

Learning to Live Differently: The Pandemic and the ‘Delhites’

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Delhi is an ancient city. It has gone through many traumas, from invasions by the Turks and Mongols, establishment of colonial rule, post-colonial Partition, periodic epidemics and political turmoil to, finally, a pandemic. Some residents have lived here for generations, almost since the city was founded in its present form in the 17th century by the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan; some came only in the recent past. Like all other ortho-genetically evolved cities, it is a patchwork of old residential neighbourhoods, a citadel-like central structure showcasing it as the capital city of India, spacious and sprawling bungalows and newly emerging neighbourhoods, both shanties and luxurious gated apartments. The city has undergone speedy gentrification after the liberalization of the economy in 1992, when glittering malls and arcades, post-modern architectural structures of multinational companies and transnational hotels and restaurants have begun to dot the city and its skyline. These have been built, as Kuldova (2017: 39) points out, ‘on violent expulsions and, paradoxically, on the labour of those expelled’.

In March 2020, it was business as usual. Then, a message from the Prime Minister Mr Modi, delivered at 8 pm came as a bolt from the blue: the city (and most of India) was to be under lockdown from mid-night the same day (22 March). It sent people into a flurry; shops, raided for essential goods, groceries and household items, soon wore emptied-out looks. However, for many, the psychological impact was the most devastating. They could not comprehend what had happened. Most people were unaware of what a pandemic was; what was the danger? Almost everyone in India is familiar with seasonal epidemics, and as soon as the weather changes people start talking about which ‘season’ it is. It used to be malaria and cholera at one time; now it is dengue and maybe typhoid. But no one had any living memory of a pandemic of this COVID-19 proportions.

The most pitiful outcome of the lockdown began to be felt about 2-3 months later, when Delhites (as the people of Delhi are fond of calling themselves) woke up to find long lines of desperate people, some with children on their shoulders and arms, some with their women folk and many without, trudging along with weary treads, trying desperately to reach somewhere. Very few people, especially those from the middle and upper classes have ever realized the price at which all the glitter that they have become used to comes. They have been blissfully unaware of a huge underbelly of the city inhabited by migrant workers — people pushed out of the rural countryside, who come to the city to eke out a living. In Zizek’s (1993) terms they were holding the Real of the social reality at bay. The pandemic and consequent lockdown exposed the mass exploitation of labour in the informal sectors of the economy, where many were being paid even less than the minimum officially designated wages. The façade of glitter and spaciousness that one experiences when entering the city of Delhi, hides a vast majority living under miserable conditions of bare survival. Many are huddled inside one room tenements in congested neighbourhoods and slums. A large number of people have no access

to proper sanitation and drinking water, and have no way of maintaining the hygiene that is required for containing the epidemic. The sprawling slums of a city like Delhi are a direct outcome of the failure of the state to live up to the democratic ideals. It is a betrayal of the trust that people put into an elected government that often fails them (Pardo 2019).

There are regions of India, like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, that suffer from abject poverty, especially of the landless lower castes, who have traditionally been living on the edge. They put in inhuman amounts of labour yet get little more than a pittance from the landed upper and dominant castes who rule in these areas. During my fieldwork in Rajasthan in 2016, I came across one such community exploited and marginalised by the landowning dominant groups that deprived them of the one key resource, in this region, water. The community had no other means of survival than to move for seasonal labour to the nearby cities (Channa 2019). The lack of amenities in backward regions ensures that the big cities get their steady supply of cheap migrant labour.

The lockdown led to the closure of many businesses, shops, restaurants, hotels and practically all informal sector enterprises, like road-side vending, fruit and vegetable selling, and so on. It affected all service providers, like barbers, plumbers, carpenters and launderers. I had conversations with representatives from the community of dhobis (traditional launderers) who told me how they had lost all their work and were dependent on their small savings and what occasional work they could find. The daily wage workers coming in from the poorer regions of the country were the hardest hit. They were thrown out of work, as most of the employers, being small-time business people themselves, did not have the resources to keep paying them wages without earning any profits. Some, compassionately gave some money for a month or two, but then these small trickles also dried up. Domestic workers employed in the houses of more prosperous families were put on half wages or helped with groceries and loans by their employers, but this did not apply to those who ran a small self-run business or who worked for daily wages. The latter were left penniless and shelterless, as the landlords turned them out for not paying the rent; so, they found themselves out in the open at the time of the pandemic, when, because of lockdown, all people were being asked to stay at home. With no public transport and no means of travel with the shutting down of metro rails buses, taxis and trains, many of them had no option but to attempt to reach home on foot.

The media gloated over the tragic images of pregnant women, little children and tired families walking in the heat and dust with practically no food and water to sustain them. Jolted into action, the state suddenly woke up and so did the middle classes and the rich in their gated apartments and luxurious houses. Massive efforts were made to provide food and temporary shelters to these people. The government in Delhi converted all the state-run schools into shelters for the homeless migrants and also provided free food. Free groceries were given to the poor families. But most felt it was too little, too late. At this time, the city was almost emptied of those who had come to it with dreams in their eyes but who had had to leave with only disappointment.

The state was on the verge of losing its legitimacy, in spite of the Chief Minister of Delhi and the Prime Minister of the country addressing the people on prime-time television, giving them assurances and stating that they were being responsible and caring. But to the people harassed on the roads by overzealous policemen's bullying and beating who considered them 'offenders' for breaking the lockdown rules, the state appeared more authoritarian than authoritative (Prato 2019). Many people were even jailed for jumping curfews. The elderly, the sick, women in labour and people with chronic illnesses needing immediate hospital and medical care were often left with no help, many succumbing in the process.

But there were some positive aspects of the crisis. The massive movement of migrants, who were seen all over the city walking along the sidewalks and even in the middle of the road, the images of them dying by the roadside or on railway tracks, shook the conscience of many of the privileged classes, who had been blissfully unaware of the realities of their own city, who lived in a bubble, believing that everything was fine. This sudden exposure to the stark reality of extreme poverty stimulated the aforementioned empathetic actions, like providing food and other support to the poor, but also led to much self-reflexive meditations.

There was also a rediscovery of simple pleasures long left behind in the rush for office and the city traffic jams, in the long waits at the petrol stations and the crowded metro trains. People connected to friends and families using various forms of digital technology. Spare time was devoted to looking up grandma's cookbooks, and sharing pictures of new dishes and exchanging recipes become a favourite hobby for many women and even some men.

India is a country where people rely on domestic help to a very large degree. Suddenly housewives had to deal with all the housework as the help could not come or were not allowed to come in for fear of infection. The men, stranded at home with the offices closed, found that their wives were actually doing a lot of work that was invisible to them until they also had to do it. Even while families rebounded, domestic violence increased.

In the last month or so (I write this in July 2020), there has been a relaxation of lockdown, but life has not come back to normal. Far from it. Today, when I go out very occasionally and fearfully to the markets in the city, they appear deserted. Even though the lockdown is over, there are no customers in the shops, the roads are empty, there is an eerie feeling in the air. It feels like a nightmarish science fiction movie, where all life has disappeared. The city is now a shadow of its old self. In normal times, I hated the traffic and the noise, but now with the clean air and the empty streets, I sometime wish the noise and rush would come back. The city has lost its smells and its sounds. The poor who left the city have taken its life with them.

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