

PANDEMICS AND PREJUDICE: SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

With the 21st century came a great economic boon, blessing countries with an influx of revenue. After independence, India's stagnant and staggered growth came to an end, bringing along scores of jobs, blessing millions of Indians. However, the seeds of modern economic and social disparity were sown long back. The Constitution of India, keeping in mind the plight of the subaltern people, emphasises the ideas of equality and egalitarianism in order to uplift those who were trapped in the mammoth structures of oppression and exploitation. In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out affecting the entire world with more than 6.38 million cases being reported, and positive cases only increasing every day. The pandemic heavily disrupted societies and economies, with many countries, including India, imposing a nationwide lockdown and implementing social distancing. Even though the entire extent of the pandemic's impact is not yet known, it is expected that it will create a greater disruption among the most vulnerable classes of our society. There is a disproportionate toll on the urban and rural poor, migrants, and daily wage labourers. It has devolved into a struggle between lives and livelihood. Other people who are facing the brunt of the lockdown include women, children, elders, alcohol or drug addicts, and physically/mentally disabled people. This is a humble attempt to trace out the struggle faced by each of these individuals in a nuanced and balanced way, with the inclusion of an international perspective. A healing strategy for each of these sections has been suggested without isolating it from the macro or micro variables. Immediate government intervention is necessary in order to prevent greater loss to our nation. The pandemic has created a vicious cycle: the decreasing socio-economic status leads to greater spread of the disease, therefore leading to more social vulnerability.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, Coronavirus, underprivileged, pandemic, poverty, urban poor, addicts.

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1.) Introduction

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.”¹

India is the fifth-largest economy and is worth around 2.94 trillion dollars. Along with being one of the world’s fastest growing economies, the second-most populous country is home to a gargantuan 1.3 billion people, comprising of the second largest workforce in the world. However, one fundamental thing to keep in mind is that mere facts and figures mean nothing, and act as nothing but embellishments, until and unless the gaping valley between the privileged and non-privileged is addressed.

There are scores of helpless people in our country persecuted by virtue of their economic or social status, and millions who are victimised by virtue of their mental or physical condition, by the people who have power. Postcolonial studies lay focus on subaltern citizens: people who, for centuries, have been excluded from the rest of society. These people lay outside the hierarchy of power and therefore, the realms of society. These include peasants, physically and mentally challenged people, migrants and other downtrodden folks.

The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted countries, bringing them to a standstill. On the 24th of March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was imp-

¹ Nelson Mandela, in his historic „Make Poverty History“ rally in London, 2005.

osed on the country’s 1.3 billion citizens. The impact of the lockdown was felt by every citizen; however, the virus has a special devastating impact on the vulnerable sections of society. The Indian migrant crisis, resulting in hundreds of deaths are a stark reminder of this. The urban and rural poor are disproportionately impacted, as are those who depend on their daily wages. Addicts are struggling to find aid, and those stuck in abusive homes are facing a crisis. Each and every one of these sections will be dealt with in detail.

2.) Impact on the Urban Poor and Beggars

According to the data released by the Union Ministry of Social Justice in 2018, there are around four lakh beggars in India. West Bengal tops the list with around 81,000, followed by UP and Bihar². Begging is in no way a new problem for our country. It is an age-old conundrum that none of our politicians have managed to solve. These people depend on the charity of others in order to live their lives. With footfalls coming to a standstill, the beggars have no means to feed themselves. They are wholly dependent on good Samaritans who provide grains and other necessities. But the seekers far outnumber the supplies.

² FE Online, *West Bengal tops the list of states with most number of beggars: Know where your state ranks*, FINANCIAL EXPRESS (March 21, 2018, 6:47 PM), <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/west-bengal-tops-the-list-of-states-with-most-number-of-beggars-know-where-your-state-ranks/1106118/>.

There is a common trend to paint beggars as undeserving panhandlers. While this may be true for some, it is important to remember that it is due to the unavailability of employment, poverty, migration, and sometimes, mental illness. Due to these pre-existing conditions, these issues are exacerbated, leading to not only difficulty in livelihood, but also a greater chance of contracting the virus.

This is not a problem confined to India. In South Africa, which has the highest number of confirmed cases in Africa, they are facing an unprecedented crisis in the form of beggars. According to the UN World Food Program, 265 million people will face food insecurity by the time the coronavirus crisis has abated- a 130 million jump³. In the USA, with social services stretched thin, the unsanitary conditions in shelters have helped contribute to the spread of the virus. In France, more than 1,57,000 people are housed in shelters with outreach and support being limited. Homeless people are being fined for not complying with a stay at home orders.

A big problem is that the urban poor is now forced to beg. They have always found their means of earning difficult, but the lockdown has made it impossible. This includes maids/house-helps, rickshaw pullers, and auto-drivers. There are multiple shelters launched by the state

³ *Virus lockdown worsens suffering for Johannesburg beggars*, OUTLOOK (April 29, 2020, 3:34 PM), <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/virus-lockdown-worsens-suffering-for-johannesburg-beggars/1818255>.

governments with the main purpose of providing food and boarding. However, many beggars have a general distrust of the shelters and aid offered by the government. They are scared that they will lose the place they have been occupying for years, and shelters are not in a convenient location. Most night shelters have a cap of no more than 50 people.

Commendably, in West Bengal, a unique system has been introduced to help these people. They have managed to institute a supply chain- in schools. This is important as most beggars do not have ration cards and therefore, cannot obtain pulses and grains from the government subsidies. But, if they have children of a school-going age, they can obtain the required provisions⁴.

Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Haryana and Punjab have been a few of the states to announce special packages and relief funds. The Department of Finance announced a relief package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore to help the poor of our country.

The risk with the homeless and beggars are that they are a highly transient and mobile population. Therefore, it is very difficult to track them and trace their contacts. They come into

⁴ Suvojit Bagchi, *How beggar's children are running households during lockdown*, THE HINDU (March 27, 2020, 09:59 PM), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/how-beggars-children-are-running-households-during-lockdown/article31178761.ece>.

contact with hundreds of people a day. This makes them not only vulnerable, but also carriers of the disease. These vulnerable sections of society do not have equal access to healthcare. With many of the countries' economies slowly falling, there is a worry that depression could further spike the number of homeless people.

Healing Strategy:

Governments must focus on tracing the homeless population and the urban poor. Homeless people must be given proper hygienic shelter and be tested. In case they test positive, they should be placed under quarantine and proper access to medical care must be given. The police must refrain from attacking homeless people and instead guide them to centres and camps. As for people living in shanties and slums, the landlords must not evict any of them in case of default in payments. Awareness is imperative as there is a multitude of reports alleging ostracisation by society against people who have tested positive for the virus.

3.) The Impact on Migrant Labourers

“An Imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics”⁵.

With the lockdown imposed nationwide, the country has been able to control the spread of the virus and protect its citizens by asking them to stay safe at their home. Amenities such as

⁵ Plutarch, the 1st-century Greek historian.

food, groceries, transportation are subject to the privilege, which is based on monetary terms and fixed jobs. People who receive fixed income are able to avail of this privilege. India comprises of a maximum population of labourers whose incomes are not fixed. They receive income on the basis of their daily work. They do not have a permanent place of living, but migrate from rural households to cities to find jobs. They suffer especially because the income earned is not sufficient enough to meet their daily ends, as a result of which they acquire more debts and the chances of savings are much lower.

In India, the total workforce is estimated to be 465.1 million out of which migrant labourers comprise of: landless agricultural labourers (112 million), underprivileged self-employed in non-agricultural sectors (Ex: painters, carpenters, barbers) (45.7 million), and regular and daily wage earners (street vendors) in non-agricultural sectors (150.6 million) ⁶. The problems faced by migrant labourers are summarized below.

- *Inability to reach native place*

Most migrants originate from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Maharashtra and migrate to cities like Mumbai and Delhi in search of

⁶ Prasanna Mohanty, *Coronavirus Lockdown I: Who and how many are vulnerable to COVID-19 pandemic*, BUSINESS TODAY (March 27, 2020, 08:32 PM), <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-wage-workers-vulnerable-landless-labourers-agricultural-workforce/story/399186.html>.

work. The lockdown stalled available transportation systems. With no money and no work, an exodus of migrants, some with their families, started returning to their native places by the means of bicycles or by walking in the harsh summer heat. They covered more than 1000 miles and many did so while hungry. This, unsurprisingly, led to exhaustion and starvation. Social distancing was violated since these people moved in crowds. For instance, a migrant's wife after walking for 100 km from Punjab to Haryana, gave birth to a girl child, who as a consequence of malnutrition and exhaustion, did not survive. They did not have adequate earnings or facilities to travel by any other means and decided to walk⁷.

In Delhi, due to a lack of awareness about the process of online registration, labourers faced problems while registering themselves for the special transport and were standing outside screening centres in long queues to gain information about it⁸. Even though special trains known as "Shramik" trains had been arranged for migrants to return back to their native places,

⁷ *After Walking 100 Km, Migrant's Wife Delivers Baby; Child Dies*, NDTV (May 24, 2020, 02:51 AM), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/covid-19-after-walking-100-km-migrants-wife-delivers-baby-child-dies-2234134>.

⁸ *Migrant labourers in Delhi face problems due to lack of awareness about online registration system*, ANI (May 23, 2020, 08:17 PM), <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/migrant-labourers-in-delhi-face-problems-due-to-lack-of-awareness-about-online-registration-system20200523201732/>.

they faced a shortage of food and drinks in the journey. Most of them were in debt as they had no money and at that time, the tickets costed a hefty Rs.2700. Many migrants were reported to be waiting in scorching summer for the trains as they were mostly delayed and diverted to other stations⁹.

- *Inability to send money to family in rural households.*

Migrant workers tend to send earnings to their families residing in native places via banks. Since all the means of earnings are put on hold, it is not possible for them to do so. As money has been transferred to their accounts by the government in form of pensions and schemes, they have to travel long distances in order to reach the bank which itself is not possible due to lack of public transport.

- *Lack of residence.*

Migrant workers in this crisis are forced to live like refugees in the cities they work. Due to poverty, they are unable to rent a place of living as a result of which they temporary makeshift tin shed houses which lack basic facilities such as water and sanitation¹⁰. While returning home,

⁹ *Divyanshu Dutta Roy, As Trains Resume, Migrant Workers Line Up With Tickets And Nothing More*, NDTV (June 1, 2020, 08:53 PM), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-as-trains-resume-migrant-workers-line-up-with-tickets-and-nothing-more-2238963>.

¹⁰ *Radheshyam Jadhav, Cites, is no place for the migrant labourers who build them*, THE HINDU BUSINESS LINE (April 1, 2020) <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national>

labourers were stopped by the police force to prevent movement during lockdown. In some cases, harsh violence has been used against them. In confusion as to whether to go back or to move towards native place, labourers have been stranded on the roads for days.

- *Unavailability of basic amenities.*

Migrant labourers were deprived of basic amenities such as food, water and sanitation. While the government schemes ensured that the poor would get ration benefits due to the lockdown, many distribution systems failed as ration cards were area-specific and fair-price shops were highly inaccessible¹¹. A few state governments introduced the “*One Nation, One Ration*” scheme where migrant workers could retrieve food grains for free anywhere across the country. This required biometric authentication and the availability of Aadhar cards. Biometric authentication was discounted due to the spread of the virus through common fingerprint sensors. Yet, this scheme was not effective since many labourers lacked awareness about this scheme and did not have Aadhar cards with them¹².

/the-city-is-no-place-for-the-migrant-labourers-who-build-it/article31218858.ece.

¹¹Kumar Gunjan, Rounak, *Impatient, Starving, Angry: As India Extends Lockdown, Stranded Migrant Workers Emerge as Crisis in Making*, NEWS18 (April 15, 2020),

<https://www.news18.com/news/india/impatient-starving-angry-as-india-battles-pandemic-stranded-migrant-workers-emerge-as-crisis-in-the-making-2578109.html>.

¹² *Distribution of ration in Delhi hit by migrant labour shortage due to COVID-19 crisis*, THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS (May 16, 2020, 09:13 AM),

Protection from the virus is a big challenge as the poorest communities do not have enough money to buy sanitizers, tissues or soap. These people do not have access to clean water for drinking or washing hands. Lack of these facilities led to a huge breakout of the virus in such communities. Adding on to this, they face a lack of sanitation and menstrual hygiene. This creates problems like diarrhoea, acute respiratory infection, and urinary infections. With such low immunity, it won't be wrong to say that migrants would be especially susceptible to the virus¹³.

In Delhi, though food supplies are available, due to a shortage of labourers to load and unload the supplies as a result of the exodus, distribution has become an uphill task. It has become a tough cycle where available labours are not able to do the job and hence, food grains do not reach their communities. The yields are also lowering since transport restrictions are drastically affecting the supply of agricultural input. There is a heavy reliance on migrant workers in the agriculture sector and a wide-spread reluctance of agriculture labour to travel in the wake of COVID-19. This is already affecting agriculture

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/may/16/distribution-of-ration-in-delhi-hit-by-migrant-labour-shortage-due-to-covid-19-crisis-2144033.html>.

¹³ Christophe Z Guilmoto & Thomas Licart, *Covid-19: Lack of access to basic amenities among poor making fight harder*, BUSINESS STANDARD (April 4, 2020, 11:09 AM), https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/covid-19-lack-of-access-to-basic-amenities-among-poor-making-fight-harder-120040400284_1.html.

as it continues to be labour intensive, with the low level of farm mechanisation and scanty adoption of technology. Resources will be accessible to those who can afford the high price and hence, poor people have to bear the shortage¹⁴.

In Bihar, during lockdown, 59% of the workers reported that they were unable to meet their daily family expenses since they have lost their sources of livelihood. Due to the lack of income, more than 50% of workers reported that they reduced their food consumption to once in a day¹⁵.

- *Loss of Dignity, and Stress*

The current situation has created fear, anxiety and panic among the migrant labourers. A combination of poverty with an almost vulgar level of inequality serves as despair to the downtrodden society. Due to a lack of awareness, most people view this virus as a deadly social stigma. This crisis has affected the labourers as most of the opportunities to work are stalled and the remaining do not yield

enough results. A 52-year-old man in Uttar Pradesh's Banda district hanged himself from a tree on the outskirts of Jaari village on April 11, after he failed to get any labour to harvest his wheat crop¹⁶.

Young children who are already exposed to the hazardous and unhygienic environments that are typical of informal worksites are made to walk miles without proper food. Such children have been made to work in order to help the family and as a result of distress due to this crisis, they have been subject to physical abuse. They lack nutritional as well as economic security. All these factors put heavy risks on the mental health and growth of such children¹⁷.

These people, due to lack of social status, are put in a situation where they are treated without dignity. According to reports, police forced a group of jobless migrant workers, making the long journey home on foot in the absence of public transport, to hop like frogs on a Badaun road for "violating" lockdown orders¹⁸.

¹⁴Coronavirus crisis: Govt must ensure food for all, prevent more people from falling into poverty, FINANCIAL EXPRESS (May 2, 2020, 01:08 PM), <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/coronavirus-lockdown-food-poor-poverty-govt-agenda-helping-poor-bpl-food-for-all-migrant-workers-labourers-covid-19/1946152/>

¹⁵Rahul Suresh Sapkal, Divita Shandliya, K.T. Suresh, *Surviving in the Time of Lockdown: Evidence from a Rapid Assessment in Bihar*, THE WIRE (May 30, 2020), <https://thewire.in/rights/surviving-in-the-time-of-lockdown-evidence-from-a-rapid-assessment-in-bihar>.

¹⁶ Kalyan Ray, COVID-19 lockdown: A recipe for mental health crisis, DECCAN HERALD (April 19, 2020, 09:33 AM), <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/insight/covid-19-lockdown-a-recipe-for-mental-health-crisis-827202.html>

¹⁷ Divya Ravindranath, Umi Daniel, *Understanding the Implications of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Migrant Workers Children*, THE WIRE (May 5, 2020), <https://thewire.in/rights/covid-19-lockdown-migrant-workers-children-implications>

¹⁸ „Frog“ insult on long walk home for jobless, THE TELEGRAPH (March 27, 2020, 2:12 AM),

A 12-year-old female migrant worker living in the state of Telangana died on April 20, as she walked a distance of 100 miles to her home, during the national lockdown. Her native area was only 6 miles short of reaching her doorstep when her frail body succumbed to exhaustion¹⁹. A 60-year-old migrant worker died in Uttar Pradesh possibly due to starvation, according to officials, three days after he began his journey to home from Maharashtra²⁰. If this situation continues, India will face a huge loss of the working force population, and the reason would be destitution, rather than disease.

Healing Strategy:

First and foremost, arrangements for transportation according to the social distancing rules must be made for all such poor communities to prevent exhaustion. Clean water, sanitation facilities, menstrual pads, medicines and healthy food should be provided in due course. Governments should introduce schemes wherein money flow is regulated within the poorest communities. To withdraw money, the

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/coronavirus-lockdown-frog-insult-on-long-walk-home-for-jobless/cid/1759541>.

¹⁹ *The Hunger of Migrant Workers Is Our National Shame*, OUTLOOK (June 02, 2020), <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-the-hunger-of-our-migrant-workers-is-our-national-shame/351858>.

²⁰ Alok Pandey, Swati Bhasin, *After 3 Days Of Journey Home, 60-Year-Old Migrant Dies Of Hunger In UP*, NDTV (May 17, 2020, 05:45 PM), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-lockdown-after-3-days-of-journey-home-60-year-old-migrant-dies-of-hunger-in-up-2230291>.

mechanisms should be facilitated in such a way that documentation requirement is not mandatory. States should conduct PCR tests for all migrants leaving the state to ensure that they are not contributing to the communal spread of the disease. Regular physical and mental health check-up camps must be organised in the rural areas.

As a major relief, the SC ordered free travel and food for all migrants in June. The originating state will be held responsible for ferrying them back to their native state within 15 days.²¹ This is after they faced ire for abdicating their responsibility in the crisis. Until new jobs are generated and the economy is brought back to normal, governments must make sure that rents or debts on poor communities are levied and landlords should be given strict warning against any kind of intimidation for money. Labourers should be absorbed by industries and they must be provided with a place of living and basic facilities. India's economy is majorly based on the labour sector, and if the human resources are revived, it would only be a matter of time for the economy to rekindle itself.

4.) The impact on Daily wage workers, Small Vendors and Businesses

²¹ Aneesh Mathur, *Supreme court gives 15 days to states to transport migrant labourers back home*, INDIA TODAY (June 5, 2020, 03:33 PM), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/supreme-court-gives-15-days-to-states-to-transport-migrant-labourers-1685877-2020-06-05>

Daily wage workers are among the population who are bearing the brunt of this crisis. These people earn a minimal level of earnings and spend maximum on daily basis. With a halt on all industries, they suffer as they neither have possibilities of savings nor any previous earnings. According to reports, for daily wage earners, the lockdown has come as a tsunami - at short notice, giving them little time to prepare for the consequences and threatening to take away everything they had managed to build and save, which was very little to start with.²²

After the government-mandated lockdown, all non-essential services had to cease operations, at least until the crisis had abated. In a country of 1.3 billion people, the total number of SMEs, or Small/Medium Industries is a staggering 42.5 million (including registered and unregistered). Almost 95% of all industries comprise of SMEs. These SMEs employ 106 million, 40% of the Indian workforce.²³ These small businesses range from restaurants, hair salons, and photography studios to small data consultancy services and animation studios.

Street food vendors are the primary feeders for a large chunk of the population. The lockdown has

forced street food vendors to shut shop. With no work and no patrons, those who fed us may perhaps have no resources to feed themselves and their families by the time the lockdown is over.

With revenue effectively coming to a standstill, small businesses have no means to pay off their rent, interest from loans and most importantly, the salary for their employees. This is especially true for family-run businesses, such as small restaurants, mechanics and so on. Multiple countries have offered aid to the SMEs in the form of moratoriums and cash injections.

The RBI's decision to provide three-month moratoriums for loans has been met with mixed feelings: some took a breath of relief, but others pointed out the fact that the interest rate might increase down the line, and that there was no way to figure out if they would be in the position to pay then. The CII suggested easing the tax compliance burden on small businesses.

Some suggest that increasing the lending capacity of banks may be the solution. However, this is a risky idea, as even though the banks are well capitalised now, the Indian economy has been plagued with instability and stress. Hence, reverting to non-performing loans without a capital buffer would be a bad idea.²⁴

²² *COVID-19 Lockdown: Daily Wage Workers Struggle for Survival*, OUTLOOK (March 26, 2020), <https://www.outlookindia.com/photos/photoessay/covid-19-lockdown-daily-wage-workers-struggle-for-survival/1955?photo-224582>.

²³ Dolly, *SME sector in India – statistics, trends, reports*, EVOMA (Sept. 28, 2017), <https://evoma.com/business-centre/sme-sector-in-india-statistics-trends-reports/>.

²⁴ Tish Sanghera, *World's biggest virus lockdown saves lives, but hurts businesses*, ALJAZEERA (April 20, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/world-biggest-virus-lockdown-saves-lives-hurts-businesses-200417081325170.html>.

Daily Wage Labourers and Small Vendors:

Awareness of carrying out daily work without infecting other people must be created. The usage of masks and sanitizers must be regulated. Daily work labourers have to bring this “Social distancing method” in their daily life routine to carry on their trade. Funds must be provided to such people through schemes to set up jobs during lockdowns to manage their daily expenditure. Putting a halt on every activity and movement will not bring about any difference in the spread of the virus, instead teaching people on how to tackle the disease would be more effective.

Small Businesses:

Small businesses have scarce cash reserves and a way smaller margin to manage slumps. A way to manage would be put forth in a three-fold strategy.

1. Compare the Business Model and the Market Conditions.

Firstly, businesses must conduct a thorough self-assessment as to where they stand in the market by ascertaining their financial position. This may be done by comparing all sources of absolute revenue to expenses- fixed and variable. Considering the market change, this will help owners plan ahead. Cash flow and credit cycles must be tracked.

2. Alter Operation Policy.

Since we have no idea as to how long the lockdown will last, it is safe to say that small businesses must adapt their business plan in order to survive the damaged economy that will emerge from the pandemic. The focus must be on reducing variable expenses, and renegotiating fixed expenses. Sales strategy may be revisited, especially with the increase of social distancing, as physical contact may not be welcome. If possible, changing up the products so as to accommodate a shift in the market would be advisable. Businesses may also consider selling online.²⁵

3. Transparent communication and Social Consciousness.

It is important to notify vendors and sellers in case of delay in payment, all contracting parties should be given prior notification in order to facilitate a smooth relationship. Similarly, companies should consider minimising salary cuts and lay-offs.

If there’s anything we have learnt from previous dips, it’s that eventually, the economy will always bounce back. However, the fate of the small businesses lay in balance. ***

5.) The Impact of the Lockdown on Family Life

²⁵ Roma Priya, *Survival strategies for businesses during COVID-19 lockdown*, ECONOMIC TIMES (Apr 25, 2020, 12.24 PM), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/hr-leadership/leadership/survival-strategies-for-businesses-during-covid-19-lockdown/articleshow/75371157.cms>.

Despite the perennial flow of articles claiming that the lockdown is a blessing for the family, it is important to remember that a loving family is a comfort and a privilege. The lockdown indeed offers an undeniable opportunity to strengthen the familial bonds- we are now spending more time together, dining with each other, and enjoying each other's company. This is indeed reflected in the migrant workers' perilous journey of walking back home- in times of crisis, the only ones you can turn to are your family. However, it must be remembered that families are as dysfunctional as they are diverse. There is a predator outside the home in the form of COVID-19, but for many people, there is a predator inside the home as well.

According to a 2005 survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, around two in every five women aged between 15 to 49 have experienced some form of domestic abuse from their husbands²⁶. The popular medical journal, *The Lancet*, conducted a study in 2014, where they reported that domestic violence affects an alarming 27.5 million women in India.²⁷ This includes physical and emotional abuse, marital rape and other sexual violence, honour killing, and dowry harassment.

²⁶ Sunita Kishor and Kamla Gupta, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India*, NATIONAL FAMILY HEALTH SURVEY (NFHS-3), INDIA (2005-06), <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/od57/od57.pdf>.

²⁷ Anita Raj, *Sexual Violence and rape in India*, Vol 383, *The Lancet*, p.865 (2014).

As for child abuse, 94.8% of child sexual abuse cases involve persons that the child knew, and not strangers. 35.8% of this was neighbours, and 10% was the child's own direct family members²⁸. Child abuse is something that is extremely detrimental to the child's development. It includes physical, emotional, and psychological torment and/or exploitation, often done through familial channels. In many cases, school or college offered a temporary respite from the abuse at home, as did the parents going to work.

A study by the *Agewell* Foundation, an NGO working for the rights of the elderly, revealed that more than 71% of elders in India face harassment or some sort of humiliation from their family members²⁹. This is especially true for senior citizens who are dependent on their families, both physically and financially. Their helplessness is accentuated by their physical and/or psychological issues. One of the recognised risk factors for elder abuse is a shared living situation³⁰.

²⁸ Amisha U. Pathak, *Child Abuse in India- An Analysis*, INDIA THINK COUNCIL, <http://www.indiathink.org/Child-Abuse-in-India-An-Analysis-by-Amisha-u-Pathak.pdf>.

²⁹ *Over 71 pc senior citizens in India victims of abuse by family members: Survey*, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (June 13, 2019, 10:26 PM), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/over-71-pc-senior-citizens-in-india-victims-of-abuse-by-family-members-survey/articleshow/69777963.cms?from=mdr>.

³⁰ *Elder Abuse*, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (June 8, 2020),

The lockdown, while certainly remaining a commendable effort for saving countless lives, has failed to address the situation by not taking any steps in order to help the millions of vulnerable citizens who are trapped under the same roof as their abusers. Moreover, the added economic and financial stress of lay-offs and spouses losing jobs adds to the tension in the household, with husbands taking their frustrations out on their wives, children, and parents.

The largest hurdle here is that of reporting. It is no secret that most cases of familial violence go unreported. With their abusers in close quarters, the abused either stay silent, or are unable to seek help. They are cut off from their regular support systems, be it friends or co-workers. There is now a lack of access to legal aid clinics, crisis centres and more importantly, sexual and reproductive health centres.

In Jingzhou, the city in China where COVID-19 was first detected, after lockdown measures were implemented, the number of reported domestic violence cases tripled.³¹ In April, a report by the National Commission for Women reflected an almost 100% increase in such cases.

Another terrifying aspect of the lockdown is the “alarming” spike in cases of child marriage. In a

span of two weeks, a government helpline received over 37 calls regarding children being married off.³² A possible reason for this could be that with the number of mouths to feed increasing and the financial means decreasing, people are looking for ways to dispose of their dependents.

6.) The Psychiatric Impact on Addicts

With the lockdown being enforced with only a brief notification four hours earlier, every citizen in India was in a flurry as to how their lives would change. Among these people were alcoholics, drug addicts, and people undergoing rehabilitation. These people are struggling to cope with the new lockdown, with late night calls being made in order to procure alcohol/cigarettes/drugs, trips to the pharmacy to stock up on nicotine patches, and drug addicts wondering where they would get their next fix from. People who stockpiled liquor and cigarettes began selling them for a much higher price. Addiction counsellors began noticing a spike in calls from addicts suffering from withdrawal symptoms, and addicts began lashing out by taking out their frustration on family members.

<https://www.who.int/en/news-room/factsheets/detail/elder-abuse>.

³¹ Shemin Joy, *Coronavirus Crisis: No lockdown for domestic violence*, DECCAN HERALD (April 26, 2020, 12:14 AM), <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/insight/coronavirus-crisis-no-lockdown-for-domestic-violence-829941.html>.

³² ROHINI SWAMY, *Amid COVID crisis, Karnataka sees „abnormal rise” in child marriage, abuse complaints*, THE PRINT (April 24, 2020, 1:58 PM), <https://theprint.in/india/amid-covid-crisis-karnataka-sees-abnormal-rise-in-child-marriage-abuse-complaints/407652/>.

COVID-19 isn't the only thing that's killing people- the largest cause of the non-coronavirus deaths was suicide.³³

80 people committed suicide due to fear of the virus and 45 people due to withdrawal symptoms. There are cases of people drinking hand sanitisers, and disinfectants is to cope up with the withdrawal. The number of cases of COVID deaths and the number of alcohol withdrawal deaths was both 5 in Tamil Nadu till the 5th of April. In fact, in Kerala, the state that is being praised for its timely action in curbing the pandemic, addiction has left its mark. The state's official death toll was 2 people as of March 30. By that time, Kerala had registered 8 cases of death by suicide due to the inability to cope with alcohol withdrawal.³⁴ Kerala and Meghalaya faced staunch criticism from the Indian Medical Association for instructing that people unable to cope could procure alcohol through a doctor's prescription.

As for the drug addicts, it is a whole other story. As such substances are banned, it will not be

easy to get the medication to cope, unlike alcoholics and cigarette addicts. They may resort to alternative means of getting the substances, administering possibly fatal substances. As the price would skyrocket due to lockdown, they may resort to criminal means to be able to afford it.

Addiction is a fairly taboo topic in Indian society. It is very difficult for addicts to seek help. Withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, shivering, headache, nausea, and insomnia. More serious symptoms include hallucinations and seizures. Due attention and monitoring must be done in order to aid these people.

7.) Impact on Physically Disabled People

The term physically challenged consists of people who have problems with their bodies in such a way that it is difficult for them to do things that others can do with ease. Around 150 million physically disabled people live in India, with around 30 million facing severe disabilities.³⁵ These people especially face difficulties during the lockdown.

With the social distancing policies implemented, they will not be able to communicate their problems to their doctors or caretakers. They will face difficulties in learning information

³³ *Suicide leading cause for over 300 lockdown deaths in India, says study*, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (May 5, 2020, 3:16 PM), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/suicide-leading-cause-for-over-300-lockdown-deaths-in-india-says-study/articleshow/75519279.cms>.

³⁴ *COVID-19 Lockdown May Have Debilitating Effect on Alcoholics, Drug Addicts, Those in Rehab: Psychiatrists*, OUTLOOK (June 1, 2020), <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-covid-19-lockdown-may-have-debilitating-effect-on-alcoholics-drug-addicts-those-in-rehab-psychiatrists/349820>.

³⁵ G.V.S Murthy, *Coronavirus: People with disabilities have special issues during virus outbreak*, THE HINDU (April 12, 2020, 09:26 PM), <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/coronavirus-people-with-disabilities-have-special-issues-during-virus-outbreak-says-indian-indian-institute-of-public-health-chief-gvs-murthy/article31324294.ece>.

about prevention and so on. Visually impaired people, especially, rely on their sense of touch and therefore, will find it difficult to socially distance. They must touch surfaces to navigate their way, touch surfaces inscribed with braille to read, and touch/hold peoples' hands to be guided. With everyone wearing a mask, hearing impaired people will not be able to lip-read. To help people stuck in such a situation, an Indonesian couple stitched see-through masks in order to make sure that hearing-impaired people do not miss out on communication.³⁶ Other people with physical disabilities may not be able to feed themselves, or maintain proper hygiene. Moreover, people with physical disabilities are more susceptible to diabetes and other diseases, putting them at greater risk due to comorbidities.

Healing Strategy:

The government must take efforts to make pamphlets and other sources of information more accessible to physically disabled people. An officer must be appointed in selected areas to monitor the needs and grievances of these citizens. Citizens should mobilise support by volunteering to check up on the physically disabled people that live close to them. This can be done by providing them with meals and other forms of aid. Hospitals must provide easier

access and priority for them. Humane action is the need of the hour.

8.) CONCLUSION

The soul of humanity is highlighted when actions are taken to uplift the downtrodden. The COVID-19 crisis is prevalent all over the world and is a huge loss for mankind. A slow response and resolution, especially with a huge population affected by poverty, will cause a great loss to the human resources of a country. With 80% of India's workforce employed in the informal sector and one-third working as casual labour, the virus spread and subsequent unplanned lockdowns have created havoc for millions. As exhibited, this crisis will devastate the world's most vulnerable people. It is the responsibility of the government and the people of privileged society to help the poor during this crisis.

With the imposition of the lockdown, many people have lost opportunities to earn and are unable to meet their daily ends. Due to lack of planning and execution, government schemes have failed when it comes to resource mobilisation and sustaining the supply chain. The state and central governments lacked vital cooperation during execution.

The constitutional right to shelter is enshrined in Article 21, the right to life and personal liberty. It remains to be seen whether the state will secure said right and uphold the right to dignity of these citizens. The strategy adopted should be one that counters threats while protecting and

³⁶ Zarafshan Shiraz, *COVID-19: Couple Stitch See-Through Masks for People with Hearing Aid to Enable Easy Lip Reading*, INDIA.COM (May 3, 2020, 3:48 PM), <https://www.india.com/viral/covid-19-couple-stitch-see-through-masks-for-people-with-hearing-aid-to-enable-easy-lip-reading-4018419/>.

balancing human rights and the rule of law. Governments should give responses in such a transparent and responsive way that they can be held accountable. Vulnerable sections of society already face discrimination based on their economic and social status. This situation has only worsened during the pandemic. In times of crisis, effective and inclusive solutions are imperative to address the emergency of today and the recovery of tomorrow.