Local Bodies, Global Risks
The Structural Violence in India's Migrant Crisis

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Empathy is a stream of imagination. Even as the anticipatory anxiety of the COVID-19 crisis diffused through the world, in India it gave birth to a moment of emergency for empathy as well. Media portrayals of the disease and its effects instigated all sorts of responses in the public imagination. A pandemic is not one, but many things: a web of disease, risk and trauma. In some sense, it unearths a very primeval worry that lies dormant in our modern hearts—the fear of survival against a mysterious force beyond grasp. Such forces spring forth from the womb of nature all the time, even though their patterns have often been discerned in specialized ways. But for the lay observer, these scientific understandings are hazy. Of course, information accessibility has increased manifold, but what happens when the particular theoretical frameworks to assimilate that information are not actually present in the consuming minds? The consumption of news and the responses to it become a ritual of self-assurance, fear-removal and certainty-seeking. A crisis situation serves to exacerbate this proclivity. The aim of this paper is to situate the aforementioned trends in the forced reverse migration of workers in India in the wake of the lockdown. It attempts to do so by taking a interdisciplinary approach to develop a critical framework within which to view the phenomenon of crisis-induced migration in India as a secondary complication of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Indian migrant labourers' predicament, the mass anxiety due to COVID-19 plays out in the minds of two separable material classes, and by association, over two different but related corporeal theatres. The first is that of the numerous kinds of labourers scattered across India, and the second is that of the Indian middle-class, however loose a category it might be. It is important at this juncture to take these two categories at face value, as they are colloquially used, because the effect we aim to measure derives from a similar intention—accessible data (in the form of news reports and commentaries) and government policies are formulated with a target demographic in mind. The ways in which there is a stark contrast in these two classes is evident from the responses that were triggered in the wake of the lockdown. The 'triggering' does not imply a delineated stimulus-response sequence, rather, actions along a set of responses that were feasible for the two categories. In the disparity between these responses lie the roots of a larger structural violence. It is important henceforth to trace the causal factors of this violent phenomenon of mass, 'reverse' migration in India in the rapid transfer of knowledge as well as the permeation of similar psychosomatic states globally via globalized media networks. This, interspersed with massive but loose policy decisions creates a spatiotemporal site of structural violence.

As employment, sustenance and shelter got snatched away from a large number of migrant workers across Indian states, and the peril of death loomed overhead, the binary of options available to them were between suffering in dire straits as is or making a dangerous journey back to the modes of living that had been left behind. This is in stark contrast to the situation of a relatively financially consolidated section of citizens, who were mandated to stay in their homes and operate at minimal interaction with the outside world during the lockdown phase. It is necessary to take into account that the precarious nature of informal employment, which in the Indian context applies close to 90 percent of all jobs, has caused employees across sectors to face retrenchment, pay cuts or delayed salaries due to the economic blow delivered by the pandemic, with scarce rights to health cover. This seems to suggest that the element of class may be dropped from analysis. But it is important to note that in each "materialized future" interdependent contingencies and options get locked in and turned irreversible because "resources used in one way cannot be used again" (Tutton 2017). The scope of this paper, thus, is to conceptualize not a generalized, cross-sectional effect of the pandemic on the livelihood of the population, but to present a case for assessing the effects of multiple factors that have played out to discriminatorily raise challenges for a disadvantaged group, within a framework of class difference. Indeed, some of the images that were witnessed in the migrant workers' ordeal were so bleak that they ought to make the idea of modernity and modern infrastructure itself suspect.

Chronicling the Migration

Devesh Kapur has raised three possible explanations for the Indian state's deep shortcomings in its behaviour towards its most disadvantaged citizens—inadequacies in local government resources, the precocious nature of its democracy, and the persistence of social hierarchies and cleavages (Kapur 2020). According to the 2011 Census, among work migrants, long-term migrants share the largest percentage, whereas short-term (circular) migrant labourers, who could be well over a 100 million in

number, lack the social capital to stay in big cities for too long[1]. Low-income states in India dominate inter-state, rural-urban migration flows; "Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had the largest stock of out-migrants moving to other states"[2]. Whereas long-term migration in India is a mobility strategy for relatively privileged, forward-caste households, "circular or return migration is part of households' survival strategy" remains a practice among more marginalized social groups, such as men from *dalit* and Adivasi. (Desai & Chatterjee 2016). The sudden market failure and increased unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in India triggered an extreme situation of domestic migration[3], which has been called the "greatest exodus since partition"[4]. With the official declaration of the unilateral lockdown on March 24, a threefold threat was posed to the average migrant worker caught in this situation: expulsion from places of current livelihood, the sheer harshness of a return journey, and the fear of societal rejection in their native areas. Journalistic coverage of the plight of these migrants brought to light images of abject violence. Families after families, men, women, children, the old and physically challenged, took to the highways with the faint hope of making it back to their native regions in other states. They had to cover the entire journey on foot, with barely anything to eat or drink, no money in hand, roads to sleep on and skies to sleep under. When they did find transport, they had to cram themselves into and on top of trucks and buses, grapple with the unexpected difficulties of uncertainty, waiting for fate to take its course. Hundreds to thousands of kilometres long routes were traversed on minimal modes likes bicycles or rickshaws, with minimal means[5]. Well-being and hygiene were a far cry. On top of being caught in this deluge of crowds, crushing fear, ignorance, neglect, despair and fight for survival, groups of migrant workers faced police brutality of all sorts often for not adhering to the badly worded lockdown rule of 'social distancing'. Many were arrested off highways and state borders. Many were shunned by the communities where they originally resided for fear of infection. Government-owned buildings that were not being used were converted to quarantine centres to keep returning workers[6]. Government policy, when it came to informal labourers, reeked of incapability, weak planning and lack of protocol. In a moment of sad irony, this section of society

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[1] Rukmini S. 2020. "Why India's 'Migrants' Walked Back Home". *Livemint*. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/why-india-migrants-walked-back-home-11590564390171.html.

[2] Gaurav Nayyar and Kyoung Yang Kim. 2018. "India's Internal Labor Migration Paradox: The Statistical and the Real." *Policy Research Working Paper* 8356. World Bank Group. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3130469

[3] Sergio Infante. 2020. "India'S Coronavirus Migration Crisis | JSTOR Daily". *JSTOR Daily*. https://daily.jstor.org/indias-migration-crisis/.

[4] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Manoj Chaurasia. 2020. "India Racked By Greatest Exodus Since Partition Due To Coronavirus". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/india-wracked-by-greatest-exodus-since-partition-due-to-coronavirus.

[5] Raghav Agarwal. 2020. "On A Highway In Uttar Pradesh, Listening To Migrant Workers' Stories Of Despair – And Hope". *Scroll.In*. https://scroll.in/article/964954/on-a-highway-in-uttar-pradesh-listening-to-migrant-workers-stories-of-despair-and-hope.

[6] Kaushal Shroff. 2020. "Migrant Workers Forced To Walk Hundreds Of Kilometres Due To Lockdown". *Caravanmagazine.In*. https://caravanmagazine.in/news/we-are-deserted-migrant-workers-forced-to-walk-hundreds-of-kilometres-due-to-lockdown.

faced the worst kind of social distancing and downright desertion. It was found in many cases that the workers' savings had eroded and they were not being paid full sums due, which led to clashed between their hopes of returning home to safety and navigating scarcity through an optimal strategy[7]. Their impossible, desperate journey also took its physical toll—swollen feet, scabbed soles, broken bodies, sleeplessness, unbearable heat and fever, fatigue, starvation and ultimately death[8].

A number of these migrants are daily wage construction workers—people responsible for erecting high-rise complexes and expanding city infrastructure—themselves not more than cogs at the mercy of contractors[9] in the continual gluttony of the business of unsustainable construction. In reality however, they are the backbone of metropolitan economies. They are a dispensable lot, but alongside that they are doubly vulnerable by virtue of not having any protection for their rights and basic needs; instead of following normal logics of safety, security and sustenance they were compelled to go through long-drawn, excruciating processes to avail these benefits[10]. Even though they were always ubiquitous in the Indian labour market, across "hotels, small industries, construction, metro stations, tourism", in public imagination they never seemed a group large enough "to be taken seriously" or merit more than a "piecemeal approach" from the state[11]. According to the third lockdown report prepared by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), based on 821 distress calls (corresponding to 5911 migrant workers in India) received between May 15 and June 1, it was observed that 63 percent had less than Rs 100 left, 67 percent were stranded where they worked, and among those who had left, 44 percent travelled by bus, 39 percent by the special train service, 11 percent by trucks, lorries, etc. and 6 percent on foot[12]. Transport disadvantage (differential access to modes of transport) strongly reinforces social exclusion (financial, gendered, ethnic, health and age-based) and poor accessibility to societal participation (Hine 2012). During this ordeal, many migrants met cruel, shocking deaths—on rail tracks, in road accidents, and from hunger and exhaustion. The

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[7] Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar. 2020. "Lockdown Hit Migrant Workers' Savings, Forced Many To Take Loans: Gurugram Survey". *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/rights/lockdown-migrant-workers-savings-loans-gurugram-survey.

[8] Ipsita Chakravarty. 2020. "A Story Of Swollen Feet: The Physical Toll Of Walking Home During Lockdown". *Scroll.In*. https://scroll.in/article/963641/a-story-of-swollen-feet-the-physical-toll-of-walking-home-during-lockdown.

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[12] "To Leave Or Not To Leave: Third Report By SWAN On Migrant Worker Crisis And Their Journey Home | Center For Contemporary South Asia". 2020. *Watson.Brown.Edu*. https://watson.brown.edu/southasia/news/2020/leave-or-not-leave-third-report-swan-migrant-worker-crisis-and-their-journey-home.

defining emotions of this battle were grief and absurdity[13]. The other, 'un-emotion' was state apathy. A suffering, floating population was instantly painted as a threat to the state's image of a successful battle against the coronavirus and summarily dismissed by the government's stance in the Supreme Court; even from the Rs 20 lakh crore *Atmanirbhar* relief package the "hardest-hit stranded unorganized migrant workers" were initially allotted merely 0.175%[14]. The movement of migrant workers soon transformed into a 'violation' of public health norms after it was already underway, and financial assistance when it came, was too less and too late[15]. Another important issue is that of access to government benefits and food safety nets: "at a time of such an unprecedented national crisis, errors of inclusion are far less consequential than errors of exclusion"[16]. The secondary effects of the pandemic have laid bare critical structural problems in India's growth that have become entrenched over the years through a corporate-state nexus, amid which the question of the political subjectivity of the weakest sections is vastly important to allow for a resistance to power asymmetries in social life[17].

Modernity and Structural Violence

The triumph of modernity is in its universalization, via the phenomena of globalization, through which it also becomes radicalized (Escobar 2004). The threat posed by the disease was so essential that it required a quick (albeit meticulously planned) response. To ensure that new customs that mitigated or delayed the risk of infection were universally disseminated and adopted demanded breaking into the private lives of the labouring non-elite classes. A sudden shift to a 'lockdown mode' of living in the country, as also globally, provided the "legitimation for the discourses and practices of social hygiene"

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[13] Ahan Penkar and Shahid Tantray. 2020. "In Photos: Migrant Workers Face Police Violence And Hunger, Escaping Delhi During Lockdown". *Caravanmagazine.In*. https://caravanmagazine.in/labour/in-photos-migrant-workers-face-police-violence-and-hunger-escaping-delhi-during-lockdown.

[14] Jawahar Sircar. 2020. "A Long Look At Exactly Why And How India Failed Its Migrant Workers". *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-migrant-workers-policy-analysis.

[15] Sourya Majumder. 2020. "Why A Comprehensive Legal Framework To Protect Migrants' Rights Is Urgently Needed". *Caravanmagazine.In*. https://caravanmagazine.in/law/why-a-comprehensive-legal-framework-to-protect-migrants-rights-is-urgently-needed.

[16] Devesh Kapur, Milan Vaishnav, and Dawson Verley. 2020. "In India'S COVID-19 Response, Minimize Errors Of Exclusion". *Center For The Advanced Study Of India (CASI)*. https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/kapurvaishnavverley.

[17] Nitin Sinha. 2020. "Perception, Legality and Politics of the Migrant Worker Crisis in Lockdown." *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/labour/migrant-worker-crisis-lockdown.

that went hand in hand with "authoritarian intervention strategies", just as has been observed in similar situations in the past (Novella 2020). The inner working of this transition occurs by making "purity and impurity a discursive, material and affective resource peculiarly adapted to facilitating social consensus" (social stigma) and government management concerned with "aggregate effects of populations" differentiated on the basis of the risk they pose (Duschinsky & Lampitt 2012, Elbe 2009). People, in this case migrant workers, who get left out of the collective global cognizance of the seriousness of the problem, as well as the top-down strategies developed to tackle it, automatically become responsible for the threat ('carriers') and are considered to require disciplining. According to Nussbaum, the political conception of human subjectivity incorporates both "striving and vulnerability", i.e., the presence of a pursuit of fate and also being vulnerable to its blows (Nussbaum 2013). The latter is an especially crucial feature visible in social groups faced with testing odds, whereby a class of citizens gets reduced to a "community of fate" left as is to fend for themselves (Baehr 2005). This sacrificial aspect has a subtle way of camouflaging the risk element and denying its urgency to those forsaken, as in Indian society, where "poverty and inequality are relational concepts"—the materially disadvantaged are also politically deprived and their compounded risk scarcely acknowledged (Bauman 2000, Chandhoke 2012). It has been proposed that this operation and entrenchment of moral judgements occurs not against a "strict philosophical definition of immorality" but on a "fuzzy psychological template" guided by an evolutionary logic of proximate or distal harm (Schein & Gray 2018).

Johan Galtung, in his typology of violence, formulated 'violence' as the cause of the disparity between our potential realizations and the actual (mental and somatic) realizations we are suspended in (Galtung 1969). His theorization accounts for a definition of structural violence as purely systemic, whether manifest or latent, the formula for which is inequality (in general, of power) in the organization of human relations (Galtung 1969). The work of individuals and groups engaged in peace, by corollary, is to extend practice across disciplinary boundaries to micro levels to engage with structural issues of like poverty, "resource shortages, the global military-industrial complex, refugees, disease transmission", etc. (Arya 2017). Foucault theorised the subtle nature of biopolitical power, which aims to "qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize" while obscuring its cruel effects (Foucault 1978). A full theoretical framework to understand the violence in this episode of migrant crisis in India must unite the concepts of structural violence, risk, biopolitics and necropolitics. Necropolitics is political violence that victimizes a particular class or group of people by depriving them of the agency to rid themselves of wretched conditions (Mdembe 1992a). Necropolitics is banal and naked in its exploitation and echoes colonial forms of violence, but the response it elicits from the masses is "a ribaldry that revels in the obscene"—moral disengagement that might actually hide prejudicial attitudes towards minority groups (Davies et al 2017, Mdembe 1992b, Passini 2019).

In Ulrich Beck's conception of the risk society, modernization reconfigures older modes of class structures to positions accruing degrees of social risk (Beck 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark example of the unforeseen, ambivalent origins of risk, its social, spatiotemporal penetration, and its aggravation through the ignorance of its globalization. Increased global integration and interdependence in the risk society has fostered the "nascence and the proliferation of diseases", exacerbated systemic risk, brought it nearer and nearer, and expanded the domain of 'risky'

possibilities beyond quantification, while simultaneously converting risk into a speculative game of profit and considerably eclipsing the notion of uncertainty through "discursive, technical, institutional, and ideological" processes (Appadurai 2012, Beck 2006, Goldin & Mariathasan 2014, Pirages 2007). The glaring failures of these exercises have been blatantly exposed in the wake of the current pandemic: risk now dances atop the crumbling of modernity through its own radicalization. The strategy of lockdown as a way to cope and hope for a return to an endangered, familiar way of life is adumbrated by risk, even as the modern institutions characteristic of that familiarity reflexively deteriorate (Beck 2003, 2006). Citizens of this global society (of risk), even the victims of localized forms of structural violence that unravels under a larger threat like the pandemic, have no one to hold accountable, just as those who wield power have "no one to whom they must justify themselves" (Rodrik 2013).

Media and Uncertainty

The novel coronavirus is terrifying on numerous levels. In the form that it has spread, it is new to the scientific community and has a broad range of symptoms. It does not yet have a proved vaccine to counter the effect. It has launched a large part of the world that was supposed immune to such dangers into a strange situation of death and disaster. It has imperiled the notion of a routine mode of operation and certainty that characterize life and work with in modern society. The pandemic is a case of profound doubt—its own origin is unknown, its behaviour not completely diagnosed and controllable, and it casts suspicion on the very fact of the globalized, modern time and the collective future. The initial footage and news reports that caught everyone's attention originated from China and Italy, even as the virus was communicated in real time by global networks communication, transport and tourism. The element of surprise and the element of the quarantine-lockdown-shutdown policy situation doubled the fear and anxiety. The diversity in administrative responses across countries and the panic and subsequent failures they resulted in launched another cycle of distrust and disillusionment. The dovetailing spread of the anxiety and demand for urgent acts of survival layered on top of the existing spread of the virus globally turned a huge chunk of the population into helpless spectators grasping for straws of sensemaking in a deluge of uncertainty. This produced immense injuries to the lives of the disadvantaged, in the scope of this paper the migrant workers, who suffered some of the worst secondary consequences, but consequences that would corrode from public memory and discourse after a brief phase of shock because news of new occurrences would soon reach us from world over.

The global media regime—the web of media agencies and channels spread across continents—is the portal through which aggregated pieces of information get distributed to minds hooked on to these channels across the world. In its viral spread, these facts build up their own fictions, as people's impulses, desires, fears come into play while the occurrence of individual and group decision-making at the local level. Media globalization has molded a "global imaginary" of a shared lived experience, even though in reality people confront and deal with this "global space of media, technology, and culture" disproportionately (Punathambekar 2017). Local attitudes towards the pandemic are shaped

by perceptions of global happenings. It is not hard to observe that we are experiencing "physical viruses infecting our bodies, virtual viruses infecting our computers, and symbolic viruses infecting our thinking" during this pandemic (Baker et al 2020). There are huge advantages of popular access to information during the pandemic—it often conveys the urgency to act, clarifies falsehoods, distillates best practices and enables a reality check with conditions of the world—all along with a rapid "model of contamination" that reaffirms network effects[18]. Affect theory has developed an analysis of new media technologies recenter the body as the site of media that "articulate, direct, intensify, and orient feeling" within particular socio-political contexts (Rentschler 2017). The encounter with huge quantities and varied forms of data is far from a story of creation of a democratic digital sphere that induces democratic behaviour necessarily. It is rather an epistemological move to "a plural landscape of knowledge forms" infused with a political ideology that infects both our "digital body" of knowledge and sense-making and the larger "societal body" (Baker et al 2020, Escobar 2004).

Modern autocratic regimes across countries have appropriated data as a novel tool for preservation of state power during emergencies, to fuel the perception of legitimacy of the rule among the masses and keep them in the dark (Guriev & Treisman 2019). Specifically, the media discourse on the pandemic, coupled with the mobilization of government policy at a certain time in India led to the spontaneous emergence of panic and haphazardness alongside the spread of infection. The "metaphorical constitution of a New India as a Digital India" has given rise to a complex reorientation of the "nation's postcolonial ideological framework" towards neoliberal underpinnings and an obsession with global competition over human development (Goel 2018). With a subtle prejudiced rhetorical manoeuvre, the 'enemy within' ("our mortality") in such a situation gets swiftly projected outside onto someone (Baker et al 2020). This viral affect assures the deterioration of the conditions of the underprivileged workforce, who were fired, asked to vacate lodgings, refused instant, organized help and left to their own devices. Disease epidemiology is entangled with crises of public communication as well as practices of governance (a pandemic-public-politics linkage) (Bjørkdahl and Carlsen 2019). Even in the COVID-19 pandemic, social media discourse, news and information from global and national hotspots of the virus, initial confusion over medical resource scarcity and precautionary measures (eg. 'social distancing'), public health awareness systems and administrative pronouncements come together in a melting pot that leaves a large chunk of citizens riddled with information without the capacity to process it. This induces immense anticipatory fear and actual social segregation. Historically, longitudinal research on popular media representations of class has observed specific thematic patterns, a significant one being the "relative invisibility of the working classes" (Grindstaff 2017).

The primary challenge to public communications during a pandemic is twofold: to navigate uncertainty and to encourage the growth of immunity. However, the very concept of immunity in the case of communicable diseases becomes "entwined with collective life" and the relation between the

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[18] Bruno Latour. 2020. Interview by Jonathan Watts. June 6. Bruno Latour: 'This is a global catastrophe that has come from within'. The Guardian. Retrieved June 21, 2020, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/bruno-latour-coronavirus-gaia-hypothesis-climate-crisis

individual and society (Davis 2019). News chronicles of the disease effects "constitute a selective progression of events based on journalistic customs and biases" deriving from political leanings or assumptions about public interest; in this they are not only a record but also a "functional part" that shape and are shaped by unfolding events (Lee 2014). Herein also arises a classic neoliberal quandary—our veritable dependence on expert knowledge coupled with the compulsion for self-reliance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Ungar 2003). In this case the paradox plays out in the decisions of the governing elite to take under planned measures under mounting political pressure, middle-class choices in the aftermath of the lockdown announcement, and the consequential survival choices of migrant workers and similar underprivileged groups. Media reports too, are faced with the challenge of translating highly scientific jargon to lay terms and maintaining accuracy while doing so (Lee 2014). Vulnerable sections often have "trouble recognizing themselves" as the target audience of public welfare and awareness messages, which eventually heightens their visceral anxiety of practical difficulties and forces them to come up with a feasible course of action (Davis 2019).

Conclusion

A larger theorisation of the latent concern for novel diseases in public imagination cannot treat it as an isolated phenomenon. It is rather a cluster of historically shaped anxieties—worries about mysterious, resistant, dangerous viruses threatening to come out of their lair any moment, fears of a "borderless, contracting world in which nothing can be contained, insecurities about strangers and migrant populations—that fuel the "nightmares of modernity", where biological villains have been given a face in the communities of developing nations through a "geography of blame" (Caduff 2015). In the specific case of India's migration crisis, this geography is fluid and in transit, residing in the bodies of the abandoned people. Through the interplay of state apathy, globalization discourses on risk through media narratives and modern anxieties, perception around the location of dangers gets transmuted to reproduce a physical-temporal site—a class of people who are subjected to a structural form of violence emanating from systems guided by these graver forces. To battle this condition calls for a "politics of place" to produce a discourse of desire and possibility that builds on pluralistic subaltern practices (Escobar 2004). The unchecked pursuit of neoliberal competition has generated systems that are weak, non-inclusive, untransparent and prone to unpredictable threats (Barneveld et al 2020, Goldin & Mariathasan 2014). Affective orientations multiplied through new media technologies and discourses that make fear the starting point for collective and individual actions must be dealt with through a "phronetic ideal" that integrates with our fears a multidisciplinary wisdom (Condit 2020). The idea of the threat of contamination attached to the body of an 'other' (projective disgust) must be denounced as "anthropodenial" and broken by enabling a culture of dissent, empathy and individual liberty (Nussbaum 2013). In the impending encounter with novel contagions, the novel pursuit of these forms shows a way out of contagious cruelties to the rejuvenation of a humane response.

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