

Inequalities as Sources of Conflicts: the Case of COVID

Concept Note

Causes and dynamics of civil conflicts remain varied, complex, and only partly understood. They are often attributed to factors ranging from “...rapid social and economic transformations...the pressures of globalization, growing inequalities within states, and the information revolution” (Nelson, 1998). This seminar seeks to focus on *inequalities* as sources of social conflict in the Indian context. In the past two years or so, COVID-19 has provided a distinctive vantage point from which many forms of horizontal and vertical inequalities have become apparent.

On 24th March, 2020, the Prime Minister came live on the television networks at 8 p.m. to announce a complete lockdown from midnight the same day. All transport, offices, factories, other places of work and educational institutions had to close down with a four-hour notice. Even a city-state like Singapore gave a three-day notice to its inhabitants to return to their place of origin before declaring a lockdown. From the very beginning, COVID-19 has been caught in political ambitions whether it was Donald Trump’s visit in March 2020 or the flouting of all reasonable norms at the Kumbh Mela or massive election rallies before elections to four state assemblies in April 2021. Of importance is the fact that the pandemic exposed and intensified the already existing inequalities in the Indian society.

For example, the last census of India, 2011 indicates that the country has around 10 crore inter-state migrants who have migrated for economic reasons and do unskilled daily wage labour in the host city. The dependence of the country’s economy on them is enormous. The sudden lockdown left the migrants with no work and no resources to fall back on. An estimated ten million migrants walked hundreds of kilometres back to their state. Not a few of them died on the way (Agarwal & Singh 2021, p. 42). Even those who did get home had to encounter initial stigma. Eventually they may have had to think of alternate livelihood strategies, especially in resource poor households. Some may have been able to return to their pre-Covid places of work, more likely in formal sector jobs, but for many this is not possible. People from the Northeast also faced compounded racism in other parts of the country, given the broadly accepted theories of Chinese origins of COVID and mainland India’s imagination of a Chinese person into which people from the Northeast “seamlessly fit” (Singha, 2021).

The first wave of COVID-19 was ending in late 2020 after affecting 10 million people and killing 155,000 by official count. Unofficial estimates put the number both of the affected and of deaths many times higher. By official count in late November 2021 the number of COVID-19 cases has reached 345 lakhs in the country and 454,000 have died. One does not know their real number. Obviously because of the enormity of the pandemic much of the discourse around COVID-19 has been on medical terms. In the process its differential impact by caste, class and gender, region has been forgotten. All the field experience and studies show that COVID-19 did not cause the inequalities in the Indian social system but intensified already existing inequalities.

The pandemic as a disease has made no distinction between the rich and the poor. The picture changes when one comes to its negative social impacts which have been felt more by the poor than by the rich, particularly in the urban slums and the rural and backward areas that are administratively neglected. For example, the preventive measure of social distancing was possible for the urban middle class and the rural upper classes. But it is a luxury that the urban slum dwellers and the rural poor cannot afford. Rural areas lack the health infrastructure required to deal with such an emergency. Moreover, no effort was made to educate the rural populations about the need for vaccines. Awareness about it was not strong enough to counter the pandemic.

Glaring disparities became evident in the education and health sectors. When because of the lockdown, schools closed down and education shifted to online classes, the class and urban-rural differences stood out and got intensified. Children from the middle class whose parents can afford smart phones and laptops for themselves and even for their children could continue online learning. But, we are yet to comprehend the psychological impact such long-term isolation might have had on children. Rural and other poor children could not even afford the electronic support system. Inequality in learning prior to the pandemic because of social inequality-based access to schools and to learning got intensified because of lack of electronic support. Many children seem to have forgotten even what they had learnt before COVID-19.

Incidents of child labour and child marriage increased so did domestic violence (Surepally, 2021, pp. 11-120). The burden of increased domestic work fell directly on women, compounded for many urban middle class women who were also doing office work from home. As Deshpande (2020) has asked, “As the workplace enters the home, does it have similar implications for men and women?”

COVID-19 has shown the need for new policies and initiatives to deal with these issues. The government that is under the influence of the dominant forces of the private sector will not change the policies by itself. It has, in fact, contributed to compounding the vulnerability of the workers in India through suspension of labour laws and the governments of several States extended the hours of work for factory workers. They increased the threshold numbers for the application of the Factories Act and the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act. A few States went further and took steps to exempt certain factories from the application of labour laws altogether (Gopalakrishnan, 2021). Civil society groups have to experiment with new approaches to development, particularly regarding access to basic services. They need to join hands to change policies in favour of the marginalised classes.

The workshop aims to focus on these and other discussions around inequalities, COVID, its ramifications, and strategies to address the disparities of access that have been made evident in the face of the pandemic and the way forward, with a special focus on gender, migration, regional specificities and infrastructural availability.