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India

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The Effects of the Pandemic

COVID-19 at Home: Gender, Class, and the Domestic Economy in India

THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into relief the particular significance of “home” as a cultural construct. Ordered to live under “lockdown,” as in India, or advised to “stay at home,” as in the United States, those of us lucky enough to work from home have experienced a blurring of the social, spatial, and temporal divide between home and work created by capitalism. We know that this divide failed to take root in agrarian-artisanal contexts and, in urban-industrial settings, has been breached by the gig economy. Nevertheless, the separation of work and home organizes both everyday experience and life trajectories for large sections of the population in urban India. These include affluent professionals and middle-class, white-collar workers, small shopkeepers, self-employed service providers, and working-class wage-earners. For those migrants who can only find waged work in places far from home, the distance between the spheres of production and reproduction is all the more marked.

Feminists have long recognized that homes are structured by both capitalism and patriarchy. In Indian households, gender norms place the burden of domestic chores and care of children and the elderly squarely on the shoulders of women. As the conjugal ideal of the male breadwinner and full-time “housewife” has eroded and, in any case, become harder to achieve, most women perform the double duty of paid and unpaid work. While their monetized labor is recognized but seen as subsidiary to male

earnings, women's housework has remained invisible and undervalued even as it continues to be culturally celebrated as an expression of love and sacrifice.¹ In addition, the emotional work of making a household into a home is naturalized as peculiarly female. However, for the daily drudge-work of cleaning and washing dishes and clothes, those who can afford it hire domestic workers or "maids"; many also employ paid nannies and cooks, usually female. This home, then, with its gendered division of labor, is the space where women encounter structural, epistemic, and sometimes, physical violence; it is where children are socialized into reproducing the pattern of these practices and prejudices. Against this backdrop, we discuss how the lockdown has affected gendered practices within and between different kinds of homes.

The Indian government announced on March 24, 2020, that a twenty-one-day total lockdown would start within four hours. This period was extended by another nineteen days to May 3, followed by a loosening of restrictions in phases three (May 4–17) and four (May 18–31). During the forty days of total lockdown, people were banned from stepping out of their homes, except to buy essential supplies. All places of work—private and public offices (with the exception of hospitals, banks, pharmacies, and grocery stores), shops and factories, schools and colleges, restaurants and theaters—were closed. Public transport was stopped and the movement of private vehicles discouraged. The government advised employers to pay full wages to all workers during the period of the lockdown.

THE BOURGEOIS HOME AND THE CRISIS OF DOMESTIC LABOR

For affluent and middle-class households, the panic induced by the pandemic was compounded by the prospect of managing housework without paid domestic workers. The conventional modern, middle-class household, with the husband-wife dyad at its center, is actually a *ménage*

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1. Ideals of gendered domesticity are ingrained in customary household practices. For instance, traditional Indian meals demand that women cook and serve while men and children eat, heaping hot, freshly made *rotis*, *dosai* or *paranths* onto their plates. Amita Baviskar, "Food and Agriculture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49–66. See also Utsa Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 123–25.

à trois. Essential to its smooth functioning is the presence of the domestic worker to whom most chores are consigned. In *Cultures of Servitude*, Ray and Qayum argue that it was domestic workers who allowed middle-class women to be “modern” women in India; they could work outside the home because much of the labor of social reproduction within the household could be transferred to working-class female wage-earners.² In the United States and Europe, materialist and socialist feminists have long challenged the gender division of labor in the home.³ However, in India, the prevalence of deep-seated caste and class inequalities as well as widespread poverty has created a large pool of working-class women to whom middle-class housework can be assigned. Thus, the question of gender inequality within the middle-class Indian household has been indefinitely deferred by class privilege, with paid workers helping to paper over potential conjugal conflict.

With the lockdown, perhaps for the first time in modern India, domestic workers were suddenly taken out of this equation. Deprived of house-cleaners, cooks, nannies, and nurses, middle-class women and men, most confined to work from home, were forced to confront a mountain of chores. How did they respond to this domestic crisis? Would it lead, as some commentators speculated, to a long overdue recognition of women’s invisible work and to a radical renegotiation of the gender division of labor? Early reports seemed to indicate a shift of some sort. Several men posted selfies on social media, proudly brandishing brooms and stirring saucepans, showing that they were doing their bit to help with housework. This suggested a willingness, even pride, in performing domestic chores. Yet the very act of photographing and circulating such images proclaimed that these activities were noteworthy, signaling unusual virtue and inviting admiration. By most accounts, middle-class women have taken up most of the slack created by the absence of domestic workers, stretching to fit in tasks while men “help out” by going to do the shopping, reaffirming the gendered divide between home and the world. The chances of figuring out a more equitable division of labor are slimmer in multi-generational households where daughters-in-law face

2. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

3. Ibid.; Barbara Ehrenreich, “Maid to Order: The Politics of Other Women’s Work” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2000, 59–70.

greater pressure to conform to traditional norms: while some women living in nuclear households reported that they cooked simpler meals, others said that they had to prepare the usual elaborate fare to which their elderly parents-in-law were accustomed. Even when both partners are working from home, it is the woman who is expected to leave her laptop and see to her in-laws' needs. For mothers with children confined at home, demanding attention, amusement, or assistance with online classes, lockdown has been especially onerous. While several women reported feeling resentful and exhausted, and some mentioned half-seriously that disagreements and tensions would drive them to divorce, most only wished fervently for the lifting of lockdown and the return of their domestic workers. Class inequality continues to be the easy way out of confronting the gender question. While women's domestic work has indeed become less invisible, the responsibility for seeing to its completion still lies with women.⁴

THE EXPULSION OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

In the meantime, what of the domestic workers themselves during the lockdown? Although the government had urged employers to pay workers during this period, only a tiny proportion of domestic workers received full wages. The majority were told by their employers that, since they hadn't worked, they wouldn't be paid or would be given only a part of their salary. Some employers justified withholding wages by saying that their own earnings had declined due to the lockdown and they had to tighten their belts.⁵ Others said that they had paid their workers in order to ensure that a "good worker" (one who is diligent, familiar with the household's way of doing things) would feel obliged to return. Whether they paid grudgingly or gladly, employers acted

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4. Interestingly, in some middle-class households, the experience of doing household chores for oneself has led women and men to realize how badly designed Indian brooms and mops are, requiring repeated bending at the waist and squatting on the ground. The demand for more ergonomic tools has increased, which may make work easier for paid employees in the long run. However, the rise in demand for household appliances such as washing machines (and vacuum cleaners and dishwashers among the affluent) may perhaps displace paid workers.
 5. See, for instance, Hemani Bhandari, "House Helps Left without Help amid Pandemic," *The Hindu*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/house-helps-left-without-help-amid-pandemic/article31586693.ece>.

as if they were doing workers a favor and expected them to be grateful. Domestic workers could not demand wages as a right; they had to beg and cajole. A woman who had worked for an affluent household for twenty years reported that when she indignantly said, "I'm not asking you for alms; I'm asking you for what's due to me," her employer sacked her, saying, "I don't like your attitude. You can't speak to me this way."⁶

The lockdown brought to the surface the deep-seated tensions inherent in this relationship of dominance and mutual dependence. When it eased up, dependence battled against suspicion. While middle-class women were desperate to hand over chores to workers again, several Resident Welfare Associations (neighborhood organizations of property owners, or RWAs), fearful about the spread of infection, continued to maintain a strict quarantine. This set off furious debates within gated communities. While women residents were keen to have domestic workers resume their duties, the male-dominated RWA executive bodies held out for postponing their entry as long as possible. When workers were finally let in, they were subjected to new forms of segregation in some gated communities, such as being prohibited from using elevators and forced to use stairs. Remarkably, domestic workers were characterized as the carriers of contagion, a threat to middle-class homes, even though throughout this period, the virus was being transmitted almost entirely by well-to-do Indians who had traveled abroad.⁷

For domestic workers, the announcement of lockdown on March 24 and the sudden suspension of employment was a shock. Many of them could not collect the back pay that they were owed for the month of March. Most experienced an immediate crisis in making ends meet. Working-class women's paid work in middle-class households stabilized the income of their own households; women's salaries were often more

6. In-person interview with Amita Baviskar, May 2020.

7. Tapping into the fear that domestic workers bring disease into the middle-class home, a well-known brand of home appliances advertised its bread-making machine by asking, "Are you allowing your maid to knead *atta* dough by hand? Her hands may be infected." Its ad urging people not to "compromise on health and purity" was withdrawn after protests on social media. See "Kent Ro Withdraws Ad Depicting Domestic Helps as COVID-19 Carriers, Issues Apology," *Business Today*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/corporate/kent-ro-ad-backlash-domestic-helps-as-covid-19-carriers-atta-break-maker-hema-malini/story/405221.html>.

reliable than the irregular jobs that men found on construction sites, pedaling rickshaws, or in small trades and street vending. With women *and* men out of work, even feeding the family soon became a challenge with daily provisions and cooking fuel out of reach, while the cost of rent, school fees, electricity, medical bills, and other everyday essentials became impossible to bear.⁸ In working-class settlements, densely packed shanty towns where residents share water sources and toilets and where physical distancing is impossible, fear of getting infected fused with fear of starvation. Within the first weeks of the lockdown, almost all *bastis* (working-class neighborhoods) emptied out as those who were renting places to live decided to head “home” to the villages they came from.

MIGRANTS ON THE MOVE

This, then, was the crux of the appalling tragedy that unfolded: millions of migrant workers, thrown out of jobs, their savings fast dwindling, trying to get to a place of safety, but hamstrung by the shutting down of buses and trains and by the closure of state borders. Hundreds of thousands of desperate people decided to walk home: trudging thousands of kilometers in killing heat, pulling along and carrying their children, their possessions bundled on their heads and under their arms, their mouths parched and their bellies empty, aching bodies and blistered feet — the biggest exodus that India has seen since the Partition of the country in 1947. More than three hundred died along the way, killed in road and train accidents, collapsing from dehydration, hunger and exhaustion, heart attacks and, quite likely, the virus.

And what was this “home” to which they were returning? To understand this, one must know something about rural India. A little more than 47 percent, or almost half, of all Indians still depend on agriculture. Yet, 101.4 million rural Indian households, or 56 percent, have no agricultural land. Of those who do, 85 percent own small and marginal farms, each with less than five acres of land.⁹ Water, nutrients, and

8. See, for instance, Meva Bharti, “Helping the Helpers,” *The Hindu*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/helping-the-helpers/article31835749.ece>.

9. Sumit Chaturvedi, “Land Reforms Fail, 5% of India’s Farmers Control 32% Land,” *IndiaSpend*, May 4, 2016, <https://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story>

credit are the other resources in short supply. A precarious agrarian economy and the absence of basic amenities in rural areas force more and more Indians to move to cities and towns (and to areas of capital-intensive agriculture), traveling vast distances across states, in search of remunerative work.¹⁰ Almost all work in the “informal economy,” a term that encompasses the diverse occupations and work arrangements under which 93 percent of India’s workforce labors. What binds them together is their vulnerability: the absence of job security, decent wages, healthcare, and other occupational safeguards as well as the denial of state welfare. These workers walk a precarious tightrope, balancing low-paid jobs and trades in the city with seasonal agricultural work in the countryside.¹¹

The lockdown caused this tightrope to suddenly slacken so that migrant workers tumbled into a free fall. No safety net of state support, such as unemployment benefits, protected them in their urban workplaces. Their modest savings were soon consumed and, with no prospect of employment in the days ahead, they stared starvation in the face. Under these circumstances, the village that they left beckoned as a refuge, a place where their families and wider social networks could provide a modicum of sustenance. Despite a law that protects migrant workers’ rights — and notwithstanding the decade-long institution of a universal portable social security number called Aadhaar — state entitlements, meager as they are, remain tied for the most part to rural residence.¹² Of these, subsidized food grains are the most important, but some rural districts also have “employment guarantee programs” that

/land-reforms-fail-5-of-indias-farmers-control-32-land-31897. All figures are from “All India Report on Agriculture Census 2010–2011,” Agriculture Census Division, Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government Of India, New Delhi, 2015.

10. Vinay Gidwani and K. Sivaramakrishnan, “Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37, no. 1–2 (2003): 339–67.
11. The Indian economy marches to the beat of the monsoons: when urban construction work stops during the rainy season, workers return to their villages to help with the labor-intensive tasks of ploughing, sowing, and weeding.
12. Satvik Varma, “Why India’s Legal and Labour System Needs to be Reconfigured to Really Help Migrant Workers,” *The Wire*, May 19, 2020, <https://thewire.in/labour/india-labour-legal-system-migrant-workers>.

provide minimum wages. Most pressingly, returning to the village meant avoiding the monetary drain of paying rent and purchasing food and other essentials in the city when earnings had stopped.

Migrant workers keenly felt the irony of having to ask their rural family members for money to return home. Until now, *they* had been the providers of cash; their remittances funded the rebuilding of a house, the deepening of a well, the wedding of a daughter. During the festive season of Divali in October, male migrants visited their villages laden with gifts: a new saree for a mother, a mobile phone for a brother, toys for children. They brought city savoir faire with them and were looked up to as well-traveled sophisticates. Now, there was the ignominy of returning empty-handed and defeated.¹³ As a grim-faced man, standing in a serpentine line to get a polythene packet of food from a charity organization remarked, “*roti hi nahin, izzat chali gayi*” (“we have lost not just bread but our honor”).¹⁴

For the workers who keep one foot in the city and the other in the countryside, there is perhaps no real home. Treated as interlopers in the cities where they work, they are reminded at every turn that they are there on sufferance, their *bastis* under the ever-present threat of demolition, their regional identities used to disparage and discriminate against them.¹⁵ Even after living in the city for decades, their claim to urban citizenship — the right to vote, entitlements to subsidized food provisions, education, and healthcare — remains tenuous. On the other hand, the agrarian economy has no room for them, and the traditional anchors of family, caste, and village are not enough to keep bodies and souls

13. There was also the stigma of being potential carriers of the virus. In several villages, those who returned from the city were isolated and treated as outcasts for weeks. However, this harsh quarantine failed to contain the infection. Thanks to the mass migration, almost all districts across India have seen a surge in COVID-19 cases. Once largely confined to big cities, the disease has spread into rural areas where healthcare is abysmal.

14. In-person interview with Amita Baviskar, May 2020.

15. Amita Baviskar, *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi* (Delhi: Sage Publications and Yoda Press, 2020). Migrant workers from Bihar, Bengal, and the hill states of Northeast India experience discrimination of different kinds in most Indian cities. See, for example, Duncan McDuie-Ra, “Beyond the ‘Exclusionary City’: North-east Migrants in Neo-liberal Delhi,” *Urban Studies* 50, no. 8 (2012): 1625–40.

together.¹⁶ Out of place in the city, out of work in the country, many migrant laborers live with displacement as a permanent condition.

NATION, CASTE, AND CONTAGION

Despite the widely reported, vivid evidence of hardship and suffering among laid-off workers, better-off sections of society have neither sought to help them nor pressured the state to provide aid. Several NGOs, charitable organizations, and individuals stepped in with cooked food and provisions, but their capacity falls far short of the scale of support required.¹⁷ Even emergency aid is inadequate, let alone the more durable resources needed to keep households going. At a time when the rhetoric of a united India has been raised to fever pitch by the Hindu nationalist government and its supporters, this callousness toward fellow citizens appears all the more appalling.

Yet, the term callousness does not capture the essence of this phenomenon. Concern for the fates of less fortunate others is against the rules of this starkly divided social landscape, where elite privilege is predicated upon continued exploitation. The Indian middle class bases its very existence on the labor of the working class, while invisibilizing and distancing from them. Domestic workers in urban India, for example, perform chores within the intimate confines of small apartments where there can be no spatial distance. Yet, through a variety of practices that discipline the worker's body—where she can sit, whether she can use the bathroom or enter the kitchen—and delimit what she can do—not drink or eat from the same dishes, not speak to her employer as an equal—the middle class routinely marks out and maintains social distance. To the middle class, the working class is both essential to the

16. Faced with the prospect of dying, migrants returning to the village could at least console themselves that they would be cremated or buried by their kin in the ritually prescribed manner. This was by no means a trivial consideration. See Dipankar Gupta, "The Urban Migrant and the 'Ritual' Tug of Home," *The Hindu*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-urban-migrant-and-the-ritual-tug-of-home/article32279861.ece>.

17. State governments relied heavily on these organizations to manage the migrant crisis: in Jharkhand, community-based NGOs set up a centralized control room, to which all calls for help were directed; they helped bring workers home by coordinating with other NGOs and district officials en route.

smooth running of their households *and* a source of risk that must be managed. What explains this dualism?

Indian caste ideology is central to this contradiction. Ingrained into the habitus of every upper-caste Indian—and this includes not only Hindus but Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and followers of other religions—is the notion of pollution. Within the caste system, pollution is closely tied to bodily substances—hair, saliva, excreta, menstrual blood—and the dead body. Those who deal with polluting substances are, by association, deemed to be polluted and therefore dangerous, since they can pollute others.¹⁸ Thus, the very people who earn a living from cleaning upper-caste homes, from washing the bodies of upper-class children and the elderly, workers who remove the “dirty” products of upper-caste bodies, are themselves rendered “dirty” and polluting.¹⁹ Their labor is needed, yet their dangerous bodies must be distanced from upper-caste ones. They are “abject,” their proximity provokes revulsion and rejection.²⁰ The argument made by Judith Butler, Anne McClintock, and others in the context of race and gender applies to the caste-class dynamic of exploitation and exclusion operating in India: domestic workers’ bodies form the constitutive other against which the upper-caste middle class understands itself.²¹ Social distancing is second nature to them.²²

18. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1966, repr. 2002).

19. This holds true regardless of the worker’s actual caste, though in the case of domestic work, there is usually a strong correlation between class and caste. Most domestic workers belong to the Scheduled Castes (former untouchables), Scheduled Tribes (roughly translated as Indigenous people), and Other Backward Classes. The only major exception from this rule is cooking, where a high-caste worker is preferred. See, for example, Shoumojit Banerjee, “IMD Scientist Files Cheating Case against Cook for ‘Posing’ as Brahmin,” *The Hindu*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/imd-scientist-files-case-against-cook-for-posing-as-brahmin/article19644659.ece>.

20. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

21. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

22. Charu Gupta, K. Satyanarayana, and S. Shankar, “The History of Caste Has Lessons on the Dangers of Social Distancing,” May 1, 2020, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/caste/social-distancing-dangers-india>.

This cultural imaginary of workers as productive labor within polluting bodies, as a danger yet still a necessity that must therefore be managed, is complicated by India's large population. For the middle class, there are just too many poor people; their presence is a drag on the path of economic progress. Eliding the entire question of the enduring economic and social inequalities that make their lives possible, the middle class blames the poor for their poverty and for the nation's failure to become an economic superpower.²³ In the middle-class imaginary, the death or disappearance of a few million from this vast reserve of surplus labor would not be mourned, for they have already been deemed lesser beings. This is why people can watch without horror the news video of a toddler playing peek-a-boo with his mother's saree as she lies unattended on a railway platform, not knowing that his mother's dead, and that she died on the long trek home. Perceived as a dehumanized multitude, these bodies are of little value and, if the virus claims them, there are plenty more where they came from.

The lockdown and the pandemic are what Veena Das calls "critical events" — cataclysmic moments in collective life that lay bare its everyday structures.²⁴ They have brought to the surface the steely indifference of the state and elites to the fate of subaltern classes, an indifference that, in "normal" times, lay concealed behind the brisk transactions between employers and workers. By shattering this public secret, COVID-19 may precipitate a crisis of legitimation, as desperate workers rise in anger and dismay. If that change in the world is to occur, it is likely to begin at home. Or rather, it is likely to begin with the *idea* of home, a place of security and comfort, a hope that has been denied to countless Indians.

23. The top 10 percent of the Indian population holds 77 percent of total national wealth. Inequality in income and wealth has been increasing rapidly since the 1990s, when policies of economic liberalization were adopted. See Himanshu, *India Inequality Report 2018: Widening Gaps* (New Delhi: Oxfam India, 2018).

24. Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).