

From Patterns to Freefall: Exposing the Vulnerability of Human Predicament in the Times of the Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 demands a paradigm shift in modes of human interaction and challenges hegemonic social structures to adapt and evolve themselves to the altered reality of human existence. Across the world, these shifts have been triggered by the new social order threatening to erase existing social systems. My paper attempts to look at the lives of the precariats, caught up within neoliberal structures, assuming these structures to be hegemonic normative systems, and the manner in which they refuse to change, thereby putting the precariats into a more exploitative crisis situation, dehumanizing them, demonizing them, thereby risking their erasure from the socio-political and legal systems that rule the world. I have used the context of India to substantiate my argument. My paper is divided into the following sections: a reading into the concept of precarity and contextualizing it in the neoliberal framework, analysing the pandemic against precarity using examples from Indian society.

Key-words: Precarity, Vulnerability, Epidemic, India, Othering

1. Introduction

India, along with the rest of the world, is on an arduous journey through the terrifying and uncertain path created by the pandemic COVID-19. The fear triggered by the pandemic is unprecedented and administration everywhere faltered. Though some of the nations maneuvered through the difficult times with minimal damages, some others like India suffered and struggled to reduce the severity of the pandemic attack. Cases in India have risen phenomenally over the months and remains at the third position globally, with regards to the total number of cases. India's statistics reveal certain structural flaws that has worsened the condition. With millions living lives of precarity, India faces an uphill task, in reducing the number of cases and above all, creating a conducive

atmosphere for the nation and its people to survive the pandemic and to rebuild the nation after world recovers from this nightmare.

2. Precarity

Precarity became a key component of human existence in the contemporary world, in neoliberal societies, to be precise. Guy Standing calls the precariat “globalisation’s child” (Standing, 2011). He calls the precariat “a class-in-the-making” (Standing, 2011) in a world of “fragmented class structures” (Standing, 2011). The precariat is an entity, that across the world, is defined by the insecurity of living in precarious conditions and therefore the precariat is often denied the rights and privileges of a citizen. He further defines them as having “labor insecurity, insecure social income” and lacking a work-based identity” (Standing, 2011). It also denies the precariat agency and hence vulnerable to social crises and othering of multifarious forms. In the neoliberal state, she cannot trust the state and can expect no protection, leave alone, welfare measures from the state. Neoliberalism keeps the system unstable and the precariat in this state of uncertainty fears othering and erasure. Precariat in this contemporary world can be the migrant, the young, the other genders and various other categories of people who remain in the margins and are voiceless against injustices and multifarious forms of oppression. The insecurity that is built into the neoliberal structures creates conditions of precarity. While other modes of oppression and injustice has thrived in societies globally, precarity has emerged as a condition of existence, post the globalization of neoliberal norms and practices. Precarity is thus “a term designating a historical moment marked by the emergence of a new global norm of contingent employment, social risk and fragmented life situations – without security, protection or predictability. (Schierup and Jorgensen, 2012).

As the world moves into the crisis caused by the pandemic, leading to disruptions that demand altered perceptions of social living, vulnerability plays an important role. The deeply divided neoliberal world is shaken to its core by the pandemic, and the resultant social changes do not seek to unravel the existent structures, rather they aim to reinforce and validate the deep-seated social inequalities, the governments of several nations playing along in this game of othering and dehumanization. The vulnerable among the population, the marginalized, the precarious, are exposed to the worst forms of othering and alienation that challenges their very existence. Judith Butler in an interview spoke of vulnerability which I will use in this context. “Vulnerability ... names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives... We are impressed upon by the environment, social worlds and intimate contact... That impressionability and porosity define our

embodied social lives... These reciprocal and material modes of sharing describe a crucial dimension of our vulnerability, intertwinements and interdependence of our embodied social life” (Butler, 2020). In the contemporary world, where human interconnectedness is foregrounded in the times of the pandemic, vulnerability of certain oppressed classes, as against the rest of the population becomes more striking. “There are at least two lessons about vulnerability that follow: it describes a shared condition of social life, of interdependency, exposure and porosity; it names the greater likelihood of dying, understood as the fatal consequence of a pervasive social inequality” (Butler, 2020). The vulnerability or precarity of those classes, the precariats, who are marginalized and oppressed, is a reality, while the causes for their precarity may be varied and diverse. They are caught in a “situation of endemic and permanent uncertainty” (Baumann, 1999) and their situation made vulnerable by the pandemic, the increased surveillance often creating unimaginable misery to the precariats everywhere in the world, be it the refugee, the migrant laborer, the transgender people or the disabled.

3. Neoliberalism and Precarity

COVID-19 as a pandemic threatens to shatter fundamental normative structures that substantiate neoliberalism, in postmodern social relationships. Neoliberalism with its thrust on control, on the power and will of the individuals to shape their destinies suffers a setback in this altered reality of the world reeling under the pressure of the pandemic. Human beings have survived through centuries believing in certain values and norms and disciplining the mind has always been about inculcating these values, internalizing them in order to live a life of contentment as social beings, as citizens, as members of a community, of a nation. Enlightenment and the subsequent strides towards modernity accompanied by the growing popularity of capitalism created the foundations of contemporary society, foregrounding the values of utilitarianism and centrality of human experiences. The post-Fordist and neoliberal structures encouraged the growth of an individualistic sensibility which helps in the politics of identity, creating a consumerist culture foregrounding identities. Values of capitalist society were internalized by the generations that believed in the normative patterns validated by neoliberalism and the narratives of personal success stories. These became more pervasive due to the presence of social media and the mass mediated images of consumption and the lifestyle of luxury and abundance perpetuated by these images.

The neoliberal market prefers to foreground the aspect of living rather than death and encourages us to take our steps backwards as we as biological beings move towards death, the fact of our mortality being constantly ignored. The pandemic challenges us to redefine these paradigms of

human existence, the morbidity of living beings is shockingly reminded through the masks, the gloves, the PPE kits that have become an integral part of human social existence. From fixed patterns of living to major plans for the future, from the molecular to the molar strata of living, human existence has been scheduled to function within structured patterns, and every attempt to civilize human beings has been towards organizing lives and futures at multifarious levels of existence. The pandemic overthrows those values and demands reassessments and revision of perspectives. The uncertainty of human existence stares at the face of a rigid social structure that perpetually demands its people to plan and organize into the future. It is a disruption of lifestyle patterns rooted in the values of neoliberalism. Yet the world seems to adhere to the neoliberal social hegemonies even as the pandemic is set to transform social definitions, a major paradox to be mentioned in this regard is the manner in which the pandemic has emerged as a tool for othering in certain nations.

When the pandemic struck human lives on a massive scale, it challenged the foundations of neoliberal structures carefully built to gratify the greed and ambition of the hegemonic powers across the world. A shell-shocked humanity attempted to survive, opted to find means to tide over the crisis, without upsetting the equilibrium, an illusion of normalcy created by the simulacrum set in place by neoliberal forces. As we complete a couple of months of the pandemic, it is apparent that the goal to survive, through multifarious means, seem to reinforce the exploitative structures of neoliberalism, everywhere in the world. The economic divide is widening, the process of marginalization and othering is worse, the states preferring to ignore the worsening plight of the poor, and the precarious lives of the other is no longer discussed or considered to be worth. This can be substantiated by analysing the condition of the precariat class in India. Precarity in India is experienced at the level of class, religion and caste identities, gender, disability and various other categories adding to this group of citizens, increasingly finding themselves alienated and othered in a nation currently occupying third position among the nations having the largest number of Covid positive patients.

While the number of billionaires increased rapidly after the nation embraced the values of globalized capitalism, the economic divide has widened and the lowest economic sections of the society find themselves unemployed and without the protective mechanisms a welfare state aims to provide them. Turning the labor class into a category of precariats, vulnerable to the shifting economic environment, the pandemic has rendered them vulnerable in every aspect. In India, a total lockdown of the nation happened without adequate preparation, resulting in a largescale migration of the laboring class from the cities to the rural areas, the people forced to walk for days. Their miserable plight resulting in several deaths did not stir the collective conscience of the nation nor bring about any radical shifts in governmental policies regarding the migrant laborers. The pandemic

became an opportunity to swiftly legitimize labor laws that are clearly exploitative in nature, intended to build a market, with ease of business for multinational corporates interested in investing in Indian markets.

4. Precarity: The Indian Context

India as a secular democracy has been witnessing major transformations, challenging the fundamental principles of the nation, the foundations of a fragile democracy like India. The ideological shift towards a Hindu majoritarian hegemony is reflected in the manner in which the nation confronts the pandemic as well. The politics of precarity in this new India, neoliberal and deeply divisive, with identity politics defining the identity of the nation, is clearly evident in this context as well. A few incidents to be mentioned in this context are as follows: The demonization of the entire Muslim community following the outbreak of Covid-19 cases among the people who attended the *Tablighi Jamaat* gathering. This happened in contrast to the Hindu community which has been organizing functions including one organized by the Hindu majority government of Uttar Pradesh and the temple festival at *Aattukal*, Kerala, where thousands of women devotees gather to offer obeisance to the famed goddess. The second incident to be mentioned is the reverse migration of the laborers who were denied basic facilities to travel and were left to their misery, while the privileged class stayed at home during the lockdown that was declared with little time to prepare for the event.

India has been a distinct site where precarity has resulted in the process of othering and victimization of this category of people is visible, the misery of these people often ignored or downplayed by the media and the government. Precarity is due to the caste identities, class categories, gender and disabilities that create social backwardness of various kinds. Muslims have been targeted and a prominent instance is the Tablighi gathering that occurred in Delhi, just before the national lockdown started in March. Tablighi religious group is a sub sect of the deoband Muslims, and they had congregated in Delhi, in March, which was held with prior permission from the civic authorities. Yet when a few Covid positive cases were reported from among the group, the whole Muslim community was demonized. Twitter saw hashtags like #coronajihad and #coronabombstablighi trending during the lockdown period in India (Ellis-Peterson and Rahman).

Migrant laborers are another category of Indian citizens who were rendered homeless and jobless with a Lockdown that was declared without allowing the people to prepare for the event. A mass exodus that led to the death of 110 people, as on May 16, 2020, while millions underwent the

tedious journey of reverse migration (Venkatraman et al, 2020). Unofficial reports published in newspapers suggest that 30 million laborers, roughly 15-20% of the urban workforce travelled back from urban to rural India. Majority of them found no means of transportation and travelled on foot for several days, while the governments and mainstream media ignored the plight of these people. Some of the states sprayed them with chemical disinfectants as they reach their home states.

Gender plays a prominent role in defining the precariat and in the times of the pandemic, women, especially belonging the lower classes of society are adversely affected. The category of domestic workers, the maid servants, women who are worst exploited among the informal work force in India, saw themselves ousted from their workplaces and most of them remained jobless for several months. In major cities, they were ousted from their homes and forced to migrate to their homes in distant villages. These house maids manage with minimal food supplies and are unaware of resources available to them (Saavriti, 2020). One of the maids mentioned to the reporter about the financial constraints that make it difficult for her to buy products to ensure her and her children's safety during the times of the pandemic. So she "made masks with scrapped clothes" (Saavriti, 2020). Women from middle class and upper class families too encounter adverse situations, worsened by the pandemic. Domestic violence during mandatory lockdowns has increased manifold, with cases of abuse being reported from across the country. Shalu Nigam, an advocate who works on domestic violence writes thus: "It is not that women are not being abused in homes earlier, but during the lockdown, the virus is mirroring and magnifying the discrimination, class inequalities, oppressions, privileges, casteism and the patriarchal violence all of which already existing in the male-dominated society. In fact, structural gender-based violence is being reiterated during the lockdown ... and women are now being economically and socially disempowered" (2020). Sex workers are another category of women to be mentioned in this context.

India's lockdown sees striking similarities with its colonial past when measures used to "segregate, isolate, and confine people during epidemics" are invoked using the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897, originally enforced by the "British government during plague outbreaks" (Chakrabarti, 2020). It gave special powers to the state and the "resurrection of the Act for Covid-19 reflects colonial modes of drastic governmental action, which has once again exposed the most vulnerable communities to greater health and economic risks" (Chakrabarti, 2020). "In India, the scientific idea of 'asymptomatic carrier' is introducing new forms of 'untouchability'. Upper caste and class Indians are seeking to distance themselves from the poor, Muslims, and lower castes, whom they accuse as the carriers of the virus" (Chakrabarti, 2020). Dalits are a major social category of people, who are precariats, due to their economic and social backwardness, victimized in this state of exception. They

are approximately 200 million people, their marginalized status rendering them vulnerable to the pandemic, and their identity as outcasts endangers them with the possibility of being discriminated against, and othered by the mainstream society (Ganguly, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Neoliberal structures that rule the social systems, including health care and pharmaceutical industries, constantly remould human sensibilities, ensuring that even a pandemic affirming the presence of assemblages that connect life, both human and non-human, does not destabilise the deeply divisive and inherently oppressive systems of power and hegemony. Even as human beings struggle to survive, having been habituated to think within patterns, to live every moment with a sense of uncertainty, they are compelled to fit in to the oppressive power structures, thereby worsening their state of precarity. When the states and governments are populist, like in India, the citizens suffer, their vulnerability increased manifold times. The pandemic has led to a process of deterritorialization, the world in a state of flux, and the hegemonic structures work towards rebuilding the equilibrium of power, while the precariats get dehumanized and erased from all public social discourses. The state of free fall has merely made the conditions of the precariats more precarious and vulnerable to socio-political and economic disruptions and Indian society, turning increasingly neoliberal is a perfect case study in this context.

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