

Lockdown Destitution: Delhi, March 2020

MARCH 29, 2020: NEW DELHI, INDIA

In a maximal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government declared a national lockdown on March 24, 2020. As the lockdown unfolded over the next week, Rima (name changed), a distraught Delhi University student, called her teacher. She wanted assistance in organizing food rations in her neighborhood in Rani Bagh, a lower-class colony in east Delhi. Her reasonably comfortable family had helped some people, but the numbers continued to increase. As word traveled of Rima's efforts to help her neighbors, migrant laborers and daily waged workers in the neighborhood dropped their phone numbers on chits of paper through her window. These mobile phone numbers were silent inscriptions of their existence, and of their hunger—a veritable SOS call from a sinking ship! Soon there were about 150 number-chits floating around. Each number represented a family—potentially five to seven famished mouths with no recourse to food or succor. Even though the state government of Delhi had started soup kitchens in municipal schools and night shelters, Rima was concerned about overcrowding, mindful of the medical directive of “social distancing” to flatten the curve of the virus. But social distance was a privilege that the poor could little afford. Moreover, among those desperately thronging her house were pregnant women, people with disabled children or old parents, and people who were unlikely to be successful in the crowded melee around the food charities.

These were working-class families that form the underbelly of the great cosmopolitan city of Delhi. They ferried noodle carts and dumpling stalls, worked as delivery boys, or were employed as maids and cooks in neighboring middle-class apartment blocks. Many of these were, ironically, in the business of food; those who had a daily relationship with food were now most distanced from it. For these working-class people who valued their labor, charity was dehumanizing. Hunger—in all its rawness—propelled the great migration out of the city. With no work and little hope, the village they had all left behind beckoned to them. “The village has the

farms, the fields that will give us food.” This has been the overwhelming refrain from the scores of migrant workers who are walking back home. As one said, home is where you go back to—where there is food. It has taken a pandemic to dent the victorious narrative of capitalism and its talk of progress, development, and plenty.

There is no way of evading the fact that the lockdown imposed by the central government—though necessary—was almost totally unplanned. There was no meeting of the cabinet, even union ministers were not taken on board, nor was there any consultation with state chief ministers who were left to fend for their states as they could. Whereas the government repatriated the corona-afflicted elites, the undiseased poor were denied trains and bus services to their homes. There was a four-hour window between the primetime announcement of the lockdown, at 8 p.m., and when it went into effect, at midnight. The result was panic buying and panic travel, all a result of panic governance.

The government did announce that essential services and supply chains would remain open. However, no clear direction was given with regard to market linkages and supply chains of food provisioning. The result was thousands of stranded supply trucks loaded with goods stuck on highways, their produce rotting. Almost fifty percent of the trucks were abandoned by their drivers and cleaners who joined the journey back to the village. Even where some commodities did reach their destinations, there were no workers to unload them. Indeed, in various wholesale markets where shops were ordered to stay open for eight hours, the traders closed their shutters in two and went home. Food aggregators like Grofers, Bigbasket, and AmazonNow that supply metropolitan middle classes were running at about 10 percent capacity due to the departure of informal labor. And those delivery persons who did venture out were brutally beaten by the police, in blanket adherence to the order.

Stories in the press and through that great communication channel of our age—Whatsapp—have progressively taken on hues of the apocalyptic. There is increasing fatalism among

India's poor laboring class, who wonder whether the disease or hunger would get them first. Part of the invisible underclass running the cities, their exodus has made them perhaps more visible than at any other time. However, even though COVID-19 hitched a ride via the affluent, the poor are quickly labeled as potential carriers of disease. As a darkly humorous WhatsApp line has it: the "ration cards" are paying for the mistakes made by the "passports." Beaten back from the borders of cities, given a chemical wash before allowed entry into their small towns, the lucky ones who reach their villages have become a source of anxiety there. But, as one of them put it, if one has to die, one should die at home.

Back in Rani Bagh, contribution arranged, a local grocer roped in, Rima decided to distribute dry rations for a week. The contribution per family would come to Rs. 890, which the grocer subsidized to Rs. 690, less than ten dollars. Rima's efforts meant succor for a week; the lockdown was to continue for another two. No one was sure how long the grocers' stores, or middle-class charity, would last. The future threatened to be diseased and hungry. Little wonder that the central government ordered a re-telecast of the 1980s devotional blockbusters *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata* on national television, possibly hoping the gods would help people forget what it could not manage or mitigate. 🍷