**How caste is disproportionately affecting the Dalits of South Asia in COVID-19 pandemics**

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**INDIA:**

India is now the fourth worst hit country in terms of number of Coronavirus infections after the US, Brazil and Russia[[1]](#footnote-1). India government’s lockdown decision to check the spread the virus in India was one of the strongest shutdowns in the world and yet India is witnessing the fastest rise of coronavirus cases in the world. The Covid-19 pandemic has strained healthcare systems, shuttered economies, and exposed our interconnected vulnerabilities. The Indian economy is attacked at all the fronts much before the arrival of the global pandemic. The joint impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the callous forced complete lockdown has put Indian economy into a recession which is of a new kind. It is a kind of medically induced coma and do requires an extraordinary stimulus package by helping the poor, the marginalized, the lower middle and eventually the middle-class household demand and resulting shocks to supply. The economic impacts in India are likely to be steep with sub 3% annual GDP (gross domestic product) growth entirely feasible. All this comes on the resoles of a broader slowdown in growth in India, which has seen the GDP growth rate fall consecutively for the last three years.

The government both at the centre and as well in the state has been avoiding transparency on this issue and even tried to spread engineered and disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in India. NITI Aayog the policy think tank for Indian government presented a questionable mathematical model which claimed that there would be no new coronavirus cases in India from 16th May 2020, but since then, there has been a steady rise of Covid-19 cases in the country. In fact, some expert epidemiologist testified, that government rarely considered their inputs on coronavirus and the measures that would actually help, one of them being aggressive testing and tracing. The lockdown was so underprepared, that the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi extended it thrice and yet failed to do one thing that could have save the day for India – testing. Ideally the lockdown should have been used to scale up the testing facilities and ramp up the medical infrastructures, however, the Prime Minister only chose to address the nation for some morale boosting by either asking Indians to clap for frontline workers or light candles to wish away the darkness. India do not need a morale boost at this time, what it really needs is safety baskets reliefs and proactive policy prescriptions for its vulnerable poor, marginalized and socially discriminated citizens. The prime minister made pointless rhetoric statements like India needs to treat coronavirus as a war and it must defeat it by 21 days. Instead of these false promises the people needed a reality check.

The long, ill thought-out lockdown has pushed the country headlong in the deep of the economic conundrum that it faces. And the worst hit, both by the disease and the lack of money, are the poor. The world became witness to the laborer’s crisis that unfolded in India. People died due to bad lockdown implementation and it cannot be written off as inevitable collateral damage during the pandemic. No country has seen death of poor due to starvation or lack of resources in the fight against Covid-19 at this scale, except India[[2]](#footnote-2).

The social security for the poor is almost non-existence in India and with Covid -19 is much more profound and hitting on all the pressure points. The poor are blamed for the migrating back to their villages because of no work in the cities due to the unbaked lockdown. The monstrosity of victim shaming during these times was truly diabolical. Estimates from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) show that over 12.2. crore people lost their jobs in India in April 2020, most being labourers and small traders. And if the popular thought is that only poor are affected, then it should be reiterated that 18 million business persons are also estimated to have gone out of business. In fact, women are economically one of the worst hit in this pandemic with many who worked in the informal sector now jobless. Moreover, 23.3 % men and 26.3 % women employees have lost their jobs, especially in semi-urban areas with factories. It is feared that the lockdown will be extended in India for the coming months, considering the velocity of Covid-19 pandemic is gaining in India[[3]](#footnote-3).

Dalits are facing extreme exclusion and discrimination during the times of Covid-19 pandemic. Since India went into lockdown to stop the spread of coronavirus on March 25, 57 families who live in Polamma's hilltop village in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, have been barred from going down the hill, even to purchase essentials such as food and medicine. The families are part of the Yanadi community, who work mainly as waste pickers and drain cleaners and who -- even before the coronavirus -- were segregated because of their caste. "We've been locked up here, like prisoners -- we live near a milk factory, and there is not a drop of milk for my children to drink. We are called dirty, and they say we spread the disease," said Polamma, who only goes by one name. Millions of people, about 25% of India's population of 1.3 billion people, are grouped under the scheduled castes (Dalits) and scheduled tribes (Adivasis) in India's constitution. Adivasis are indigenous Indians who have been socially and economically marginalized for centuries. Both groups have long endured social isolation, but it's feared the rapid spread of the coronavirus and measures to stop it have worsened their segregation. Jobs that Dalits and Adivasis have been forced to take for centuries -- cleaners, manual scavengers and waste pickers -- expose them to a greater risk of catching the virus. During the pandemic, their jobs are considered essential services by the Indian government, but many say they haven't been given adequate equipment to protect themselves against Covid-19. And if they get sick, there's no social safety net to ensure they don't fall even deeper into poverty. Poverty makes lower castes more vulnerable during emergencies like extreme weather events. Dalit activists fear the coronavirus will again reinforce inequality in India. "India has 600,000 villages and almost every village a small pocket on the outskirts is meant for Dalits," said Paul Divakar, a Dalit activist from the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. "This settlement is far from health care centers, banks, schools and other essential services. During times like Covid-19, the aid may not even reach this small pocket." He said repeated advice on social distancing threatened to encourage the kind of behavior seen in the northern city of Bareilly when migrant workers were doused with bleach disinfectant. "Covid-19 is legitimizing these actions all in the name of hygiene and social distancing," said Divakar[[4]](#footnote-4).

The work Dalits do exposes them to another risk: discrimination. Sanoj Kumar left his job at a brick kiln in Tamil Nadu to return to his village near Bodh Gaya in Bihar before the lockdown was imposed. He said he faced ostracism as soon as he stepped off the train. Lower caste Indians are not only more exposed to the coronavirus and face more stigmatization, but they're also being left out of government subsidies. Dalits most of the time on cannot claim the government-based benefits and monetary benefits because they don’t the unique identification, biometric cards, ration cards, formal bank accounts etc. The unique national identification number is required to access many government schemes including getting subsidies and direct cash transfers, and health insurance under the Prime Minister's health project, as well as to open a bank account. "It has been seen that most Dalits and Adivasis, find it difficult to get these government ID cards ... or ration cards. Either the information doesn't reach them, or the enrolment camps to get biometric IDs are never set up in their villages and mostly they are asked to pay huge bribes to get these IDs made," said Alladi Devakumar, executive secretary of Dalit Bahujan Resource Centre[[5]](#footnote-5).

Dalits are also facing a lot hate, prejudice and biases during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are cases of open display of online hate posts against Dalits, some of the upper caste and privilege people are openly saying that the Covid-19 should attack the Dalits and Adivasis first because they are usually avail the government representation scheme of reservations in government higher education and job systems[[6]](#footnote-6). Dalits are usually ostracised in the public health system of India. India’s obsession with caste rules even in the time of coronavirus. Whether the psychology of pandemics will be understood during public health cannot be guaranteed, but its sociology of caste needs to be taken into consideration. Coronavirus may have no religion and race, but it certainly will have caste in Indian context. Aarefa Johari—drawing on coronavirus and the idea of social distancing—explores “several public healthcare professionals acknowledge that there is an unmistakable class and caste bias to India’s response to the coronavirus threat, particularly with respect to social distancing. Economically and socially disadvantaged groups, whether urban or rural, have never been in a position to practice social isolation or distancing, even before the Covid-19 outbreak.” Johari elaborates this through her brief discussion with a safai karamchari, domestic worker and doctor’s projection of the idea of ‘social distancing’. In the context of India, idea of ‘social distancing’ generates through caste understanding by which people’s social-interaction is restricted, in the same manner their occupation is also allocated[[7]](#footnote-7). Urban Middle-Class Mentality of Seeing Lower Caste Lifestyle as ‘Unhygienic’. It is largely observed that the urban middle class, who can afford air-travel abroad and within the country, have primarily been the carriers of the coronavirus. However, their participation in distributing class-specific, self-righteous awareness messages in social media often reflects a mob mentality in condemning and othering the lower castes perceived to be living in ‘unhygienic’ conditions in the slums. Instead of questioning the caste-bias of the ‘social-distancing’ method and acknowledging the practical difficulties in following this when one lives in a slum, or reflecting on why Indian patients are fleeing from the public hospitals, social media appears to be a tone-deaf platform[[8]](#footnote-8).

The government must take all the necessary precautionary measures to control the effect and impact of the coronavirus, making sure people’s health will be taken care. But along with it, one must also have to think how health facilities are going to deal differently with different people, what are the measures taken for people who live in remote areas, manhole workers, cleaning staff, and wage labourers. The sanitation workers are mostly from the marginalised sections of the society; they are Dalits often forced into this occupation because of their caste. The sanitation workers rarely receive appreciation for their service. Compared to other groups like doctors, nurses, police etc. who are at work during the lockdown, the sanitation workers are the most vulnerable because they come in direct contact with several kinds of wastes, including liquid waste, solid waste, organic waste (garbage), hazardous waste, and so on. Not only do the sanitation workers deal with the cleaning and disposal of wastes from our living premises, they also have to deal with the cleaning and disposal of medical wastes. During this pandemic, direct contact with the waste makes them more prone to the corona virus and they may infect their family members as well. A few sanitation workers are already reported to have tested positive for COVID-19[[9]](#footnote-9). The guidelines of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) recommend that sanitation workers use personal protective equipment (PPE) such as N-95 face masks, gloves, coats, boots, sanitisers and so on. But have the sanitation workers who work under the municipal corporations been provided with adequate safety measures against COVID-19? Are they using PPEs provided by the municipalities[[10]](#footnote-10)? The ground reality of sanitation workers in states like Bihar, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. The workers lacked basic protective gear but continued to work. They urged the government to provide the gear because they are aware of possible infection, given that their work brings them in close contact with corona virus-infected people[[11]](#footnote-11). Reports from states like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Gujarat highlight how the sanitation workers deal with the waste directly without protective gear. For instance, in Gajapati district of Odisha, the workers use plastic bags instead of gloves to clean and dispose of waste material. Apart from the PPE, it is shocking to know that the men and women involved in sanitation and scavenging work are not even provided sanitisers, soap and water at the workplace. A television report showed that sanitation workers get one bar of soap a year from a Municipal Corporation in Maharashtra. Is that enough for people who are always in direct contact with waste material? To fight COVID-19, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other health organisations have instructed everyone to clean their hands with soap or a sanitiser. Yet sanitation workers are not provided with safety measures. How will they fight the novel corona virus when they lack even the minimum safety equipment? Thus, sanitation workers are more prone to COVID-19 and in this pandemic, they are scared. Nevertheless, they are compelled to take up this occupation. According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011, 1,82,505 households[[12]](#footnote-12) in rural areas reported themselves as manual scavengers or sanitation workers and this figure would be elevated substantially if we identified the households engaged in manual scavenging in urban areas. Almost all the sanitation workers are poor and vulnerable, relying on undignified work for their survival. They are so tightly bound to sanitation work that if they leave it, they will die from starvation. In India, trash is not segregated – everything is mixed and put in one bag. Many a time, sanitation workers encounter sanitary pads, expired medicines and broken glasses in trash bags. Lack of protective gear makes sanitation work difficult during normal times. During a pandemic, these factors make them far more susceptible to the virus.

A local activist from Panna district of MP said, “Our people are facing the coronavirus pandemic with courage, but there is always a fear in their minds: what if I get infected with the coronavirus? Who will take care of my family and children? Who will feed them?” So, despite being at the frontlines, sanitation workers are still at the bottom of our priorities. A few days back, the Delhi chief minister’s office tweeted[[13]](#footnote-13), “Doctors are on the frontlines of the battle against coronavirus. All doctors serving in Delhi government’s Lok Nayak Hospital and GB Pant Hospital on COVID-19 duty will now be housed in Hotel Lalit.” Similarly, the Uttar Pradesh government has taken over four five-star hotels – Hyatt Regency, Lemon Tree, The Piccadily and Fairfield by Marriott – to lodge doctors in. In Mumbai, Taj Hotel, Colaba and Taj Lands End, Bandra were opened for doctors and other health workers. But for corporates and political leaders, sanitation workers hardly ever count as frontline workers. It bears testament, yet again, as to how caste and class continue to shape our public policy, blinding it to the issues of some while focusing on others. Poverty makes Dalits more vulnerable and helpless during such times of sustained lockdowns. Shivshankar is a father of five daughters and two sons. He used to work at a hotel in Dhanbad as a cleaner. His wife Rekha is also a cleaner working in the houses of upper-caste Hindu and rich Muslim families. His elder son Virkumar also works as a sanitation worker on contract. They earn Rs 7,000, Rs 3,000 and Rs 5,000 per month respectively. But since the lockdown, they have all been left without a job. Shivshankar doesn’t have money and the PDS ration is far from enough for his family. The problem faced by sanitation workers like Shivshankar are in the worst condition during this lockdown compared to those working for government institutions as the latter at least have work. The sanitation workers of India usually don’t get much of work and fair compensation during normal times because they are always robbed of their dignity, during Covid-19 induced lockdown their overall survival will be heavily compromised[[14]](#footnote-14).

The novel coronavirus is detrimental to the human race but the unplanned lockdown is detrimental for poor families. And as it happens, both are disproportionately affecting Dalits. Sanitation workers today need Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs), minimum wages, food, insurance, accommodation and transportation like other health workers, mechanisation of the work and solidarity. But instead, most are satisfied with just the clanging of empty vessels as if to celebrate our collective failure. The caste system continues to “reserve” sewer and sanitation work for Dalits be it is Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation or Nagar Parishad Dehri or the private sector. For instance, around 30,000 sanitation workers are employed by the Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation and all 30,000 are Dalits. Estimates say that 40-60% of the six million households of Dalit sub-castes are engaged in sanitation work. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Rules, 2013, (under section 4 and 5 of the rules) mandates that the person getting the job done must provide workers with ‘protective gear’. Despite the efforts of many organisations, unions, and activists, the government is not following the mandated law. The casteist apathy continues and has, in fact, been amplified in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. When municipal workers expressed the need for sanitisers, given the nature of their work in the national capital, they were provided with fluorescent jackets so that they can be identified as ‘essential’ workers from a distance. Sooner or later scientists will develop a vaccine for the coronavirus, but as a society, we are far from confronting the viral casteism that continues to determine the fate of millions over generations. Everybody is at home because of coronavirus, but we are here fighting it. Even then, there is no appreciation”, said Radharani, a sanitation worker at Panna, MP. Much like Ambedkar lamented in front of Gandhi decades back, it is for us to ponder if Radharani has a homeland – one that cares? Hundreds of crores were spent to welcome the US President in February but the government is unable to provide proper protective gears to sanitation workers during this pandemic because in India the cheapest product is the life of a Dalit[[15]](#footnote-15).

India’s indispensable 40 lakh waste pickers in the informal sector, and garbage collectors employed by states, the backbone of the waste management system[[16]](#footnote-16). Yet, despite providing an essential public health service to residential colonies, hospitals, and commercial establishments, most work without safety gear, have no social security, face rampant discrimination, but still keep our cities clean. Now, they are also at risk of exposure to Covid-19[[17]](#footnote-17) from handling unmarked medical and contaminated waste. To ensure strict compliance of waste management guidelines, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) had directed the Centre and CPCB to supervise handling and scientific disposal of Covid-19 waste. The tribunal said that while the Bio Medical Waste Rules deal with waste generated in dealing with infectious diseases, the coronavirus pandemic has presented further challenge in terms of capacity to scientifically dispose of generated waste. In its observation, the green tribunal noted that the “disposal of Covid-19 waste in general bins so as to be part of municipal waste or unscientific handling sewage and other liquid waste without safeguards can also be hazardous”[[18]](#footnote-18).

During the Covid-19 pandemic the government of India in cahoots with the state government where the ruling party is having a stake is altering labour laws. The alteration of these labour laws might prove the draconian delivery it has stored for the Dalits. Uttar Pradesh had previously suspended all but four labour laws[[19]](#footnote-19). It revoked the order later, after a notice by the Allahabad High Court. But other states[[20]](#footnote-20) were quick to step in with labour law relaxations of their own: mandating longer working hours, lax or no government inspections, and dilution of unions, among other things. One of the reasons being put forth for these moves is attracting more investment by increasing labour flexibility. This comes at a time when India is witnessing a spiralling migrant crisis. Visuals of hungry, poor, and disabled workers walking thousands of kilometres to get to their homes amid the Covid-19 lockdown are now commonplace, and a large section of them belong to marginalised communities. According to Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar with the Harvard University and author of 'Caste Matters', of the 395 million intrastate migrants in India, approximately 62 million are Dalits and 31 million are Adivasis. "Can you imagine that?" he says. "People ask why they (migrants) are walking? That's because they are forced to this exhaustion," he says, explaining that migrants often walk kms daily to their work site, subject to difficult circumstances. "On their return, they face diluted or suspended labour laws," says Aruna Roy, co-founder of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and president of the National Federation of Indian Women. "Oppressed already both by class and caste, discrimination against the migrant labour, daily wage workers, factory and informal sector workers, will be further entrenched by downgrading their rights." Professor Khalid Khan from the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies says the share of casual labour who don't enjoy any social and job security is the highest among scheduled tribes (STs) and scheduled castes (SCs). "Casual labour makes up 21% of total workers overall but among these, 29% are STs, 39% SCs and 26% Muslims. A similar pattern is observed in states like UP, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh: states where these changes have been announced," he says. He also points out that the share of regular salaried workers with long-term contracts and social security is already lower among underprivileged groups. The proposed changes may further worsen their condition in terms of increased working hours, and provision of basic amenities, Prof Khan says[[21]](#footnote-21).

According to the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), marginalised groups, such as Dalits, are often the ones working in the hardest and most precarious jobs where labour standards are already compromised and human rights are often violated. "Dalit human rights defenders have been working hard to promote access to remedy and justice for Dalit workers and inform them of their rights in the labour market," IDSN points out. "A relaxation of the labour laws will not only create a much worse working environment in the short-term, it will also set an unacceptable precedent for disregarding labour laws and shatter any confidence that marginalised groups may have developed in that there are laws that will protect them against abuse and violations in the labour market." MLA Jignesh Mevani from the Vadgam constituency of Gujarat affirms that "oppressed castes" will be the biggest sufferers of these changes. Workers are already facing hunger, discrimination, as they walk with blisters on their feet, the legislator says. "Now they have legalised 12 hours of work. The workers may even be made to work for 14 hours. If there is violence in a private factory or establishment, how will we get to know? These things hardly come out," he says. Yengde says when industrial accidents happen due to oversights and relaxed inspections, ex-gratia payments become a way for the state to assuage those affected and tone down legal reproach. "Their (authorities') family members have not died," he says[[22]](#footnote-22).

"The caste system is not merely a division of labour but also a division of labourer, as convincingly argued by Dr Ambedkar," Prof Khan says. He points out that while the caste system is justified on the ground of division of labour, the fundamental feature of institutions of caste is the restriction of choice of occupation. This is imposed based on circumstances at birth. He sheds light on the concept of meritocracy and upward mobility in India: "In its ideal form meritocracy might ensure everyone gets an equal chance of getting into privileged occupations. But in a caste-ridden society like India, meritocracy cannot work." There are two reasons for it, he says. First, that caste-based networks play an important role in getting jobs which favour a candidate from a privileged background more. Second, access to education in general and the quality of education, in particular, is highly unequal. In the context of such labour law changes, AICCTU points out that by hitting at the wages earned by workers and restricting the same, any possibility of upward mobility is curtailed. Upward mobility is defined as the capacity or facility for rising to a higher social or economic position. However, in India, the shackles of caste often prevent marginalised communities from rising up the ladder. "By keeping workers in conditions where they are unable to earn adequately, and through a steady process of privatisation of all basic services such as education, it becomes more difficult for even future generations to come out of the hereditary occupation," the labour body says[[23]](#footnote-23). Yendge points out that, within the workforce, marginalised communities are often not taught other skills, as that would result in their empowerment. According to Roy, a shocking 98% of safai karamcharis or manual scavengers are Dalits and/or women. The varna is often used as an argument to force lower castes into performing the most venal and menial jobs, she says. "Other work that is typically done by SCs or STs such as sweeping, garbage collection, cleaning, factory work, etc, is also devalued," Roy says. Mevani is of the opinion that if a pro-people, pro-worker socialist economy is favoured, then Dalits would not be the only ones to carry out sanitation jobs. There would be professionalisation of different works. But if more exploitative, capitalist tendencies are unleashed by the state, he says, then the jobs which certain sections have been historically subjected to would continue, thus strengthening caste stratification. "Most Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Castes are landless labourers. So, when both the big farmers, and the small and marginal farmers suffer due to a failing economy, it is the Dalits and tribals to more brutalities and economic exploitation," he explains. "It will strengthen the caste system," he warns. Professor Rajendra Prasad Mamgain, S.R. Sankaran Chair Professor, National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj, Hyderabad, who specialises in labour economics, says that his recent work on recruitment shows how social networks are very important for entering into the formal labour market. "Even when you are coming to the city, you need a social network. And not everyone can migrate to the cities due to lack of such social networks. And it will limit the mobility of occupations for SCs and STs. With rising informalisation, the insecurity of labour is increased," he says. According to him, these labour relaxations will dampen the morale of workers. "If the employer is heavy on you, you cannot raise your voice." This, Prof Mamgain says, will result in workers switching more jobs until they find a humane employer, who will provide proper compensation/social security and work environment. Roy underscores the current situation, and feels that it should teach us a lesson: "The economic distress caused by the Covid-19 lockdown should show us that all work has value, and all workers should be treated with dignity, given decent wages as well as livelihood and social security”[[24]](#footnote-24).

Everyday other day the Covid-19 pandemic is unfolding new pressure points for exclusion and discrimination for Dalit women, who at the bottom of any human development and dignity stratification. The lockdown has significantly impacted women employment in the country mainly for the labourers, daily wage earners and house hold workers. According to a study by Azim Premji University, the urban India was more severely affected with 80% employment losses in urban areas as against 57% of rural region mainly for blue collar job holders. Across states, the share of women reporting job losses was greater than that of men. The unemployment rate of India is steadily increasing during these lockdown and Covid-19 pandemic. According to a study by Institute of Social Studies Trust, there has been a consistent pattern of increase in the burden of household chores and loads on women, the burden of childcare has increased quite significantly because most of the schools remained closed. Majority of the women have reported a loss of income, but at the same time, there has been an increase of unpaid work and demand for child & elder care. Less than 25% of males support their wives or partners in household chores. The other concern is that even when there is work, women and Dalits might have to choose between putting themselves in harm’s way and retaining their jobs, Deshpande says. “While women and Dalits have suffered disproportionately more job losses, risky, hazardous and stigmatized jobs are exclusively their preserve,” wrote Deshpande in her discussion paper. “All frontline health workers are women; manual scavengers are exclusively Dalit. Thus, for several women and Dalits, the choice seems to be between unemployment and jobs that put them at risk of disease and infection and make them targets of vicious stigma”[[25]](#footnote-25).

Systematic discrimination and acts of violence against Dalit has not stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic. National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ), headquartered in New Delhi, has released a detailed report on increasing human rights violation cases against Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized communities of India during COVID-19 lockdown. In April and May alone during the nationwide lockdown, NDMJ and SASY intervened in 67 cases of caste and gender-based violence, the nature of these cases revealing layered untouchability through socio-economic boycott and physical assault as the main cause. Reports of the murder of Dalit men, brutal physical attacks on Dalit families, rape and murder of minors, domestic violence have flooded media sections covering the community. Also, cases of Dalit women being branded witches and their heads tonsured, forced to consume human waste, honour killings and death of sanitation workers were recorded by the Dalit monitoring agency. Dalit agriculture labours s were denied to harvest crops due to the fear of spreading Coronavirus and were assaulted by landowners and influential upper caste farmers. he reports proves with cases and all over India that ‘social distancing’ as a measure to curb the spread of the disease has led to a surge in physical assaults and social boycott of the already marginalized community. In this regard, the report highlights that the term “actually bred into the caste practice of untouchability in many nuanced ways during this pandemic,” leading to multilevel atrocities against them. The experiences of marginalized communities have to do a lot with the practice of social distancing similar to untouchability since generations, therefore NDMJ-NCDHR has instead preferred “physical distancing” as more appropriate terminology, which is also endorsed by WHO guidelines[[26]](#footnote-26).

M. Sudhakar who returned to his village from Chennai due to lockdown was killed by his father-in-law when he tried to meet his wife of six months who belonged to an upper caste. The murder of Sudhakar is one among the rising number of atrocities against Dalits in the country that have taken place during the national lockdown to combat the coronavirus pandemic. The lockdown brought not only a daily struggle for food and employment for Dalits but also a sharp uptick in caste-based murders and public humiliations. The missing data on the rise of anti-Dalit atrocities in the state has however, been carefully collected by Evidence, an organisation which works on Dalit rights and is based out of Madurai. Vincent Raj, the founder of Evidence and commonly called Evidence Kathir, told me, “We have been collecting data of atrocities from the police and from Dalit organisations for years now. The lockdown has seen a clear rise in the number of brutal atrocities. If you count brutal atrocities, against SC and ST communities, like rape, murder and lynching, those have sky-rocketed.” Kathir told me that in January, February and March this year, the number of brutal atrocities in the state were five, eight and six respectively. “According to our studies, which we conduct on a regular basis, every month in Tamil Nadu there are about 100 to 125 cases filed under Atrocities act, five to seven of them being brutal,” Kathir said. “During this lockdown period the brutal cases alone have shot up to thirty.” Several Dalit organisations in the state told me that this high number was despite the systematic under-reporting of atrocities during the lockdown and the Tamil Nadu police’s unwillingness to register atrocity cases. “It becomes very difficult for the victims to reach out to police stations because of the lockdown,” Kathir said. “The police, on the other hand, cite the pandemic as a reason to avoid filing FIRs or take action. Some form of atrocity is being committed against Dalits every day till date. Perpetrators look at this lockdown as an opportunity to unleash atrocities against the vulnerable communities,” he added. Economic empowerment of the marginalised communities has never been given priority by the State and Central government. An effect of this lack of economic upliftment is that Dalits often need to migrate to cities for employment. Any form of economic assertion in rural India by Dalits when they return from cities is resented and attacked by dominant-caste communities. The lockdown has greatly increased the frequency of this happening and the state’s police and administration are using the pandemic as an excuse to look the other way. Being oblivious to such atrocities is a bigger crime than untouchability[[27]](#footnote-27).

There are also issues in quarantine centres where Covid-19 suspects cases are kept for institutionalized observation. These centres are mostly managed by the government and as result Dalits have some provision to work in them. Dalits who are seen as a fit for only sewage and toilet cleaning by the upper caste people could not be imagine to do anything else like cooking food in these centres. Upper caste COVID-19 patients from Uttar Pradesh and Nainital refused to eat the food in isolation centres because it was prepared by a Dalit cook[[28]](#footnote-28). Even a pandemic cannot wipe out the deep-rooted casteism in the country. As lockdown continues, reports have been emerging of individuals in quarantine centres refusing the food being served to them, reportedly on the grounds that it was prepared by Dalits. That such bias still exists in Indian society is shameful enough, but the fact that it persists even during a pandemic is also testament to how ingrained casteism is in our society. The men in the quarantine centre are at the mercy of caregivers and one would expect them to be grateful. But prejudices have become like an old habit which refuses to die[[29]](#footnote-29). Upper caste people who are isolated in the quarantine centres simply refusing to eat food which are made by the Dalits, instead they prefer to go to their home and eat. Not because food isn’t available at the quarantine facility, the upper caste people simply won’t because they treat Dalits less than humans[[30]](#footnote-30).

According to the JNU PhD Scholar Rahul Son pimple , “In India, there exists no modern idea of “labor” or “work” in the lived experiences of a majority of citizens. For the labour castes (shudra and ati shudra, who are Dalits in other words) at the lowest end of the caste system, work is described as a ritual duty to produce food, goods and services, for the consuming castes — the brahmins and savaranas at the higher rungs of the system. The economy of caste isn’t premised on reciprocity, cooperation, and interdependence, rather the caste system continues with its principles of restriction, coerciveness, violent disciplining, and punishment. Those looking to understand how the central government and the administrations of several states could enforce a lockdown as brutal, unplanned, and unequal as India’s without any regard for the consequences, should look no further than Caste. As the lockdown made clear, India is one nation of two worlds: the ruling upper caste-class world and work caste-class world. And for India’s brahminical state, and the policymakers within its confines, work and labour is something that is done by other people from other castes who live in other worlds[[31]](#footnote-31).

According to Wealth Inequality, Class and Caste in India, 1961-2012 report by Nitin Kumar Bharti (2018) India’s Brahmin community alone monopolizes 48 percent of national income which is above the national average income and other upper caste communities secure 45 percent. Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC together earn far less than the national average household income. Now, as we move from “Lockdown” to “Unlock”, the centuries old stratifications of the caste system are quickly becoming visible in the discourse around Covid-19, as is the contempt versus reverence, and purity versus pollution binary that is core to Indian society. Now, the anxiety over Covid-19 transmission experienced by upper castes will be refracted through the centuries old lens of caste prejudice, and will become the basis for fresh violence and atrocities against Dalit and Bahujan bodies. The Nai, or barbers, the Dhobi or washerfolk, the sweeper and many such service caste occupations have already disproportionately borne the brunt of the lockdown, compared to their savarna caste peers. We can expect them to be further marginalised in a post lockdown society[[32]](#footnote-32).

Dalits are also facing issues around shared transportation. Due to the unplanned lockdown the public transport facilities is totally stand still. Even if there are some private arrangements, Dalits are usually left-off from this. Dalits are relying on individual efforts for transportation like Jyoti Kumari, a 15-year-old Dalit girl, managed to cover the distance between the outskirts of Delhi, in India, and her family's village in Bihar in just eight days.

Her father, Mohan Paswan, is an automatic rickshaw driver who was injured in a road accident earlier this year, leaving him with a physical condition which means he cannot walk long distances[[33]](#footnote-33).

As the Covid-19 pandemic is yet to peak in India situation might get worse for the Dalits. According to a recent health study by the Government of India, the peak stage of COVID-19 in India has been delayed by the eight-week lockdown and has strengthened public health measures, and it may now arrive around mid-November when a paucity of isolation and ICU beds and ventilators can arise. The study, conducted by researchers from an operations research group constituted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said the lockdown shifted the peak by an estimated 34 days to 76 days and helped bring down the number of infections by between 69% and 97%, allowing time to shore up resources and health infrastructure. In a scenario of intensified public health measures with 60% effectiveness after the lockdown, the demand for treatment facilities can be met until the first week of November. Thereafter, isolation beds could be inadequate for 5.4 months, ICU beds for 4.6 months and ventilators for 3.9 months, projections by the researchers showed[[34]](#footnote-34). What it means is simple that when there will scarcity of health services and facilities due to anticipated rise of Covid-19 cases in India, the Dalits will be completely side-lined.

In the best of times, India’s poor lead a fragile existence but in the worst of times their situation becomes extremely precarious. The lockdown of the country over the past few months has discomfited everyone but it has hit the urban poor the hardest. Measuring vulnerability accurately is difficult but an analysis based on data from official sources suggests that even in the most optimistic scenario, close to 30% of India’s urban population could be out of savings and unable to cover essential expenditure by June-end. In contrast, the rural poor, though hit hard, are relatively better off with still some savings and welfare support to fall back on. 139 million people in urban India is likely to run out of savings by the end of June or mid July 2020[[35]](#footnote-35).

The poverty rate in India is 21.9% which is grossly understated. Among the lower castes, 81% of the Adivasis, 66% of the Dalits and 58% of the Other Backward Castes live under the poverty line. On the other hand, poverty level among the rest of the population is 33%[[36]](#footnote-36). The Covid-19 lockdown has somewhat tuned back the clock, the reverse migration of the migrants who were some how earning their livelihoods as labourers and daily wage earners are forced to head to their rural areas because lack of no earning provisions and thus resulting to not able to secure rents for their houses and food for their daily survival. This reverse migration will have its own set to challenges.

71% Dalits are landless labourers who work on a land they do not own. In the rural areas 58.4% Dalit households do not own land at all. This gets grimmer as we look at Dalit dominated states viz. Haryana, Punjab and Bihar where 85% Dalits in these states are living at the mercy of their landlords. Dalits has only 9% share of India’s total agricultural share with an average land holding of 0.78 hectares[[37]](#footnote-37). The rural Dalits already facing discrimination and violence on agricultural land tenure rights and rights for farming. This will be further aggravated due to the reverse migration of urban Dalit migrants and daily wage earners. This shows that a large section of the Dalit population lives in poverty, making most of them more vulnerable to the disease.

**Pakistan:** Pirbhu Lal from Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network said that, “The minorities who are mostly poor in Pakistan is facing the worst situational crisis. The Dalits of Pakistan are facing enhanced discrimination and exclusion at the moment. The relief and financial services are almost nonexistence for them. There is a rise of suicides members from the Dalit communities due to highly distilled poverty and exclusion rising out of Covid-19 pandemic. The sanitation workers who are mostly comprised of Dalits and Christians don’t have safety provisions like sanitizers and personal protection equipment’s.

**Nepal:**

**(from – Anju – JMC) - Social and Economic of COVID-19 on Dalit and Marginalized communities**

After the government announcement of a lockdown in order to contain the possible spread of coronavirus, the marginalized population has been even more affected. Majority of the marginalized population is below poverty line, depend on their traditional professions paying very low and other daily wages jobs.

The fear of possible transmission of the coronavirus apart, the low-income households from the marginalized population are more concerned about the hunger than health. The population is also worried about the losing their economic opportunities recently provided by the government in the field of farming, agriculture among others. They are now worrying about the extra financial burdens to be imposed in the days to come.

Meanwhile, some castes from the Dalits community like Musahar, Dom, Badi among others traditionally depend on others for food and other necessities. Because of the scarcity in food they are not in the position to store or buy extra food. After the sudden imposition of lockdown as in attempt to regulate the Covid-19 pandemic, they are in total dismal.

Consequently, the pandemic has generated not only scarcity of food but left them with mental stresses and psychological trauma. A member of Dalit community said, “We mightn't be dying of Coronavirus infection but we are sure to die of hunger and mental stress if the current situation is prolonged.”

The distribution of the relief to most vulnerable groups or badly affected people in lack of concrete plans. The process of receiving relief distributed by the Dalits and marginalized community were not that friendly. Many individuals from those community lacks documents and identity cards, resulting to be left with no relief even if they are affected the most.

In Western part of the Nepal, the relief materials meant for the vulnerable population were distributed to non-marginalized population. While raising the voice, a youth representing Dalit community was thrashed by his own local representative.

The border closures affects the Dalit and marginalized. It is estimated that majority of the youths from bordering areas opt jobs in India to support the family. Members from the Dalit and Marginalized communities of province 6, 7, 5, and 2 choose to work in India as security guard, chef, porter among others. The border closures have snatched their job opportunities keeping their dependent families in dire conditions. The lockdown in the both countries has also made transfer of the money almost impossible.

The illiteracy and poverty, the misinformation or lack of accurate information hinders the marginalized populations the most. They easily believe in the information floated and couldn’t judge the consequences of rumors. As a result of that there are chances of additional health hazards or incidents might occur due to lack in clear information. As the habitats of the most marginalized populations are located in difficult topography and hence could not easily verify the misinformation with knowledgeable persons in their reach in case of any doubts.

Caste Based Discrimination in quarantine:

It is shocked to see several incidents of caste- based discrimination and violence that have been taken place during the lockdown period of the pandemic. It is really frustrating that caste based prejudices and orthodox thinking’s remain deeply rooted in our country in the 21st century.

In this pandemic, there has been a series of incidents of caste-based discrimination against Dalit community and caste based discrimination has been carried out even in the quarantine which has been set up by the government of Nepal. The Dalits in the quarantine set up by the government have faced caste based discrimination in different ways where Dalit members has to face a lot of inconvenience and humiliation

The so called upper caste people thinks they are one who have all the authority to be on top in all sectors of living the life. As the society named Dalits as ‘Untouchables’, the management in the quarantine has asked to prepare their food separately so that they don’t have mix them up other caste people, in terms of cooking food, fetching the water or living in the same room . This hideous behavior of the management in the quarantine brings more pain to the Dalits due to the caste discrimination.

Right to Food: Basic Needs (Died without food):

The basic needs of human life is food, shelter, and clothing. The Corona Virus (COVID – 19) has brought the life changing situation of the people who are from low level income and especially daily wage workers because it has adverse effect on sources of economy. Almost 3 months of lockdown in Nepal, people are suffering from many problems and hideous situation and one of the main problem is hand to mouth (food to eat) for low level income family, workers, daily labor, and poor people.

The people from low living and workers are facing the hardship to feed their children and families because they do not have work to go and earn for their living to sustain. The people from different level and positions are facing this hard times because there is no way of going outside of their homes to work and earn.

In Musahar community, a person has died named Malara Sada due to poverty in Pathari Rampur Tole of Kanchanpur Municipality-5. Malara Sada was 50 year old man who died after not being able to earn and eat due to two-month of lockdown. The Government of Nepal has committed that ‘No one will go hungry due to poverty in Nepal’ but the commitment was not fulfilled during this situation. Malara sada was one of the helpless victim of this pandemic as he has to lost his life in this lockdown, his stove has not been burn for 4 days. He and his family were unable to cook and eat because of their low income earning which has been affected by corona. Due to corona virus (COVID – 19) the lockdown has hit them so that they were unable to have fulfilled their basic needs. His sons have gone to Gujarat for work but they had trapped in Gujarat because of the lockdown situation in India and Nepal. Due to the lockdown situation, his sons could not come for the rituals and his grandson gave him a dagbatti. The deceased Malara Sada and his wife Jileshwari Sada were living on a daily basis and sustaining their life in Kanchanpur Municipality – 5. The situation of Sada’s family was so bad that they did not had money for cremation purpose. The neighbors had collected the money as a donations to support the deceased family for the last rites rituals. The wife of deceased Jileshwari Sada said, ‘my husband died without food, who are we? “Neither my children nor the government looked after him when he died without food.’ We are scared of hunger than disease. The government of Nepal said, ‘No Nepali will die without food now but Malara Sada fought with hunger and gave up his life.’ The death of Malara Sada has mocked the government’s commitment.

**(from Ankita – FEDO) -** **Dalit communities suffer due to economic crisis during the pandemic of COVID.**

The COVID 19 pandemic is capable of affecting anyone regardless of the age, gender, social status, caste or ethnicity. However, the impact of the pandemic on the historically marginalized groups such as Dalits- reinforces the fact that there are inequalities in every sphere and they are at greater risk. Dalit communities as they are extremely poor and survive through minimum daily wage labor; the pandemic too has taken away this opportunity- to survive. Dalit communities are dying out of hunger.

Malara Sada, resided in Sudurpaschim Province (7) of Kanchanpur district. His sons migrated to India for job opportunities and have been trapped due to the lockdown. Sada and his wife dependent upon the wages they earned daily by doing all sorts of work in the nearby market. At normal times too, Sada and his wife did not have food security with the amount they earned. But were able to survive. However, since the lockdown they were trapped and unable to engage in any work. They were left with no money and food.

It had been four days since Sada had eaten anything at all. Nutritious food had always been a far-fetched dream. He and his wife were relying on the beaten rice, salt and water- that too once a day. With minimum energy he had, Sada went off to plough the field of a farmer nearby the village and while returning home he collapsed. The villagers carried him home and at night his wife served him with beaten rice- stained with salt and drained in water. The next day, Sada did not wake up at all. The villagers collected some money for his final rituals and now his wife is all alone with no one to rely on and worrying about dying of hunger.

Sada is just one example of how the poor Dalit communities who have to rely on daily work for survival are suffering due to hunger more than the pandemic itself. The government is lagging in terms of planning for containing the pandemic itself and in such conditions, extremely poor communities such as bound to left behind.

**Bangladesh:**

**(from Ishtiauqe Nagorik Udyog)**

The whole world has been experiencing the devastating nature of corona virus which was first identified in China in December, 2019. Gradually coronavirus pandemic has spread all over the world. According to World Health Organization (WHO), this virus has so far spread in more than 216 countries/areas/territories and affected 7,805,148 people all over the world. WHO has also confirmed death of 431,192 people due to Covid-19 outbreak. Though more than 4 million people so far recovered from this devastating coronavirus attack, the scientist and researchers all over the world yet to successful in finding out any curative solution to covid-19 patients.

However, the first case of Covid-19 was identified in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020. The Institution of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) first got the existence of coronavirus in three persons. Two of them are male who returned from Italy in the last week of February, 2020. According to IEDCR another female was affected by one of the two affected persons who are husband and wife. However, the first death due to coronavirus outbreak was occurred in Bangladesh on 18 March, 2020. A senior citizen died. According to IEDCR total 90,619 people in Bangladesh so far affected by coronavirus. Among them 1,209 died and 34,027 recovered. According to the health experts all over the world, the corona situation may worsen in Bangladesh especially in densely population areas. Covid-19 infection is more acute in the urban areas than the rural. The infection and death rate is more in the urban areas than the rural areas. More than 70% of the total infection and death occurred in Dhaka. Despite more than two months of shut down and general holidays declared by the government started from 25 March, 2020, the it was difficult to reduce the number of infections. Under this circumstance, Bangladesh government has decided to go for lock down in few selected urban areas which fall under the red zones.

Dhaka, the capital is a densely populated city in Bangladesh which has more than 21 million people. More than 23, 334 people (source: Aljazeera) living in per square kilometer in Dhaka city. Though Bangladesh government has already taken some initiatives to protect people from coronavirus by shutting down educational institutions, government and non-government organizations, supermarkets and restricting public transportation all over Bangladesh, the country is in great danger of community spreading of this virus because people from the lower income groups are still on the street for their livelihood and many people still aren’t maintaining social distancing and personal hygiene. Another big issue which is intensifying the risk of coronavirus outbreak is lack of enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the doctors, nurse and other people who are providing health services to the affected.

It is important to mention that like the people serving in health sectors, the cleaners are also at high risk of corona infection. About 11,683 people (Female-5785, Male-5898) from 2,623 Dalit cleaner’s families currently live in Dhaka city. The cleaners in Dhaka city mainly work in different government, non-government and private institutions like shopping mall, super shop, super markets, etc. Many of them work on day wages basis. However, two months of shut down by Bangladesh government could not stop spread of coronavirus. It is reported that so far 15 people from Dalit community in Dhaka city got affected by Covid-19. Total 4 of them so far died and 11 of them recovered.

Covid-19 outbreak has brought out the real scenario of health sector to the mass people. Despite getting three months of time after the first case in China, Bangladesh government didn’t take any mentionable initiative to stop spread of this virus in the country. Even many doctors died due to lack of proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). These deaths have created a fearful atmosphere among the doctors to deal with Covid-19 patient. Though many doctors are still providing treatment support to the Covid-19 patient, there are also many cases of exception. Many Covid-19 positive patient are reported to die without any treatment. Even the hospitals denied to get them admitted.

It this situation, where people with social status, dignity and money are denied to get admission to the hospital, we can easily assume how situation will go with the Covid-19 affected Dalit community.

26,550 Dalits from 5,900 families in Dhaka city are in vulnerable to Covid-19 infection due to their occupation, lack of PPE and maintenance of social distancing during home quarantine. They are also vulnerable due to lack of job opportunity and scarcity of food. Because most of them work as day wages basis.

A. Health hazard of Dalit cleaners at work place:

As mentioned earlier, the City Corporations and Municipalities all over Bangladesh have engaged the cleaners to ensure proper sanitization of the cities. After Covid-19 was identified in Bangladesh, Dhaka City Corporations provided hand gloves and musk to the cleaners. Despite being at high risk of getting affected by coronavirus, many cleaners of Dhaka city especially who have been working to other sectors were found without proper protective equipment. As Covid-19 is a highly transmitted disease, there is high risk for the cleaners to be infected.

B. Health hazards of Dalit cleaners at their residence:

Corona infection has been increasing rapidly day by day. Mass people including Dalits have been denied of getting general treatment under the current situation in Bangladesh. There are lack of hospitals to treat Covid-19 patient. There are also scarcity of doctors and nurses in the hospitals. The hospitals lack oxygen cylinder, ventilators and ICU. The treatment of Covid-19 patients are being hindered in the hospitals due to lake of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for the doctors and nurses. Moreover, tendency of avoiding general patients among the doctors and nurses is also observed. The Dalit cleaners have been working in the City Corporation, municipalities, markets, shopping malls, etc. risking their lives. They haven’t been provided with safety materials like mask, apron, gumboot, hand gloves, etc. for their health protection. As a result, many of them got affected by Covid-19 and few of them died.

Dalit colonies in Dhaka city is highly populated. It is important to mention that the scarcity of space is so acute in colonies that three generations live in just one room. Each cleaner’s family comprises of 6-8 members who live in a room measuring 100-120 square feet. So it may prove dangerous for them to maintain the rule of home quarantine if any of them gets affected by coronavirus as it is highly contagious in nature. Dalit cleaners living in different colonies of Dhaka City Corporation are at high risk of coronavirus infection.

C. Financial insecurity of Dalit cleaners in Dhaka city:

It is mentioned earlier that many cleaners in Dhaka city work on daily wages basis. Many of them have already lose their jobs due to coronavirus outbreak. In this situation, if the country goes for lockdown for a long time they will lose their jobs and will suffer from extreme financial crisis. Moreover, constant price hike of daily necessities in the local market will add to their sufferings. In this situation, they will suffer extreme scarcity of food and will have to strive for days. Many people from this community are engaged in small business like shoe repairing, tea stall and small grocery shops. But due to government declaration of shutting down of all offices, they have become jobless. As a result, they remain vulnerable both in health and food security.

Though the Prime Minister during her remarks to the whole nation on 25 March, 2020 said that her government has allocated 5,000 crore taka as stimulus package for the export-oriented industries, it is not going to bring benefit to the cleaners of Dhaka city who are engaged in non-government and private sectors.

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