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Learning to Listen

Building an Empathetic State

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The Indian state's lack of empathy for the weakest could be seen so clearly in the hardships it imposed on the poor during the Covid-19 lockdown. This can be fixed only by listening to people's voices and paying heed to what they say.

India's governance systems that engage with the poor were never perfect to begin with. The coronavirus crisis has only brought the stark reality of these faultlines into public gaze. These faultlines were always known, but were never fixed, and are causing hardships in people's lives during the lockdown.

This inaction has much to do with a lack of empathy. Only a system that is empathetic to hearing voices of hardship will make an effort to change itself and fix problems. Empathy is crucial for states to design policies and systems that work for the poor, and for members of society to understand one another. Building an empathetic state and society requires a communication infrastructure that supports feedback processes and ensures fair representation of diverse viewpoints.

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The crisis during the lockdown has created such an infrastructure in a temporary and rudimentary form, which must now be strengthened and institutionalised. The following discussion relies on reports of hundreds of users of the [Mobile Vaani platform](#), a voice-based participatory media service running in several districts in rural areas and urban industrial locations.

Technologies as if people mattered

Empathy has always been rare in the Indian state's engagement with the poor.

Let us start with technology-assisted welfare delivery. Any technology needs to be designed appropriately keeping the least powerful stakeholder in mind: the poor (Duquenoy 1999). This has however been lacking in how India chose to deploy its giant Aadhaar infrastructure as a means to plug leakages in the Public Distribution System (PDS).

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Technologies like Aadhaar were designed to make it easier for the state to enumerate people and control access to welfare provisions. This has led to disempowerment of the people: at the hands of a technology they do not understand, at the hands of officials who do not care to listen to them, and at the hands of dishonest ration shop dealers.

Had Aadhaar been designed to be sensitive to the context of the poor and their rights, it would have taken a different form. For instance, it would not have dismissed unfair denial of benefits as a minor statistical error, or followed a hands-off approach on how Aadhaar-linked data is used, stored, or shared (Agarwal 2017). It would have called out for stronger data and privacy laws. It would not have assumed that biometrics and the internet would work for everybody. It would have conducted rigorous pilots in diverse conditions before advocating mass adoption.

Similarly, labour laws that forbid collective bargaining, and allow hire and fire at will, but [do not strengthen worker rights and entitlements](#), will only [disempower the workers further](#). Rather, systems that help document workers easily will go a long way in providing them with social security, means of grievance redressal, and will empower them to demand their rights.

A crisis of empathy

The lack of worker documentation meant that employers could shirk their responsibilities easily during the lockdown. Of the workers surveyed by us two weeks into the lockdown, 60% reported having been [laid off by their employers](#), and, of those, 57% reported not having [received their due wages](#).

Our surveys among industrial workers showed that only 50% of the workers are actually registered under the Employee Provident Fund scheme, while the law mandates full coverage (Gram Vaani 2020b). [Jan Sahas reported an even lower compliance figure](#) among eligible workers for registration for benefits under the Building and Other Construction Workers Act of 1996.

|| [Had the systems for enforcing labour laws been designed from the standpoint of workers \[... they\] would have been able to hold employers and governments accountable.](#)

As a result, many state governments were clueless about how to identify workers for relief measures such as cash transfers. Not all workers had the smartphones required to access apps for this purpose. Not everybody had the right documentation or bank accounts in [their own name](#), all of which [led to many rejections](#).

The resulting lack of cash led to [harassment at the hands of landlords](#), and inability to [procure medicines](#) and [other essentials](#), hurting the dignity of these hardworking people. Our platforms have been [flooded with cries for help from industrial workers in Gurgaon, Tirupur, Bangalore, Mumbai](#), and towns in [Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan](#), who had not received any assistance from the state governments and were hungry.

Had the systems for enforcing labour laws been designed from the standpoint of workers, they would all have been registered under various social security welfare boards or under the Employee State Insurance Corporation. Workers would not have had to chase their employers for their dues. They would have been able to hold employers and governments accountable for prompt redressal of their grievances.

|| [\[The\] state and capital do not see workers as people, but as mere resources in service of the economy.](#)

Empathy is therefore at the heart of designing services and technologies appropriately. But is anybody listening to the poor and the weak, and designing for them?

Even during the extreme time of this crisis, empathy has been lacking in the state's response. The problems faced by stranded migrant workers with many [walking back home hundreds of kilometres](#) has not gone [unseen by anybody](#) (Gram Vaani 2020b). Governments have largely ignored the desire of workers to go back home. Rather than organise a well-coordinated transport system, the central government has instead been [commissioning a skills tracing exercise](#) to match workers with work. This shows how the state and capital do not see workers as people, but as mere resources in service of the economy.

Similarly, despite evidence that the retail banking infrastructure was hobbled by the lockdown, [only a few governments](#) organised door-to-door delivery of cash. [Hardly any information](#) was provided about the process to access cash transfers, whether through the Jan Dhan Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, or other top-up schemes of state governments. [Deactivated bank accounts](#) due to incorrect Aadhaar seeding further meant that many people missed out on income supplements like [PM-KISAN](#).

|| [\[Rumours\] started doing the rounds that the government would take back the transferred cash if it was not withdrawn quickly, leading to overcrowding at the banks.](#)

Our surveys done two weeks into the lockdown reported only 40% of the people in Bihar received any kind of cash transfers for relief. Statistics for Jharkhand were lower, at 19%, and Madhya Pradesh at 34%. Many women reported not having a Jan Dhan account or [not knowing whether they had one](#). To make it worse, [rumours started doing the rounds](#) that the government would take back the transferred cash if it was not withdrawn quickly. This led to [overcrowding at the banks](#). Repeated trips were required when the internet at banks [would not work](#).

Even though ample evidence emerged of people running out of food and of not being able to access rations, very few states actually allowed [universalisation of PDS](#), or included [dal, oil](#), and [other essentials](#) in the rations. In our surveys, only 6% of the respondents had availed access to PDS in Bihar, 27% in Jharkhand, and 23% in Madhya Pradesh (Gram Vaani 2020a). [Unanswered applications](#) for new

ration cards and the lack of systematic surveys to [renew ration card lists](#) came out prominently in conversations. Further, ration shop dealers have continued to [misguide people](#) and [evade the beneficiaries](#).

|| A lack of empathy is reflective of a lack of respect for human rights. Policies and services designed without empathy will violate human rights.

In rural and urban areas alike, the other constituency that has been badly hit are street vendors and small shop owners, who have proudly run their own businesses. But in this crisis they have been invisible to the state for welfare measures. They include [tailors](#), [carpenters](#), [wall painters](#), [chaatwalas](#), [kabadiwalas](#), [vegetable vendors](#), [auto drivers](#), and [stationery shopkeepers](#).

An infrastructure to build empathy

A lack of empathy is reflective of a lack of respect for human rights. Policies and services designed without empathy will violate human rights, as we have seen with [unfair denial of welfare benefits](#), the lack of data privacy in the case of Aadhaar-based services, the [inadequate relief measures to deal with the lockdown](#), or the [treatment of stranded migrant workers](#) in cities.

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Why is empathy missing in the approach of the state and capital? The answer has probably to do with ideology, biases, and intentions.

Much has been written about the intentions of the state and of capital. The state wants to control its citizens and make them liable for taxation, and uses technology towards that goal (Scott 1998). Very rarely have states seen citizens as partners who can be trusted or as people it has to work for, and therefore sees little need for empathy.

Capital's empathy is limited only to the extent that it helps discover people's needs and identify goods and services to sell to them. It does not however judge which needs ought to be universally provisioned or provisioned at affordable costs. Regulatory mechanisms to provide a moral compass to capital are routinely flouted through corruption and even legally (Stiglitz 2012).

This lack of empathy to learn and fix systems is at the heart of hardships caused to many people during the lockdown. How can we ensure that empathy becomes a foundational value in the functioning of the state?

|| Empathy can only work by responding to feedback [...] It is not that feedback systems are altogether absent [... But are] these feedback processes merely tokenistic or are they being acted upon?

Empathy can only work by responding to feedback. Into the future, a critical need therefore, is to strengthen feedback systems for the state. The precise mechanisms through which this feedback is sought can be worked out: whether it should be through formally established commissions or ad hoc consultations; accessed directly or via representatives; whether these representatives should be from civil society or be experts or politicians; or whether the feedback should be through Randomised Controlled Tests or qualitative reports.

It is not that feedback systems are altogether absent. Parliamentary democracy is intended to serve exactly this purpose. What needs reflection is why many such pathways today stand broken. Are these feedback processes merely tokenistic or are they being acted upon?

With more empathy, it may even be possible to rein in capital and align everybody's priorities to build a more just and equal economic system: a system that does not ignore public health and education and does not pander to the irresponsible interests of the elite.

|| The Aarogya Setu app is a good example of how distrust can undermine positive outcomes.

If India pursues a strategy of less transparency, greater silencing of feedback, and of concerted attempts to craft public opinion through manipulation of the media, it will in all certainty lose the ability to listen, and in turn, the capacity to learn and to respond. This will undoubtedly lead to an economic and social collapse because no system can sustain itself without course-correcting based on authentic feedback.

Empathy is also significantly lacking in our society. We are unfortunately a divided society. [Misrepresented data or misinformation easily fuels communalisation](#). Reports about the [stigmatisation of returned migrant workers](#), of [recovered Covid-19 patients](#), of [health workers](#), or of [people not following social distancing, without understanding their context](#), have been common. With the fear of infection, many people chose to give up on their friends, their neighbours, or their caregivers.

The Aarogya Setu app is a good example of how distrust can undermine positive outcomes. The app is [loved by healthy individuals](#) because they feel [it will protect them](#) from Covid-19. But Aarogya Setu will work as intended only if those with symptoms [self-report correctly](#). If people scare returning migrants, or those who work in jobs where social distancing is not easy to follow, or [violently attack health workers](#), the lack of mutual trust will reduce people's confidence to report symptoms correctly. The app will not be useful for anyone.

|| The internet and social media [...] have served to weaken the social contract that needs people to be empathetic.

Bridging such societal division needs communication across dividing lines so that people understand one another. The internet and social media were believed to be such systems. However, content recommendation algorithms [reinforce biases](#), create filter bubbles, and [prioritise sensational news](#). Online business models [divert revenue](#) from responsible content producers to irresponsible content distributors. These have served to weaken the social contract that needs people to be empathetic.

Platforms for communication should encourage healthy deliberation towards shared understanding and mutual respect. They must build a culture of constructive debate and be representative of diversity. Such platforms need careful moderation and curation, since entirely open platforms like Facebook and Twitter are known to devolve to uncivil conversations, disengagement, silencing, and hardening of echo chambers (Seth 2020).

Building brick by brick

The fault-lines and lack of empathy exposed by the crisis must be fixed. Several fragile and temporary infrastructures have been put up during the crisis. They can serve as a basis to create strong systems for the long term. Some of them are listed here.

The emergent bottom-up collaboration between civil society and government on health and health care systems must be formalised. (Chakraborty 2017). Civil society can indeed be the eyes and ears to inform the state about new problems and potential solutions.

Helplines for ration related complaints have been set up in most blocks. These must not be turned off after the lockdown. Systems should be built to update PDS lists and run social audits of distribution. These helplines must function in a decentralised manner and learn to respond to emergent issues that might come up in the future. Centralised helplines have been extremely [busy and unreachable](#).

Some states have set up temporary ration cards or [SMS token based systems for PDS universalisation](#). Other states have done away with Aadhaar-based biometric authentication. These steps should be adopted widely. Simple smartcard-based authentications, or even social trust by somebody who can endorse on behalf of others, should be used. Any denial due to authentication failures, or claims of stockouts by ration dealers, should carry an audio-visual testimony of both the ration shop dealer and the beneficiary. These recordings should be accessible for social auditing purposes. Such systems will empower the people to demand more responsiveness from the state.

|| We would not only be naïve but also be denying the rights of others if we do not institutionalise the necessary components to build an empathetic society.

Door to door delivery of ration should be institutionalised for households who find it hard to visit the ration shops. Such steps would demonstrate an empathetic response by the state. Similarly, the door to door distribution of cash, which was initiated in a few places, should be institutionalised, especially for the elderly and the physically disabled.

Apps and helplines have been set up for cash transfers to street vendors, daily wage workers, agricultural labourers, construction workers, and industrial workers. These worker-initiated systems should be systemised so that all workers can be registered under the relevant welfare boards and social security schemes. Inter-state integration of these schemes should ensure that benefits like health insurance operate seamlessly across the country. Mass awareness programmes should be undertaken for workers to understand their rights and the ways to raise grievances. The design of such a worker-centric system will not only be more empowering for the workers, it will also serve as a learning platform to understand worker issues and to respond to them.

The requirements for an infrastructure for empathy go much beyond just these examples. Today’s highly connected world provides an unprecedented opportunity to build empathy-facilitating systems. We would not only be naïve but also be denying the rights of others if we do not institutionalise the necessary components to build an empathetic society.

A longer version of this article can be read [here](#).

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