Lived Experiences of Pandemic by Waste-picking Migrants in Delhi: A Glimpse from an Informal Settlement

By

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Abstract

Migration has received renewed attention in the wake of the global pandemic COVID19. In his book "Borders of an Epidemic" Ranbir Samaddar highlighted the ethical and political implications of the epidemic in India – in particular reference to India's migration crisis due to corona outbreak. He argues that like all other wars, this crisis too has recreated "race" as a physical reality of life. Race originates from the obligation to defend a society in as much from the dynamics of conquest and subjugation. Once again corona crisis brought this reality out. In this play of power, the migrant stands on the borders of entity. In fact, COVID-19 has brought to fore the forgotten knowledge of bordering exercises of containment, isolation, mass scale nursing and treatment, rapid evacuation, zoning, erecting corridors, guarding, respecting the implications of age differences, guarding vulnerabilities and getting on top of the enemy. Bordering will also mean border managing in terms of jobs, spaces, economy and life. Pushing the migrant workers to the fence and robbing them of access to public distribution of food, public health provisions, and employment in public works to tide over the crisis of epidemic became willingly or unwillingly a part of disease control measure. Migrant is portrayed like a virus. The migrant's body is suspect. Like the virus, the migrant symbolizes as the enemy from outside. Therefore, this study is an attempt to unravel the episodic illustration of accumulated vulnerabilities which brought out by COVID-19 pandemic for internal migrants in particular.

In such situation, the phenomenological experience of migrants engaged in waste picking becomes crucial to understand. This waste picking community has vulnerability in manifold; social, cultural and economical. Though they play vital role in urban waste management, their contribution never be acknowledged. Therefore, this paper tries to understand their response to pandemic by unraveling the different aspects of their social, cultural and economic life. It is an

effort to underline the everyday anxieties and their ways to deal with the severity of pandemic. In order to meet the objective of the study one informal settlement of waste picking community in Delhi is purposively selected in Uttam Nagar. This study would be exploratory in nature. For the holistic understanding of the phenomenon qualitative approach would be adopted where ten in-depth interviews would be conducted along with the participant observation with the waste-pickers.

Key-words – Pandemic (COVID-19), migrants, waste-pickers, informal settlement

Introduction

COVID-19 Pandemic is still being impacted all over the country. The lives of India's internal migrant workers have been and continue to be severely affected. More than anything, these lockdowns have been the fiercest reminders yet, that our cities and development models are by default, exclusionary for migrant workers. However, the visibility of migration crisis during pandemic could be an opportunity for state response to deal with; the persistent Statistical exclusion of internal migrant workers seems quite visible as a carceral strategy of government. As migrant workers did not constitute as a vote bank either in their home or work state; it may be one of the reasons for state's negligence. This paper, therefore seeks to understand the episodic vulnerability of migrant workers during pandemic and more importantly the state response to it. The sudden visibility of internal migrants in India renews the hope – that it remains possible to come together to create a more united and just society, despite dark times we live in today. In contrast, social tension and discrimination are "dangerously on the rise". Therefore it is a high time which requires a persistent discourse on migrants, in the media, academia and civil society, which can play an important role towards improvement in their lives which demands visibility of the migrants, their issues, problems and concerns.

The response to Corona outbreak which India and other South Asian countries have made the pandemic unique. Hence, pandemic pose ultimate questions about life and death which also raises the question of peoples' relationship with authority and the politics of public action. The indignity heaped on poor people as evident in narration of standing in long queues, not getting food even after standing for long hours, getting infrequent and inadequate ration, and not getting it when they expected it, is the evidence of violence of fundamental rights of poor citizens in the

time of a national calamity. It was eventually recognized that hunger was not the fault of the hungry where they were victims of failing political and economic system over which they had no control. Consequently, the category of hunger becomes a critical locus for rethinking how statecraft emerge and work to redeem the hungry and vanquish hunger.

Migrant & City

The neo-liberal envisioning of cities and the accompanying hyper-commodification of land and new forms of social marginalization have increased precarity among migrant labour, severly impairing their ability to negotiate the city space and city as large. Though playing a critical role in the neo-liberal restructuring of urban space, the migrants have been targeted by state agencies and sections of civil society, who find it difficult to accommodate them within the physical, social, political and cultural space of the city (Samaddar, 2016). Migrant workers have been forced to converge on the outskirts of the city, to the hybrid areas where town and countries merge. Leela (2006) suggests that both state practices and exclusionary definitions of community and citizenship produce visions of urban development that exclude poor and working-class communities. Such questions of livability and development are fundamentally shaped by the emergence of a model of consumer-citizenship that seeks to displace the political claims of marginalized social groups to resources such as jobs and housing. The politics of forgetting is thus bound to remain a partial and contradictory process that interrupts the claims of the new Indian middle class to idealized visions of a globalising Indian nation.

Migrant Labourers as Waste-pickers

Who takes care of the waste of daily life in urban India, apart from the workers employed by the municipal sanitation department? Who are these people sorting through other people's waste? Waste Picking by migrant labours was not necessarily by choice. The labour of waste and other informal sector workers is critical for maintaining the quality of life desired by the well off in cities of the global south, but fails to get the recognition it deserves. Waste workers are poorly compensated, regularly stigmatized and frequently invisible in policy decisions.Gidwani emphasized that this is an enduring inequality that demands urgent correction (Gidwani, 2015). Another study which aims to show that scavengers in developing countries generate a positive externality to society; argues that their activity should be encouraged through economic

incentives that lead them to increase the amount of solid waste recovery upto economically efficient levels (Sanchez & Maldonado, 2006). The role of waste pivkers is incorporated in an integrated dynamic model of production, consumption, disposal and recycling of waste. Therefore, this study demands a policy aimed at recognizing the activity of waste-pickers in developing countries is part of the necessary set of instruments required for efficiency.

Informality and Exclusion

In waste economy, the lines between 'formal' and 'informal' are frequently "porous". A stronger post-colonial critique might even insist that informality and exclusion, driven by uneven forms of primitive accumulation, ought not to be viewed as a new phenomenon at all, but as a structural and periodically repeating process i.e. integral to the capitalist world economy. The casualization of work, enacted through law or by willful oversight of existing employment regulation is a recurring phenomenon that promotes more through going exploitation of labour by capital, particularly during periods of crisis. Gidwani indicated how the activities of waste workers pivot on their bodily "feel" for space. Space can be friendly, hostile or humiliating, impacting the body's capacity to use space for movement, rest and social reproduction. According to Gidwani, geography matters in hard ways within urban need economies. The space in urban economy is actively produced and relational rather than inert. Power is to command space involves negotiating space for these activities. For instance, waste picking is closely tied to place of dwelling. Walking imposes certain physical limitations on the catchment area that pickers are able to traverse. Urban commons also include the less obvious municipal garbage that provides livelihoods to waste pickers.

Gidwani valorized waste crisis because they create jobs; skills and livelihoods- and deploy imagination and ingenuity in so doing – far more effectively. In his view, the economic and political challenge is how they can be supported to create safer, less exploitativc and more stable forms of employment. Gidwani also draws attention towards how livelihoods in the urban need economy implicate a 'political history' of the senses. Thus what appears to be banal and dirty jobs-handling garbage, cleaning sewers, vending food, operating a small butcher shop and so forth require a sensory resilience i.e. extraordinary. Indeed, that which bourgeois senses condemn as 'filthy' or 'revolting' is very often the normal order of things for the city's

underclasses. India's informal waste economies draws attention to the heterogeneous forms and temporalities of society's detritus, and the jeopardy they pose to capitalist reproduction.

Pandemic and waste pickers

Accounts of hardship among waste-picking communities and sanitation workers have appeared intermittently in the print and social media since March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in India. These accounts brought to public consciousness the lack of personal protective equipment (mainly gloves and masks) among sanitation workers, and the risks they faced in relation to exposure to the virus, in the context of increased medical waste, including masks, that were being seen in public spaces and landfill areas. There were also accounts of loss of livelihoods because of the nation-wide lockdown for three weeks. During this time waste pickers were unable to go out and collect and recycle dry waste, and this severely impacted their ability to feed themselves. Emerging accounts highlighted the negative impact of measures taken to contain covid-19, while they also laid bare the troubling reality of waste picking communities, of lives lived on the margins of societies, with little to no recognition and protection (social, income, health and safety protection) despite the crucial work they do to keep cities and commons clean. For these communities, COVID-19 has intensified the uncertainty hardwired into their work, their living spaces and their everyday lives. Public health practices around masking, washing hands and physical distancing, while necessary to reduce the risk of contracting the virus, have little resonance with the living and working conditions of waste-picking communities; for these community members, protecting and taking care of themselves is extremely difficult. Drawing on policy discourse analysis, this paper ( ) suggests that while the COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways exceptional, the policy responses and their impacts in specific contexts are an acute manifestation of what is already built into the worlds and everyday lives of waste-picking communities. Puar articulates the concept of 'debility' as a 'durational death', a way in which bodies are allowed neither to live nor to die. By 'creating injury' and maintaining this population as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, this population can be controlled and used. It helps us to understand how waste workers are deliberately held in a socially and economically constrained position. Their marginalization is sedimented in both everyday social and national and local function as a clean state without the marginality of those charged with the work of cleaning. The state apparatus needs this precarity to continue its claims

to cleanliness and purity. We need an accommodative frame of policy to move towards a framing capable of transforming power relations and redressing the inequalities in the health and wellbeing of waste-picking communities (Garimella et.al., 2021).