

Precarity at the time of Pandemic:
The case of slums in Indian cities

Mahalaya Chatterjee

The worldwide pandemic caused by the Covid 19 virus has exposed many loopholes in the socio-economic fabric. The pandemic is not only an issue of public health but it affected the economy through the stoppage of physical movement by imposing lockdown in the first stage and consequently through the following of Covid protocol and several Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) in the public places. The upper section of the society belonging to the mostly to different forms of service activities resorted to Work from Home (WFH) taking help of the ICT. But the lower section, especially that of urban dwellers depending mostly on casual works in the informal sector, did not have any option like that. Most of them became jobless with the lockdown and remained jobless. Added to that the dwellers of urban slums were declared most vulnerable during this pandemic. This is because of two reasons mainly. Firstly, their dwelling places were small and inadequate leading to impossibility of 'social distancing'. Secondly, washing of hands was also not possible because of inadequacy and infrequent availability of water. The experiences of slums in Europe and United States made the situation gloomier. However, in India, the slums were actually spared by the deadly virus. Though at the first wave, the largest slum in Asia, namely the Dharavi at Mumbai, had several cases but it could save itself just through better management. Similar was the cases of slums in other cities and towns. Corona ravaged middle class and upper middle-class household more. And one may say 'social capital' was used judiciously by the slum dwellers to save them from the wrath of the pandemic. However, they became economically weaker because of either non-availability of jobs or irregularity of payments. They were more affected by issues of livelihood rather than the deadly disease. This article will explore the precarity and vulnerability of slum dwellers in India during the Pandemic. The exploratory discourse will be supplemented by the data from a primary survey of five slums in Kolkata.