

From communal violence to lockdown hunger – Emergency responses by civil society networks, Delhi, India

Sobhi Mohanty (22 May 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. Within less than a month of lockdown, extensive loss of livelihoods combined with inaction by central and state governments around provision of food, emergency welfare, and economic reassurances, had resulted in the prolonged starvation of millions of urban and rural poor families, a nationwide crisis around mass attempts by rural-urban migrant workers to walk back home under physically precarious conditions, and devastating economic consequences for the one-fifth of Indians who live below the official poverty line and for the millions who work in the informal sector. Each of these consequences has grown in severity over the course of the two month lockdown, with extensive media reports and policy analysis around these issues also having emerged.

Within the media and policy discussion of these multiple crises however, two points have remained relatively less discussed. First, 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 second, ways in which social movements prior to the coronavirus crisis have been intersecting with the current scenario. In this article I 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 their efforts.

Delhi and its surrounding areas are the hub of one of the densest industrial regions in India. Announcement of the lockdown without advance notice, and shutdown of transportation and of inter-state borders quickly resulted in NGOs and social workers being faced with an overwhelming scale of distress. From migrant workers who lived in temporary makeshift shelters and lacked domicile documents, to the tens of thousands of families living in Delhi's slum settlements who typically get by on marginal daily or weekly wages, a large section of the region's population started running out of food, running out of savings to purchase supplies from private or even government stores, and frequently lacking the paperwork needed to access food from public distribution systems.

Civil society actors, themselves in physical lockdown, responded along two lines. First, they focused on creating a system of local network/s for relief provision - to ensure coordination with public officials – district and municipal authorities, police officials, and elected state representatives – to make relief work more efficient and in line with social distancing rules. The work on ground comprised drawing up lists of individuals and families who were in critical need of food or any form of emergency support on the basis of incoming messages for help, verifying these messages through an extensive volunteer network, roughly mapping areas that needed help, and then working on either fundraising, procurement and distribution of food supplies, or setting up of community kitchens at strategic locations. Indeed, it was not only in Delhi that civil society organisations (henceforth CSOs) organised so effectively despite severe logistic constraints: a news report suggest that in at least thirteen states of India, it was CSOs and not government authorities, who ensured that people had food.¹

A second line of work done by CSOs was to meticulously document ground realities and gather information. The Delhi Relief Collective for example – a loose association of NGOs and individual volunteers that had come together to respond to a prior crisis, as will be discussed subsequently – used WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media platforms to collate and communicate information about relief work, and continuously worked to build a database of target beneficiaries on the one hand, and policy responses, changes in government rules around lockdown, and the broader on-ground context of the growing food (and migrant) crisis. Unlike the Facebook group ‘Caremongers India’ for example – a nationwide network that by now includes at least 40,000 members – which predominantly comprises middle and upper class volunteers privately helping with individual requests for food and emergency assistance across the country, those working with low income groups used this knowledge to build a rights-based discourse around the fallouts of the lockdown for informal and migrant worker, focus media and political attention on the situation, and advocate for targeted governance and emergency welfare measures.

Against this context, it is significant that 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. This violence followed an intense nationwide political movement that was in process at the time that the coronavirus pandemic hit. The movement itself had started as a protest against the CAA/NRC² legislations that were widely

¹ ‘Coronavirus in India: In 13 states, NGOs fed more people than govt did during lockdown’. By Mukesh Rawat. In *India Today*, 9th April 2020. Article can be accessed online at:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/in-13-states-ngos-fed-more-people-than-govt-during-coronavirus-lockdown-1665111-2020-04-09>

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,

perceived as a strategic intervention by the right-wing government to undermine the legal and social citizenship of Muslims within the country³. Its focus soon broadened from a display of solidarity with the Muslim community, to dialogues around the secular principles underlying India's constitution, and broad opposition to the national ruling party's authoritarian and communal politics. It took the form of both online activism, and a continuous series 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 over 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 curfew primarily served to intensify the violence in these areas. Over the next week, at least fifty people were reported brutally killed in these riots, many more dead bodies started emerging in sewers, and the extensive arson in these areas left thousands homeless, including both Hindus and Muslims, and the many families that lived in the numerous slum communities nearby.

On the night of 24th February, a well-known national human rights activist – Harsh Mander – started organising emergency rescue operations in the curfew neighbourhoods in response to emerging reports of violence. Meanwhile, both private residents of these areas and a few independent news media reporters started using Twitter to disseminate live coverage of mobs carrying out lynching, setting mosques, shops, and homes on fire, and police complicity in these ongoing events. Soon, multiple leading activists joined in these efforts to coordinate emergency rescue and relief operations by setting up private WhatsApp groups comprising NGOs, researchers, lawyers, journalists, and other private citizens across Delhi; the Delhi Relief Collective was one of them. As civil society came together however, police and government authorities began a crackdown by tightly cordoning off these neighbourhoods, preventing entry of ambulances, doctors, aid workers, and journalists into the affected areas, and speeding up legal action against activists who had criticised government actions during the CAA/NRC protests. Even as riots continued, the solicitor general of India filed a complaint in the Supreme Court against Harsh Mander, claiming that hate speech by him and other activists had incited the

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.

violence. As a result, Mander and his group had to curtail their operations. Given these repressive measures by the government, volunteer operations had to be rapidly configured so as to circumvent government authorities and yet effectively reach emergency medical assistance and funds to those in urgent need.

The complete lack of cooperation by formal government institutions, from the police to elected representatives, necessitated enormous online coordination using WhatsApp groups, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in order to track and verify distress messages, connect with residents within the affected neighbourhoods in order to collect detailed information about the violence as it happened in real time, start campaigns to raise public awareness, and put pressure on political representatives once reports had been verified. As the curfew eased, the information compiled over these few days became the basis of further investigations by civil society actors and the media, and also helped ensure that victims of this violence could seek legal redress and rehabilitation support from the government. It was only under 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. The coordination of supplies, fundraising, and on-ground assistance in these camps and neighbourhoods continued well 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 planning regarding the many hundreds of homeless families in east Delhi who had just been the victims of horrific communal violence, lost their homes, and were now 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 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.

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 access to information about ground realities, made delivery of emergency support difficult, and required personal risks to civil society volunteers. Both necessitated helping those on the margins

of citizenship in urban India. Some of the areas in Delhi that have been 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. Finally, extensive documentation and creation of a knowledge base of on-ground realities in each case not only allowed relief work in both cases to be efficient despite minimal resources, but also allowed CSOs to publicly demonstrate how already marginalised groups were being systematically targeted with physical and economic violence through the complicity of formal government institutions. Thus long term strategies of advocacy and civil society support for these groups could (and continue to) be built atop the layer of emergency relief provision.

Yet it is not only identity politics and civil society strategy that links these events of resistance, violence, and pandemic. Acts of government repression also link them. Thus, even as the food and migrant worker crises grew during lockdown, the central government issued orders to the police to continue arresting those involved in anti-CAA/NRC protests in Delhi during lockdown. Prominent Muslim activists and a number of university students who had been the target of police violence during the protests in Delhi were served legal notice under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), and arrests of many of these individuals began midway into the lockdown. At a time when access to legal support was limited because of the lockdown, this put further pressure particularly on Muslim civil society volunteers, who feared being arrested under a variety of pretexts as occurred during the time of the protests earlier this year while out conducting their relief activities.

Discussions about a post-lockdown and post-Covid world have been ongoing in many circles across the world throughout this pandemic crisis. There are questions about 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 conclusively answer questions such as these for India – although the recent labour and economic reforms announced by the national government suggest that privatization will (be made to) play a prominent role – since the country continues to grapple with the public health aspects of the crisis as case numbers rise. It is undeniable however, that it has been Indian civil society that has allowed for a humanitarian crisis in the making to be swiftly identified and at least partially addressed. Using the lockdown as an opportunity to target this same civil society with repressive measures has perhaps been one of the worst uses of the Indian government's resources at this time, providing a not unclear indication of the democratic struggles that lie ahead.

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.