties like China, Japan, Korea, Singapore. The growth of Bangladesh's economy is based principally on the 2R-Remittance and Ready-made Garments Sector (RMG). *The New Age* (2020) reported that approximately 7.5 million people in the Bangladeshi diaspora sent US$18.32 billion in remittance in 2019. Remittance has extensively improved the economic status of Bangladesh and contributed to its development. So did the RMG, with US$34.13 billion in export earnings, functioning largely due to European and American buyers. A further share of India's GDP is generated from travel and tourism: over US$28 billion in 2018 (Jaganmohan, 2020). Around 10.89 million tourists came to India in 2019; producing income that increased by 8.2% to Rs 2.2 lakh crores (Chowdhury, 2020). India's remittance earning in 2017 stood at US$68.968 billion in 2017 sent by its diaspora. According to a World Bank report, remittances in South Asia grew 12% to US$ 131 billion in 2018 (The Economic Times, 2019).

Similarly, Sri Lanka is experiencing decreased export demands, while the

import of raw materials from China are delayed, harming manufacturing and causing job losses. Furthermore, both Sri Lanka and the Maldives tourism sectors, both major sources of earning, have been disturbed. Maldivians live by earnings from tourism that generates two-third of their GDP while tourist entries to Sri Lanka decreased by 17.7% in February 2020. Nepal on the brink of being high-risk too. Though still a low-income country, for the last three years Nepal saw economic growth of 7% (Budhathoki, 2020). As around 30% of its GDP is generated through remittance, however, this primary source of GDP is affected like other countries (Ibid.).

The restrictions on travel affected global industrial activities. Advanced, developing and poor economies have all been hit in varying proportions. China's GDP fell by 36.6% in the first quarter of 2020; South Korea's productivity reduced by 5.5%; in Europe, the GDP of France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and fell by 21.3, 2.2 and 17.5 and 19.2% respectively. According to the IMF, China accounts for nearly half of the global demand for industrial metals. After lockdowns across the world, the requirement for industrial metals, raw materials reduced as factories ceased work (The Indian Express, 2020) limiting global supply chains and port activities. Oil prices plummeted in March 2020 as transportation services, which account for 60% of oil demand, were hit by the plethora of lockdowns (ibid.).

South Asia is a geo-strategically important region, with China, Southeast Asia, the Gulf nations located in close proximity; connections that are far reaching beyond health-related concerns. While US-China and China-India power rivalries are brewing speculations about a post-pandemic new order in the world, China continues to maintain its relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, causing India significant anxiety. In recent decades, the significant geopolitical trends of South Asian growth and development have been possible through Chinese involvement; which continue post-pandemic. China extended healthcare assistance to Bangladesh in the form of medical supplies, expertise and a proposal to establish 'sister-city alliance'. To maintain its regional stature, India has come forward with disaster response support for its neighbours. The Indian Air Force led an evacuation operation on the stranded Bangladeshi, Nepali, Sri Lankan and Maldivian nationals to be able to return to their respective

countries. India has lent medical support like testing laboratories facilities and medicine supplies to the Maldives, it has promised Bhutan similar supplies amidst its lockdown, and it has kept assistance ready near the Nepalese. Bangladesh too has extended support to Maldives.

Conclusion

At a time when globalism is taking an inward and protectionist approach, there is scope for regionalism to reboot from the post-pandemic setbacks. How far this will succeed in the future is something only time will tell. The world's trade and commerce communities have witnessed the precariousness of the complex global supply chain, particularly due to the domination of certain countries, such as China. The pandemic has laid bare the disadvantages of expansive international integration, over-reliance on foreign sources, and foreign travellers by producing conditions that legitimise national restrictions on the international movement of people and goods. This magnitude of crisis in the history of mankind is rare, unfavourable for the already enervated global supply chain and minimise the hyper-mobility of global travellers. Though the Coronavirus may be temporary, it is already believed to leave a continuing impact. South Asia has been regionally quite detached for a long time due to internal conflicts, hence regional institutions like SAARC, BIMSTEC have been dysfunctional, and trade minimal. In the past few years an increased interaction was observed between India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the current crisis can offer a way forward to rebuild old connections and lost regional interconnections. The economic stakes are high for all and any form of conflict or contestation is in no one's best interest; rather the most desired path forward is regional cooperation to safeguard the economy and regional cohesion.

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Pandemics and Wildlife

Piyush Kumar Tiwari

With the recent Covid-19 epidemic, wild animals have become increasingly visible across cities worldwide. However, wildlife was never inherently alien to urban spaces, and has managed to coexist with urbanization, even thriving in the aftermath of man-made disasters. Although many wild animals are resilient enough to survive in altered landscapes, Covid-19 has in fact heightened the threats faced by wildlife across the world, especially the challenge of poaching.

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Wildlife and urban spaces

In the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, numerous reports emerged of wild animals defiantly roaming the streets of cities across the world, from a gang of monkeys in Bangkok, Thailand to a puma prowling in Santiago, Chile. In India, frenzied reports about similar invasions described a usually shy and diminutive civet seen at a zebra crossing, while nilgais and leopards reportedly entered cities, to the utter shock of their residents. Many in the media saw this as a sign of wildlife 'reclaiming' urban spaces, as the shutting down of industrial processes, transport and lower pollution levels prompted animals to seek food, shelter or safe passages through urban centres. Our exclusionary and myopic 'urban' imagination posits that wild animals simply do not belong in the cities, the natural habitat of *Homo Sapiens, while these stragglers are seen as curious cases of adventurous wildlife, due only to the quietude caused by the pandemic.*

However, in this simplistic understanding of the natural world, we have somewhat forgotten that traditionally, 'wild' animals have peacefully co-existed in cities historically and continue to do so in modern times. In fact, it is our modern industrial capitalist mode of production that has wreaked havoc on the natural world, has left little space to wild animals, gobbling up vast forests, scrublands and other habitats. Despite habitat destruction, pollution and large-scale poaching, patches of relatively healthy forest exist in and around cities, and animals continue to thrive in these sections of urban Eden. In seventeenth century India, the emperor Shah Jahan hunted lions in the vicinity of Palam in Delhi, currently the site of an airport (Rangarajan, 2005). As late as the 1930s, tigers were hunted on the outskirts of Mumbai. Wild animals can also utilise fragmented habitats in the heart of major cities, if human interference is controlled. In New Delhi, nilgais, peacock, macaque, palm-squirrel, fox, and jackal can be found in the urban forests of the Delhi ridge, a remnant of the Aravalli mountains that provide a safe haven for many species. Even large predators, otherwise deemed too dangerous to be living close to human habitation, have learnt to coexist in the peripheral zones of cities, if a suitable prey base is available. Leopards are particularly successful in living along the Delhi

Ridge forests along the Delhi-Gurgaon border, and one was even found in the heart of the city, in the Yamuna Biodiversity Park (Pillai, 2016). As predators, they have largely been successful in avoiding conflict with humans. They rely on small animals for food, as is visible in their healthy numbers in Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park, from where they stealthily enter the city's slums and apartments to prey on dogs.

Some animals have adapted and in fact expanded their population and range across urban spaces, due to severe habitat loss elsewhere and the availability of food in cities. For example, gangs of rhesus macaque monkeys have thrived in major Indian cities since the fruit bearing trees and semi-urban forests on which they relied have largely been razed by agricultural and urban expansion. Similar examples of urban wildlife being tolerated in the heart of cities can be found worldwide. Wildlife therefore is not alien to cities, and the Covid-19 epidemic has only made their presence more visible to many who would have otherwise not noticed it. Wildlife in urban spaces also reveals another interesting aspect of the relationship between humans and animals.

Wild animals can show great resilience in the face of natural and man-made disasters which can sometimes bring reduced human interference, giving animals the breathing space that they need to reproduce and extend their territories. The Demilitarized Zone, established in 1953 along the 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea, is ironically, one of the most dangerously militarized borders in the world. However, the prohibition on construction and agriculture along this border has allowed the local wildlife to bounce back, including several rare and endangered species such as the Siberian musk deer, Asiatic black bear, and the *goral,* a wild goat (Havlick, 2018). Many of these rare animals have been completely pushed out of their former ranges and find refuge in the tranquillity of the border. In rare instances, serious environmental disasters can also produce conditions where reduction of human interference can allow wildlife to prosper. One such example is the Chernobyl zone in Ukraine, where the nuclear disaster of 1986 rendered thousands of square kilometres of land unsuitable for human habitation. Wolves, bears and bison have made a wonderful recovery there, making the formerly urbanized settlement and the forests around it into a de-facto wildlife reserve.

Pandemics and poaching

Despite many animals' ability to adapt to adverse change, pandemics and disasters further exacerbate the anthropogenic pressures of habitat loss, deforestation and poaching. During such disasters, governments are busy grappling with the mitigation of human suffering, and wildlife conservation may not be a priority. In the Covid-19 lockdown, international wildlife watchdogs have reported higher rates of slaughter of wildlife in Africa, Russia, South America and India, to feed the lucrative global market for animal parts. Black rhinos have faced severe poaching pressures in Botswana, while a rise in the killing of pumas and jaguars is reported from Colombia according to the organization Panthera. TRAFFIC has also reported a rise in poaching in India during the lockdown, compared to pre-lockdown phase (Badola, 2020). Barking deer, cobra, gazelle, pangolin and leopards were targeted during the Covid-19 crisis, according to TRAFFIC. Some poachers even posed with their dead quarry on social media, as if celebrating a 'lockdown festival' (Badola, 2020).

Rare wild animals are also killed in Africa and Asia to feed the growing demand for traditional medicine in East and South East Asia, and the Wildlife Conservation Society is calling governments to ban the live animal markets, where endangered species are often sold. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, acting executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and Jinfeng Zhou, secretary general of the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation have joined the chorus to ban wildlife markets for the greater good of mankind (Moulds, 2020). However, simply focusing on the international demand for wildlife products does not adequately address the inherently unequal socio-economic condition of forest dwelling communities in developing nations, that often motivates poaching. Data from India indicates that the largest cause for poaching for ungulates during Covid-19 lockdowns is the demand for meat, as job losses due to a deteriorating economy create economic pressures for extra income among already marginalized groups (Badola, 2020). The Conservation International has in fact, linked the demand for bushmeat and trafficking to Covid-19 lockdowns, as falling availability of food

and a decline in tourism reduced the economic incentive to conserve wildlife. The power relations in illegal hunting ultimately favour the organized traffickers, rather than the village hunters, who are generally paid a pittance compared to the profits garnered by the traffickers in East Asia and other markets. Various studies have indicated that there is a direct connection between poverty and higher levels of poaching, such as the trafficking of ivory and rhino horn from Sub-Saharan Africa. The pressures on livelihoods may increase exponentially during crises like pandemics, and local communities living in or around forests can also be targeted by much larger organized wildlife traffickers. In the case of India, as well as parts of Africa, South East Asia and South America, deforestation and land degradation are already destroying the habitats necessary for rare wildlife to survive, and the surge in poaching during pandemics should not divert policymakers from this environmental challenge. Moreover, there have been reports that suggest the Covid-19 virus may have originated in wet markets that often sell endangered and rare wildlife for consumption, bringing the issue of wildlife to the forefront. Large-scale poaching for bushmeat is due to cultural preference for more 'wild' food, as well as poverty when traditional sources of protein are more expensive.

Consumption of such meat is said to have facilitated the transfer of zoonotic diseases, and almost two-thirds of human infectious diseases can be transmitted from animals to humans (Maruma Mrema, 2020). In fact, science writer David Quammen predicted as early as 2012 that the 'next deadly human pandemic' would be a virus transferred to humans from wildlife (Quammen, 2012). With rise in populations and increasing poaching, humans are exposing themselves to greater contact with disease carrying animals. The leading conservation organization IUCN has already made the connection between biodiversity loss and the spread of zoonotic diseases to humans in the context of the deadly Ebola virus outbreak in Africa in 2014(IUCN, 2014). It is believed Ebola was transferred to the local human populations in the handling of wild bats and primates. Many experts have claimed that traditional wet markets where wild meat is often sold for human consumption may have enabled transmission of Covid-19 to humans. In fact, scientific evidence suggests that other recent pandemics like SARS and MERS have possibly been transferred from animals to

humans. The Convention on Biodiversity suggests that the 1998 outbreak of Nipah virus in Malaysia and the Ebola virus in Africa in 2014 may have been the direct result of forest destruction forcing animals to migrate close to human settlements, carrying the virus (Maruma Mrema, 2020).

It is clear that reckless deforestation, and our obsession with urbanisation and industrialisation have made us more susceptible to pandemics. When thinking of recovery, governments and citizens across the world have to factor in the largely irreversible decline of the natural world. Beyond the ever-shrinking protected areas and reserves, we have to learn to accept and protect wildlife around our urban settlements. Strengthening tribal and forest dwelling populations by the provision of alternative livelihood opportunities, tackling poverty, and the protection of existing natural habitats are the need of the hour. By proactively addressing these challenges, we can reduce, if not eliminate the emergence of future pandemics like Covid-19.

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Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET)

SASNET is an interdisciplinary network for the production and dissemination of research, education, and information about South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). SASNET produces and disseminates knowledge and research about South Asia in three principal ways. First, SASNET produces knowledge about South Asia through research, seminars, workshops, and conferences. Second, SASNET supports research, seminars, and international collaborations at Lund University. Third. SASNET collaborates with Swedish and Nordic universities that have a strong focus on South Asia.

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