

September 30, 2020

## A Moment for Civilizational Introspection

By: Harsh Mander

*The devastating effects of the pandemic upon the working poor should be a recognition of the collapse of our moral centre as a nation and as a people. The elite have exiled the poor from their conscience and consciousness.*

Defence Colony is one of Delhi's affluent leafy neighbourhoods, centrally located, with wide roads, parks, and many popular restaurants. Early into the lockdown, tragedy hit one of its sprawling apartments. A couple in their 80s and their son, all tested positive for Covid-19. The elderly man tragically died in hospital, his wife was discharged, and his son fought for his life for a long time on a ventilator. Fortunately he survived.

Through all of this, a person from the family thought it fit to call the local police [to complain](#) about their security guard. Perhaps they wanted to blame someone for the tragedy that had engulfed their family. Their security guard was Muslim. That was reason enough for them to surmise that he secretly participated in the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Nizamuddin. They were certain that it was he who had brought the deadly infection into their home. The vigilant Delhi Police acted promptly, registering crimes under Sections 188, 269 and 270 of the Indian Penal Code against the guard, charging him with a "negligent malignant act likely to spread infection of disease dangerous to life." They also issued an advisory to the residents of Defence Colony to be careful of their domestic helpers who might bring the infection into their homes.

The matter was widely reported in the press, and there was popular rage among readers and television viewers about the criminal irresponsibility of the security guard. The guard was reported by the police initially to be missing. The police, however, quickly found him and sent him to be tested for Covid-19. He turned out to be negative.

It was later revealed that the grandson of the Defence Colony household studied abroad and [had returned before the lockdown](#) by an international flight. It was probable that it was not the guard who had irresponsibly endangered the family in their Defence Colony apartment. It was the family which endangered the guard, by asking him [to run errands](#) for them in violation of the strict lockdown of the early weeks.

No one thought it fit to charge the family for violating curfew rules just because a middle-class family in India finds it difficult to manage their lives without domestic help.

The police never satisfactorily explained why they filed a criminal case against the hapless guard. No one thought it fit to apologize to him. No one thought it fit to charge the family for violating curfew rules just because a middle-class family in India finds it difficult to manage their lives without domestic help. No one thought it fit to charge them with endangering the life of the security guard.

The story did not end there. Some weeks later, the same family employed an 18 year-old domestic helper. They organized to get her tested for Covid-19. Three days later, the report came in. She had tested positive. It was 10 at night. The family [turned her out into the streets](#) at that hour. She was distraught and began to wail in the dark and empty streets, not knowing where she should go and, how, at this hour in the curfew of the lockdown. Some other residents came out of their homes to enquire when they heard her crying. The security guards also gathered around her. Among them was a doctor, who gave her a PPE kit. Someone called for an ambulance, others called up her male relative. One ambulance arrived but refused to carry a person who was Covid-positive. Three hours later, a second ambulance finally took the frightened woman to hospital.

### An X-ray of our society

The writer Arundhati Roy, [in a conversation](#) with Karwan-e-Mohabbat, has said that the coronavirus is not just a virus, but also an X-ray, an X-ray which has exposed what we have done to our societies, to our planet: "this desolation that we call civilization, this greed that we call happiness, this horrifying injustice that we call 'business as usual'."

The bulk of India's rich and middle classes are among the most uncaring in the world, mired still in the cruelties of caste and class.

The traumatic months of lockdown have indeed laid bare our broken society, the near-complete estrangement of people of privilege from the working poor in India. They have revealed a people with a stunning comfort with inequality, and ruling classes bereft of elementary empathy and solidarity. They have confirmed that the veneer of modernity and the progressive, egalitarian values of the Constitution remain, in the prophetic words of Babasaheb Ambedkar, no deeper than a coat of paint.

In my book *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India*, I examined why and how the bulk of India's rich and middle classes are among the most uncaring in the world, mired still in the cruelties of caste and class, with a singular capacity to look at injustice and suffering and simply turn away. I wrote of the exile of the poor from our conscience and our consciousness.

The lockdown has shown precisely how absolute and brutal this exile is.

This should be a moment of civilizational introspection, a recognition of the collapse of our moral centre as a nation and as a people. In coming months and years, as so many crises converge in a confluence, as hunger spreads into the innards of an enfeebled economy like a cancer, jobs crumble, children are pulled out of school, women endure violence, loneliness grows into another silent pandemic, and the long-term impact of the criminal neglect of public health programmes begins to show in needless suffering and deaths, will we at last learn lessons of solidarity, equality and justice?

|| The arrogance and casual cruelty of imposing a sudden devastating total lockdown [...] is a crime against the people of India.

There is no better time to recall the talisman Mahatma Gandhi left for us. In a letter he typed just months before he was killed, he counselled that when in doubt and confusion, think of the most vulnerable person you know, and ask if the measures will improve her life and freedom.

The measures the state has opted for during the pandemic may arguably protect you and me, but they have wrought havoc on this 'last person' who Gandhiji had asked us to remember before we took any step. If policymakers had held to their hearts the talisman which the father of our nation left for us, they could never have opted for a lockdown that destroyed in one fell blow her livelihood, her already tenuous support structures, her dignity, her trust and her hope. The effects of this violence will cast a blight over her world for many years.

Light years away from the vision of Mahatma Gandhi, the arrogance and casual cruelty of imposing a sudden devastating total lockdown—which spurred mass hunger, bombed out the livelihoods of millions of the poor, perversely worsened greatly the rise and reach of the pandemic, and was not used even to build a scientific and effective public health response—is a crime against the people of India. It is, and must be recognized to be, a crime against humanity.

### **A new untouchability**

For young people growing up in middle-class homes, the poor are visible at every turn, but only in their instrumentality as labour who exist to service our every need. They never know them as classmates, as colleagues or competitors at work, or as friends in a playground or cinema theatre. They see the poor as problems, as their slums deface 'our' beautiful city; or when governments buy their support with 'freebies'.

|| When the Covid-19 infection hit us, the working poor were seen as dangerous in new ways.

They see the poor as vaguely dangerous, underclassmen potentially as rapists; ignoring the fact that 90% of all rapes are by persons known to the survivor. They fail to recognize that the working poor inhabit shanties only because the state does not invest in social housing, and that the middle-classes enjoy three times more subsidies than the poor, and the super-rich are given astronomically higher subsidies.

When the Covid-19 infection hit us, the working poor were seen as dangerous in new ways, this time as potential carriers and spreaders of the infection. Suddenly we wanted them at bay. We ignored science which would have demonstrated that it was not the poor who endangered us, but we who endangered the poor when they came into contact with us. After all, it was the bodies of people who could afford international flight tickets who brought the virus into India, often in Club Class!

My colleagues involved in food relief in several cities in the country reported that many households refused to pay domestic workers during the lockdown. Gated colonies placed multiple restrictions on them even after the lockdown was partially lifted, and immediately blamed them if anyone in the employers' households was infected. In one instance, a public notice was issued by a Gurgaon Residents Welfare Association [to not allow](#) domestic helpers to touch lift buttons ('her hands may be infected').

The restrictions of a health emergency sat too comfortably on age-old prejudices and apartheid of class and caste. Members of a domestic workers' union in Jaipur told me that they said that they had fought for 10 years against humiliating practices of what they called 'untouchability' in the homes they worked in, such as separate vessels and restrictions of their using the same toilets. The pandemic had reversed all of these gains, and the untouchability the workers now had to endure was even worse than a decade earlier.

### **The bored few and the wearied many**

We welcomed the strategy of a nationwide lockdown—the most draconian and the largest in the world, with the smallest relief package. We felt safe inside our homes. Often deprived of domestic help, we were inconvenienced, but mostly adjusted willingly for our own safety. We also adjusted to working from home, secure that our salaries and savings and health insurance would see us through. We celebrated the cleaner air and birdsong. We grappled with boredom and occasional depression, but it was a time also to rebuild our bonds with our families.

|| The lockdown by design had nothing to offer the working poor except to destroy overnight the lives they had built for themselves.

Through all of this we were indifferent to the reality outside our safe homes, that the lockdown fell like a meteor on the lives of millions of the working poor. They had fully functional lives before the lockdown, mostly without state support. After possibly some years—if any at all—in poorly resourced schools, they travelled far to escape the dead-end poverty and caste oppression of the countryside. The cities were uniformly unwelcoming to them. The state made no arrangements for even the most basic affordable housing, or to protect their rights as workers. Instead it was consistently hostile to them, rendering illegal and demolishing their slum shanties or roadside vending stalls. Still millions of them survived and struggled on, working to build, clean, and sustain the cities, and improve the lives of their families not because of, but in spite of, an unjust and uncaring state. And not because of, but in spite of, employers who never paid them their due.

The lockdown by design had nothing to offer the working poor except to destroy overnight the lives they had built for themselves. The safety of physical distancing and hand-washing was impossible for them in their crowded shanties or out on the rough streets. With their livelihoods carpet-bombed by cruel state policies, they were suddenly forced to endure the very hunger from which they escaped when they had moved to the city. When they sought to return to the solace of their homes in their villages and to the company of people they could call their own, the state unleashed its police force to stop them, thrash them, and douse them in harmful disinfectants. Or the state left them to trek on blazing highways, wearing them to near-death.

It is sobering that most of the men and women trudging or cycling home in dangerous journeys, dying on railway tracks or of hunger and exhaustion on trains without food and water, were between 15 and 30 years old. But for the accident of their birth, they could instead have been in high school or university, studying online, or working from the safety of their homes, fighting tedium with an overdose of Netflix.

Despite this, we in the middle-classes readily demonstrated our support for the lockdown, cheerily banging utensils or lighting candles, as instructed.

### **Of special provisions and bureaucratic mazes**

The brazen class bias of state policies did not trouble us at all. Government servants and most employees in the formal private sector were relatively assured of their income during the lockdown. The poor had to make do with slim financial handouts, that only for some. The Rs 500 a month paid into the accounts of those with Jan Dhan accounts was less than two days' statutory minimum wages. They got a non-enforced and non-enforceable 'appeal' from the prime minister to their employers to pay them wages, and charity meals—often just gruel—for which they had to queue up for hours like beggars each day.

What was not practical for resourced and networked air-travellers was made mandatory for pauperised workers without social capital.

All of this seemed in the fitness of things to us: the poor have survived worse conditions than this, after all, they are used to this, so this wasn't too bad. It seemed also in the fitness of things that while we could quarantine in the comfort of our homes or in hired hotel rooms, the poor who attempted to get to safer places of refuge than their rented hovels in the cities were forced into crowded dormitories in which physical distancing was an impossibility, with clogged bathrooms, inedible food, and disrespectful staff .

Governments and business did not help them both because they did not care, and because they did not want them to move. They did not see these workers as human beings of equal humanity. If they had, there would have been special buses and flights for them, too, as there were for Indian professionals or tourists stranded overseas, and for the middle-class students in hostels in Kota and elsewhere.

In fact, as we have seen, when the government did belatedly start a limited number of trains for migrants, for the lottery of getting a seat on these trains, the workers had to negotiate a complicated maze of bureaucratic requirements—apply online, get a health certificate, a no-objection certificate and then go into quarantine at the other end. But when the union government decided to restore domestic flights, the minister in charge announced that people would not be required to furnish health certificates before they travel, or be quarantined in their destinations, because this was not 'practical'. What was not practical for resourced and networked air-travellers was made mandatory for pauperised workers without social capital.

More than a war, the pandemic is a struggle in which solidarity alone [...] will enable us to overcome.

As the legal philosopher Upendra Baxi has [noted](#), the foundational postulate of the Declaration of Philadelphia in 1919 that marked the birth of the International Labour Organization was that 'labour is not a commodity' and that 'all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have a right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity'. We failed, even these 100 years later, to see workers in anything of the fullness of their agency and humanness.

We still saw them only instrumentally as a factor of production—labour which should be obediently available on call whenever big businesses were able to restart their enterprises.

### The circles of kindness

Since the early days of the pandemic, a metaphor we heard very often was of war. Health professionals, governments and people the world over were fighting a war, indeed a world war, against a virus which threatens to destroy tens of thousands of lives, and, as some believe, even the world as we know it.

Every war has weapons. Some weapons were obvious in waging this war— science; health personnel, equipment and infrastructure; public investments; state capacities; and the quality of political leadership. But what would be most decisive if we were to emerge victorious was a weapon rarely remembered, understood or nurtured: our solidarity. More than a war, the pandemic is a struggle in which solidarity alone—between classes and gender, between nations, and between people and the planet—will enable us to overcome. We can only overcome together.

Solidarity is many things. It is my capacity to feel your pain as my own. It is my incapacity to look away when you suffer. It is kindness. It is collective struggle. It is the moral resolve that we must take care of each other.

There were indeed many extraordinary displays of solidarity in our country amidst the trauma of the pandemic and lockdown, most of all by public health professionals at all levels. Often badly let down by a state which has not invested nearly enough in their protection, nor in testing kits, equipment and infrastructure; they still battled at the frontlines of this war. Unmindful of their own safety, cut off from or risking the lives of their loved ones, they fought to save our lives.

Each time I was on the streets helping distribute food to the homeless and destitute, I was edified by the numbers of ordinary people reaching out to the hungry.

And then there were what I call ‘circles of kindness.’ Each time I was on the streets helping distribute food to the homeless and destitute, I was edified by the numbers of ordinary people reaching out to the hungry with food and care. The police mostly did not stop them, even if they had no formal permission. I even heard reports of police persons themselves organizing food kitchens for the hungry at some police stations.

In Nizamuddin, I asked a homeless man how he was surviving. He said he had just a little money saved up when the lockdown was imposed, which he was spending on food. But not just for his own family. He also fed three other families which slept on the pavement beside him. He was not related to them in any way. But how could he eat, he asked me, and watch their children sleep hungry? In a lane in Old Delhi, I spotted a cycle-rickshaw cart piled with packets of roti and sabzi. The owner of a modest tent-house, I was told, would get 500 meals cooked every morning and distribute these to people rendered destitute by the lockdown. In Ghazipur, during the long march of migrants on the highway out of Delhi, I found many people driving up in their cars packed with drinking water pouches and food, which they handed out to grateful migrants abandoned by the state.

There were many young people in cities and towns who were defying their families by setting out each morning to distribute food to the hungry. Some slept in separate rooms from the rest of their families; others moved out of their homes to their offices, to save their families from infection. My young colleagues in the Karwan-e-Mohabbat project resolved to drive out to distribute cooked food and dry rations from the second day of the lockdown to the homeless who they knew would be worst hit. We organized masks and gloves, but the risk of infection always remained.

“I’m frightened of Corona,” one young volunteer told me. “But their suffering is greater than my fear. That is why I had to step out.”

### **The decimation of solidarity**

And yet, this period has also witnessed the most profound decimation of our solidarities.

|| Solidarity demanded that we in the middle-class should have instead been outraged that the poor were cruelly stranded overnight without work and wages, unlike us.

In a survey undertaken during the lockdown by my colleagues in the Centre for Equity Studies, 97% of the workers we interviewed testified to not receiving their wages during the lockdown. The overwhelming majority of the salaried middle-class did. Solidarity demanded that we in the middle-class should have instead been outraged that the poor were cruelly stranded overnight without work and wages, unlike us. We should have demanded from the state that every worker in the informal sector be paid for the entire duration of the lockdown, no different from us, at least the statutory minimum wage, and that the state should ensure this if employers failed to pay. But we did not.

In fact, we saw the very opposite of solidarity. People who supported the lockdown and coercive measures to enforce it—including banning of interstate travel—demanded and were allowed exemptions. Not only did governments give exemptions, they arranged special flights for the affluent who were stuck — not stranded — abroad or at pilgrim sites, and for students forced to confine themselves to their comfortable rented flats and hostel rooms. Was it too much to hope for one radical, redeeming and transformative act of solidarity? What if even a small number of these expatriate professionals, pilgrims, and students had refused the special treatment unless the migrant workers desperate to reach their homes were provided the same assistance and relief?

And then in our fear of the virus, it was as though we then needed to find some scapegoat for our fears and hate. The first were people from North East India, whom we savaged with our apartheid, only because their narrower eyes reminded us racist ‘mainlanders’ of China, where the virus originated. Many North Eastern Indians were taunted, shunned, and not allowed into stores and neighbourhoods. Then the scapegoat became any outsider. We received reports from around the country where not just gated colonies, but poor neighbourhoods and villages too, blockaded themselves, with no stranger allowed in, even if hungry and desperate to reach their home. Even migrants who managed to dodge the police, walked for days or hid in airless containers on trucks or cement mixers, and were willing to quarantine in their homes, were not allowed entry.

And then the Muslim became the biggest scapegoat.. Social media was fevered with hate, accusing Muslims of waging a ‘corona jihad’, labelling them ‘corona bombs’. Social and economic boycotts of Muslims continue to this day.

### **Building back better**

In these dark, depleting times, Upendra Baxi still suggests the possibility of hope. He [writes](#):

If the spread of a global pandemic was an act of misfortune, its catastrophization has to be located in the injustices of social structure and policy. On the other side, the spectacular emergence of new communities of belonging (social groups trying to meet the many needs of migrants on the move), which counter the politics of creating communities of danger, hopefully will become a post-Covid-19 future, ending forever the production of social indifference.

|| Can we use the moment of this crisis, the gravest that we have faced in many decades, to rebuild our broken country into one which is more compassionate, more just and more equal?

Arundhati Roy too [writes](#) luminously of the pandemic as:

a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

India has lived too long with inequalities which should be intolerable. Can we resolve to fight to *build back better*? Can we use the moment of this crisis, the gravest that we have faced in many decades, to rebuild our broken country into one which is more compassionate, more just and more equal?

The pandemic demands the best from us. The only chance we have of overcoming it one day is by cementing our solidarity. By holding each other in circles of kindness, across all our differences of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, age and national boundaries. By never turning our faces away, by standing with each other, and with our planet, by caring about and caring for each other.