From communal violence to lockdown hunger: emergency responses by civil society networks in Delhi, India

Sobhi Mohanty, 20 April 2020

The Covid-19 story in India has rapidly become one about the equivalence of a public health crisis caused by the pandemic on the one hand, and a near humanitarian crisis precipitated by government measures to control the pandemic on the other. As three weeks of lockdown ends and the next three week phase begins, a flood of reports have emerged about prolonged starvation and devastating economic costs of the lockdown for the poor, and government measures that are imperative in order to mitigate this drastic socioeconomic fallout. Somewhat less discussed, is the critical role played by India's civil society in ensuring that the human cost of managing the pandemic has not been even higher, and ways in which prior social movements have been intersecting with the current scenario. In this article I aim to highlight one such intersection by using the case of civil society response to the event of extreme communal violence in Delhi that immediately preceded the events of the coronavirus pandemic. The case illustrates how the networks, knowledge and tools developed by civil society actors in one crisis scenario allowed them to act with immediacy in the next. The discussion is informed by media reports and public discourse on social media, but also by direct involvement with civil society actors and efforts to extend support to their work.

It is useful to first briefly summarise the current lockdown scenario in India. To begin with, announcement of the lockdown without advance notice caused an attempted exodus by thousands of migrant workers from the national capital region of Delhi and surrounding border areas – one of the densest industrial hubs in the country. Given the shutdown of inter-state borders and public transportation, police crackdown, and requests by administrative officials to stay put, NGOs and social workers across the country soon started receiving distress messages from migrant workers and families to request food supplies; their savings were running out, and they lacked the domicile documents that would allow them to access government subsidised food. In Delhi and in other Indian cities, food scarcity soon hit slums, informal settlements where much of an Indian city's informal labour force resides. Civil society actors – themselves in physical lockdown – responded along two lines. First, loose associations of NGOs and individual volunteers such as the Delhi Relief Collective, focused on coordinating with each other and with public officials to create an extensive chain of people – district and municipal authorities, police officials, community organisations, workers unions, private volunteers – who could quickly reach food supplies to target groups within the constraints of social isolation. Second, they focused on meticulously documenting details on ground, using WhatsApp

groups, Facebook, and even websites[1], to widely share guidelines for collecting information, and to build a systematic knowledge base about the growing food crisis. Unlike the Facebook group 'Caremongers India' for example, which predominantly comprises middle and upper class volunteers who are privately helping with individual requests for food and emergency assistance across the country, those working with low income groups have focused on building a rights-based discourse around the fallouts of the lockdown, and on using the extensive information collected to advocate for specific emergency welfare measures and pressure the government to act.

Against this context, it is particularly interesting to note how in the case of Delhi, a large section of the civil society network leading current relief and advocacy efforts actually mobilised in response to a very different sort of crisis – communal violence – but one that required similar strategies. The violence followed an intense nationwide political movement that was in process at the time that the coronavirus pandemic hit. The movement had started as a protest against the CAA/NRC[2] legislations that were widely perceived as a strategic intervention by the right-wing government to undermine the legal and social citizenship of Muslims within the country[3]. It grew into a massive display of solidarity with the Muslim community, support for India's secular constitution, and opposition to the current national government's authoritarian and communal politics. It took the form of both massive online activism, and a chain of physical demonstrations across the country. The most iconic of these was a sit-in organised by Muslim women in the east Delhi neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh. The sit-in started around 11th December 2019 and continued unbroken into the next many weeks. By the end of February 2020, it was being extensively covered by international media as the longest running peaceful protest in India. Despite incidents of police-aided violence on university campuses in Delhi and at protest sites in other parts of the country, protestors at Shaheen Bagh and at these other sites remained non-violent. On the night of 23rd February 2020 however, there was a sudden eruption of extreme violence across multiple east Delhi residential neighbourhoods, a predominantly Muslim part of the city. The government declared a curfew in these parts of Delhi on the next day, but the

[1] While details of WhatsApp groups cannot be shared here due to privacy concerns, take the example of guidelines for volunteers as explained by the Bangalore-based civil society collective *Maraa* in the article 'Solving hunger crisis during lockdown: A guide to documenting migrant workers in need'. By Angarika Guha. In *Citizen Matters*, 19th April 2020. (https://bengaluru.citizenmatters.in/)

[2] Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). The former is an Act by the Indian national government from 2019 purportedly to provide citizenship status to non-Muslim victims of religious persecution in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The latter is a legislation to carry out a countrywide census and taking count of legal and illegal migrants.

[3] These legislations have had a significantly different meaning and public reaction in the north eastern state of Assam, where agitation against these Acts was extensive and violent, but ran contrary to the Muslim-solidarity focused public response in other parts of the country. This is not discussed here.

curfew primarily served to intensify the violence in these areas. Over the next week, at least fifty people were brutally killed in these riots, while extensive arson in these areas left thousands homeless, including both Hindus and Muslims, and the many families that lived in clusters of nearby slums.

On the night of 24ᵗʰ February, a key human rights activist – Harsh Mander – and his organisation began rescue operations in the curfew neighbourhoods. By the next day, civil society groups – such as the Delhi Relief Collective – had been set up to connect individual volunteers and NGOs across Delhi for coordinating rescue and relief operations in these areas. Despite the violence continuing however, police and government authorities quickly began a crackdown on rescue operations, preventing entry of aid workers, journalists, and researchers into the affected areas, and speeding up legal action against activists who had criticised government actions during the CAA/NRC protests[4]. Volunteer operations thus had to circumvent government authorities and yet effectively reach emergency medical assistance and funds to those in urgent need. This necessitated massive online coordination and communication using WhatsApp groups, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in order to track, verify, and map distress messages, constantly call elected state representatives but also opposition politicians to pressure them into acting, connect with residents within the affected neighbourhoods in order to collect detailed information about the violence as it happened in real time, and start campaigns around raising public awareness once reports of violence had been verified. As the curfew eased, the information compiled over these few days became the basis of investigations by other civil society actors and media, and to also ensure that victims of this violence could seek legal redress and rehabilitation support from the government. It was only under enormous public pressure that the government started judicial inquiries and set up relief camps for the thousands of people in these areas who were rendered homeless. The work did not stop here however. There were large gaps in provision of food, medical supplies, and legal assistance to these camps, which continued to be filled by civil society volunteers and their network of doctors, lawyers, journalists, and private donors. Thus, the coordination of supplies, fundraising, and on-ground assistance in these camps and neighbourhoods continued long after the violence itself had occurred.

It was under these circumstances that news broke of the WHO declaring the coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic. As with the migrant crisis, there was little pre-emptive action taken to plan for the many hundreds of homeless families in east Delhi who had just been the victims of horrific communal violence, lost their homes, were living in crowded relief camps. When the Delhi government discussed shutting down these camps, volunteers who had been involved with rescue efforts made urgent attempts to help these families find a temporary home with relatives or volunteers. The pandemic also provided the

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[4] For example, as these riots proceeded, the solicitor general of India filed a complaint in the Supreme Court against Harsh Mander, claiming that hate speech by Mander and others like him had incited the violence.

perfect opportunity for many government supported news outlets to extensively brand public protestors, such as those at Shaheen Bagh, as irresponsible for endangering public health. On 25th March – while hundreds of migrant workers were crowding the streets of Delhi, and hundreds of poor and homeless families were gathering en masse at community kitchens and shelters as a consequence of government lockdown measures – the Shaheen Bagh site was cleared by the Delhi police in the interest of social isolation.

In many ways, the communal violence events described here and the pandemic lockdown measures have provided a similar context for civil society actors to navigate. Both violence-related curfew and social isolation related curfew restricted physical entry into areas, prevented easy access to information about ground realities, made delivery of emergency support difficult, and required personal risks to civil society volunteers themselves. Both necessitated helping those on the margins of citizenship in urban India. Some of the areas in Delhi that are worst affected by the lockdown for example, are those same east Delhi areas that were affected by the communal violence. This is not surprising given that they are largely poor Muslim neighbourhoods, are located at the outskirts of the city, and have numerous migrant worker settlements, all factors contributing to their being relatively sidelined when it comes to government welfare provision. Nor is it only identity politics that links these events of resistance, violence, and pandemic. Acts of government repression also link them. Reports emerged last week about the central government issuing orders to the police to continue arresting those involved in anti-CAA/NRC protests in Delhi, even during this lockdown period. A number of university students who had been the target of police violence during the protests in Delhi, have also been served legal notice. At a time when access to legal support is limited because of the lockdown, this puts further pressure particularly on Muslim civil society volunteers, who are beginning to fear being arrested under a variety of pretexts as occurred during the protests.

Discussions about a post-lockdown world have already begun in many circles. There are questions of whether countries will see this as an opportunity to invest in governance and public health infrastructure, whether political elites will see this as an opportunity to seize greater control of government institutions, and so on. It is too early to answer questions such as these for India. The lockdown continues here, and neither the extent of the pandemic's health cost nor its economic cost is fully understood yet. It is undeniable however, that Indian civil society has allowed for a crisis in the making to be swiftly identified and at least partially addressed. Using the lockdown as an opportunity to target them with repressive measures would perhaps be one of the worst uses of government resources at this time.

About the author

Sobhi Mohanty is currently a PhD student in Political Science at the Graduate Institute of International & Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Switzerland. Her dissertation focuses on the links between electoral

participation and social mobilisation in urban slums in India. During her masters, Sobhi studied as a research scholar with the late Dr. Elinor Ostrom at Indiana University Bloomington. This served as her introduction to the study of collaborative and community-led governance approaches to development. Prior to starting her PhD, Sobhi worked for several years on sustainable livelihoods projects in India, both in slums, and in rural communities.