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Widening Urban Divide: COVID-19 and the Unequal Citizenship

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"COVID-19 lockdown means starvation," laments Lila, a street vendor in Manila, in the Philippines. Lila has previously weathered police harassment and countless evictions. But the COVID-19 crisis, she says, is a different catastrophe. In Dhaka in Bangladesh, domestic worker Shamima echoes Lila's concern: "We have to drink poison if we cannot go out for work. Who will save us from hunger?" These accounts reflect the sentiments of many informal workers in Asian megacities which have recorded high number of cases in their countries. As governments scramble for an effective approach to combat the pandemic, millions of urban poor like Lila and Shamima endure its impact with limited state assistance and unjust policy enforcement.

Inadequate state support

On 1 April, twenty-one residents of San Roque, an informal settlement of 30,000 people in the northern part of Metro Manila, were jailed for voicing discontent and seeking aid to fight hunger. While the national government has distributed PhP8,000 (US\$157 per household) to the most impoverished families, around five million households have been excluded from the list of beneficiaries. In many areas, cash aid distribution has been marred by irregularities.

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people has also not benefited all poor residents. Many urban poor had to rely on the NGOs to fill this void. However, local NGOs have only provided financial aid to the most vulnerable groups.

In Delhi, migrants protested about the lack of money and food due to the abruptness of lockdown, and demanded transport to go back to their villages. Amid international criticism, the government announced relief measures for the poor and transport facilities for the migrants. However, experts have warned that

the aid package for the poor is insufficient, as many undocumented urban poor people cannot access the funds. Similarly, travel arrangements have been fraught with inconsistencies. Opportunist agents have sprung up swindling the migrants for a ticket back home.

These incidents exposed the dire condition of daily-wage earners, who have been forced to stop working due to tough movement restrictions. The limited state assistance has compelled some urban poor to set up community kitchens, spend their own savings and rely on aid from civic groups to arrest hunger.

Urban exodus

With fears that COVID-19 would spread rapidly in poor, dense urban settlements, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte issued an Executive Order reviving the 'Balik Probinsya' (Return to the Provinces) programme. This policy was intended to de-congest Metro Manila and drive balanced and inclusive urban and rural development. However, critics claim this rehashed scheme to dump the urban poor in the provinces is unlikely to succeed without significant development and job opportunities in rural areas.

In Bangladesh, the government's declaration of a 10-day holiday beginning on 26 March impelled many urban poor, including garment workers, to rush to their rural homes two days earlier. The government later banned travel on water, rail, and air routes and suspended road transportation. This situation forced many garment

workers to walk hundreds of miles to return to Dhaka to save their jobs.

In India, the national lockdown left many urban poor at the mercy of their employers, most of whom had abandoned them. Exposed to hunger, thousands of migrants walked for miles, while some rode on bicycles for days to return to their rural hometowns. As one migrant, Jai, put it, "for the poor, the choice is between dying of hunger or exposure to coronavirus". As reports of the migrant exodus began circulating in the media, the government urged them to stay put and promised food and shelter, fearing they would spread the virus. But the assurance came very late; many migrants who stayed put had to beg for survival.

Unjust enforcement of lockdown rules

The limited state assistance and forced urban exodus have been exacerbated by an inequitable and violent response to the crisis. In the Philippines, over 100,000 people have been arrested for violating curfew and quarantine restrictions since the lockdown was enforced. The United Nations has described the country's approach as highly militarised, with reported human rights abuses. Some local officials locked quarantine violators in dog cages and coffins. This heavy-handed approach is in stark contrast to how the government has handled violations committed by some state officials.

In Bangladesh, the urban poor faced discrimination when the Dhaka Metropolitan Police allowed hotels and restaurants in the capital to sell iftar (a meal taken by Muslims at sundown to break the daily Ramadan fast) items on 27 April. However, they did not allow small eateries to set up stalls on the footpaths. This means the informal food traders are not allowed to operate any business in public spaces.

Returning migrants in India were exposed to inhumane quarantine practices, both on their way home and once they reached their villages. Images of workers being sprayed with disinfectant have emerged from different parts of India. In some



villages, they were forced to quarantine on trees and in fields, far from the residential clusters. The bias against the poor was evident since the middle class and rich returning by air were not subjected to this kind of discrimination, even though the virus had reached India by air passengers.

Unequal experiences of (urban) citizenship

These accounts reveal a fundamental issue in many Global South cities – the uneven experiences of urban citizenship. Inadequate state support, leading to a 'voluntary' exodus, and the 'return to the provinces' approach reveals how governments consider the urban poor as a burden, with little recognition of their contribution to the urban economy. The 'stay-put' strategy without offering provisions or giving any assurances shows how migrants are treated as dispensable.

Double standards prevail in the administration of justice in unequal

cities. The poor and vulnerable are criminalised and punished, while those in power are treated with compassion. In India and Bangladesh, the sudden imposition of lockdown without warning or adequate assistance exposes how the poor are invisible to the state gaze.

It is important to end by emphasising how solidarity-based initiatives – e.g. community kitchens and NGO assistance – create spaces of urban belonging and enable the poor to cope with the onslaught of COVID-19. Yet they also reveal the enduring struggle of impoverished urban residents to realise the substantive meanings and practices of being a 'citizen' in the city. COVID-19 reminds us how informal employment and deep-rooted inequality in these megacities mean the vulnerabilities and opportunities to recover from the pandemic are unevenly distributed. ♦

All names of the interviewees in this article are pseudonyms we used to protect their identity. We thank Ravish Alam, Parul Sharma and other participants for their inputs.

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