Covid in an Uneven World: Are We All in This Together

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In the early uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, many national governments adopted three epidemiological Public Service Announcements (PSAs)—social distancing, sheltering-at-home, and handwashing. These seemingly simple directions, however, have highlighted what Ambedkar (1916) referred to as 'graded hierarchies', which are inherent in the uneven social and economic terrain that we inhabit under global capitalism. We have been forced to contend even more starkly than before with several vital questions. These include which lives matter more than others, who can access healthcare, which bodies are exposed to greater risks and fatality, who can shelter safely and who cannot, and who can access clean water, sanitation, food, livable income and other resources to survive the pandemic. Employing a feminist political economy perspective we argue that the pandemic shed its harsh light on the devaluation, underpayment and nonpayment of essential work and workers who produce and reproduce for individuals, households and society. Caregivers, teachers, parents, garbage collectors, healthcare workers, meat packers, farm workers, the incarcerated and many others, continue to fall under the shadows of capitalism's constant quest for risky labor extraction from the working classes. This market fundamentalist framework continues to atomize and separate individuals into "each person for themselves" while also generating a racialized market eugenics within a pandemic. Without accounting for structural inequities of race, class, gender, caste or sexuality, the PSAs attempted to 'flatten lives' much more than 'flatten-the-curve.'

The epidemiological PSAs assume that they would adequately protect all populations. Following Bakker and Silvey (2008), we comment on the multiple inequalities that make social reproduction particularly difficult for some in the current pandemic. Despite vast differences in historical conditions and contemporary contexts, working class Black and Brown communities in the U.S., and lower-caste Dalit households in India appear to operate under immiserated conditions. As Naidu and Ossome (2017) suggest, this indicates the conditions of both differentiation and homogenization of reproduction under capitalist exploitation. As feminists of color based in the U.S., we offer examples from India and the U.S. not to paper over different historical trajectories, sociopolitical contexts, and locations in the global power hierarchy. Rather we see an urgent need for a framework that connects the processes and apparatuses that produce and intensify structural inequities as well as the need for decentering capitalism and profits while centering life and equity. This, we believe, is the basis of a transnational feminist solidarity agenda.

The PSAs

The biomedical response to the pandemic, emerging from an industry imbricated within global capitalism, was to proclaim three PSAs: social distancing, shelter-at-home, and wash-your-hands. The political, economic, and social response was that 'we are all in this together' – the assumption being that the pandemic affects everyone equally.

Social distancing, however, has been ignored in incarceration facilities. This has led to a spike in covid infections and deaths in jails, both of inmates and staff, one of the most infamous examples being Rikers Island in New York (Hutzler 2021). U.S. policies on "crime" have resulted in 2.2 million people in federal and state prisons and locally run jails, with Black people disproportionately represented at 40% of the incarcerated population in 2010 (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). Mass incarceration serves to discipline a racialized, gendered and classed labor force (LeBaron and Roberts 2010).

In India, the most marginalized sections of Indian society, Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis, constitute 39% of the Indian population and account for 55% of the imprisoned population (NCRB 2015). About 68% of those imprisoned are undertrials. Moreover, carcerality has increasingly also been employed to combat the "resistance to neoliberalism" (Sudbury 2005 cited in LeBaron and Roberts 2010) and suppress dissent against an authoritarian Hindu majoritarian Indian state intent on privatizing all public and common resources. The frequency of arrests of public intellectuals, civil rights activists and students under anti-terror and other draconian laws, even during the pandemic, should be viewed as a continuation of policies that have criminalized resistance to land dispossession, and destruction of livelihoods and nature since economic liberalization in the 1990s. And more recently, this includes criminalizing opposition to othering Muslims.

The PSA, shelter-at-home, assumes that one has a home, a home that has separate rooms, and is structurally sound and safe. Considered to be one of the harshest and most disorganized responses to the pandemic, 1.4 billion Indians experienced the largest global lockdown starting on March 24, 2020. The national lockdown generated a massive crisis of survival and reproduction for an estimated 120 million inter-state and intra-state rural migrants living in precarity even before the pandemic (Palaith 2020). The laboring classes, both migrants and non-migrants, many of them Dalit and Adivasis, have faced humiliating and potentially life-threatening encounters with the police for not 'sheltering-at-home' in cities over which they didn't have a claim to a 'home'.

Shelter-at-home is also impossible for the homeless in the U.S. who are disproportionately Black individuals. Homeless individuals must contend with not having access to toilets, places to shower, access to hygiene and hand washing and places to sleep as shelters have had to deal with the challenges of the pandemic (Project Home 2018). Further, as incomes decline or stagnate, many families simultaneously face evictions, homelessness and rising housing costs. One in four Americans pay 50% of their income towards their rent. Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, approximately 300,000 evictions were filed in the U.S each month. As the number of new unemployment claims grow with workplaces closures due to the pandemic, newer eviction and foreclosures catalyze the next housing crisis (Durana and Desmond 2020).

Lack of affordable housing and social infrastructure affect the two countries differently. Nevertheless, they produce similar outcomes – inability to follow the PSA. In India, cities are often segregated by caste (Sidhwani 2015) with lower caste Dalit residential areas often lacking access to piped clean drinking water, in-house toilets and other basic infrastructure. Moreover, this PSA needs to be contextualized in the caste-based notions of purity-pollution. Despite legislation banning employment in manual scavenging work (e.g., cleaning city sewers and septic tanks), government data shows that in 2019 over 54,000 Dalits (possibly an underestimate) were forced to engage in this obnoxious and hazardous work (Sen 2019) due to social compulsions and lack of economic options. This group of people are now called upon as 'essential workers' to keep Indian cities clean during COVID-19 but work under hazardous work conditions for low pay without basic protective equipment, and with the additional risk of contracting the virus.

Flattening the Curve

Our use of the PSAs as a heuristic device demonstrates how COVID-19 has unmasked existing fissures in societies and further consolidated social, economic and political hierarchies. While the pandemic touches everyone, it disproportionately affects those who continue to be systematically placed in circumstances of greater risk and exposure, and thus subjected to harmful outcomes.

Increased privatization of social reproduction has squarely imposed the burden of providing labor for everyday survival and care of individuals and society on the same racialized and gendered bodies that typically belong to the working classes. This is reflected not only in the work of the domestic population, but also the precarious working conditions of immigrants in the US who are employed in low-wage jobs. Many of them work in food production sectors and are therefore deemed 'essential workers,' risking their lives to support society and the economy. Yet they face the existential threats of being detained in crowded for-profit detention centers, deported back to conditions of extreme violence and economic immiseration or contracting the virus at their work place or detention centers.

The contemporary labor market, whether in the U.S. or India, is comprised of a high percentage of low-waged, 'low-

skilled', and sometimes high-risk jobs that have not provided a decent life and livelihood options for the working people. During the pandemic, India's lockdown has been among the strictest in the world, whereas attempts to arrest the spread of the virus have been relaxed in the U.S. Yet, both states have employed authoritarian tactics to pander to the demands of capitalists without mitigating varying degrees of worsening conditions for the working classes. In fact, several Indian states suspended protective labor laws to boost industrial production impacted by the pandemic (Rathi and Chatterjee 2020).

Markets and states were unable and unwilling to secure conditions of life under the pandemic, whether in the form of protective equipment, basic needs (food, shelter, employment), or adequate access to healthcare and other forms of care before or during the pandemic. The burden has instead been imposed on already exhausted unpaid household labor (Moore 2015). These, as feminists have argued, reinforce the gendered burden of reproduction, or make life dangerous for some due to their commitment to racialized heteronormativity. In other words, capitalist exploitation is co-constitutive of gendered, race-based, and caste-based oppressions. This existential crisis, the crisis of social reproduction, both before the pandemic, and particularly during it, however, has produced a moment which is rife with positive transformational possibilities.

Intentional and chosen communities (some more explicitly political than others) and collectivities have stepped in with an emphasis on mutual reciprocity and the primacy of life and dignity before and during the pandemic. These values reject economic self-interest in favor of relationships that emphasize our interdependence. In these communities we see instances where individual isolation, despair and shame are transformed into collective action and solidarity. For instance, community members raise funds and pressure prison officials to get Black women out of prison on Mother's Day so that they can visit loved ones; water protectors and advocates in Dharavi, Standing Rock, Flint and Detroit come together to fight for safe affordable water; LGBTQI activists and advocates from the global south and north develop a transnational mutual aid infrastructure; activists manage to get detainees out of ICE custody or incarcerated persons out of prisons to protect from the spread of the virus; community kitchens in Indian cities and along highways offer nutritious food to migrants who have lost their jobs; marginalized women farmers in the global south and north grow and cook nutritious food to provide for families who have lost their daily income; women in Ohio challenge anti-choice legislation enacted during the COVID-19 crisis; farmworkers, teachers, healthcare, sanitation and delivery workers demand safe working conditions and thousands of workers Strike for Black Lives; communities members show up in Minneapolis and cities around the U.S. to demand justice for the loss of Black lives. When epidemiological PSAs have failed to account for structural inequities that impede life-making, communities have stepped in non-biomedical ways of flattening the curve. Through collective action, they are sustaining well-being by increasing social, political, economic inclusion, community sovereignty and health. These methods of flattening the curve extends life, places gratitude and solidarity at the center for those who systematically suffer.

Moreover, in the U.S. we are beginning to witness labor organizing in some of the harshest and most inhospitable conditions. Amazon and Starbucks workers, among others, are unionizing despite the high possibility of job loss and heavily funded campaigns against them (Brooks 2022). Even in India, where dissent has been explicitly and implicitly declared seditious, activists and regular people continue to register their opposition through legal challenges, strikes, and the pen. Prof. Saibaba, a civil rights activist, who has been incarcerated for alleged sedition and held in the infamous Nagpur Central Prison in western India has received little accommodations despite being paraplegic and is disallowed to write in his own language. Even under this inhumane treatment he has published two books, one of which was released in May 2022 titled *Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?* (Sen 2022). Father Stan Swamy, another civil rights activist, was held under a draconian sedition law but not formally charged. He succumbed to COVID related complications on July 5th, 2021. He was 83 years old and suffering from Parkinson's disease, yet prison authorities often denied him a straw or a sippy cup. It was the inmates of the prison who lovingly fed him and held his water cup for him. Writing about the plight of undertrials and the 16 others accused of sedition with him, he ended his last letter from prison with hope – "But we will still sing in chorus. A caged bird can still sing" (Scroll 2021).

These repertories of resistance challenge injustice, resurrect democracy, and emphasize the indivisibility of rights that are simultaneously social, political and economic.

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