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Turbulence ahead: labour and struggles in times of the Covid-19 pandemic in India

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ABSTRACT

One year into the Covid-19 pandemic, India is in the midst of a struggle over its future economic and social relations. During this period, the Indian state has pursued policies that have further intensified labour exploitation and widened inequality. These policies can be located in prior struggles to reproduce conditions for accumulation and to resolve the crisis of social reproduction. This article argues that this process is likely to continue even after the economic recovery from the pandemic in India and elsewhere, and these contestations may open potential opportunities for linking struggles across existing boundaries.

RÉSUMÉ

Un an après le début de la pandémie de COVID-19, l'Inde se trouve plongée dans une lutte concernant ses futures relations économiques et sociales. Au cours de cette période, l'État indien a entériné des mesures intensifiant l'exploitation des travailleurs et augmentant les inégalités. Ces mesures peuvent être situées dans le contexte de luttes antérieures pour reproduire les conditions d'accumulation et de résoudre la crise de reproduction sociale. Cet article démontre que ce processus a de grandes chances de subsister en dépit de la reprise économique après la pandémie, que ce soit en Inde ou ailleurs. Ces contestations pourraient alors ouvrir la voie à une nouvelle forme de collaboration entre les différents mouvements sociaux.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the policy response to it have brought about health and humanitarian crises, but they have also resulted in unprecedented changes to the economy and society across the world. Over the past year, governments have introduced curfews, lockdown, physical distancing, quarantine, and other isolation measures of varying degrees as the virus spread around the globe. In the US and the UK, it was estimated that around half of those employed worked remotely in April and May 2020 (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Office for National Statistics 2020). This has inspired corporate-induced imaginations to promote techniques and regimes in order to manage a remote and flexible "future of work" by fast-tracking the use of robots, drones and artificial

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intelligence to replace human labour (Naudé 2020; World Economic Forum 2020). In contrast, Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Khalid (2020) estimate that about 15 per cent of workers globally are engaged in jobs which cannot be carried out by remote working or "telework", but that this proportion is higher amongst low income, precariously employed workers particularly those in the informal sector in developing countries.

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on labour and struggles in India. In addition to the scale of ensuing economic, social and humanitarian crises, the perspectives and debates in India enables the impact of Covid-19 on labour to be examined in a context where 90 per cent of the working population are informally employed, and where juridical and institutional boundaries of many of the labouring activities, as well as distinctions between productive and reproductive activities, have always been inherently blurred. From this perspective, the "future of work" unfolding in response to the pandemic appears differently. The response to Covid-19 has worsened material conditions of subsistence for the majority of the labouring class in India, has resulted in "an increase in trafficking, bonded labour, and slave-like working conditions" (Sinha 2020a) and has also further widened inequality between the top billionaires and the working poor (Berkhout et al. 2021).

At the same time, processes that contributed to the intensification of labour exploitation and widening inequality in India can be located within broader regimes of accumulation and social reproduction (Fraser 2016, 103–104). The inertia of competitive accumulation compelling capital to ever expand the scope and possibilities of exploitation tends to undermine social reproduction, the very process that is indispensable for the possibility of production of surplus value (Mies 2014; Federici 2017; Mezzadri 2016; Bhattacharya 2017). This gives rise to an *inherent* tendency for crises of social reproduction to emerge in capitalism, which undermines the possibility and stability of capitalist accumulation. Capitalist societies have responded to these crises by organising reproductive work differently throughout the history. This paper argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the crisis of care and social reproduction for the majority of the working poor in India and elsewhere, as reflected in the renewed debate on the importance of social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2020; Dattani 2020; Mezzadri 2020; Pulignano 2020).

In the meantime, the past year has seen a surge in labour and social movements of various scales and types across the world. Drawing on cases from India, this article shows that these disparate movements draw on bargaining power and organisational capabilities that have developed through distinct prior struggles, which have been impacted differently by the pandemic and policy responses to it. It is argued that even if the projected "V-shape" economic recovery materialises, these movements are likely to continue to shape the post-Covid economic and social relations in India and elsewhere, especially if they challenge existing boundaries and link struggles across them.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section outlines the economic and social impacts of the pandemic in intensifying the crisis of social reproduction for the majority of the labouring class and in unevenly shifting bargaining relations in India. This is followed by a section evaluating the policies that the Indian state pushed through during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the struggles that have been ensuing in all their different manifestations, by situating them within prior policy developments and debates. The concluding section summarises the arguments and suggests possible spaces and avenues for collective political responses.

Crisis of social reproduction in India: informality, mobility, and inequality

In India, the first case of Covid-19 was identified in Kerala on 30 January 2020. One year on, at the time of the writing in early February 2021, India has nearly 11 million confirmed cases of the virus, the second highest in the world after the US. Daily new infections peaked at nearly 98 thousand people in early September 2020, and have since dropped to less than 20 thousand cases per day. While the vaccination programme has started, it remains to be seen if the epidemic in India will come to an end without a significant nation-wide "second wave" as observed in other countries. However, due to the limited capacity to test for the virus, these figures reported by the authorities in India are thought to severely underreport the actual extent of the spread, with alternative estimates ranging from 200 to 600 million infections amongst a population of 1380 million (John and Seshadri 2020). This has led to suggestions that India has achieved a degree of "herd immunity", possibly reflecting the ineffectiveness of the Indian government's national lockdown and other containment measures (S. Agarwal 2021).

The Indian government announced the nationwide lockdown on 25 March 2020, only 4 hours before the measure was imposed, initially for three weeks. It ultimately continued for 75 days until the start of the phased reopening on 8 June, although localised lockdown in major cities and some states continued to be in place. India's lockdown was seen at the time as amongst the "strictest" (Hale et al. 2020), and was hailed by the media as a superior response to the pandemic by Prime Minister Modi and his government (Times of India 2020). The lockdown restricted people from leaving their homes, and suspended all transport services with the exception of essential goods, fire, police and emergency services (ILO 2020). While lockdown measures in India ultimately were ineffective as they did not lead to the "flattening of the curve", they brought about incalculable damage to the livelihood of a large section its population (Bukhari 2020; Kannan 2020).

Ultimately, the lockdown and other policy measures in India led to a sharp rise in the unemployment rate, which peaked at 23.5 per cent in May, but has since been fluctuating between 6.5 and 9 per cent (CMIE 2021). The decline in the unemployment rate after June is likely reflecting the initial absorption of the unemployed in rural areas, partly by the publicly funded generation of non-agricultural work discussed below, but also by the increase of self-employment and other forms of precarious work across the country, resulting in increased underemployment and the further decline of living standards amongst the working poor (R. Kapoor 2020).

In addition, it reflects the limited ability of the vast majority of Indian workers to subsist without sustained paid employment of some form. According to the periodic labour force survey carried out in 2018, India is estimated to have had 461 million workers, 418 million or 89 per cent of whom engaged in informal work by either working in the informal sector, informally working in the formal sector, or being self-employed (Government of India 2019). Kannan (2020) in particular highlights that the estimated 128 million workers who are either in casual employment or self-employed are particularly at high risk of losing their jobs. Indeed, despite the government's directive for retaining employment and pay, a survey conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies (2020) involving 1405 workers who reached out for food support in north India, shows that about 94 per cent had not received any pay 45 days into the lockdown.

Kannan also estimates that two thirds of informal workers earn less than Rs. 375 per day, which is recommended by the government's own committee as the national minimum wage necessary to meet their household basic needs at 2017–18 prices. Informally employed workers also have limited access to compensation or social protection schemes if they are laid-off or retrenched (Ray 2020).

In Indian cities, where there is drastic inequality in the distribution of urban spaces and resources, the experience of the stringent lockdown imposed by the national government is starkly different between those with and those without the capacity to maintain physical distancing measures or to access the sanitary amenities required protect themselves and their families from the virus. Khan and Abraham (2020) draw on the National Sample Survey (NSS) data from 2018 to highlight that self-isolation at home is difficult for 60 per cent of the population given that "almost a third of the rural population and half of the urban population in India live in houses where the per capita space available is less than a single room". They also report that 40 per cent of urban households and 75 per cent of rural households in India do not have access to tap water in their house or within their residential premises, making the hand sanitising guidance difficult to implement. Furthermore, the limited space further heightens the blurring of the division between paid and unpaid work times, as well as the boundary between productive and reproductive labouring activities within the residential premises.

Amongst these precarious workers engaged in informal employment, the most severely impacted have been the internal migrants. The exact number is unknown since the government does not have a comprehensive register for internal migrants, but they are estimated to be over 100 million in India, more than 50 million of whom are seasonal and temporary migrants circulating annually to find employment (Shah and Lerche 2020; Srivastava 2020). The latter categories of migrant workers have not only found themselves without work when businesses, factories, farms and construction sites closed down due to the lockdown (Ruthven 2020), but also unable to "stay at home" or to sustain their livelihood, having been excluded from many government schemes, which have increasingly been decentralised to provincial states, district and sub-district administrative bodies in India (Pandey 2020). For example, it is known that many migrants are often not issued with the ration cards that are necessary to gain access to the food distribution system provided by the local authorities where they work. The government of India has set up a scheme to distribute food grains to the estimated 80 million migrant workers who do not possess ration cards, a figure that has been widely challenged (K. Agarwal 2020). According to the NGO, the Stranded Workers Action Network (2020), who have supported about 34 000 migrants across India during the pandemic, more than 82 per cent of them had not received any government rations and about two-thirds had less than 100 Rupees (around 1.33 US dollars) left as of 1 May 2020. This has impacted the immediate survival of migrant workers and their families, and will also have subsequent repercussions on remittance income.

The dual incapacity of not being able to work but also being unable to access material means of subsistence led to attempts by many migrants to return to their home despite the initial suspension of transport services under the lockdown measure imposed by the Indian government, resulting in untold human sufferings, including several hundred deaths (Rajalakshmi 2020). The World Bank (2020, 27) has estimated that "around 50,000–60,000 moved from urban centres to rural areas of origin in the span of a few

days" after the introduction of the lockdown. Imbert (2020) estimates that the potential number of returning migrants who may have moved as the lockdown eased may be as high as 11–22 million. According to a survey involving a total of 31,423 migrants across India between 11th April and 20th May 2020, conducted by another NGO, the Ekta Parishad (2020), 86 per cent of migrants who were under lockdown away from home were uncertain about their livelihood, and 95 per cent responded that they would like to go back to their homes even if this resulted in financial loss and unemployment. Yet the survey also shows that only 17 per cent of local administrations and 28 per cent of companies responded to the needs of migrant workers after the lockdown.

The Indian government has also committed a macroeconomic stimulus package totalling over 20 billion rupees (about $265 billion) or 10 per cent of its GDP, which is reported to be the fifth highest ratio amongst the G20 countries (M. Kapoor 2020). While some such as Chauhan (2020) have commended the Indian government's initiatives, others have questioned the effectiveness of these measures, which predominantly rely on forms of liquidity injection and loan guarantees that primarily ease credit access for firms through the formal banking and financial systems, and therefore tend to sideline those engaged in informal employment (Economic and Political Weekly 2020a; Research Unit for Political Economy 2020). At least part of those who lost their jobs found means to subsist through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), in which the state guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment in unskilled manual work at a statutory minimum wage to all rural households in India. It is reported that around 90 million people received some form of employment in public works during 2020–21 (Government of India 2021). The Government of India also announced an enhancement of the public distribution of food grains during the lockdown, although the effectiveness of the measure has been questioned due to reports indicating that less than one per cent of the allocated food grains were initially distributed in 11 states (out of India's 28 states and eight union territories) (S. Sharma 2020). Thus, while the government's policies supported businesses, they did not sufficiently alleviate the deterioration of the working poor's material conditions for subsistence.

As the nation-wide lockdown started to unwind from early June 2020, employers started to entice workers, including migrants, back to their workplaces in factories and fields (Beniwal and Sanjai 2020). This has also led to some provincial politicisation of the welfare for migrant workers between "home" and "host" state governments within India, often with appeal to the "sons of the soil" populist politics dividing the "local" from migrant workers (Sundar and Sapkal 2020a). Another response by the state has been the promotion of online portals that can be accessed through mobile applications, which allow access to information about government welfare schemes, as well as facilitate the application process (Gupta 2020). While such measures can facilitate informally employed workers to access the governments schemes they are legally entitled to, it also serves as a confirmation of the extent of employment informalisation, and of the willingness by the Indian state to facilitate capital's access to informalised labour.

Furthermore, these impacts are unfolding differently across gender, race, religion, caste and communal identities. In India, the aforementioned survey conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies (2020) shows that women, lower caste and tribal groups, Muslim workers, and migrants have faced more uncertainty about jobs than upper

caste Hindu men. These social categories also coincide with lower pre-lockdown earnings, higher incidents of hunger and indebtedness, and limited source of relief and support.

To sum up, the pandemic has brought to the fore contradictions within and between production and reproduction – the "two constitutive elements of capitalist society" (Fraser 2016, 103). The manner in which the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in India, intended or otherwise, led to a further intensification of crises of care and social reproduction, and to a widening of inequality both in wealth and bargaining power. The next section will examine how these crises provided the context for the Indian state to pursue their long-standing policy agendas, which have opened up debates and struggles for post-pandemic future economic and social relations.

Emerging struggles for post-Covid economic and social relations

The Research Unit for Political Economy (2021) points out that from the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been calls to "ram through politically difficult measures" by proponents of long-standing liberalising reforms, in the face of unfolding economic and humanitarian crises. These reforms go beyond the government's pursuit of a rapid return to the "normal" in order to realise their projected "V-shaped recovery" from the recession. They can be seen as measures to use the crisis in order to further reconfigure bargaining relations in favour of capital in general, and more specifically in promoting large-scale corporations and global investors. At the same time, it is argued that these policies can potentially intensify struggles over exploitation and accumulation, as well as over boundaries of productive and reproductive labouring activities.

One of the long-remaining agendas for proponents of liberalising the Indian economy since the 1980s has been the labour reforms (Sundar 2005; A. N. Sharma 2006; Miyamura 2012). At the national level, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government continued with its pursuit of consolidating 29 national-level labour laws by enacting three new codes on industrial relations; social securities; and occupational safety, health, and working conditions in September 2020, in addition to the code on wages previously passed in 2019. While these reforms have "simplified" laws, critiques have argued that they promote labour flexibility and "ease of doing business" in India (Sundar 2020c).

Crucially, over the past decade, there has been a drive to amend and override national labour laws at the level of regional states, particularly where the BJP holds power. This has meant that, even prior to Covid-19, labour laws at the national-level were unevenly applied and implemented. And it is at this decentralised level that the Covid-19 pandemic has been manifestly used as the pretext to further tilt the playing field in some regions. Since April 2020, immediately after the nation-wide lockdown, more than a dozen provincial state governments passed ordinances to deregulate labour markets (Sundar 2020b). This has included attempts to further weaken restrictions on firms to close down factories and retrench workers; to relax conditions for employing contract labour; to extend the legally permitted maximum length of the working day from 8 hours, in some states to 12 hours a day; to suspend health and safety inspections; to withhold workers' rights to form trade unions, to engage in collective bargaining or to legally

initiate industrial disputes (Sundar 2020b; Sundar and Sapkal 2020b). As K. R. S. Sundar (2020a) has pointed out, not only are these legislative changes and policies hastily framed, but these labour law amendments have also consistently bypassed the previously established institutional mechanisms for social dialog involving trade unions.

Centralised trade union organisations (CTUOs) affiliated to all political parties and factions in India have responded to these policies and unfolding humanitarian disasters by organising collective protests across India on 3–4 July and then again on 9 August 2020. These culminated in the nation-wide general strike on 26 November, in which all CTUOs except those affiliated to the ruling BJP participated, reportedly mobilising 250 million workers (Crowley 2020). These joint action by trade union federations also follow from similar previous initiatives over recent years in January and August 2019 and in November 2017. However, negotiations on their demands have only been offered in the form of virtual tripartite meetings, which the joint platform of trade unions have rejected as a "farce" (Chhabra 2021), calling for another nation-wide protest on 3 February 2021.

Another long-standing set of "difficult measures" the Indian state has attempted to push through in the context of the pandemic are deregulations on agricultural markets and removal of restrictions on contract farming, which have resulted in the passing of farm bills in September 2020 (Harriss-White 2021; Sinha 2020b). The deregulation of agricultural markets has coincided with reported breakouts of land struggles in various parts of the country (Bansal 2020; Sayeed 2020). Fearing that these laws will undermine minimum support price and state procurement policies for agricultural produce, protests have erupted across the country since August. The most prominent of these farmers' protests has been taking place in and around the capital, Delhi, which has attracted international media attention, and has also been the site of violent state repressions, infiltrations by right-wing private militia, misinformation campaigns, and fatalities, including suicides. These mobilisations around the farm bills also saw solidarity actions by labour movements beyond those represented by the farmers' unions. While relatively well-off middle farmers in northern Indian states have been the visible faces featured in the media, protests across the country have drawn in marginal landholders and landless labourers too. The protest march to Delhi coincided with the aforementioned general strike on 26 November, and some of the well-publicised actions included the participation of transport unions halting operations in northern India in support of farmers (The Tribune 2020), demonstrating the potential for mobilisation and solidarity that can be built across sectors, occupations, and labour market status. As measures to re-establish and reshape conditions for capitalist accumulation are pursued by the carving out of greater opportunities for large-scale corporations and global capital, the state and state policies continue to be an important terrain for struggle, which explains broader mobilisations by the joint platform of CTUOs and farmers' unions.

But the pandemic and the policy responses to it have had an uneven effect on bargaining power and organisational capacities for workers. While the effectiveness of organised labour movements in influencing labour market policies at the national and regional levels may have been weakened, workplace-based mobilisation has been enhanced in specific sectors due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the year, there have been protests by doctors and care workers across India raising awareness about issues relating to safety equipment and working conditions (Ravichandran 2020). This included the

nation-wide strike on 9–10 August in which an estimated 600 thousand health workers under the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) scheme took part (NDTV 2020). These actions follow from several decades of struggles by ASHA and other so-called scheme workers in India to get the state recognition as workers rather than "volunteers" (The Hindu 2013; NewsClick 2018; Miyamura 2021). Bus drivers in Mumbai also organised a series of protests in June and July over inadequate protective measures as the lockdown eased (Somit Sen 2020), again building on a 13-year struggle over pay equalisation and against privatisation (Miyamura 2021). In January 2021, the strike carried out by sanitation workers in Delhi led the local authority to concede previously withheld payment of salaries and pensions (PTI 2021a). Waste collectors and sanitation workers across India are drawn from *Dalits*, who are subjugated at the bottom or outside of the caste hierarchy, and while the pandemic might have enhanced their bargaining position, mobilisations such as these are also, at least in part, based on decades of attempts to unionise and regularise these workers across India (Fernandes 2019; Miyamura 2021).

These episodes of mobilisation contrast with a vast majority of workplaces where trade union struggles have been undermined even while the importance of their work has been acknowledged during the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes the readymade garment sector where the supply chain disruption caused by the pandemic was used as an opportunity to crack down on unionisation and workers' rights (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2020). There are also workers who are engaged in labouring activities that are difficult to mobilise because they are not considered as such or do not take place in a clearly definable workplace, such as domestic workers, sales representatives, and those in the so-called gig economy (Joseph 2020).

Nevertheless, and while not in any way exhaustive, these episodes reflect the inclination by the state to further subjugate care and social reproduction to the restoration of exploitation and accumulation, but also demonstrate how public discourse and support can be cultivated to mobilise around the crisis of social reproduction as a strategy for class struggle. These struggles can also be mobilised to challenge boundaries of labour markets segmented along gender and race, as well as ethnic, religious, communal and regional identities. Struggles can also be mobilised beyond the workplaces, for example by forming trade unions through community organising in slums where many domestic and home-based workers reside in major cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata (Samita Sen and Sengupta 2016; Miyamura 2021).

The Indian state has also pursued other measures to project its attractiveness as an investment destination for domestic and global capital (Research Unit for Political Economy (R.U.P.E.) 2020; Economic and Political Weekly 2020b) by making more investible assets available through the privatisation of sectors such as coal, defence, railways and the postal system (Patnaik and Roy 2020). Privatisation initiatives such as the auctioning of 40 new coal blocks have broader environmental impacts by initiating commercial mining in some of India's most ecologically sensitive forests (Ellis-Petersen 2020). This opens the potential for ecological issues, along with the crisis of social reproduction, to bring together labour and social movements of different types to contest privatisation and other state policies, as exemplified in demands publicised for the 3 February 2021 national-wide protest (PTI 2021b).

To sum up, the Indian state has used the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to pursue measures that further intensify labour exploitation and widen inequality. At the same time, cases outlined above show possible spaces for diverse forms of struggles, including those linking conventional workplace-based mobilisation with broader struggles over social reproductive, ecological and community-based issues, that can shape the alternative post-Covid "future of work".

Conclusion

This article illustrated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on labour in India. The focus on India highlighted specificities of its highly informalised, mobile and segmented nature of labour, and the impact of the pandemic that has led to a severe humanitarian crisis involving the intensification of labour exploitation and worsening inequality. It also drew attention to how the crisis has been used as a pretext by the Indian state in attempting to "tilt" the playing field further in favour of corporate capital and global investors. And while the specific ways in which the pandemic impacted on labour in India offer a different perspective to the post-Covid "future of work" and the economy, they nevertheless also draw attention to how these dynamics are part of the broader crisis of care and social reproduction in capitalism, which are as much precipitated by tensions internal to the current form of capitalist accumulation as much as by the disease.

Against this trend, the Covid-19 pandemic has also coincided with the increased recognition of widening inequality and its impact on life chances, as well as the importance of labouring activities essential for social reproduction. Spaces for trade unionism and labour movements have opened up in some sectors and occupations, while being suppressed in many others during the pandemic. As the full impact of the pandemic on unemployment and loss of livelihood unfolds in years to come, issues of care, housing and unequal life and survival prospects will continue to re-emerge as potential economic and social issues around the world. The transformative change, however, will require the advancement of labour organising that builds on workplace mobilisations, linking them to broader social movements that challenge existing boundaries between the divisions of labour for the accumulation and for the reproduction of life.

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