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**To Go or Not to Go:
Unpacking Mobility Decisions
in Mumbai During the
COVID Lockdown of 2020**

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Abstract

The hastily announced lockdown in March 2020 by the Indian government precipitated a wave of uncertainty and fear among urban residents living in auto-constructed settlements. In subsequent weeks, images poured in of people undertaking arduous journeys across hundreds of miles to try and get back to their native villages – a process that was dubbed the ‘migrant crisis’ by the mainstream media. This coinage, however, hides a number of differences in the positionality of city residents in terms of housing, employment, access to credit, political clientelism and family structure, factors which are themselves circumscribed by caste, religion, gender and ethnicity. Drawing on qualitative research in two separate field sites within Mumbai, this paper seeks to provide insight into the way choices on staying, leaving and returning to the city were made by various informal workers at the individual, family and community levels. While offering a chronological account of how the lockdown unfolded in the city, it makes three central observations. First, the status and relationship between landlord and tenant within the autoconstructed settlement was a key axis along which migratory decisions were negotiated. Second, the unforeseen gendered fallouts of punitive state action structured certain people’s desperation to leave. Finally, the collective psychology of fear and safety worked more along the lines of caste, religion and ethnic community rather than friends and neighbors. Taken together, these insights aim to emphasize the need for more granular categories and new vocabularies to understand the evolving relationship between mobility, social structures and precarious forms of urban labor.

Keywords

India, labor, informality, housing, internal migration, pandemic

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1 Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 induced lockdown in India threw light on the paucity of understanding and lack of concern regarding internal migrant workers. India's urban transition has been popularly imagined as rural migrants flooding metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore in search of livelihood (Mukherjee 2003). In reality, the processes of structural transformation, urbanization and economic development are far more complex – a whirlpool of farm and non-farm activity obeying no rigid boundary between village and city. A subset of migration in India is closely intertwined with urbanization processes and job markets, yet only a fledgling body of work exists about the nature of linkages and patterns of movements between villages, small towns, and metropolises, as well as the decision-making processes to mediate the labor market at India's major urban centers.

The city of Mumbai is synonymous with migration in the country's popular imagination. This image has persisted – often in a reductive and incorrect fashion – despite tectonic changes in India's economic, political, social and technological landscape that have reshaped both the city as well as the multiple hinterlands it draws its working class from. Waves of deindustrialization, rising costs of living, autochthonous politics, newer path dependencies based on state boundaries, and a lack of job growth have all played a role in making Mumbai an inhospitable environment for the working class migrant (Imbert & Papp 2020). At the time the lockdown was announced, it appeared that the city – like many others in India – was facing an exodus of the working class. The word that seemed to stick across the media for this archetypal person leaving the city was, understandably, the 'migrant'.

The media's emotive story of urban depopulation hid larger nuances about the urban fabric of cities such as Mumbai – flattening them into this simplistic rubric. Mumbai is a complex patchwork of parallel, segmented urban markets, often reductively seen through the binary of 'formal' and 'informal' (Harriss-White 2003). Following waves of deindustrialization starting in the 1980s, and a subsequent financialization that sky-rocketed land values – the city underwent immense economic restructuring. Mills and unions collapsed – becoming the sites of real-estate speculation (Prakash 2010). Construction boomed, inviting newer waves of seasonal migrants who would be housed in-situ on construction sites and cut off from the larger dynamics of the city (Roy & Naik 2017). Older working populations were forced into scrambling over legitimacy on land, cultivating clientelistic avenues to look for access to services and tenure security (Bjorkman 2013). Moreover, autoconstructed settlements¹ became the hubs of new modes of small-scale unorganized manufacturing and home-based work – metal work, meat-packing, pottery, furniture work, scrap dealing, garment sewing and so on (Breman 2013). This created a kind of opaque parallel city, visually cut off from the gleaming 'world-class aesthetics' (Government of Maharashtra 2004) of a remodeled financial capital, while nonetheless producing the labor to sustain it.

It is the dynamics of this 'opaque' city that this paper seeks to unpack, to understand how these categories of precarity came to be shaped by the rupture of the lockdown in 2020. The media narrative was indicative of a general lack of clarity to the discourse. The hastily announced lockdown in March 2020 by the Indian government precipitated a wave of uncertainty and fear

¹ The term here is borrowed from Caldeira (2016), who suggests that autoconstruction be used to describe forms of cityscapes which "have been largely constructed by their residents, who build not only their own houses, but also frequently their neighbourhoods".

among urban residents engaged in these forms of casualized, non-unionized physical labor. In subsequent weeks, images poured in of people undertaking journeys across hundreds of miles to try and get back to their places of origin – a process that was dubbed a ‘migrant crisis’ by the mainstream media. This coinage, however, hid a number of differences between various city residents within the so-called “informal” economy in terms of housing, employment, access to credit, political clientelism and family structure; factors which are themselves circumscribed by caste, religion, gender and ethnicity.

This paper seeks to address this vacuum. It examines the decision-making processes of migrant groups that had decided to stay on in Mumbai after the lockdown was announced. It looks at how the nature of their precarity evolved – with a particular emphasis on negotiations between landlords and renters. It describes practices of survival and coping, mechanisms of support in the absence of the state, and on-the-go strategies of navigating the city under lockdown that emerged. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the manner in which the pandemic, as a form of “shock”, reconfigured the migrant’s right to the city by eviscerating the thin base of domestic savings and fixed assets that, in normal times, holds up numerous distinctions between different types of workers.

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted in the months of January and February 2021. It draws on 31 interviews with migrant workers in two distinct field sites within Mumbai, facilitated by two major NGOs – Pratham and LEARN – as well as 13 in-depth interviews with academics, journalists and on-the-ground NGO workers engaged in relief efforts in various parts of the city. It seeks to provide insight into the way choices on staying, leaving and returning to the city were made by various informal workers at the individual, family and community levels – for which it offers thick descriptions of survival and negotiation strategies used between March and May 2020 as the lockdown played out.

The paper makes three main observations. First, the relationship between landlord and tenant within the autoconstructed settlement was a key axis along which migratory decisions were negotiated during and after the lockdown. Second, the unforeseen gendered fallouts of punitive state action structured certain people’s desperation to leave. Finally, the collective psychology of fear and safety worked more along the lines of caste, religion and ethnic community rather than friends and neighbors. Taken together, these insights demonstrate the need for more precise conceptual frameworks to understand the evolving relationship between mobility, social structures and precarious forms of urban labor than to simply deploy the term ‘migrant’. This paper thus concludes with a brief exploration of the way the experience of Mumbai might serve to sharpen the canonical models of study used by critical migration studies, postcolonial studies and urban planning.

2 Background Context: The Naka and the Basti as Sites

Various administrative, policy and ad-hoc forms of categorization in India inform the contentious definition of ‘migrant’ in megacity labor markets. Paradoxically, the most mobile workers are almost never captured as ‘migrants’ in official data categories. These include the ‘seasonal worker’ who is sourced, often for the construction industry, directly from the hinterland by a contractor (*thekedar*). In megacities like Mumbai, this worker is increasingly difficult to access as they are likely to migrate to the city with a specific job in hand – usually in the construction sector – and so are given housing within the premises of their construction projects. This means that they are often

under the direct supervision of their labor contractor and have limited interaction with the larger fabric of the city. During the lockdown, this group was arguably the worst affected by the suddenness of the decision – and there is good reason to believe that most of the striking images of people walking home were of those whose relationship to work was structured in this way (YUVA 2020).

Owing to the time the fieldwork was conducted (when construction had very tentatively begun to pick up again in late January 2021), as well as the barriers to entry on construction sites – it remained unfeasible to speak directly to these workers. This paper looks mainly instead at two other types of workers who spend at least 10-11 months a year in the city (and have done so, in many cases, for over 20 years or even all their life). These two groups can broadly be thought of as ‘semi-permanent’ workers, to use a temporal classification, or “renters” in autoconstructed settlements. These are working class residents who, as scholars like Parpiani (2019) have noted, adopt the strategy of ‘localization’, staying in the city for prolonged periods of time and forging community links, though having limited political voice. Most of these workers, unlike seasonal construction workers, seemed reluctant to leave the city in desperation when the lockdown was announced. However, in light of the circumstances that emerged throughout the course of the lockdown, many saw more reason to return to their ‘native’ villages – spaces that they had limited (if any) interaction with in years.

Two spaces typify the entry-points to the labor market of these migrants. The first is what is known in Hindi/Marathi as a *Naka* – a physical space of congregation in the mornings between 7 and 10 a.m. where workers line up to look for casual labor on a short term and informal basis. Most workers who look for jobs at *Nakas* are men – who are usually in their late 30s and above (in Mumbai) – along with a few women who are usually widows. *Naka* jobs are most often for types of ancillary work in the construction industry that require additional labor, but can also range across a wide spectrum for any kind of short term job – from distributing pamphlets to attending political rallies (Desai & Sanghvi 2020). Most *nakas* are located close to (if not attached to) a *basti* or autoconstructed settlement – the second major site of work for many internal migrants. *Naka* workers are almost always residents in the closest *bastis* and tend to have methods of identifying and “protecting” their *nakas* from non-residents coming to look for work there.

The *basti*, aside from being a home, doubles up as a working space for many. Some *bastis* contain within them small-scale industrial manufacturing units, usually for garments or small metal components. In addition to this, they may also provide spaces of work to potters, artisans, washerfolk, spice grinders, fruit and flower markets and, in some cases, fisherfolk (Nijman 2010). The *basti*, however, is also typified by forms of home-based work done by women. Many women run kitchens that sell cheap food to the single male workers that live on rent in the settlement, and some have begun taking larger orders in the burgeoning hospitality industry. In addition to this, some people work on sewing and stitching garments from home, while some string flowers together. Finally, women also often seek out work in more affluent buildings as domestic helpers – cooking, cleaning and offering services as nannies. The *naka* and the *basti* thus signify two distinct types of work environments frequented by longer-term migrants to the city. It is important to emphasize here that a vast majority of the workers who seek employment in these spaces are renters – given that landlords in a given *basti* tend to have a fixed income from rent (Harish 2016).

The research for this paper was conducted in two field sites: one *naka* and one *basti*. The *basti* is arguably one of the world’s most recognizable and famous autoconstructed settlements: Mumbai’s Dharavi. To be specific, the fieldwork in Dharavi was conducted in a part of the settlement called Dhorwada (Dharavi is spread across 225 hectares). It must be stressed at the outset that, as far as such settlements go, Dharavi is far from the norm. Indeed, it represents an outlier case in three specific respects. First, unlike the vast majority of economically poor ‘slum’ settlements (Bhan & Jana 2013), Dharavi is (in non-pandemic times) a bustling and self-contained engine of economic activity. Second, unlike some settlements that are largely dominated by a single (or few) ethnic and linguistic groups, Dharavi is truly immense in its cosmopolitanism. Numbering close to a million residents, it contains a wide cross-section of Indian society. Although internally segregated to a certain degree with areas divided along caste, linguistic and, more recently, religious lines (Mehta 2006) – forms of collective life and interaction with public space within the settlement bring people from varied backgrounds in much more regular contact than within a typical *basti*. Lastly, Dharavi is perhaps as far along on the end of the “tenure continuum” (Rains et al. 2018) vis-a-vis land rights as possible for a settlement. The original core of the settlement, a fishing village called ‘Koliwada’, has full legal land-ownership rights, while the potter’s colony or ‘Kumbharwada’ has long-term leasehold tenancy rights dating back to 1930 (Pacco 2018). The remainder of the slum squats on largely municipally owned land, but has since acquired recognition through state notifications, access to certain services and a host of other proxies for safety from eviction (Weinstein 2014).

In addition to this, Dharavi has a well-organized (albeit, strictly-speaking illegal) system of recognizing owners and renters, replete with “contracts” signed on stamp paper and backed by local muscle. Despite these particularities, the context of the post-pandemic landscape offers reason to look at Dharavi’s experience – as its state of precarity can offer a sense of just how much more difficult circumstances might have emerged in less robust or well-organized spaces. The fieldwork at Dhorwada in Dharavi entailed in-depth interviews conducted with garment and mess workers within their homes – which in most cases double up as their spaces of work (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Garment Workers at home/work space in Dhorwada, Dharavi



Source: Author Pranav Kuttaiah (February 2021)

The *naka* selected for fieldwork is known as Kapurbawadi, in the district of Thane – one of Mumbai’s peripheries approximately 26 km north of Dharavi. It is attached to a *basti* of much smaller size – one that has seen waves of eviction for the expansion of a major road, State Highway 42, and has therefore splintered into clustered sets of smaller homes near the *naka*. The vast majority of the *naka* workers at Kapurbawadi hail from the northern districts of the neighboring state of Karnataka, while some of the newer and younger single male migrant workers come from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In most ways, the home-work mix at Kapurbawadi represents the far more typical (and therefore polar opposite) case to Dharavi – a small, splintered, frequently evicted settlement with limited (if any) options for work at the best of times. The men who come to find work at the *naka* are largely carpenters, masons, tile-layers, welders, or other workers linked to construction (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Migrants looking for work at Kapurbawadi Naka



Source: Author Pranav Kuttaiah (February 2021)

This juxtaposition of sites seeks to demonstrate the extent to which ‘embeddedness’, local networks and pre-existing differences in precarity structured the difference in outcomes during the lockdown. By contrasting a highly robust, organized and relatively wealthy settlement (Dharavi) with one that is far more typical in both its class position and lack of political voice (Kapurbawadi), this paper seeks to investigate to what extent the lockdown served as a “leveller” across variously placed socio-economic groups.

It also seeks to demonstrate, drawing on the experiences of these two locations, how the COVID-19 lockdown created its own axis of who was and wasn't a 'migrant'. Before the pandemic, the notion of 'migrant' referred more to the employment category held by individuals. Contrary to the perception often created by popular culture and the media, anybody born elsewhere who lived in the city for most of the year was not necessarily thought of as a 'migrant' on the ground. The 'migrant' was more defined by the person who divided their year between farm work in the village and some form of non-farm (usually lower skilled or construction) work in the city – the afore-mentioned 'seasonal' worker recruited through a *thekedar*. This categorization is often reflected, for example, in the language of local traders and shopkeepers – when distinguishing someone as “from around here” in providing credit.

This localized distinction between the short-term circular and longer term migrant was upheld by a difference in skills, an accumulation of some savings and fixed assets, and a willingness to start a family in the city. The lockdown served the function of effectively destroying the thin layer of domestic savings accumulated by the latter that served to hold up this notional distinction between these two different kinds of 'migrants'. In the post-lockdown landscape, the migrant/non-migrant binary came to be defined more by housing status than by employment strategy. If the lockdown situation had eviscerated one's ability to keep their income marginally above their cost of living, they came to be seen as a 'migrant' no matter the number of years they had spent 'localizing' to the city or forming networks.

2.1 The Relationship Between Landlords and Tenants

Perhaps the key axis along which to understand the pandemic-induced precarity is that of informal housing. Early into the lockdown, the state government announced a moratorium on rents. However, landlords in informal settlements found no reason to conform to such a call. Having been in tension with the law and the state for years, they had long established a parallel or perhaps 'transversal' (Caldeira 2016) sense of authority that had limited respect for the state's diktats. Moreover, in the case of Dharavi – which receives state electricity – little was done by the state to reduce or subsidize the cost of electricity bills; an expense that had grown exorbitant in light of stay-at-home rules. “*When the government refuses to give us a single rupee off on the electricity bill, how can it ask us not to take money as rent?*”, explained Rajesh, a resident of Dhorwada who had rented a room to a group of young migrants engaged in stitching garments. These individualized and particular relationships (between the landlord and the tenant) undoubtedly structured the nature of people's response to the lockdown.

Of the people interviewed in Dharavi, the first clear distinction on the landlord-tenant relationship was whether the landlord lived in the settlement or had moved elsewhere. This is an issue that may be considered specific to the socio-economic nature of the settlement itself. A 2011 article in the Times of India cited a survey from the Slum Rehabilitation authority that suggested that over 59,000 of Dharavi's tenements were “owned” (in a tenuous, rather than strictly legal sense) by around 100 families who were “operating through extended family and *benami* (false name) fronts” (Lewis 2011) and thereby ensuring a steady flow of tenants in and out of individual houses. These families were able to generate money through rents, make investments and eventually move out of the settlement while retaining pieces of evidence that marked their “ownership” of homes within Dharavi.

While scholars like Chattaraj (2016) have highlighted that landlords tend to meticulously hold on to documents including electricity bills, property tax receipts and so on as means to provide proof of legitimacy, they are quick to add that most often within informal settlements, in the long run, possession inevitably amounts to ownership. It is owing to this anxiety that informal rental “agreements” in Dharavi are often created on 11-month contracts (that are enforced by local gangs rather than the government), for which landlords usually demand the downpayment of a security deposit. Once a contract period is over, they may choose to move within Dharavi (as most usually do), or to another settlement. Through this cycle, renters have ended up staying within Dharavi for decades, performing various acts of ‘localization’ while continuing to navigate precarity.

Planning scholars like Apte (2008) have encouraged us to look beyond the slum as a class category in and of itself – and understand that a settlement’s tension with the law and planning can have little to do with its economic condition. Dharavi represents a case in point in this regard, with numerous studies describing the large forms of industries and bustling activities occurring cheek-by-jowl in the settlement (Engqvist & Lantz 2008; Nijman 2010). Thus, it may be surmised that many of those who “own” a house in Dharavi have either been able to afford to live elsewhere or ensure their children are placed in more steady, salaried jobs that are likely to be quite safe from a potential slide into poverty caused by a welfare shock like the pandemic. Among my respondents, those whose landlords lived outside Dharavi did not report any major pressures on questions of rent and found relatively amicable ways of dealing with their landlords. *“He [the landlord] was very understanding. He said this is a tough time for everybody, so if you are not able to make the payments right now, it’s ok. When you get some income, you can start paying me back.”* said Arshar, a garment worker from Sitamarhi, Bihar. When asked how his landlord was able to make ends meet without his rental income, he replied, *“I’m not sure. But I know his son works at a company [does a white-collar job]”*.

Landlords who tended to live within the settlement (often below or next to the rooms they offered on rent) were, comparatively, more likely to face a crisis during the lockdown, and therefore be harsher on questions of rent collection. This was particularly true at Kapurbawadi, where landlords themselves needed to supplement their rental income by finding jobs at the *Naka*. Here it is important to highlight the difference that tacit links to the local state play in distinguishing types of landlords. The relatively long history in the city of Dharavi’s original settlers combined with strong forms of political organizing has created a class of landlords whose children have been able to move on to more lucrative service positions and white-collar work. By contrast, the generation that built most of Kapurbawadi is, in relative terms, more recent – therefore having much more tenuous links and facing more waves of eviction and police harassment. Thus, even between “informal” landlords – lengths of settlement often determine their position and ability to navigate labor markets and rights to the city. While in Dharavi, there were still some landlords who could afford to waive rents temporarily in the beginning, this was hardly the case at all in Kapurbawadi. However, as more and more time went by with no source of income, even the relatively more secure households in these spaces came to be put to the test. The major point of contention as the lockdown progressed was on the nature of how the security deposit made by various tenants was to be handled. This theme is explored in more detail in the following sections.

2.2 The Lockdown Announcement and its Ripple Effects

When the lockdown was formally announced on the 22nd of March 2020, it fostered divergent responses. Here it is worth contrasting the experiences of the seasonal worker with that of the longer-term rent-paying migrant. Most seasonal workers, as mentioned before, tend to live on the premises of their respective construction projects in worker housing that is extremely limited in space. Although not required to pay a monthly rent, these workers nonetheless suffered massively. While some employers were concerned enough to actively look after them, many contractors and developers froze wages, providing meagre (if any) money or supplies for survival (YUVA 2020). These workers were generally – by the very spatial nature of their kinds of jobs – cut off from the fabric of the city. As a result, this group was stuck in the city with no real sense of how to navigate it – no local networks to tap into, no history of negotiation with local government actors, no major access to NGOs (as contractors very rarely allowed NGOs to interact with workers on-site before the pandemic), no access to local institutions of credit and arguably the poorest living conditions in which to be locked down in the punishing heat of the Mumbai summer. It was this particular form of precarity that led many from this group of workers to wager their luck of returning to their villages by foot (YUVA 2020). Some borrowed money from their relatives in villages (a process facilitated by emerging modes of digital payment) and bought cycles, others tried hitchhiking, and a large number simply decided to walk – providing the snapshots that would become definitive in the popular media of the terrible human effects of the lockdown.

Comparatively, at this early phase of the announcement, the calculations appeared different for longer-term migrants. First, because of their frequent interactions with markets and spaces as well as with affluent classes, some seemed to have a sense that something serious was approaching. *“One of our students came to me a week before the lockdown and said he was going back home”*, explained Suresh, a vocational trainer with the NGO Pratham at the Kapurbawadi Naka. *“He said his wife worked as a domestic help in an apartment complex nearby. They told her the disease was spreading and they did not want to take risks, and so told her to stop coming. They said soon the government too would put a ban on open movement. This made them fearful, and with one less source of income. So they decided to get their deposit back as soon as possible and try to go home”*. Naka workers also deploy a particular language related to the demand for services. ‘*Thanda*’ and ‘*Garam*’, the Hindi words for ‘cold’ and ‘hot’, are often used to describe the atmosphere of the *naka* in terms of the demand for work by season. *“The naka had gone completely thanda (there was no work available). That’s when we realized something was wrong and maybe we should leave”*, explained Ashok, a carpenter from Uttar Pradesh’s Jaunpur district.

Despite this, most long-term migrants chose to stay on and try their luck. There were multiple reasons for this. First, the government’s initial announcement proclaimed that the lockdown was for only 21 days – a period that most felt they would be able to eke out a living during. Second, there was a widespread perception that the COVID-19 virus was being brought from the city to the village, which was reported to have made villagers hostile and unwelcoming to returning migrants. Here it is important to note a difference in the relationship to the family structure and the village between seasonal workers and long-term migrants. Seasonal workers – increasingly single men in the case of Mumbai – often migrate to cities as part of a rural household strategy of risk diversification from crop failure, a phenomenon that has been well documented by scholars such as the ‘new economics of labor migration’ (de Haan 1997). As a result, they are often considered

‘people of the village’ with temporary engagements in the city, and less likely to face problems upon returning to their villages. By contrast, longer term migrants (who are usually more highly skilled) tend to “settle” in the city in the familial sense, and therefore are often considered to be people who have “moved on” or are no longer connected to the life of the village.

This made it more difficult for the longer term migrants to go back to their villages – especially at a time that they were considered to be carriers of the disease. *“I was born here [in Mumbai], have lived here all my life and have only been to my village a few times”*, said Fatima, a young home-based worker in Dharavi whose family hailed from Telangana, *“I barely know anyone in the village other than my grandmother. We [her parents and her] are called the ‘Mumbai people’. We never thought of going back initially. Even when we spoke to them [the relatives in the village], they said just sit at home, it will be over fast. Don’t come here and risk spreading the disease”*. Lastly, the issue of money having been sunk into the security deposit made some feel that they had a monetary “last resort” in the city should things get bad, and that the amount would be at risk were they to leave for an indefinite period. The combination of these factors would tempt longer-term migrants to not make a seemingly impulsive rush back to their villages. However, new considerations and negotiations would emerge as the lockdown progressed that would affect these calculations.

2.3 Mumbai’s Lockdown And the Emergence of New Logics of Negotiation

One of the first effects of the lockdown – at a global scale but with various localized iterations – was the emergence of a state-approved classificatory vocabulary of forms of work into “essential” and “non-essential”. Here it is perhaps interesting to note the way in which such a classification was ordered in the Indian context. India relied on a 1955 act of parliament known as the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, which listed seven key commodities: *“essential drugs; fertilizer, whether inorganic, organic or mixed; foodstuffs, including edible oilseeds and oils; hank yarn made wholly from cotton; petroleum and petroleum products; raw jute and jute textile; seeds of food-crops and seeds of fruits and vegetables; seeds of cattle fodder; and jute seeds and cotton seed.”* The act also lists ‘essential services’, the very first of which is *“any postal, telegraph or telephone service, including any service-connected therewith; railway service or any transport service for the carriage of passengers or goods by air and any service connected with the operation or maintenance of aerodromes, any service in any major port”* (IANS 2020).

Despite this, the national state doubled down on another old law – the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 – to justify the closure of transport routes, in addition to which state authorities were instructed to impose “Section 144”, a section of the Criminal Procedure code (CrPC) that bans the assembly of 4 or more people in a public area. This was enforced strictly by the police, through patrols and acts of surveillance and violence. *“The government says only essential work is allowed. If a person eats food on the basis of his daily earnings, and without that he cannot eat, is his work not “essential” to him?”*, asked Arshan, a daily wage worker at the Kapurbawadi Naka, sardonically. The rhetorical question he posed masked a subtle point: most of the workers were angry at being stopped from working in large part because they did not have the slightest expectation that the state would come to their aid to compensate for this loss of income.

This flew directly in the face of widespread media coverage that the government had announced a “package” to help cope with the losses that would be incurred. While experts had already begun to critique the size of the package and the challenges the government would face in rolling it out (Harikrishnan 2020), on the ground in Kapurbawadi there seemed to be no anticipation that any such support would arrive. The few times I questioned my respondents about the “package” after they had described the unfairness of the lockdown, I was met either with hostile retorts or chuckles at my naivety. *“What package? What will those greedy bastards ever give us? You must be joking”*, shot back Arshan when I asked about this in response to his sarcastic query.

While in Kapurbawadi, there seemed to be next to no reach of the state – the situation in Dharavi was quite different. Although many semi-permanent migrants also lacked forms of documentation, the deep links forged with local state officials, as well as the long history of organizing against the redevelopment of the settlement had fostered a comparatively more robust architecture of registration and claim-making. The lockdown was the opportune moment for various elected actors to come to the forefront. Scholars have noted in the case of Dharavi that much of the ‘messiness’ of the settlements’ land status has been the perfect opaque environment for the thriving of multiple layers of intermediaries who are able to game the electoral process and have a core constituency strongly organized around the largesse of a local ganglord, businessman or politician who is able to negotiate with the local bureaucracy and police on their behalf (Hansen 2001; Auerbach 2016).

During the lockdown, this local municipal official or ‘corporator’ became a key intermediary in the disbursement of supplies. Unsurprisingly, the disbursement followed clientelistic lines – with larger, better-organized and politically relevant groups receiving the bulk of the supplies. Here too, landlords occupied a privileged place as compared to renters – having been more likely to have local political links and connections. Despite this, it is worth noting that in the case of spaces like Dharavi, the form of community links meant that many renters spoke of having rations shared with them by their landlords if they were unable to get their hands on the same through the distribution network. *“Our maalik [landlord] knew the corporator and organized some ration... he was willing to share some with us, knowing it was very difficult for us to be able to organize it ourselves. He would give us something at least for our daily needs”*, said Ravi, a welder from Karnataka. By contrast, Kapurbawadi’s landlords and tenants seemed to fare equally poorly vis-a-vis the state, with low registration rates for even ration cards. The long presence of Pratham, an NGO, at the *Naka* had ensured some people were registered for labor cards, though almost none had linked this to a bank account – thereby cutting them off from the proposed cash transfer to construction workers.

Beyond the local state, understanding negotiations of survival during the lockdown necessarily involve recognizing how community affiliations came to the fore – particularly through ‘Seths’ (large, powerful businessmen, ganglords or politicians with specific caste, ethnic, or religious bases of support). This phenomenon has been in play for years – but came to be even more prominent in the wake of communitarian networks of protection following the riots of 1992. This was encapsulated in a telling quote by Rehman, a tailor from Bihar’s Sitamarhi district in Dharavi, speaking about how he and his fellow workers accessed rations in the lockdown: *“People always say ‘Mumbai is great, Mumbai is secular, Mumbai people don’t see religion’ and so on. But when things are bad everyone knows how it works. I’m sorry to say that through this entire lockdown we received no help from any Hindus. Forget politicians or businessmen, not even from shopkeepers! They would act like they were out of stock and then give it to their own people. We had to rely on*

our own Seths, our own big people [better-off Muslims]. They told us: feed everyone, don't look at their religion and give. We tried, and we did give a few non-Muslims too. But ultimately we had to prioritize our own people, no? After all we have no support except each other." By contrast, residents of Kapurbawadi had few organized options or avenues based on community, and had to rely more on other day-to-day quick fixes. *"Some days we would try going to the Gurdwara [Sikh place of worship], if we heard some food was there. Sometimes we would come to the main road to see in case there was somebody giving things away. If somebody found something, he would tell us and we would go look there. It was horrible, you cannot imagine. We had no control over getting food when we wanted, we just had to take something whenever we heard it was being given. And we shared with each other whatever we got"*, said Shambhu, a *Naka* worker from Uttar Pradesh. The mode of survival relied on at Kapurbawadi seemed closer to Simone's (2004) conception of 'People as Infrastructure', as compared to Dharavi's, which moved in more complex and well-connected ways between institutions of the state and local logics of organization.

Finally, in the case of Dharavi, multiple NGOs that had spent years facilitating various forms of development practice in the settlement came to double up as channels of redistribution – using helplines and online groups to facilitate the supply of essentials. While numerous NGOs cast a wide net over a large number of informal settlements to provide whatever relief they could, they were nowhere close to covering the entire city and still received much more calls on helplines than they could possibly deal with (YUVA 2020; Kamath et al. 2020). Nonetheless, access to civil society mediators was often crucial for various migrant groups attempting to get even basic supplies. By the end of the lockdown, most NGOs had thus engaged in some way or the other with questions of relief, collection and distribution – and referred to the various vulnerable groups that they were working with as 'migrants'. Access to NGOs and civil society also augmented the chances of being connected to the evolving modes of welfare based on newer conceptual categories. As Bhan et al. (2020) note, the vulnerability of specific groups created *"new innovations discovered during relief work – measures of proximate registration, self-declaration, and the expansion of modes of registering and declaring need to the state"* – all of which were greatly aided by the help of civil society actors. Here it must be noted that even a massively "NGOized" space like Dharavi could not fully manage to meet the needs of its residents, which is food for thought at how dire the situation was in less "networked" settlements like Kapurbawadi.

The last major fallout of the lockdown was a transformation in renting migrants' relationships to work. As noted previously, while a large part of men's work required movement and negotiation in public (looking for work at the *naka*, masonry, carpentry, heavy lifting and even industrial or manufacturing work that involved sourcing and transporting materials from various places), women's work tended to be a home-based affair. The lockdown, which came to be enforced by a largely male-bodied police force, came down particularly severely on loitering men. *"It was terrible for them"*, noted Asma in Dharavi, *"they were beaten for the smallest of things. Police were not even merciful if they were standing in line at the public toilet, despite the fact that most homes have no toilets and they had no option but to go there. So there was no question at all of them going out and trying to find work as the lockdown got extended and things got desperate"*. And things were getting desperate. Rations were running low and electricity bills were crippling. Landlords were beginning to suggest that they would be keeping security deposits in lieu of rent not being paid. Tensions within the home led to major spikes in domestic violence (Suryawanshi 2020). In this backdrop, a large number of women decided to try their luck earning a new source of income.

Fashioning makeshift baskets, many took to street hawking – particularly onions and bananas – as a means to try and earn money. These two commodities were easy to access at large markets, relatively less perishable than some others and had seen a huge spike in demand as a cheap and easily edible option for desperate single migrants who could not cook. With women less likely to be harangued by the police, many adopted this new temporary profession as hawkers – going to areas they knew would be crowded with hungry, desperate and strictly confined young men to sell their wares. *“We already knew areas where some men would need food, since we used to give them food when we were running the mess. After the lockdown, they could not afford that, so we used to go there and see if they would buy bananas or onions, since going out was dangerous for men. We too needed to do something to survive”*, explained Salma, a mess worker originally from Bihar in Dharavi. Despite this, the situation had become largely untenable to most migrant renters. Conversations had begun on what the course of action would be as the lockdown continued to be extended and eat more into their domestic savings. As the lockdown entered its second month, renter households began to entertain more serious conversations of leaving the city.

2.4 To Go or Not To Go: Unpacking Tenant Household Conversations Towards the End of the Lockdown

By the end of April 2020, some single male migrants had begun to wager their chances of leaving the city by bribing truck drivers to let them hide in trucks transporting essential supplies across states. However people looked to leave, an immediate source of money seemed to be an obstacle that was seemingly insurmountable. This focused attention on the “last resort” – the security deposit that long-term migrants had paid upfront to their landlords. The situation was a complicated one: most migrants felt they were entitled to get the deposit back in full as the state had issued a moratorium on rents. On the other hand, landlords insisted that rents were a large part (if not the entirety) of their income, and that the state was not a legitimate authority to dictate terms in a space it had never recognized at all.

In the case of Dharavi, these issues came to be relatively more amicably resolved due to an existing institutional architecture of intermediaries in the housing market. Actors like brokers stepped in to convince landlords that they could not demand a full rent for the month, while also reminding tenants that landlords were very dependent on their rental income. In most cases, the resolution was the deposits would be returned in part if required for emergencies, while tenants offered to share some money and/or supplies in small quantities if they managed to find something temporarily. *“Some of them [landlords] were totally unreasonable, but that was not the case for most. Everyone in Dharavi knows how hard it is to survive in Mumbai at the best of times. And this was a situation even worse than 1992 [the year of the Mumbai riots]. Everyone knew they had to compromise a little because it was a question of survival.”* said Hasan, a garment worker in Dharavi. By contrast, the situation in Kapurbawadi was very different. Most landlords flatly refused to return deposits, often creating scuffles and tension in the settlement. *“I was cursing my decision to have stayed”*, said Shambhu, a worker from Uttar Pradesh, *“Had I left earlier, I might have got my deposit back since the landlord may not have realized how long it was going to be. And I would not have had to sit through the lockdown, dying of hunger and not knowing where to get my next meal. It was really a big mistake to stay.”*

In general, it appeared that the lockdown was particularly harsh on single male migrants. Households with a mix of working age members across genders tended to fare somewhat better – with an ability to tweak their survival strategies to the daily changes in the labor market. At the same time, households with children suffered hugely – with limited capacity to work, very limited space to share, and more mouths to feed. Scholars have long noted how the dynamic between landlords and vulnerable renters (albeit while studying more ‘formal’ housing markets) hinges around the twin-notions of ‘control and care’ (Green et al. 2015). In the context of Mumbai’s informal settlements, some part of this relationship between landlords and tenants hinges on their respective family sizes. If the tenant household is young, able-bodied and predominantly male – the anxiety of having no ability to evict them is much higher for the landlord (particularly if he/she is older). Such a dynamic tends to be a very cautious relationship, more built on ‘control’. Conversely, if the renting household is a family, a dynamic of ‘care’ might emerge – with a higher likelihood of favors and errands being exchanged, a building of trust and, if given enough time, potentially a more lasting relationship.

Such household composition questions also affected the nature of the willingness to leave once things began to open up. Households with predominantly women members seemed very reluctant to risk travelling – believing that it could be unsafe on the road. *“I have no choice of going back to the village anyway, I am nobody there”*, explained Shamshad, a widowed mess worker in Dharavi, *“besides, with two daughters it will be extremely unsafe. Not just the journey, but even on reaching there – who knows what can happen when travelling with young girls when men have been locked up for months like this? Everyone with daughters and sisters is thinking about this”*. Aside from this, the issue of small, not-easily-movable assets created a major problem for many workers who were desperate to leave. *“I spent months and months saving to buy a second-hand fridge and mixer. It’s because of this my wife earned some additional money cooking for people. When we were leaving, it was like accepting that we would not see those things again. We locked the room, but we knew that such things which could be sold easily would definitely have vanished by the time we got back. The landlords gave us no guarantees”*, explained Rehman in Dharavi. A similar story was described for fans, TVs, mattresses, and other sorts of household goods.

Despite these setbacks and considerations, it was evident that most migrants decided that they would leave the city at the earliest opportunity. When probed on this, most seemed to point at a kind of “atmosphere of fear/worry” that had a collective element to it linked to caste and community. *“I think one of the major reasons people left was just panic of being the only ones left behind when their community had left the city. Initially it might have been a few people who had personal reasons for leaving. But that had an effect like a wave. People survived the lockdown only because of community – because they could rely on people of their caste, their religion, their language group – to share problems. The minute a few decided they would leave at any cost, the others panicked. ‘What if there is another lockdown?’, ‘What if there is no one to help?’ – these became the big questions. And people were willing to leave-behind their hard earned assets, and even their jobs because of the fear of that”*, explained Sushil, a community activist from Bhadohi, Uttar Pradesh. When asked about whether people had not made friends/neighbors they could rely on in case of an emergency, he replied *“Yes, to an extent, for small things. But nobody wants to be reliant on those kinds of favors. With your community it is always different – there is an expectation that they will help you, not an obligation. The community finds you a house, finds you a job, pitches in for your weddings, your problems. Survival is only possible with them. If they leave, you have to leave. Otherwise there is no chance in the city”*.

3 Conclusion

And so it began. No sooner had travel restrictions begun to ease slightly in June 2020 than a second massive wave of movement from the city commenced. In buses and lorries, trains and even a few flights, rural migrants who had spent years in the city would return to their villages without a definitive sense of the future or of ever returning. Some did continue to stay, despite a lack of work, owing as YUVA (2020) describes, *“to the travel procedure being expensive, bureaucratic and unpredictable; their fear of being a burden on their families in the village; having no land or home in the village and the city as their only ‘home’”*. But this appeared more the exception than the rule in May-June 2020. An emphasis of the government had shifted towards a bolstering of the Rural Employment Guarantee Act – a scheme through which most returnees hoped to make some income. Soon, however, it became evident that villages were no less devoid of their own organizational logic. The disbursement of funds was at the discretion of village institutions heavily inclined towards the prevailing social structure of the village. Jobs were minimal, and at the discretion of contractors who favored their own caste compatriots within the village (Jebarak 2020). The few who did get some work found it to be demeaning and demotivating having spent years moving up the “skill ranks” in urban job markets. The insularity and misery of the village proved too much for many – who, at the first signs of demand for labor in cities, began to return in batches starting from the end of October.

Mumbai’s experience during the lockdown is specific in many ways, yet it must provoke inquiry into more profound questions of theory-building in multiple disciplines. This article attempts to discuss granular details in the effort to provoke new debates in fields like critical migration studies, postcolonial studies and city planning. For migration theorists, the meso-level has always been a scale of analysis with profound explanatory potential (Katz & Stark 1986). The experience of Mumbai however asks us at what precise point we can begin to distinguish the meso from smaller and larger scales, when family decisions are mediated at community levels and in constant interaction with state policies in particular situations such as shocks. For postcolonial studies, the most pertinent question is to reorient a form of ‘rural bias’ (Desai 1956) prevalent in many country-specific sociological canons to understand the fluid nature of evolving spatial relations while situating it in proper historical context. Finally – and perhaps most importantly – city planners in the global south must also be called upon by the experience of the lockdown to reflect upon the kinds of built environments, spaces and lived histories that form the templates for policy delivery. The pandemic experience offers a lens through which to understand the hostile and precarious nature of urban environments and the delicate threads that hold them together. It is these individual granularities that add up to the entire city – and thus must be addressed on their own terms to account for future planning and resilience.

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