Ekabali Ghosh

“Life is an Uncertain Mess.”

India, Kolkata, 21 March – 3 July 2020

Ekabali Ghosh is an M.Phil. scholar at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She is 26, belongs to India’s teeming urban middle class, and in the grand tradition of South Asian millennials, is yet to move out of her hometown. She lives with her self-reliant yet paranoid mother who washes currency notes in water hoping to shoo away corona. Mother and daughter share an apartment in Kolkata, and their extended family live nearby.

Ekabali is also a feminist activist deeply concerned about the global rise of right-wing populism.

Date: 21.03.2020

Time: 23:19

The situation so far: Coronavirus first entered my conscious mind when a friend who has family in China showed me a video of a car spraying disinfectants into the air. The move was orchestrated by the local authorities somewhere in China, presumably where his parents were living. The point he made was that spraying disinfectant in the air would not stop the spread of the virus, but it would be spectacular enough for the layperson to be calmed by it. The scene looked positively dystopian.

After that, I followed the situation every now and then and was annoyed by how the response to the virus was mostly panicked white people. We made jokes about it in university. We called Europeans funny, sensitive and stupid: jokes that are only fun when you make them at the expense of white people (which Europe is dominated

by). I do not exactly remember when the first case of COVID-19 was documented in India. But by the second week of March, I was washing my hands thoroughly for twenty seconds. However, I was still not openly talking about COVID-19 to my family or warning them about handwashing techniques. My family consists of me and my mom but in the next apartment live my aunt who is asthmatic and an uncle who is a senior citizen.

On 14th March, 2020, a person forwarded a demand to a university activists WhatsApp group that the university should be shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We were livid. Many of us wanted the university to remain open. A few of us said that they would go mad alone, at home. I wanted the university to remain open because we had a bunch of conferences planned that month. We had a WhatsApp discussion among a lot of student activists within the university and decided that we would demand that all university bathrooms have: 1. Soap and handwashing equipment (bathrooms of government run universities are notoriously unsanitary in India) 2. Peer to peer training. 3. Doctors and testing kits in the rundown university health centre 4. Regular checks and protective equipment for cleaning staff 5. Notification from the university that sick students should stay at home. 6. Rescheduling of examinations for those who are sick. 7. Ban on spitting within the university. But before the day passed, the Chief Minister of West Bengal had already responded with a suspension of classes and examinations till the end of March. We were unhappy but at least the administration section was open. The following week, she prolonged the shutdown till the middle of April. My principle worry was how I would live at home for so long, with my checkered relationship with my family. I already suffer from depression and anxiety. That week itself, a fellow activist messaged me saying that she had tried to kill herself twice the previous day. She was one of the people opposed to the shutdown.

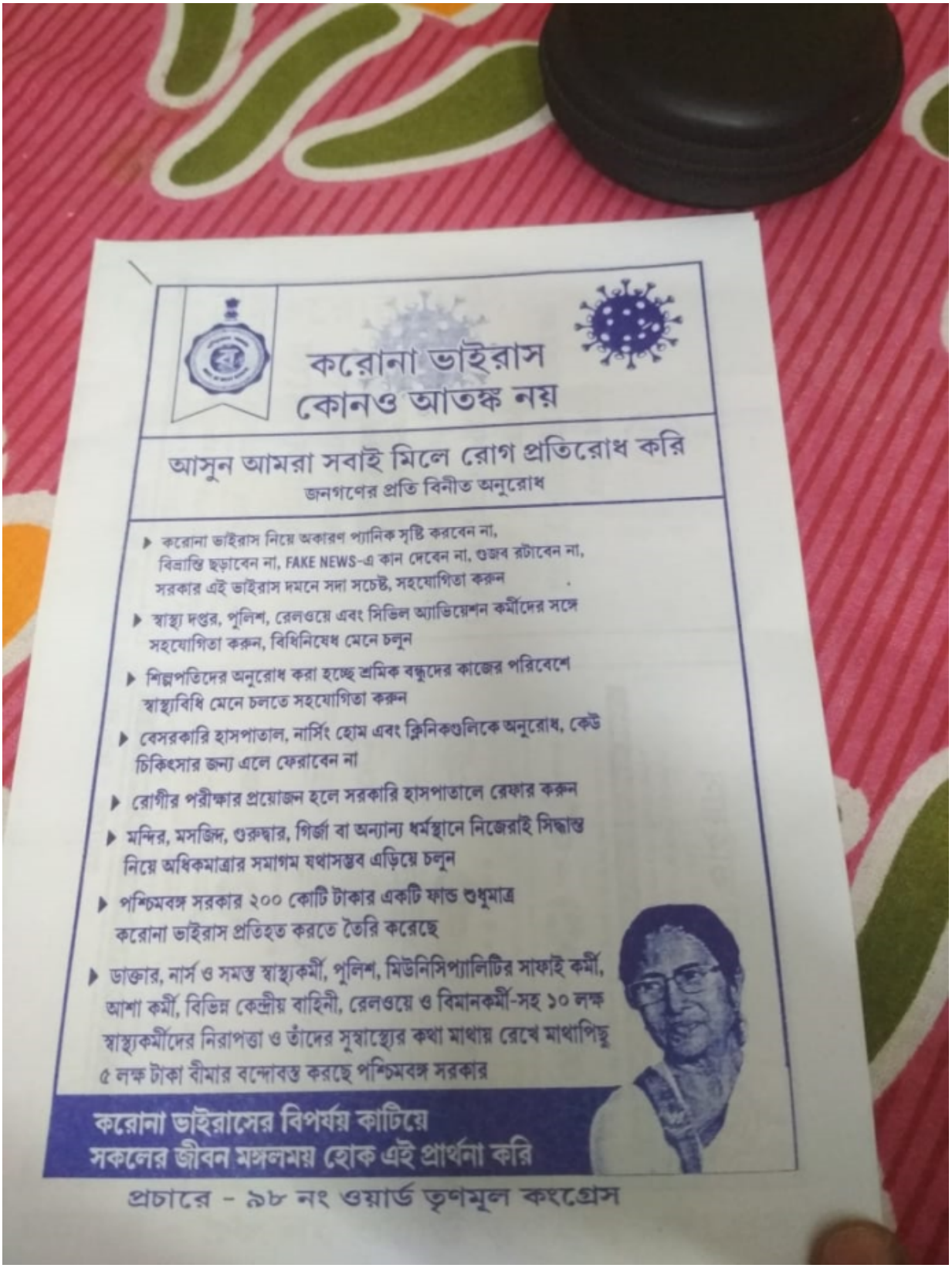
Things obviously spiraled from there. In hindsight, the state government took a smart decision though I hear from my friend that we might have to ration food for 6

months. We are told about social distancing but a lot of leftists are suspicious of it. They are right, to a degree. Social distancing is a privilege for most people in this country. Those who can afford it, do it. One of my professors whose own health is not the best keeps forwarding us COVID-19 helpline numbers. A WhatsApp voice message that asked people with symptoms of COVID-19 to not get themselves admitted unless they were critically ill became viral. The message was falsely attributed to a well-known heart surgeon called Devi Shetty (founder of Narayana Health). Narayana group had to come out with a public statement saying that the voice was not Dr. Shetty's. Fake news abounds on social media. My father, a 67-year-old man, declared to me that the summer will prevent the spread of the virus when I told him he should probably isolate himself. My mother buys homeopathic medications from this one shop about 5-7 km from our home, hoping that those little sugary balls will prevent COVID-19. I would rather use the alcohol in the medicine to sanitize my hands.

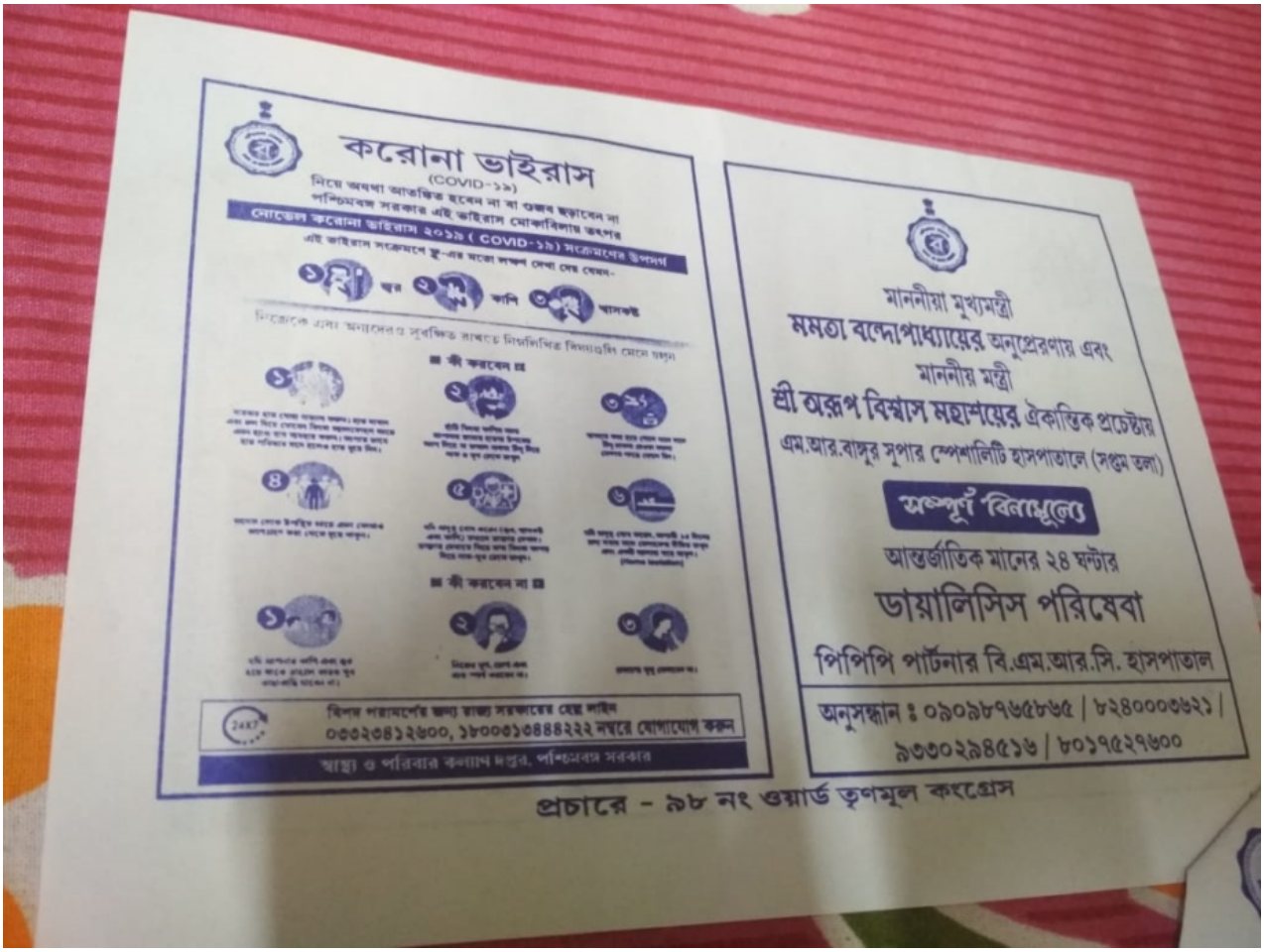
Meanwhile, sanitizers and masks have become as costly as a meal in a restaurant. A mask cost 350 rupees in the local pharmacy on the 18th and sanitizers were priced at 200 rupees a bottle. A small bottle.

This morning my mother went to the bazar and she was handed a public health leaflet being circulated by the TMC, which is the party in power in the state of West Bengal. The following are the photos of the leaflet.

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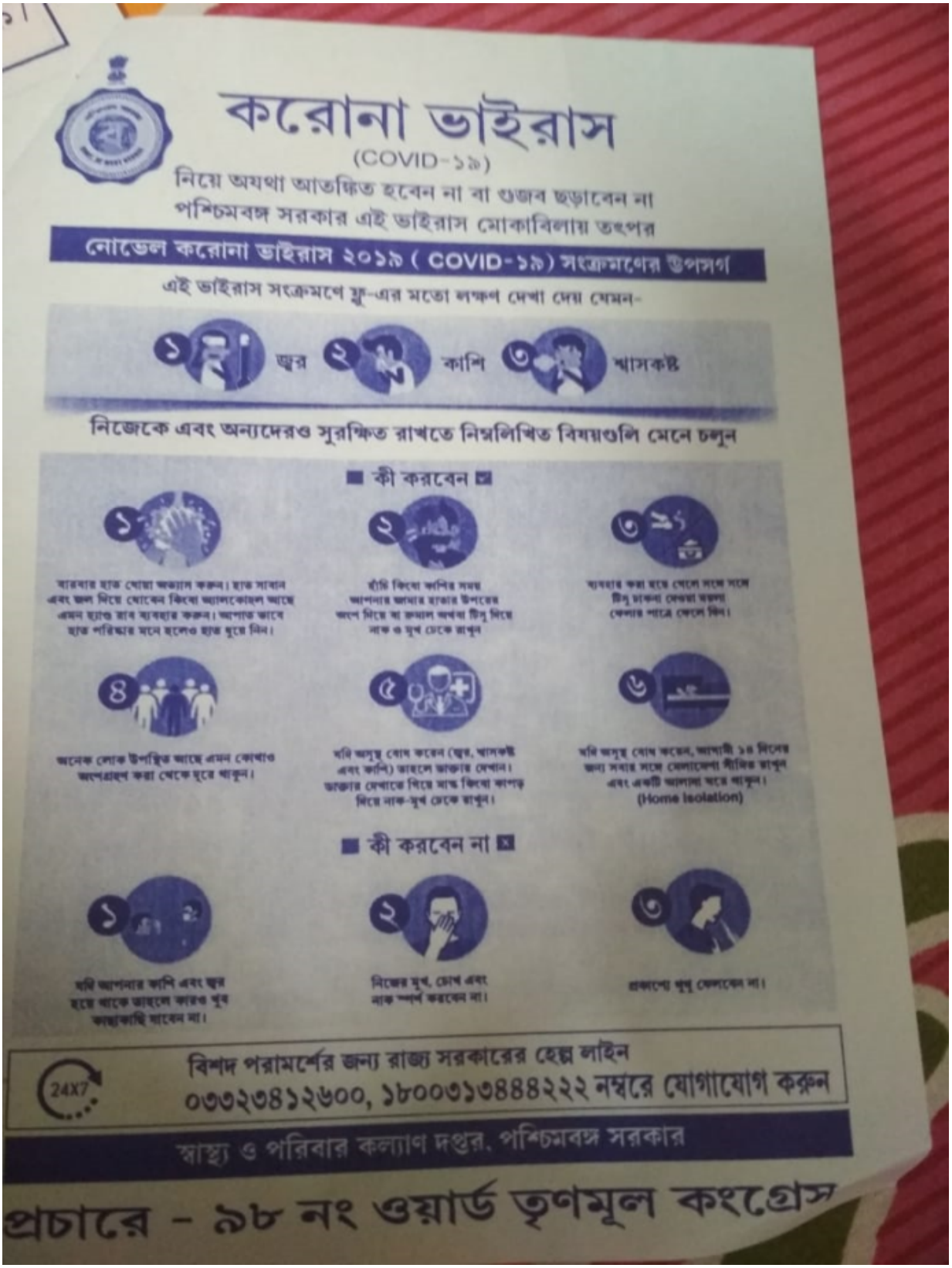


Fig. 1-3: Leaflet by the local Trinamool Congress (the party in power in West Bengal) in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Own photography.

Date: 22.3. 2020

Time: 19:41

I feel feverish and have a mild temperature. My mother is panicking. I am trying to isolate myself but I don't think it will work in a family where everyone lives in such proximity to others. My aunt has been told to not come to our apartment. Mom said she is praying to God and there is no way she will be spared from the disease if I get COVID-19. She puts her faith in destiny and such things. My friends calmed me down and one of them pointed out that even if I were to get it, I would recover fine, as I do not have any other underlying health conditions. Another texted a doctor of a government hospital asking to know what measures I should take. He said there is no need to test until the 8th day of symptoms. If any other condition develops like breathing trouble, I should immediately go for testing. I am wearing a mask and writing this.

In other news, the Prime Minister's beloved janta curfew happened today with relative success. People got out of their homes and banged utensils, played conch shells and rang bells at 5 pm. I have taken an audio recording of it. I thought the gimmick would not pick up in West Bengal as we have a government directly opposed to the central government, but clearly the idea of supporting healthcare workers struck a chord with the masses. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister's speech 2 days ago was quite sketchy about actual prevention measures. He mentioned the usual social distancing, the creation of an Economic Task Force (which was barely outlined) and so on.

I think I am about to start a cough.

Ekabali Ghosh

23.03.2020

Time: 13:37

A school in East Medinipore's Nandigram distributed midday meals to all its students who lined up to take it. The school claims that they had no other way out. However, there was an announcement from the Chief Minister of the state yesterday that all students who are registered as recipients of midday meals will be provided so at their homes. The announcement sounds grand and benevolent but my worry is that the perpetually broke state of West Bengal does not have the infrastructure required to carry this out.

https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/kejriwal-shuts-delhi-airport-as-part-of-lockdown-centre-overrules-order-120032201044_1.html

West Bengal and many other states in India go into lockdown from today. Gatherings of more than 7 people will be punished under the Indian Penal Code in West Bengal. Only essential services are to remain open. There is a sense of thankfulness towards doctors and healthcare workers. The state government has announced that doctors will be kept at hotels near the hospitals. They have asked private hospitals to do the same.

Punjab has gone into full on curfew.

https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/23/asia/coronavirus-COVID-19-19-update-india-intl-hnk/index.html

Two schools are distributing food in Kolkata in queues. In some of these queues children are present. Media is after them and calling up the Education Minister of the state of West Bengal for comment.

Ekabali Ghosh

25th March, 2020.

1:15 am

From tonight onwards for the next 21 days, this country goes into lockdown. I read it as a necessary measure. It might actually prevent the spread of the pandemic in India. But god the repercussions on my mental health are terrible. And I am not the only one. All over social media I see people write about how horrible they are feeling. More than one person is talking about how they are suicidal. To add to this, someone died in China of a hantavirus infection. I saw one person at least writing about being confused and freaking out for a moment over this other virus (hantavirus). My mother reacted quite virulently when she heard about the hantavirus case and declared that China must be conducting some experiment which is resulting in the creation of these viruses. I did not correct her at that point but I will have to tell her later that the hantavirus has been around for a few decades now. I think #hantavirus trended on Twitter too for a while.

This lockdown is going to be painful and any hope that I have of international travel will be ruined eventually as other countries go into lockdown. The lockdowns are essential but perhaps none of this would have been necessary if governments had funded their healthcare systems enough to be actually able to fight this illness. If hospitals were nationalized and had enough kits perhaps, then we could worry less about this. The way I see it, this is a crisis of neoliberalism, of not funding public healthcare and leaving private players to swoop in.

Yesterday on television a doctor said another pertinent point that I cannot throw out. He mentioned that in Europe who gets to live is being decided by age. The younger people get to live. He suspects that this socialism (yes, the guy actually called this a kind of socialism) will not be how things will be decided in India. In India, young people have the least amount of money, young parents are the lowest income earners. He repeated that because of this it was more likely that rich but old

people will be selected for survival over poor but young people. He placed what is a downright ageist practice in the European model of handling COVID-19 and made it look like a socialist practice. The whole narrative is so bonkers I am still wrapping my head around it. There are still people on TV trying to say that India does not have a culture of touching, blissfully unaware that what he is waxing poetic about is the caste system and ideas of bodily purity. However this guy clearly understood communal discrimination because he commented that playing bells and kashors etc. gives it the colour of one particular religion.

Anyway, that is just the people coming on TV. I get my news from YouTube, where TV news is often live streamed. There is a chat feature that comes with the YouTube channels of known news houses and in those chats I see people soliciting sex and advertising for sex work all the time. I was so amused by this modality of trade, I even posted about it on Facebook. A couple of my friends showed up and claimed that the lockdown has been a complete cockblock.

Humour is what remains. It keeps us going and we keep making jokes about random things. It is how we are keeping sane.

Date: 25.3.2020

Time: 13:43

At least one area in my city is being cleaned by the municipal corporation to make it germ free. Golpark, which is a kind of centre of southern Kolkata, is a well-known neighbourhood bustling with expensive apartments, cafes, and shops, and it is being cleaned with water and sodium hydrochloride solution dispersed through Kolkata Municipal Corporation's water sprinkler. I doubt if this will have any lasting impact to prevent or slow the transmission of the virus. These things are done for the spectacle of it, to keep people calm.

It is also difficult to make out if they are cleaning the place with sodium hypochlorite or hydrochloride. The former is bleach and might work to disinfect surfaces (though how will that work to disinfect surfaces treaded upon all the time?). I am not sure if the TV reporter caught the name of the chemical right. From my own experience of university politics, I know that reporters in this part of the world are notorious for getting nitty-gritties wrong.

Meanwhile, as of yesterday, more than a thousand people have been arrested for venturing out pointlessly. There are reports of police punishing youths by asking them to hold their ears and sit up and down in Kalyani, Mumbai for the same. The process goes like this: you hold your ears, squat fully and stand up immediately after and then squat again. It is a form of corporal punishment that was popular in schools for ages before corporal punishment was banned and became unfashionable. The lockdown has given way too much power to the police and they feel free to insult people's dignity.

https://m.timesofindia.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-under-lockdown-orders-to-stay-home/amp_articleshow/74784801.cms

27.3.2020

20:27

I could not write yesterday as I had a severe mental health crisis. I am trying to write today. I can only manage to be productive after an online session with my therapist. For various reasons, more than one friend has resorted to this technique. Others I know are suffering from mental health issues as well. I know a queer person who told me that this lockdown is basically forcing her back into the closet, referring to her home. And she is in pain. Anyway, back to COVID-19, I guess.

Ekabali Ghosh

Unable to leave their homes, people have taken to the terraces of their apartment buildings to find some space to socialise. But this too can get risky as a lot of people are sitting around chatting, playing board games, sharing a small space etc. Only yesterday I saw about seven to nine people, from three different families who reside in our apartment building playing board games on the terrace. I go there to walk and to catch some exercise. Today, when I saw the same group of people again, trying to pass the time walking around and chatting, I asked them whether they feel scared about catching the disease, since so many of them are socialising in one small space. One man replied that none of them had a cough, or a cold or fever. I told them about asymptomatic patients who carry the virus around but do not show symptoms. They did not reply to that. I don't think they were aware of such modes of transmission. Unfortunately, one of the families who were hanging out owns a testing laboratory. However, it must be noted that the person who runs the laboratory is the man of the house, who was not present in that situation (when I asked the question).

My mother asks me not to go to the terrace as she is afraid I am going to catch the virus from one of these people if they have it. I have started to pay heed to her fears. Instead, I am considering going to the terrace at a different time when it is empty. She also asks me not to spend too much time in the shower. She thinks I will catch a cold. Note the odd combination of non-scientific, indigenous (albeit Brahmanical) knowledge forms and progressive western (I am completely aware of how loaded these words are) medicine happening here. For example, she thinks that catching a cold will make me prone to catching SARS CoV 2. But I will fundamentally catch a cold not because of the common cold virus but because my body would somehow cool down due to excess exposure to water. Conceptions of hotness and coldness of the body are very common here. Certain foods make the body hot, for example, non-vegetarian food. And certain things are believed to cool the body, for example, lightly cooked vegetarian food. The concept is Brahmanical but applied broadly in daily life here.

Finally, my mother has also managed to get her hands on some homeopathic medicine which she thinks will protect us all from coronavirus. Our entire family is taking it with great gusto. She slips me a couple of granules too early in the morning when I sleep (she walks into my room, boomer parents have no understanding of privacy here).

Mom and I planned a vacation when all of this is over so that I can heal from my various mental breakdowns.

Date: 28.3.2020

Time: 22:56

There is no good news. The pandemic is spreading to the suburbs, towns and villages now. Cases in which people have taken the illness to these places are only now emerging. There is no statistics yet of how many infections have been passed on by these people already. Meanwhile, at Delhi's Anand Vihar today (which is the bus terminus for long distance travel in Delhi), more than a thousand migrant workers have appeared trying to catch buses to their native places. There is no space left for social distancing. These people cannot afford it. And neither can most of this country. I shudder to think of what might happen when these people actually go back to their villages. Some are walking hundreds of kilometres to go back to the villages as without their temporary jobs in Delhi they cannot live in that city. They have no money.

https://www.timesnownews.com/delhi/article/COVID-19-19-lockdown-triggers-mass-migration-from-delhi-thousands-gather-at-anand-vihar-bus-stand/570813

Accessed 28.3.2020, 23:05 pm

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-lockdown-migrant-workers-in-very-large-numbers-at-delhis-anand-vihar-bus-terminal/videoshow/74865929.cms

Accessed 28.03.2020, 23:05 pm.

At least in Kolkata we have not seen any such images yet. Our total number of cases in this state, as of today stands around 18.

Times Now says that India's curve is still controllable, they still have a chance at defeating the pandemic. But since Times Now once employed Arnab Goswami who is a right wing ideologue, I find it difficult to believe them. However, I do hope they are true. Meanwhile, the PR wing of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal promotes all that Mamata Banerjee is doing very carefully. I think this COVID-19 19 pandemic will be the tipping point of the 2021 elections in West Bengal. I sure do hope that healthcare becomes Mamata's central agenda in 2021 along with protection of Muslims and other religious minorities. These two agendas together can bring the Hindus and Muslims on the same page. This pandemic is politically super important here.

https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/COVID-19-19-outbreak-when-will-coronavirus-epidemic-peak-in-the-country/story-KJn0PZafCrGTq2W2ak2MhN.html Accessed 29.03.2020, time: 10:41 am.

Doctors are already talking about the need to change common habits of the people. For example, washing hands and no spitting are two habits that need to be incorporated. But I doubt if that will happen or not. The concern now is that the virus might become endemic to India.

30.03.2020

Ekabali Ghosh

00:48 am

India has crossed the one thousand mark in total number of cases. In my state itself, we have 21 cases. The virus has spread to the northern part of West Bengal, one cases has been reported there. At the Eastern Command Hospital in Kolkata, where my mother accesses much of her health insurance, an anesthesiologist who had just returned from Delhi has been diagnosed with COVID-19 19. Meanwhile, people are still congregating in small groups on terraces. Today (well technically yesterday) I overheard two such people talk while I was walking. One of them was convinced that the virus is part of an insidious plot by China to control the world economy. This boomer uncle also thought that rich Chinese men in Shanghai have withdrawn all the antibiotics from the market in order to protect themselves from the disease. I don't think he understood the difference between antibiotics and antivirals in the first place. He claimed that the illness would not impact India as badly as we are expecting higher temperatures in the coming weeks. Though there seems to be some correlation between higher temperatures and limited transmission of the virus, getting too confident about it is not a good idea. A lot of people in India are buying conspiracy theories about China due to the strained political relations between the two nations. More importantly, they are buying it because right wing governments everywhere thrive on this. At least one activist friend has told me that the IT Cell of the ruling party in India is actively fanning anti-Chinese misinformation through social media propaganda. Today, a fellow student activist told me that more than one student in her class has been called "coronavirus" because they look East Asian, coming from North East India or northern West Bengal. There is at least one meme which was widely shared in February in which the virus is called the "Chinese virus". Anyway, boomer uncle also mentioned that people who are dying of coronavirus are not really dying of the virus but really of heart attacks. At this point, the other guy he was talking to stopped him and explained to him that said heart attack would be triggered by COVID-19. I joined the conversation but I maintained a distance from them. In other news, the central government has stopped buses from plying from the

capital to the states so that migrant workers cannot leave Delhi. Those who have reached their villages will be required to be quarantined in home shelters. I do not think this will work at all in India. I do not have high hopes from the state, especially when it concerns rural India.

I keep searching for some good news online. I don't find much.

30.3.2020

13:53 pm

One more death in West Bengal brought the total number of COVID-19 casualties to 2 in the state. The TV media is reporting that there are quite a few people in the streets today. Too many people are going to the market, catching up at tea shops etc. Many people supposedly leave the home after daytime is over, as that is when police surveillance is less. The same news channel is also asking people not to spit randomly. I calculated the corona cases in Spain and Italy from the coronavirus worldometer website. It seems that those two countries have reached their peaks. They are receiving less and less cases every day. India's curve on the same site looks like a plateau but I doubt that we have correct statistics. India is not testing enough. This country has only tested about 35,000 people. A friend who lives in Santragachhi (a suburb of Howrah) told me yesterday that people are gathering in her neighbourhood to chat every day. She complained that one of her neighbours has constantly travelled between Maharashtra and Bangladesh recently and is going on and about. She also thinks that the family lied to local health authorities about her travel history and told them that she returned to Kolkata before the epidemic broke out, but that is untrue.

I do not think we will be able to gauge the full affect of the pandemic in the public psyche until the lockdown is lifted and we go back to normal life. Would people still

spit on the roads? I think we will have to wait and watch.

I do not think the lockdown will be lifted at the end of 21 days as the central government has said so far. Our 21-day period will be completed on April 14th, right before Bengali New Year (and a bunch of other regional new years' celebrations). Raising the lockdown at that point would be public health suicide.

31.3.2020

13:40 pm

I saw a video on a TV network in which some small time traders in local bazaars were drenching cash in Dettol and water before accepting it with their hands. I did not know whether Dettol works against the novel coronavirus and looked it up. Apparently, Dettol does work against other forms of human coronavirus but the novel coronavirus is not up for testing yet. Either way, if it works against SARS CoV-1 and MERS, maybe it will work against SARS CoV-2 as well. I am just going to hope these small time traders are right. Italy's growth seems to be slowing down, just as USA's growth seems to be rising. It is absolutely ridiculous to think that none of these countries have imposed proper lockdowns. The privileges you can afford when you are not completely in dire straits with your healthcare! Not to say that USA has a fine healthcare system, it doesn't. But at least it is better than India's. This country is a ticking time bomb which we are hoping to defuse but which we know is going to burst anyway, killing those nearest to it. We are simply in denial.

There is a video doing the rounds in which a doctor in North Bengal Medical College is talking about how they do not have enough masks to deal with coronavirus disease.

In a televised meeting yesterday, the Chief Minister of West Bengal decided to

requisition private hospitals with their staff to deal with the novel coronavirus. It might not be a bad idea as government infrastructure is poor to say the least. So much of this pandemic has been created by governments not spending enough on their healthcare programmes and generally not taking healthcare seriously and relegating it as secondary to other concerns.

15:23 pm

Migrant workers are the worst hit in this crisis. Yesterday there were reports of migrant workers being sprayed with bleach at Bareilly in order to prevent infections. Today, I just saw a report online that an eight months pregnant woman and her husband have been forced to walk a hundred kilometres in the middle of the lockdown, because the husband's employer turned both of them out without any money. This too, has happened in Uttar Pradesh and some locals who saw them walk offered the couple an ambulance to go back home in Meerut.

Link to report on bleach sprayed on migrant workers: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-india-lockdown-disinfectant-sprayed-on-migrants-on-return-to-up-shows-shocking-video-2202916 Accessed 31.3.2020

Link to report on pregnant woman and her husband walking 100 kms: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/locals-help-pregnant-woman-her-husband/story-s9QEWktmfZ4sKXDx3KUkYI.html?fbclid=IwAR0BVWXJWUgVS6lUh-G5lY7iVUZXXT2Mvzy4dkNus6yfRAPpixrukNiZgnE Accessed 31.3.2020. Time: 15:34.

1.4.2020

12:13 pm

1590 cases in India. 45 deaths according to report. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/coronavirus-live-updates-COVID-19-19-total-cases-death-toll-in-india-lockdown-statewise-tally-delhi-maharasthra-us-italy-spain-latest-news-120040100152_1.html. Accessed 1.4.2020 time: 12:14.

6 people have died of coronavirus in West Bengal. 37 infected. Apparently, the reports of two people have come in after their deaths according to ABP Ananda headlines.

PM 2.5 in Kolkata air has decreased by 8-10 times according to an ABP Ananda news by 30th March in Dunlop. Other parts of the city have similar counts. Birds are flying freely in parts of Dharmatala.

Gatherings continue on terraces. Kids are playing cricket and football in the terrace of the home and in the car park (ground floor). I think this pandemic is going to make a lot of people fitter. Since people have been told not to go out, they miss exercising even though under normal circumstances most middle-class aunties barely ever exercise beyond light walking. Had the pandemic not happened, none of these individuals would really bother with exercising. Middle aged aunties are jumping rope (it is called "skipping" here) in the terrace during the lockdown. Before the lockdown happened, they never bothered to get themselves any kind of physical activity.

Everyone up to eighth standard will be allowed to pass in the CBSE examination. For ninth and eleventh standards, only essential examinations and class assessments will take place. IIT Delhi has postponed joint entrance advanced examinations.

Just saw a news segment on people crowding outside ration shops. Much of the

crowd consisted of women, all economically underprivileged. According to the journo who was reporting they do know about social distancing but they were unwilling to follow it. I do not think it is as simple as that. There has to be some other reason why so many underprivileged women are behaving in this manner. One of them mentioned that they were sitting in the shade so as to avoid the sun. There has to be a wider sociological reason as to why so many women came down to the ration shop, not caring about a health hazard. One reason could be that they are out of work and free rations is incredibly important to them. The other more pertinent reason could be that they do not have the means to follow social distancing measures in their private spheres and hence the public sphere does not really matter so much to them anymore. This argument was used by many activists while trying to explain why women in Shaheen Bagh and Park Circus were interested in continuing their protests even as the pandemic was just getting started in India.

2.4.2020

13:34 pm

The state government of West Bengal too has decided to “pass” all students till eighth standard in its schools following its board curriculum.

Coronavirus worldometer is claiming that the number of confirmed cases in India has crossed 2k. But ABP Ananda claims it is 1,965 people. 50 people have died in India according to the leading news channel in the Bengali language. One person has died in Mumbai’s Dharavi, which is Asia’s largest slum area.

In Madhya Pradesh, a group of healthcare workers and a doctor was attacked by people when they went to identify a COVID-19 patient. I just heard this in a news update as I am writing this. The problem with news channels is that they just report the “story” and explain it through “oh look how people are so irresponsible”. They do

not delve deeper into why people are acting the way they are acting.

https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/attacks-on-d octors-healthcare-workers-rise-amid-COVID-19-19-pandemic-2204547 Accessed 2.4.2020 Time 13:43 pm

Attacks on doctors are a frequent incident in India's government hospitals. Doctors are blamed for not saving lives, even when they have no choice and have done all that they possibly could have. Sometimes, such attacks happen in private hospitals too. In June 2019, a mob attacked a junior doctor in Nil Ratan Medical College and Hospital brutally. The doctor in question was severely wounded. The mob consisted mainly of Muslims. This became a moot point in the political mobilization that followed. The TMC government would not promptly punish them as they are counting on the minority vote to be re-elected to power in 2021. On the other hand, the BJP (the right wing Hindutva brigade) which is breathing down TMC's back, claimed that the Mamata led government was "appeasing" the Muslims at the cost of Hindu doctors. Much of the middle class Muslim community was not in favour Mamata Banerjee's actions either. Doctors went into a strike, called for protests and nearly brought the government hospitals to a halt. Both the left and the Hindutvabadis supported the doctors. Eventually, some action was taken against the people responsible for the violence.

The point is, such attacks on doctors is not uncommon in India. June 2019 was not an exception. Doctors probably were frustrated with the broken healthcare system and wanted greater security and police postings outside their wards in government hospitals. Notably, they did not ask for better healthcare for the people. The gap in the parliamentary left's analysis of the doctor's movement was that it completely forsook the lens of class in its reading of the crisis. Doctors in India are a privileged class and are some of the most highly paid professionals in this country. The anger against doctors comes from the way they treat patients, suspicions that they are engaged in malpractices and a general tendency to think that doctors can do whatever they want to with a patient and can give life to a dying patient. The attacks

against doctors is a class issue that stems from the broken healthcare system of this country.

Perhaps I should try and establish here that medicine has its own awareness capital. Not all people are medically aware and who gets to be medically aware is dependent on learning in science, access to the internet and of course access to the English language. How doctors treat their patients depends on who can talk to doctors in their rational terms. This of course does not mean that doctors will refuse treatment, but the gap in how a doctor would talk to someone like me and someone who is a domestic worker is massive. The absence of awareness capital in people is a question of class and educational privilege and hence they are far more likely to see a harsher healthcare system than us. This also ties up with how the media represents those who do not have said awareness capital: they are irresponsible, stupid, buffoons etc. Often, doctors on news channels bring up the question of education when they bring up issues of social distancing. “Educated people should understand this”. When the son of a top bureaucrat in the state returned from the UK positive for COVID-19 and did not quarantine himself, the anger stemmed from the fact that these people had been irresponsible despite being “educated”. In short, they had access to education and awareness capital, but decided to act in an entitled manner. “Education” when doctors and media talks about it is not education in the way we understand it in academia, it is a snide reference to the capital one gains from awareness.

There are actually quite a few reports about doctors who are complicit in the malpractices of the private healthcare system in India and these cases reinforce negative stereotypes about doctors.

Anyway, in the backdrop of all this, it is not impossible that many people, especially those without an awareness capital, will see doctors as enemies and the medical system as alien. Also noteworthy is that India has its systems of alternative healthcare measures: herbal cures, Ayurveda, Unani, homeopathy. The purpose of mentioning this is not to talk about their effectiveness but that these medical

practices are often there for people when conventional medical practices are out of their grasp. To add to this, there are questions of Brahminism: this food makes the body hotter or that practice is going to keep your body cool and you have a pandemic bomb about to explode.

3.4.2020

11:47 pm

12 quarantined patients escaped from a hospital in Serampore.

https://www.facebook.com/abpananda/videos/vb.198230903525774/2985371611310 43/?type=2&theater Accessed 3.4.2020, time: 11:47 pm

People are not taking the lockdown seriously. I went out to do groceries yesterday and saw several dozen people loitering in the main road closest to my home. To be honest, I volunteered to get the groceries with my mother (usually it is mom and aunt doing groceries together) because I am sick of being at home. It felt good to walk about on the streets but there were a lot of people who were roaming about purposelessly. This is particularly true for young people with bikes and cycles who can go out and are roaming about on unpoliced streets (smaller main roads, areas that are not "key" in the city). Procuring milk is becoming difficult as you have to wait for the new lot of milk to arrive in the evening and then sort of pounce on the shopkeeper. We got four packets. Usually a packet lasts us two days. I was sort of hoping that we would not find it in the nearest shop, so we could take a second walk to the market but that did not happen. It is contradictory on my part to judge people roaming about when I will pick up any excuse to go out but crises bring out the contradictions in people.

Meanwhile, I am joining an activist venture to distribute essentials like sanitary

napkins, milk powder and soap to women in need, especially to low income women who have children. I wish I could claim that the innate nobility of my nature has urged me on to this path but it is really a terrifying need to be out in public, instead of being at home. If it does come down to having to go out and work for relief, I guess I will find more material for this diary. More than one activist today opined that we may run out of essentials like soaps and milk powder at some point. One of them was afraid that we will end up with the hungry masses looting shops eventually. I do hope it does not come to that. But if it does, I sincerely hope the hungry masses dethrone the right wing first.

5.4.2020

12:48 pm

Total number of infected in India is 3374 according to local media. Doctors are sure that the total number of infected people is far higher than that. There is no counting the number of asymptomatic people spreading the virus about. One doctor was hopeful saying that we will see the result of the lockdown after fourteen days. I am not that hopeful. I see people interact around my home all the time. In the private sphere, it is virtually impossible to police people's interactions. On our terrace itself, there were about 9 people from three different families gathering to play football. I had already told them about asymptomatic populations before but I do not think it had much of an effect. Anyway, yesterday evening, while these people were playing upstairs (I was walking trying to maintain my distance), we saw a drone hovering above the locality. Some of these people started waving at the drone and another woman suggested that if the police do show up at our apartment, they are all going to claim that they are a joint family. At this point, I crept out of the terrace. I have been an activist for years and avoided getting arrested, I am not going to risk getting my name into the documents of the police for this. Nope, that is not going to happen.

Ekabali Ghosh

I did the rest of my exercise routine in my room.

Meanwhile, depression continues to haunt me. A friend of a friend predicted the worst recession ever once the pandemic settles and that leaves me to worry about what kind of scholarships I am going to get if I apply for a PhD outside the country. What would this pandemic mean for humanities academia? What would this mean for privatization? These questions continue to haunt me as I keep nursing a deep sense of loss inside me.

19:20 pm

A sweetshop in Jadavpur, which is the area where my university is located, has innovated a sweetmeat called “corona mishti”. (Note: “Mishti” is Bengali for sweetmeat.) It looks very icky if you ask me, but if people find levity in tough times, making and eating weird looking sweets, so be it. Here is a picture of corona mishti.



Fig. 4
https://www.mensxp.com/social-hits/news/74808-kolkata-shop-sells-coronavirus-shaped-sandesh-its-the-sweetest-form-of-facepalm.html

https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/06/covid-19-kolkata-sweet-shop-comes-up-with-corona-sandesh-corona-cake-2126545.html

In other news, the Prime Minister asked everyone to light a candle or "diya" (lamp) today. He and his party knew very well that people would take this upon themselves to celebrate Diwali. And celebrate they did. In my state, where the BJP is still the opposition party, people lit lamps, firecrackers, lit torches from phones and took every opportunity they could find to show their loyalty to the PM. My mother and aunts are all anti BJP because they support the TMC (the ruling party in the state of

West Bengal). And I am of course a left feminist with a strong Ambedkarite bend. Anyway, instead of switching off the lights as instructed, we did the exact opposite and switched on all the lights everywhere, as defiance. Mom is borderline scared now that BJP cadres might come knocking at our home but I told her I will chase them away with shoes if they try anything.

I saw a video on Facebook of a group of people with flames chanting "go go Corona" and taking to the streets in a rally. Apparently, the incident happened in Chennai. Somewhere in Rajasthan, a lantern crashed onto someone's hut and set a rather large fire.

My own social media is awash with people making jokes about those who are lighting lamps.

Links to two videos of people in "coronavirus rallies" have been attached.

The first one is from Chennai, and the next one, judging by the language, is from West Bengal.

https://www.facebook.com/jayanta.deb.33/videos/3428195703874689/UzpfSTEwMDAwMzM3OTM2NTQwNjoyNjIyNDQ5ODU0NTQ0MzAx/

https://www.facebook.com/drtfb/videos/10157631451283702/UzpfSTEwMDAwMzM3OTM2NTQwNjoyNjIyNjA0MzAxMTk1NTIz/

6.4.2020, 1:40 am

https://www.facebook.com/aanchal.khulbe/videos/pcb.10213510621120474/10213510619240427/?type=3&theater

Here is another video of people gathering together to shout "China virus go back".

7.4.2020, 6:53 am

I was talking to one of my friends in Britain and he opined that Boris Johnson's condition has got to be much worse than what they are letting on. Besides, he has been shifted to the ICU, which means a 50% chance of survival. If he does die, it will be the most publicised death in the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, it will actually create a space for the Tories to gain popular sympathy and hide the horrible way in which they have handled the pandemic. You never know how racist Britons can get. Who knows a few of them might use this as an excuse to make racial attacks on Asians? This will turn into a case where the nation would be asked to stick together. People will forgive the government out of sympathy. Johnson's partner is pregnant with their child. Even I feel bad, imagine how much sympathy they will get from the general public.

Meanwhile, there are hints that India might partially lift the lockdown on the 14th for economic reasons. They are trying to follow the Bhilwara model, which is the identification of hotspots and containing the epidemic in the aggressively in said hotspots. Howrah, which is next to Kolkata might be one of the hotspots. All fine, but I doubt that it will bear much fruit. I am suspicious about the government's intentions and they might be doing this in order to prevent an economic crisis rather than saving lives. I am also certain that in the near future the union government would declare an economic emergency and cut all our salaries, scholarships etc by 30%. Why else would they cut the salaries of the ministers, MPs, and MLAs?

Here is a useful link from the media and the PDF for the union government's containment plan.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFSuxQhURuU&feature=youtu.be

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https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/3ContainmentPlanforLargeOutbreaksofCOVID-1919Final.pdf

Meanwhile, my mother has taken to washing currency notes with soap and water before touching them again. I would rather she be safe than sorry.



Fig. 5: Photography: Ekabali Ghosh.

9.4.2020

Time: 00:07 am

I think I am going to submit the above picture to Subtle Curry Traits. I have gotten comfortable in the lockdown even as I hear terrible news from everywhere. Cases of domestic violence has increased. What seldom gets counted as domestic violence in this country at least, is the violence inflicted by fathers, often in association with mothers, upon their daughters. A friend of mine was asking me today if it is possible

for me to host someone who finds it impossible to live with her parents. Similar situations are being reported by queer women, transgender people etc. We are being forced back into the closet, as a friend of mine accurately pointed out. My mother does not bother me a lot these days because she knows my mental health situation is terrible at the moment. I wake up, study, exercise, repeat. Sometimes when I am triggered, I write. Otherwise, I just maintain this diary and keep recording what I see around myself. Once a week, we have an online class.

The lockdown will not be lifted on the 14th of April and we are sure of that. It is a relief in a way, as I was half expecting this right wing government to prioritise the economy over lives lost. Eventually, I am certain they will move into partial lockdown mode and follow something which is called the Bhilwara model. Bhilwara is a town in Rajasthan which had a high number of COVID-19 cases. Extensive antibody testing allowed the administration to identify certain clusters where the epidemic was rampant. These areas were put in a complete lockdown and even essential services like groceries were closed. The district was completely sealed off. Eventually, the number of cases was brought down drastically. Once the lockdown is lifted the government will probably identify hotspots and practice the same model in these places. If that is the case, Howrah in West Bengal might become a hotspot. If Howrah is on lockdown, I don't know how Kolkata would function since the two are twin cities. A large chunk of students in my university live in Howrah. How can we have examinations with those students missing? I actually asked a junior who lives in Howrah to settle somewhere in Kolkata if that kind of lockdown happens. Another friend escaped Howrah in the wee hours of the morning in the back of a brother's bike. Should I disapprove? I am just glad that my friend escaped her high population density neighbourhood which is dominated by economically underprivileged people.

The same friend told me a story that one particular person in her locality which is a ghetto of Muslims in Howrah, was admitted to the hospital with COVID-19 like symptoms but the case never made it to the government records. Again, this is not

something I can verify. She also reported that people in her locality are roaming around in shoes (as opposed to sandals) as they want to run if a medical raid happens. As Muslim men in India, many of them would actually be afraid of the police, who would undoubtedly accompany the healthcare staff.

A lot of important documents is also stuck in transit due to COVID-19. My passport is stuck somewhere in the process. A friend was complaining that his debit card is stuck midway. Postal services are supposed to be open, but in practice most post offices are closed and the ones which are opening occasionally are only dealing with monetary affairs (Indian save a lot of money in post office savings schemes).

9.4.2020

21:29 pm

The total number of cases in India has crossed 6000 officially. I am sure the real numbers are much higher. The West Bengal government claims it does not have enough money to sustain everyone. Yet, if we are to deal with the economic recession, we will need money pumped into the economy. But the only rumours I hear are governments planning to cut down on people's salaries and austerity measures. The central government might declare an economic emergency soon. The lockdown will definitely be extended and I do not know when or how we can even go out to university. I miss being at university. I want to dress up, meet my friends and go out to eat somewhere. Anyway, I am just going to take comfort in the fact that I can have Maggi at night.

Update: The top medical officer at Howrah Zilla Hospital has developed COVID-19 and he came into contact with several dozen nurses, doctors and even ministers.

Ekabali Ghosh

10.4.2020, 12:28 pm

https://www.bloombergquint.com/coronavirus-outbreak/coronavirus-india-live-updates-total-covid-19-cases-at-death-toll-cured-who-lockdown-extension-narendra-modi-health-ministry-testing-hospitals

I have fallen into a comfortable pattern. I wake up late, say around 10 am. Try and read something, follow up on the latest statistics in Europe (because Indian and American statistics are too depressing), take my lunch, exercise in the evening, take a snack, take a dinner, go to sleep. It is odd how easy life can be when you have nowhere else to go, no commitments to meet outside the home. Sometimes I refrain from watching the news too and instead prefer going on Netflix. It preserves an amount of peace. We are nowhere near the peak, community transmission is happening and there is no way this thing is going away easily. International travel will probably not open until September. The whole situation is depressing and painful. So instead I just focus on my own life, career and mental health. Sometimes I even dissociate from my own family members as I get lost in my own world of online friends. I still miss going to university and I miss the Maggi in the stall in front of the Arts building. Once the lockdown is over, I simply want to go there and order some cheap Maggi.

12.4.2020

Okay, first off, I am writing this diary first thing in the morning tomorrow or I get too caught up in other things.

Anyway, so much for me desiring Maggi from university stall. The Chief Minister of West Bengal announced yesterday that all universities, colleges, school and other educational institutions in the state were to be shut till at least till the 10th of June.

That includes the summer vacation. We don't know if examinations will happen or not. We do not know how we are going to organize the entrance examinations to the various departments of our university. If at any point we fail to do that, the state government will be after us (the university) trying to impose their own system of marks-based entry on us.

Anyway, somewhere in a Muslim locality in Kolkata, several people beat up police who went to impose the lockdown. (https://www.msn.com/en-in/health/entertainment/COVID-19-pandemic-locals-flouted-lockdown-attacked-police-in-kolkata/vp-BB12tBjw) So of course, savarna (literally the ones who possess a "varna" i.e. are not part of India's untouchable castes; colloquially used to denote upper to middle castes) Hindu Bengalis are doing what they do best: spreading Islamophobic rhetoric. The Chief Minister, herself an authoritarian who depends on Muslim votes for her election is being accused of appeasing the Muslims. The RSS and BJP IT Cells are of course fanning this flame. But BJP propaganda is not all. The problem lies with the ingrained Islamophobic hatred that Hindu Bengalis carry in themselves. I hear horrible things said by my family about Muslims every day. I check them and they take offense at that. After a point, it seems futile to engage.

Apart from the attack on the policeman, some videos of people being out on the streets in Muslim dominated areas became popular on news and other media. Not a lot of underprivileged people are following lockdown measures, simply because it is not possible for them. I had a conversation with one of my friends who lives in such a locality and is a Muslim herself. She was talking about how most poor families in her locality cram into a 100 sq ft space. These are families of 5-6 people. Even if a woman has to change clothes, the men have to leave the room. People do not have space to sleep inside their living spaces. Many of these men try and find abandoned auto rickshaws in which they sleep at night. Often, they will share the same space with dogs. How is soap supposed to work for these people? They do not have 24 hours of

water supply. They fetch water in buckets from local taps that are at least 500 m away. That water is then rationed throughout the day. How do you expect such people to follow government guidelines? Not much development takes place in these localities either. It is almost as if the state conspires to keep these people poor. But hey! Muslims are responsible for every problem this country has. Can't find your ladle in your kitchen? Blame a Muslim. Heater not working properly? Blame a Muslim! Half-educated General category brat not getting a job? MUSLIMS!

I had a conversation with my first cousin yesterday. He is a patient of lymph node tuberculosis. I asked him to stay quarantined and not leave him home. Incidentally, he is located in a corona hotspot which is expected to go into a stricter lockdown soon. His response was that Muslims are beating up police officers, why should we stay in lockdown? And he said it is such a disgusting language, like completely unapologetically. Like he does not care. This first cousin of mine is 28 years old and not a BJP voter. He votes for the Trinamool Congress.

A large section of the Bengali middle classes in Kolkata which vote TMC vote so not because they are inherently anti-Islamophobia. They vote TMC because they care only when Modi cuts down on the interest rates they receive from their banks. The constant shrinking democratic space in this country and the attacks on Muslims and other minorities are not an issue for many of them. Anyway, I did not engage further. I feel like I will lose my intellect if I argue with people like this.

P.S: A group of Nihang Sikhs chopped off the arm of a police officer in Patiala, Punjab. I am waiting for this too to turn into Hindutva propaganda given the contentious history of Sikhs with the Indian nation state.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/nihangs-cut-off-hand-of-policeman-after-scuffle-in-vegetable-market/articleshow/75104243.cms

Ekabali Ghosh

13.4.2020

11:49 am

The coronavirus continues wreaking havoc throughout the country. Kerala, however, seems to have flattened the curve a little, according to a few media reports. That might be because of a good system of healthcare or it might even be because of limited testing. I certainly hope it is not the latter. More so because Kerala still has a government which claims to be the "left front" though it has non left parties in the alliance too, like NCP. Anyway, if the non BJP states do better in fighting this pandemic, it will certainly give us something to fight the centre with. I am even rooting for the Mamata Banerjee government in West Bengal.

In other news, sex workers throughout the country are having a tough time as their clientele are forced back home (migrant labourers). Again, many of them share their living spaces with 10-15 other people and they cannot afford social distancing. I wonder how the sex workers in Sonagachhi are doing. A fundraiser was doing the rounds a while back for them. I think I will dig it up and send something. The same applies for trans people who depend on sex work and begging.

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/india-sex-workers-fight-survival-coronavirus-lockdown-200412073813464.html

14.4.2020

23:46

The lockdown in this country has been extended till the 3rd of May at least according to the Prime Minister's address today. Modi also mentioned that the government will keep close tabs on how every locality/area fares in containing the pandemic and

accordingly reassess the opening those areas that have been able to contain the pandemic properly. In the middle of this, he also asked everyone to download Arogya Setu, an app promoted by the Indian government to track who has been in contact with COVID-19 patients. The problem, of course, is that the app is expected to increase surveillance as it has dubious terms and conditions. I don't think any left activist is going to download that application.

In other news, a thousand migrant workers gathered in Mumbai today after news of the extension broke, demanding transport arrangements be made for them so that they can go back home. The police lathi charged the migrants. Amit Shah is reported to have called up the Chief Minister of Maharashtra regarding the matter.

https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-narendra-modi-announcement-on-india-lockdown-2-coronavirus-modi-speech-live-updates-1666672-2020-04-14

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/amit-shah-speaks-to-maharashtra-cm-on-gathering-of-migrant-workers-at-bandra/articleshow/75145254.cms

https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/lockdown-woes-mumbai-stations-flooded-with-migrant-labourers-hoping-to-get-back-home-1666908-2020-04-14

15.4.2020

22:22 pm

I think our end semester examinations will not happen this time. The Chief Minister of West Bengal announced today the pending Higher Secondary papers will only take place in June. Only those students who are supposed to take their final semester examinations (among undergrads and postgrads) will take their examinations.

Everyone else will be promoted to the next semester. We are not clear where that places MPhil students (MPhil is not considered a postgrad degree here, rather it is a research degree). We have examinations only for coursework and not for the thesis. The thesis goes ungraded. That practically makes the coursework of second semester our final examinations but I don't expect the state government to understand any of that.

Meanwhile, BJP's troll army is at it again. A profile called Anshul Saxena (a prominent BJP person from somewhere in the deep dark well of the Cow Belt) is spreading news of police and doctors being attacked in Moradabad. I have been attacked online by this guy. He was allegedly spearheading the "Clean the Nation campaign" after the Pulwama attacks last year. The online hate campaign in directly or indirectly resulted in several activists being attacked physically. I am not sure what this guy has planned this time.

Ekabali Ghosh



Fig. 6: https://twitter.com/askanshul/status/1250441233559764999?lang=en.

16.4.2020

23:32 pm

ABP Ananda, one of the more prominent Bengali news media houses, is in a flurry because one of the reporters of ABP group in their Marathi channel were arrested by the Congress-Shiv Sena government in Mumbai. The accusation is that ABP Majha (the name of the channel) was responsible for spreading inaccurate information which resulted in the gathering at Bandra, I wrote about the other day.

Meanwhile, the central government run by BJP is talking about sending military and paramilitary forces to West Bengal to make the lockdown successful. Of course, they are insisting on sending paramilitary forces to Muslim localities like Metiabruz, Manicktala Bazar, Rajabazar and other localities. The state government run by the TMC is livid.

The same central government has only tested 2,90,490 people out of a population of 130 crores (i.e.:1.3 billion).

https://news.abplive.com/news/india/bandra-incident-abp-majha-reporter-rahul-kulkarni-granted-bail-by-mumbai-court-1199626

18.4.2020

22:21 pm

Media coverage has moved on to debate about West Bengal's terrible testing system.

And West Bengal is indeed testing very little. In terms of number of people tested per million, West Bengal is occupying one of the bottommost rungs of the table. BJP is having a field day about it. If this continues, the Mamata government will very likely be blamed and ousted from power. That would mean a Hindu right-wing government which would spell doom for the Muslims in West Bengal.

More than 14,000 cases have been reported throughout India. Mom walked in a while ago to tell me that about 60 people from Howrah have tested positive. I could not find anything on the internet about it, but it is very likely given that Howrah is one of the hotspots of the pandemic in West Bengal. Four districts in West Bengal have been declared by the central government to be coronavirus hotspots. These are Kolkata, Howrah, North 24 Parganas and East Midnapore. If the lockdown does happen in phases, then these districts are likely to be sealed off. But it is very difficult to seal off Kolkata, Howrah and North 24 Parganas simply because of how large and populated the area is. I think they will look for hotspots within hotspots and seal off those areas.

Life continues at home at its boring pace. Sometimes we chat about what we are going to do once the lockdown is lifted but I don't think any of us are going to follow up on things we say we are going to do. For example, I don't see myself going to eat at a restaurant when they are opened. I crave certain foods that I cannot make at home but I have been warned not to order pizza. In Delhi, a pizza delivery boy tested positive and then all the families he delivered food to had to be quarantined.

We have still not gotten a government order about what exact modality the end semester examinations will take. I have halted coursework studies and instead am trying to delineate my research project. Sometimes I wonder how peaceful life is for middle classes like us in India as long as we have enough to pay for healthcare in this country and do not venture outside the country with our tumbling rupee. The pandemic has also become an excuse to not deal with problems of domestic violence, sexual violence, online violence against women and queers etc. Somehow I

think online toxicity has also increased. Hindutva gangs online are leaving no stone unturned to send threats to various people who speak against Modi and go viral. At times, I wonder if this is what it was like to live during the CPI(M)'s Reign of Terror in West Bengal and if that is why my family is so terrified of communists and equates any form of left activism with CPI(M).

https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/delhi-pizza-delivery-boy-tests-positive-for-coronavirus-1667501-2020-04-16

https://thewire.in/government/west-bengal-COVID-19-testing

19.4.2020

23:26 pm

People can be quite intense about their weddings and coronavirus will not stop them from getting married. Hundreds of weddings have happened in India during the lockdown and quite a few have been reported on. However, these wedding parties have had a limited number of guests and witnesses and taken police permission. One such case happened in Hooghly in West Bengal. Former Prime Minister Deve Gowda's grandson got married, it seems and that has been deployed as a defence by other couples.
(https://www.sakaltimes.com/nation/%E2%80%98if-ex-pm%E2%80%99s-grandson-can-marry-during-COVID-19-lockdown-i-too-can%E2%80%99-says-bengal-youth-48779)

This is the month of *Baisakh*. Lots of Hindu weddings happen during this time (Hindus don't marry during *Chaitra*). The media coverage seems to be sympathetic to these couples who are being projected as law abiding citizens. Much ink is being spilt over how they are taking police permission and following social distancing rules

during the wedding. I cannot help but wonder, had these been Muslim couples, would the media be so sympathetic? Today itself an image was forwarded to an activists' group in our university. The snapshot was from something published by Anandabazar Patrika (ABP) and it noted down the hotspots for infection in Kolkata. Most of the places named were Muslim majority areas and the image carried the picture of a Muslim man in a traditional skullcap. Some students pointed out that ABP is softcore Islamophobic, which is true, they do pander to savarna Hindu sentiments.

I am worried about something else. Muslims will fall prey to this pandemic more than Hindus, much like how black people are affected more by the pandemic in the US. But how do we talk about this social reality without falling into a Hindutva trap? How do you talk about how Muslims are dying due to the virus without letting the discourse be hijacked by the Hindu right who want to project Muslims as carriers of the disease?

After what happened with Tableeghi Jamat, the discriminatory approach of much of the media has become pretty clear. An article was shared regarding the same in the activists' group.
(http://thedialoguemedia.com/analysis/communalising-a-pandemic-a-deliberate-diversion/)

The image detailing hotspots in Kolkata is being attached:

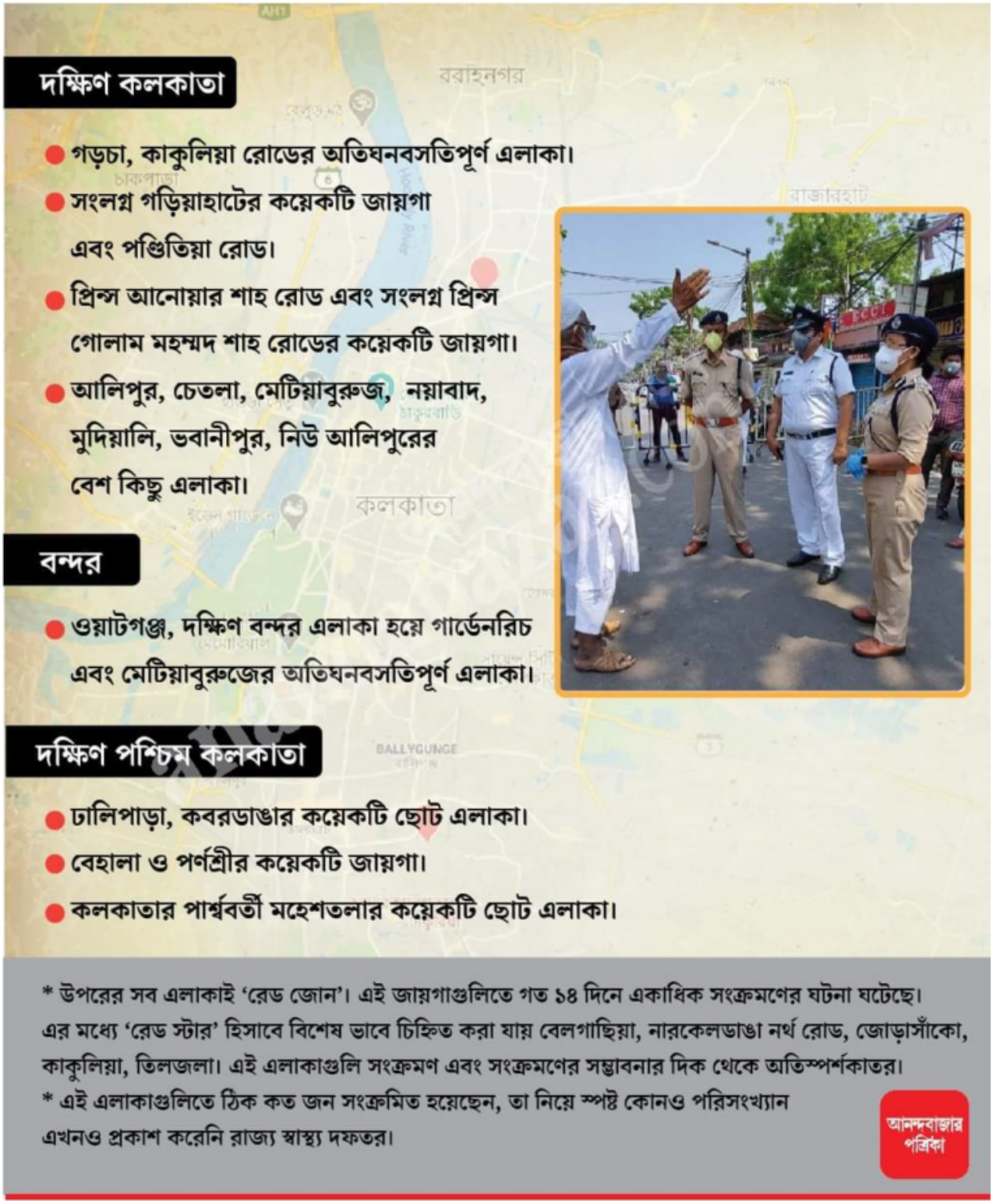


Fig. 7: Image allegedly circulated by Anandabazar Patrika, one of West Bengal's leading Bengali dailies. The image went viral on social media and several people pointed out that it had a deep anti-Muslim bias.

Sections of the left are protesting against the manhandling of the crisis by the TMC government and by the central government. CPI(M) seems to be bothered about TMC more. But AISA, the students wing of CPIML Liberation, appears to be stressing on the migrant lives issue. I saw a group of AISA activists posting pictures with placards on social media saying that they are on hunger strike in solidarity with migrant workers. I will find out more about these campaigns tomorrow.

21.04.2020, 00:41 am

Did not see any posts about hunger striking activists today. I think it was a one day hunger strike, more of a tokenistic thing. Nothing new. Same old same old.

21.4.2020

21:37 pm

Clashes between centre and state continue. A group of representatives from the centre came down to West Bengal today. The state government did not take this very well. TMC MP to the Rajya Sabha Derek O Brien mentioned on record that it is by no accident that opposition party ruled states have more COVID-19 hotspot districts. Goa, which is a BJP ruled state, is not testing enough people either. Apparently, Goa has tested only 800 people. Yet, there is no talk about Goa. Clashes between the state and the centre are also happening in the education front. The state Education Minister Partha Chatterjee told the media that he has notified the UGC (ruled by the centre) that whatever decisions are taken by the centre regarding examinations will have to be taken in consultation with the state. This is probably why we do not yet have a GO (Government Order) on whether the end semester examinations of M. Phil candidates will happen or not. The state government is

bringing up arguments of federalism and the concurrent list. To be honest, they are not very wrong here.

23.04.2020

15:23 pm

Did I mention that on Narendra Modi's address to the nation on the 14th of April he asked everyone to follow AYUSH's advisory? AYUSH is the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy. I looked up AYUSH's guidelines for boosting immunity. It included things like gargling with coconut oil in your mouth and drinking milk with turmeric. To prevent COVID-19. Milk with turmeric. Sure. Why not. Makes perfect sense. The Prime Minister's advice basically had the same validity as our grandmothers asking us "beta ye kha lo", "beta wo pee lo" ("Beta please eat this", "Beta please drink that"). It is of absolutely no significance in a medical emergency.

We can argue all we want about how conventional western medicine is not the only school of medical knowledge. And it is not. But it is still our best bet at defeating COVID-19. In our attempt to destabilize western forms of rationality, we should not *valorize* a non-western form of knowledge. It is absolutely important to keep in mind how Brahmanical our mainstream medical system in India is. The destabilizing of western rationality comes from a point of resistance that does leave much to be desired especially in terms of commenting on non-western oppressive structures like caste. Nevertheless, in that spirit of resistance, it does us well to remember that blatant promotion of knowledge systems like Ayurveda are part of intense supremacist agendas that have gained ground in India. In the way it is being deployed, Ayurveda or any of these alternative forms offer nothing in terms of resisting western rationality, especially in the middle of a pandemic. Rather, the

progresses of conventional medical science can and will be used as a safety cushion on which propagandist practices can depend on when they fail. In fact, the successes of conventional medicine can be touted as successes of these alternative forms. Modern rationality has been a privilege to many, especially to those who have been prevented access to better lives in the older Brahmanical systems, due to their caste. It should not be thrown away in favour of propagandist practices.

Link to AYUSH advisory: https://www.ayush.gov.in/docs/123.pdf

25.4.2020

It has been a while since I noticed many changes in my life. Life has assumed a steady pace. I am sure the changes are happening, just that I cannot identify them sitting at home. My little circle of friends and family are still enjoying relative security, as middle classes are used to. They have enough food, they can sleep under a roof and they will not die even if healthcare is too expensive. Beyond that, the teeming millions continue to struggle. What do we know about that anyway?

Certain areas of the city have been placed under complete lockdown. This means that these areas do not even have medicine shops open. Government personnel are providing the people in these houses with rations and medicines. Our area has not had any known cases so far so we do not have a complete lockdown. If you walk up to the main road here, you will still see the occasional bike, cycle and truck. Shops remain open here between 12 and 5 pm and there is the occasional buyer in them. We went and got some groceries today too. Some areas have been sealed. I am yet to find out the exact different between “sealing” an area with tape and police and a “complete lockdown”. Probably they are the same. Nobody allowed out, nobody allowed in. Bhilwara Model.

How are they testing so many people though? The antibody testing kits sent by the

central government recalled due to some error, right?

Ramadan has started. Muslims have started fasting. This would automatically ensure that some of their immune systems will be compromised and they are likely to fall prey to the coronavirus even more. This too, will give rise to a new wave of Hindutva propaganda, I think. And that scares me. Nothing a Muslim does in this country is ever free of scrutiny. And this time, they have managed to medicalize their Islamophobia.

Mom comes back home from outside and insists that we wash all our clothes. Clothes are not one of the main sources of infection. We are not going around rubbing our clothes into people's noses. Hands are the main source of spread. But we are so used to Brahmanical modes of operating that what strikes a chord with us is a ritualistic cleaning of clothes and bags. I have seen mother, drag her regular use shoes all the way to the bathroom to have them washed by water. The virus does not go away with water. You need soap for that. My mother is doing this because she has lived all her life believing that water will "cleanse" the shoes of impurities. These belief systems are not helpful during pandemic times. If anything, she is just spreading dust inside the drawing room. But that is not how Brahmanism operates. During every illness, Brahmanical "purity" and "cleanliness" is legitimized some more. The Chinese eat all kinds of meat. Hence, they got the virus and now they have spread it to us, haven't they? I am tired of people saying either of the following things:

1. The Chinese eat the meat of random animals and hence they get these viruses.
2. This was developed by the Chinese in a lab.

With the latter, I can almost visualize what people imagine: an evil Chinese man creating and transplanting a virus. Then a booming evil laughter. All of our minds are so colonized by these pop culture depictions of evil scientists.

Ekabali Ghosh

I heard one of the men who were detained after the Tablighi Jamaat incident died in quarantine after being denied food. I have to look up more trustworthy news sources on this which I cannot right now because there is no internet at home.

26.4.2020

23:33 pm

Reports and statistics say that India will reach the peak of the coronavirus pandemic in mid-May or even as late as end of May. The lockdown as it stands now has been extended till 3.5.2020. If they have an exit strategy from a nationwide lockdown, the central government better announce it soon. I think even as India reaches the peak, we will be under partial lockdown. But we will have to wait and see.
https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/coronavirus-crisis-expect-COVID-19-19-cases-to-peak-around-may-end-say-experts/story/401968.html

But ICMR claims success in flattening the curve.

https://www.livemint.com/news/india/coronavirus-growth-curve-has-been-flattened-difficult-to-predict-peak-says-icmr-11587652426995.html

https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-new-cases-after-may-16-says-study/article31434766.ece

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/coronavirus-epidemic-could-peak-in-india-by-mid-may-study/articleshow/75283258.cms

It is true that two members of Tablighi Jamaat died while they were in quarantine. Delhi Minorities Commission is alleging that they were not provided food while they were in quarantine. I am not surprised. There are also questions about the quality of food served as well as on the eating schedule in these centres.

https://thewire.in/communalism/delhi-quarantine-tablighi-jamaat

27.4.2020

23:55

My heart breaks a little every day. As if the constant images of non-COVID-19 patients dying were not enough, we are running out of space in private hospitals. The 38 bed Corona ward of AMRI Salt Lake has 42 patients. I got this from a doctor who works there. The same doctor also said that if we follow the 6 ft+masks+handwashing rule, we won't get the illness. I also heard from the same guy that nursing homes and many smaller private hospitals that deal with non-COVID-19 cases are closing down for lack of patients. Nursing assistants and nurses, overwhelmingly women, are going out of jobs.

I am even more worried for international travellers. Some of my friends who I am close to have gotten into PhD programmes in the USA, Germany etc. If international travel is curbed for months and months, for say 2 years until the vaccine is fully developed, then all that hard work will be to no avail. This pandemic is a career disaster.

An Oxford University study is showing considerable hope. Pune based Serum Institute of India is partnering in the study and plan to start manufacturing the vaccines in 2-3 weeks even though the whole approval process might take till September. They also say that if the vaccine trial succeeds they will not patent the vaccine.

https://www.businessinsider.in/science/news/the-worlds-largest-vaccine-maker-is-producing-40-million-units-of-a-coronavirus-vaccine-on-trial-in-oxford-without-yet-knowing-if-it-works/articleshow/75406329.cms

Ekabali Ghosh

I read yesterday, that the peak in India is going to come in mid-May or late May. In that case, we will not even have a normal life till the end of June at least.

https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/coronavirus-crisis-expect-COVID-19-cases-to-peak-around-may-end-say-experts/story/401968.html

28.4.2020

23:50

I just sit around and pretend that the pandemic is not happening and go on with my life at home. We got a list of COVID-19 containment zones from the Kolkata municipal corporation today. Thankfully, there is not a single one in our ward. But my cousin (who already has tuberculosis) is not that lucky. His street is a containment zone. I have decided to not put my fingers into my eyes anymore. I check myself every now and then from rubbing my eyes. I have started being really scared of the pandemic, like something bad is going to happen. Like a sense of foreboding. Maybe it is just my depression talking.

1.5.2020

00:02 am

Went out yesterday to buy some medicines. Saw a random man about 6 ft behind me coughing his lungs out, without any mask or even covering his mouth. Ran across the road to the other side to avoid him. Made an aggressively annoyed gesture at him from the other side of the road. Don't know what effect it had on him. The problem is that this man looked pretty middle class. He had a helmet (which means he also probably owns a bike) with him and seemed well dressed enough. But what is this

absence of awareness? Anyway, my head is aching right now. Will write again tomorrow.

2.5.2020

1:54 am

Lockdown extended for two more weeks till 17th May at least. Meanwhile, the central government has started on its exit plan. They have allowed a lot of activities in the green and orange zone districts including farming, manufacture, harvesting etc. Buses are also supposed to be plying within green zones. Taxis can run with one passenger in green zones. Unfortunately, most of the big cities, including Kolkata where I am located are all red zones with several containment areas (complete lockdown areas) in them. This means that none of these cities are likely to open up soon. Within red zone districts too, non-municipal (rural) areas are going to get certain concessions as the argument is that they have less transmission rates. The problem with all of this will be the confusion created among enforcers of the lockdown, mostly police. Already it is so easy to slip out from your homes with false excuses. This is only going to make their jobs more difficult.

Meanwhile, the one shopkeeper at the medicine shop I went to said that sodium hypochlorite is carcinogenic if spread in large amounts. I looked on the internet. There seems to be no definite conclusion to it.

2.5.2020

22:41 pm

Ekabali Ghosh

Managed to find a decent news programme on Bengali media and watched it online. I did not watch the usual ABP Ananda which is too large and has too many ads. Instead, I went with Kolkata TV, a channel which is comparatively smaller but grounded in its reporting. Anyway, found out from their coverage that about 33 people have been arrested in the city today for spitting on the road. Meanwhile, in an incident in Tikiapara where Muslims were reported to have beaten up a policeman, there seems to be direct involvement of the right wing (BJP). They have done this before too. During the anti CAA protests, BJP hoodlums allegedly dressed up in skullcaps and wore clothes traditionally considered "Muslim" to hurl stones at passing trains. In another instance, migrant workers in Gujarat seems to have staged a protest braving the May heat (Gujarat has arid to semi arid climate). In another incident, migrant workers were being smuggled from one state to another inside a truck. I looked up on the internet, and apparently this has happened before. These people are in serious crisis. About a quarter of India's population is migrant and they are poor and our government does not have the first clue about how to provide them with money. The central government has accused the West Bengal state government of messing with the total number of COVID-19 deaths. They say it is probably above 100 but the Mamata government wants people to believe it is 30 something. The Mamata government has done this before to hide their public health failures. They did this before with a dengue epidemic. Back then, a research scholar from the department of history in our university filed a PIL in the Kolkata High Court to bring the government in line. Anyway, point is, the Mamata government very likely did this but right now they are our best hope to prevent the Hindutva onslaught next election.

https://news.abplive.com/news/india/coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers-hide-in-empty-milk-tanker-to-reach-rajasthan-held-by-police-1184228

https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/dengue-list-under-stress/cid/1327377

https://www.deccanherald.com/national/10-arrested-in-attack-on-police-in-ben

gal-s-howrah-831461.html (will wait for tomorrow to update this).

https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-spitting-in-public-places-in-kolkata-might-invite-arrest-fines-2823106 (more to be updated)

23:51

Oh and TB patients are finding it difficult to access treatment in the middle of the lockdown.

6.5.2020

23:53

Liquor shops (shops that sell alcoholic drinks) have been opened after 4th. Liquor is very highly taxed here and governments make a lot of money from its sale. Anyway, there are huge queues in front of liquor shops. I spotted about a hundred people in front of the liquor shop in my locality (customers, police, volunteers for crowd management etc.). Some people are even kidding that it will sanitize their insides.

7.5.2020

23:25 pm

A total of about 79 people have died according to the latest reports by ABP Ananda which I am accessing on YouTube. We still have a whole month of this to put up with. News reports are saying that India has not reached its peak although the

government officials are saying the curve has been flattened. Meanwhile, BJP is keeping no stone unturned to bring down the TMC government.

In other news, KPC hospital, which is the closest hospital to my university has been affected by COVID-19. About 40 doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers had to be placed under quarantine as they had been exposed to the virus through 3 patients who delivered babies there. All 3 of them tested positive after the delivery.

Sections of Peerless Hospital also had to shut down after a number of doctors tested positive for the disease. At this rate, if so many hospitals shut down, we will be in trouble. Not to say anything of the political mess it will create as the Hindu right (BJP) is in the opposition in this state.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/coronavirus-in-kolkata-latest-news-updates-on-kolkata-corona-cases-deaths-07-may-2020/articleshow/75590758.cms

https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/400-bed-kolkata-private-hospital-shuts-down-ops-after-doctors-staff-contract-COVID-19/story-5XuJ9uzaFzsfSAROwYp1hJ.html

9.5.2020

1:08 am

I have lost count of the number of cases in Kolkata. But our area somehow still doesn't seem to have COVID-19 cases. How is that possible, I ask myself? The total number of cases are jumping every day. Those who were talking about how corona will never really establish itself in India thanks to high temperatures are quiet now. Well, they continue to peddle misinformation but not the same kind of

misinformation. A couple of days ago, I heard my neighbours gossip about how Trump is outside the establishment and does not really care about diplomacy. Again, misinformation (misunderstanding perhaps?) but not of the strictly medical kind.

Kolkata does not seem to have a food shortage however. This is especially true for the middle classes. The departmental stores are full of different brands of food. You might not find the brand you always buy, but you will find the same kind of products in other brands. The groceries which sell unbranded food items are open too. However, you do not get anything slightly non-essential anywhere. I went looking for a jump rope day before yesterday. Didn't get one in all of my locality. Sweetshops are open for a few hours. I think there is a surplus of milk here while there is a shortage in other parts of the country. Medicine shops are insisting you stand far away, or in one case, tying up a rope a few feet ahead of their counter. Shops for alcoholic beverages seem to be the ones where people are crowding the most. A friend reported that in her locality the alcohol shops open at 10 am and people crowd from 4 am. That sounds a little exaggerated but it is quite possible that people are crowding there a few hours before opening time. Along with volunteers, the crowd in front of the shop here definitely has about a 100 people during peak business hours. Even my friends who are regular drinkers, the ones who are close to being addicted and the ones who can drink like fishes, find this irresponsible. Meanwhile, Muslims are celebrating Ramadan and have launched campaigns to only donate and not shop for Eid (Eid is one of the main festivals of Muslims and shopping for new clothes and gifts during the run up to Eid creates large crowds in several shopping districts of the city). More on that tomorrow.

9.5.2020

21:47

Ekabali Ghosh

The migrant crisis grows worse and worse. It has been two months since these labourers have had any income. 16 migrants were run over by a train in Aurangabad while they were sleeping on a railway line on their journey to their home states. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers are walking their way home through thousands of kilometres. When they are not allowed to leave, they are demonstrating. In Surat, such a gathering was tear gassed. In Chennai, they were lathi charged. Tamil Nadu is an opposition ruled state. The BJP and its mouthpiece media outlets are highlighting it at the cost of the Surat assault. Migrant workers are being treated like slaves. In West Bengal, the TMC government refused to let in migrant workers. Amit Shah, the BJP home minister at the centre, sent a strongly worded letter to the TMC government regarding this, ABP Ananda reported.

https://m.dailyhunt.in/news/india/english/republic+tv+english-epaper-repubeng/tamil+nadu+police+resorts+to+lathi+charge+to+stop+migrant+workers+from+walking+back+home-newsid-183508164

https://www.ndtv.com/aurangabad-news/maharashtra-aurangabad-train-accident-bodies-of-migrants-being-taken-home-2226134

https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/migrants-clash-with-police-in-surat-over-100-detained-6401883/

Closer home, sections of Dhakuria have been designated as containment zones. Maharaja Thakur Road was designated as a containment zone by Kolkata Police. This led to confusion as there seems to be no persons with corona residing there. A nurse did live there who got the virus but she was shifted. Sections of Rajpur Sonarpur are also under complete lockdown. The first cases of coronavirus are being reported from Uttar Dinajpur district. The people who have got the disease arrived from Topsia in Kolkata, again presumably migrant workers.

In other news, a gas tragedy happened in Vishakapatnam day before yesterday from

LG polymers' plant there. Styrene gas leaked, bringing back memories of the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984. The death toll so far seems to be 13, but thousands are supposedly affected. I hear that the usage of coronavirus facilities and ambulances helped with treating these individuals. The fumes had spread over an area of 3 kms and affected five villages. People fell unconscious on roads and died. Others have been evacuated from their homes.

I will attach the Wikipedia link here. I don't know who contributes these wiki articles so quickly though.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visakhapatnam_gas_leak

https://www.firstpost.com/india/visakhapatnam-gas-leak-live-updates-lg-polymers-vizag-industry-andhra-pradesh-latest-news-today-8341321.html

https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/was-vizag-gas-tragedy-waiting-to-happen-lg-polymers-visakhapatnam/589509

https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/vizag-gas-leak-what-is-styrene-gas-6398020/

https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/vizag-gas-leak-what-is-styrene-gas-6398020/

11.5.2020

2:36 am

Almost all of north Kolkata is a containment zone. Only one (out of 50 wards) is corona free in north Kolkata. South Kolkata is slightly better off because population density is less here. My ward is still better. The total number of people affected has

crossed 63,000 people. More than 3,200 people have been diagnosed in the last 24 hours. The state government is saying that Kolkata as a metro is better than other metros. Chief Ministers are supposed to have a meeting with the Prime Minister.

A private lab (GCC biochemicals) here has developed a COVID-19 test kit that will detect the coronavirus in 90 minutes for 500 rupees.

12.5.2020

1:58 am

Infections are increasing rapidly in this country. In a day, there are more than three thousand cases reported. The total number of cases increased by ten thousand in three days. We are at more than 60,000 now. Private laboratories have stopped testing stools, urine etc. The only tests they are doing are thyroids and USGs. At least this is the conversation I overheard between two women who are our neighbours and whose husbands own a private lab. I don't know the situation in larger private labs. The new and inexpensive test that they have innovated is supposed to be useful in getting more tests done from Tata Medical Centre. Tata Medical Centre is also one of the foremost cancer treatment centres in the country. Cancer patients are bound to face more difficulties, checks etc. to get treatment or seek an appointment there. Already government run cancer centres are turning away patients or saying that they are not going to treat anyone unless they have a negative test report. For a cancer patient to even stay among people who may be corona positive, in a long queue itself is pretty risky.

My father called from his side of the city (more like the suburbs, to be honest). He says he still sees spit, mucous lying about on the road. Someone around him was sneezing very loudly when he went to the market for groceries. Meanwhile, his brother (my uncle) went to the barber to get a haircut and a shave. Apparently, the

saloon only keeps the shutter closed but you can get haircuts behind closed shutters. People wear masks as they cut hair and shave but it is too risky. My uncle is dependent on a bunch of other family members for food (because hey men don't cook!) and there is no way they can successfully isolate him. Also he must be more than seventy now. And my dad is 67. I don't get along very well with him or his family and rarely talk to him. But I am concerned about his safety.

14.5.2020

1:18 am

Modi addressed the nation yesterday. The lockdown will be extended though a different modality will be followed. We don't know yet what modalities. That will be released later. Meanwhile, the PM insists that we use only Indian goods. After selling off half the country, he wants us to use goods made in India. Great. The opposition is having a field day on this. But his supporters are not the most critical of thinkers.

Limited trains have started plying. Railways has notified that the responsibility to maintain social distancing is upon the passengers. The opposition has not taken well to this. Meanwhile, BJP is playing the same argument with buses and insisting that the state government wanted the trains to ply in the first place. Buses are not supposed to touch containment zones. A large section of the city are containment zones. Despite that, there is a steady demand for buses. The crowd queuing up for buses are not following social distancing measures. Cases continue to rise every day. This country seems to be heading for disaster.

15.5.2020

Ekabali Ghosh

00:45 am

One of my friends thinks he has been exposed to the virus via his doctor flatmate whose best friend is sick with COVID-19. The flatmate in question has not confirmed yet that she visited her sick friend. I think my friend will confront her tomorrow. All of them live in London. My friend is 30 and healthy. He has a spine issue but otherwise he eats healthy, exercises daily and so on. I sincerely hope his flatmate did the responsible thing and did not visit her friend. But if she did, my friend has already been infected by now. I am sincerely worried about him as he is one of my closest friends. Moreover, I hate that we cannot do anything but wait for the symptoms to show.

I wanted to record other things today: how my aunt asks me to yawn with my hands over my mouth, how people are getting tired of the terrace, and how the state government is vague on the exact death toll in this state. But this remains foremost on my mind.

16.5.2020

12:02 am

Turns out my friend has not been exposed. His doctor flatmate had the good sense to not visit her best friend. So yay. Now that we have that out of the way, it is time to move on to different topics.

The migrant crisis continues. Hundreds of migrants are trying to make their way home from different cities. A teenager from a migrant family trying to make its way back from Delhi was run over in Uttar Pradesh. The state government is complaining the central government has not given us enough trains to Kolkata. Local BJP leaders are flexing their muscles on regional TV.

Ekabali Ghosh

My cousin went to get his USG done today. USG is one of the few examinations that are still available in most laboratories, though my cousin also needs regular blood tests. Most of my friends continue reporting terrible mental health. I don't know how much of it is a performance to fit in. Sometimes they ask me how I am doing and I reply "shit". But sometimes I think I am not doing that badly you know compared to other people. I can still be functional, learn, read etc. A friend I spoke to today said that most of his area is being terribly maintained. He lives in Madhyamgram. It is a suburb, not as many distractions as we have here. I can still go down to the local departmental store and since it is the southern part of the city, the corporation is forced to take note of public health. Back in Madhyamgram, my friend says soap is being sprayed. I am not sure what he means. He couldn't elucidate further. And my friend's neighbour goes to the bazaar every day. Only groceries are open. The central government wants to loosen the lockdown by starting e commerce in all zones (even red). Only containment zones are excluded.

17.5.2020

2:12 am

The number of people on the roads is more than before. There are more vehicles on the roads. Not a lot of people are maintaining social distancing, even when they can afford to. Perhaps the biggest offenders are small grocery stores. My father is already going to venture out in a cab or bus. I am sure people outside are doing the same things. It is a special kind of tomfoolery to do this, especially when you can afford to stay at home.

23.5.2020

Ekabali Ghosh

5:14 pm

I missed a couple of days due to personal reasons and then Amphan happened. Amphan is the worst ever cyclone I have seen first-hand. I cannot begin to describe how terrifying the whole affair was. The cyclone started showing severe effects on Kolkata from 5 pm onwards on the 20th of May. By 6 pm, it was ravaging the city. We shut off all our doors, windows, everything possible. The power was cut off and the wind was howling outside. And we would have been used to it had it just been howling. It was far worse. The wind made noise as it hit things everywhere: there were thuds, bangs, a series of sounds I cannot describe in a language that is not my own. There was a constant *khat khat* sound, the wind roared, things fell and crashed. With the wind came lightning and rain. But the rain was not so much the problem. When we walked up to the terrace the next morning, we found pieces of a used ceramic bathroom basin lying about. Many areas in the city are flooded. More importantly, power supply throughout southern Bengal has completely collapsed, as have river embankments. Internet services (broadband and mobile) were severely disrupted. There was no water, from the evening of the 21st. I wish I could show you what our area looked like on 21st evening. For miles upon miles there was no electricity. All I could see was miles upon miles of pitch black darkness. On the 21st and 22nd, we carried water up from the tank at the base of the building to the 3rd floor. Various other families too did the same. We paid 2000 rupees to get a rented generator later to propel the water to the overhead tank. Showers were limited and restricted. We barely bathed with two mugs of water (we still use mugs to bathe here). 22nd and 23rd were by far the worst as the summer heat started getting back on track as the cyclone had passed. Anyway, a few minutes ago, on the 23rd, power supply was finally restored in our ward after locals gheraoed the municipal councillor.

Disaster profiteering should be illegal. With power ravaged all across the city, one candle costs 40 rupees. People supplying drinking water are charging a few hundred rupees as deposit money which they do not want to return later. Some five thousand trees have collapsed alone in Kolkata and removing those trees will take ages. The corporations and municipalities, already burdened with COVID-19 and working with less people than required, cannot handle the removal of so many trees. Private individuals are removing these trees for a very high amount now. For one tree that needs to be removed on the main road, one of these traders were asking for 40,000 rupees plus the wood from the tree. In our ward, the councillor was gheraoed yesterday by members of a working class neighbourhood who still do not have power.

You can understand that social distancing has gone for a toss. Today itself as people were gathered to see the tree that was causing the power outrage in our neighbourhood being felled, they stood all huddled together. You will expect them to be more careful but a lot of them have been lulled into a false sense of security as we do not have any reported cases of COVID-19 in our ward. Women from Naskarpara (the working class area which gheraoed the councillor), had barged into the party office and started yelling expletives. I cannot imagine that they maintained social distancing as they did that. Even as relief work starts, I am 100% sure, COVID-19 cases will also rise.

25.5.2020

8:43 am

The state's basic facilities and amenities have still not recovered from Cyclone Amphan. Power may be back in our area but power cuts are frequent. These cuts might be the result of the electricity boards trying to mend their grids, or plain load

shedding exercises. We are not sure. Internet services are not back to normal. WiFi is not available and only Jio internet seems to be running. I do not use Jio as the owners are known to be frequently in cahoots with the ruling Hindutva faction. Vodafone and Airtel internet is struggling. I am losing out on my online classes. Calls barely ever get through due to torn wires, severed connections and other hardware problems. At one level, I think I am just glad that most people around me have survived the cyclone without severe damage. True that one of my friends lost her boundary wall at her home to the cyclone and another lost a few windows, but things could have been far worse. People around us have reported seeing tin rooves being blown away. The morning after the cyclone, I went to our terrace and found a lot of concrete lying about. I thought our overhead water tank had been damaged but turns out the concrete was blown there from somewhere else. The sheer might of the wind is something I have never encountered before. I have some pictures of the damage wrought by the cyclone. I will upload them here later.

The state government has asked for the army's help in relief work. The central government and BJP honchos are gloating over it. I am sincerely worried about how TMC will fare in the next elections after this. The COVID-19 lockdown is being used by the Home Ministry at the centre to arrest activists and dissenters.

26.5.2020

22:53 pm

Our internet is still not up and running and hence I have to depend on what I am hearing to address the COVID-19 crisis here. Firstly, the Modi government is planning to lift the lockdown in phases even as the total number of infected people soar past a lakh (i.e.: 100.000). Trains and buses are plying. As are flights. My mother reports to me that doctors think this is a terrible idea (and that sounds plausible). But

I will have to substantiate with video clips or news links later on. E commerce has started working.

A friend of mine and his partner (both living in Pune) tested negative for the virus. I asked him to narrate to me what the testing process in Pune is like. He said that he needed a doctor's prescription to get the test. When they went to the local municipal facility (which is where the tests are being carried out), they were asked to come back later, on the next day. On the following day, both of them went back to the facility. They did not have to wait and my friend said that the experience was "smooth". He said they checked the doctor's prescription and sent them to a different room where they were counselled. A number of people received this counselling for about ten minutes. The patients were told that even if they had corona, "it was not the end of life". At this, I remarked that they sound like they are treating HIV patients, not SARS CoV 2. My friend said that the whole process left him feeling like he had something way more stigmatized like HIV. He said that the way "they" looked at him "with sympathy and concern" made him feel that way. He reported that the junior staff at the facility ran away from patients who came in for testing and they even look at patients with "disgust". I have already mentioned the importance of Brahminical ways of thinking in how the pandemic is being handled. Looking at a patient in disgust has its root in understanding the diseased body as impure. It is both an ableist and a casteist construct. It is casteist because this mode of behaving with people, looking at them with "disgust" is a mode of behaviour people are conditioned to produce due to the normalization of casteism. People consider sewage workers "dirty" and shy away in disgust from them. When asked, they medicalize their behaviour and cite "germs" as an excuse. Therefore, the sewage worker becomes the substitute of the germ, someone who carries around disease because their body is fundamentally impure. "Lepers" too are treated with the same disgust. The belief is that touching someone with leprosy will give you the disease, where in reality leprosy does not spread in such a manner. Often, leper colonies exist on the outskirts of settlements. So disease and caste are connected through how the

body is treated similarly in both cases. And that is because caste provides the nurturing ground of exclusion that can be meted out in the case of diseased bodies. This is helped by the fact that many people who carry diseases like leprosy are actually dalitbahujan (dalit, literally oppressed; name taken on by India's vast number of erstwhile untouchable castes and other lower castes who are still discriminated against) due to lack of healthcare facilities.

Culturally, there is precedence of shying away from touching people with a disease. Somehow the presence of a disease makes a body "untouchable". This mode of showing disdain or disgust is already available to various Indians. A similar mode of behaviour is being reproduced here where disgust is projected by people as a means of dealing with disease.

In other news, my friend is fast recovering from his fever and cough.

27.5.2020

I forgot to complete the full story about my friend. Turns out, in Maharashtra at least, reports are being handed out offline. Online reports are being avoided as it would make it more difficult to isolate positive cases. And positive cases are spiking. We do not know if we have reached the peak yet. The Ministry of Health and Family Affairs is advertising that the epidemic has been contained. But newspaper reports claim that there is a spike in cases as more and more people start returning to their states. An advisor to the governor of Jammu and Kashmir has gone into isolation following a positive diagnosis of one of his family members. Maharashtra, especially Mumbai reported the highest spike in COVID-19 deaths yesterday (97 deaths). Other cities in the state are also witnessing a rise in cases.

https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-coronavirus-lockdown-may-27-2020-live-updates/article31684132.ece/amp

Ekabali Ghosh

28.05.2020

11:53 am

COVID-19 keeps raging in India. Meanwhile, domestic flights from airports have started operating. All passengers are required to download the Arogya Setu app on their phones. The app is a breach of privacy and will allow the government later to track data. However, at this point, people who are desperate to go home have to compulsorily download the app. The pandemic is making it easier for state surveillance to keep track of citizens. Migrant workers continue to be in crisis. A video of one woman lying dead on the platform while her kid tries to wake her up has gone viral. In one month, a news channel estimates nine migrant workers have died on trains itself. There is much need to ply trains, but there is no need to run flights. People who can afford flights can afford to stay put in the city they are in. This government is putting its economic and business concerns over people's lives and it is the hallmark of neoliberalism (the same is being done by the Republicans in the USA).

Pre-monsoon showers have started in the city. There was a storm yesterday though nothing close to the cyclone or even depression that we saw before. But I heard on the news that a number of people have died of electrocution.

Closer home, my neighbour, who lives in the same building as us, is bringing workmen into the apartment. This has angered my mother and my aunt. My cousin suggested that we lodge a complaint with the local police station but I don't think my family will go that far.

30.5.2020

Ekabali Ghosh

16:40

In West Bengal, the lockdown will be lifted from the 1st of June (more or less). Lockdown 4.0 ends on the 31st of May, West Bengal plans to open public and private offices from the 1st of June. The rest of India however, will probably go into lockdown 5.0, which will probably be in implementation in West Bengal as well, but it will likely be loose enough to not even feel like a lockdown. Migrant workers are returning in thousands to the state, many of them infected. Doctors predict that it is going to be a disaster. I guess depending on which political colour they are, they will accordingly blame Modi or Mamata. But since migrant workers seem to be returning to every state, it is likely that all states are going to face the same conundrum – quarantining, managing and checking them for the virus. India is probably going to see a spike in coronavirus cases. The question seems to be that if the central government did let migrant workers return, then why now? Why not in the beginning of the pandemic, when a smaller number of them were infected? The state government claims that adequate social distancing is not being practiced in these trains. They released a press statement yesterday claiming that they are paying for the trains so why is the central government not adding more bogeys to the trains or running a larger number of trains? Meanwhile, the same state government claims that if people can travel by thousands on trains, then places of worship can open too. They have found a loophole in the central government's rules. The CM herself claims that the rules state that religious gatherings are forbidden but then she is not permitting gatherings. She is simply opening up these spaces without any gathering of people.

The order comes into effect from 10 am on 1st June, 2020. From the same day itself, jute and tea industries, plantations, factories etc. are to be operational and running on full capacity. From 8th June, 2020, private and public sector offices will be operating at 100% capacity. I have a feeling that we are all headed for a massive disaster. The CM also apparently said yesterday that we should all make a "pashbalish" (upholster) out of the virus and sleep with it. Basically, increasingly the

discourse is shifting to living with the virus. Schools, ICDS centres, colleges and universities are to remain closed through June. It looks increasingly like, I will get another month to stay here at home and potate.

31.5.2020

16:33

We suspect that the relatives of a family living downstairs might be down with the virus. Some of them might have come into contact with the family too. I asked my family to not go up to the terrace anymore. And not use the same exit from the building as them. Touching the same doorknobs will transmit the virus. For at least the next fourteen days, we will try to stay indoors as much as possible and when anyone has to go out for something, try and use a separate gate.

University is going to reopen around July, most probably. We do not know for sure yet. Going to university and work is a sure way of catching the virus at this point. Cases are expected to rise in June. We have been lucky enough to lead a corona-free life all these months but June is starting to concern me already. Meanwhile, my mom needs to see an eye doctor. And we don't think it is safe for her to go to one.

1.6.2020

16:09

There has been a case of COVID-19 in an apartment close to the market from where we get our fish. The market will be shut down for 6 weeks now. Mom went to the market today for essential items and received this update. She said that at the entrance to the market, healthcare workers were checking temperatures of

everyone entering the market. But that is not too useful, especially since most carriers are asymptomatic. The apartment building in question has been barricaded and people are swarming around the area in PPE. Most probably the area is now a containment zone and will remain a containment zone for a while. The patient in question has recently returned from Maharashtra, which is a hotspot for the pandemic. Such imported cases are only going to rise in the next couple of months as trains and buses start plying. Private buses in West Bengal are not plying as the state government has not come into an agreement with the bus owners. The bus owners want an increase in bus fares as they will be ferrying a relatively less number of passengers due to social distancing rules. The state government does not wish to increase the bus fares. The situation is a deadlock. Apart from that, state owned buses are plying. Taxicabs are plying. I heard that the metro rail authorities are doing test runs on metro rakes. Metros too will probably start plying in the next few weeks. The number of cases are probably going to explode.

On 29th May, Howrah Hospital released a large number of patients: more than 101. That is a good sign as Howrah is one of those congested areas which have reported a large number of cases. But it is also to be remembered that West Bengal has a very high mortality rate for COVID-19 and that is not going down as far as I can see. Domestic flights have started operation from today. 71 flights will operate from Kolkata airport, exactly a third of the usual number of domestic flights that operate from the airport.

https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/ray-of-hope-amid-dark-times-in-a-first-west-bengal-hospital-discharges-101-COVID-19-patients-in-a-day/599075

https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/with-country-s-highest-COVID-19-mortality-rate-west-bengal-a-concern-for-centre/story-JM8vn2KIiHStKjtFbOZtFJ.html

https://www.firstpost.com/health/coronavirus-outbreak-highlights-covid-19-indi

a-today-lockdown-4-migrant-workers-death-count-cases-uttar-pradesh-maharashtra-delhi-rajasthan-8427331.html

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/coronavirus-in-kolkata-latest-news-updates-on-kolkata-corona-cases-deaths-31-may-2020/articleshow/76115099.cms

2.6.2020

13:21

That apartment with the alleged case of COVID-19 is still barricaded. However, the adjoining market is still open. The shopkeepers are saying that the case is a suspected case and not a confirmed case yet. I am not buying it.

4.6.2020

21:57

Aunt's friend has an old father with asthma. He had to take a COVID-19 test to rule out the disease. Had to stand in line all night. This is in Kolkata at a Kolkata hospital. They are saying he could only take the test at 5 am in the morning. In stark contrast, my friend in Pune (I wrote about a few days ago) only had to wait 10 minutes. Meanwhile, another cyclone has hit Mumbai called Nisarga. It is not as horrid as Amphan but still pretty bad because National Disaster Response Force had to evacuate people in buses increasing the risk of the disease.

In Kolkata, private buses are plying at full capacity i.e. all seats are full. And this increases the risk of the spread of the disease. Protests too have started, maintaining

social distancing but as soon as the protests start getting larger, I am concerned that it is going to outgrow safety measures. If the protests are organized by leftists, the central and even the state government are going to use it as an excuse for their failures. And it will only provide more fodder to the fascists. As it is, they are using the lockdown to slap activists with draconian UAPA charges.

9.6.2020

00:31 am

India is reporting more than ten thousand cases daily now. And with the lockdown relaxed, it will only increase. Of course the country is testing very little so there is a huge number of undiagnosed cases. People have gotten lockdown fever by now and are going out to the streets. West Bengal has extended its lockdown till June 30th. The lockdown was expected to be lifted on June 15th. However, the relaxations i.e. operation of public offices and private offices are still in place.

A number of people are trying to sell homeopathy in the middle of this. Saw an interesting thread on Facebook. I took a couple of screenshots. Will attach them later.

10.6.2020

00:20 am

Maharashtra alone has more COVID-19 cases than the official total reported cases in China. Indian official reports claim 9987 reported cases as the highest number of cases reported in a day, reported yesterday or day before yesterday. A joint suicide

case has appeared in Behala where according to reports, a family killed themselves unable to secure hospital admission for their ill father. The family left a suicide note but police say it says nothing about being denied admission into any hospital.

https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/west-bengal-three-members-of-family-commit-suicide-after-being-denied-admission-in-hospitals/articleshow/76286783.cms

10.6.2020

23:33

I went out to do groceries today. There are plenty of people on the roads now. Traffic jams are slowly reappearing. Private buses are plying at limited capacities. They are not taking more passengers than the total number of seats. I asked a bus conductor if they were picking up passengers from the middle of the route. He said that they are, if there are seats left. Usually in India, people just get on a bus, most people just stand inside to get to their destination. So the seat thing is hugely restrictive for private bus owners. The conductor seemed happy to talk I think. He is probably just happy to finally work. I plan to go to a friend's place tomorrow, the first time I have done anything non-essential in ages. Mom is freaking out and with good reason. However, I plan to walk to her place and talk to her. She has not interacted beyond her partner and her roommates. I hope nothing untoward happens out of my desire to get out of the home. But at one level, I am happy I will see my friend.

11.6.2020

23:11 pm

Ekabali Ghosh

I went out of my home today to my friend's place. About six people were there. Two people who live in the same apartment, and four others. Most of them were smoking pot. Given the amount of times they passed down their joints and cigarettes, if one of them is positive for COVID-19, the rest are completely done for. And I don't smoke but I will probably catch the disease if any of them are positive because of how much time I spent in close proximity with them. But we were very careful about washing our hands and sanitizing our things. I am sure we did not carry the pathogen on our hands into the home. I took an auto and then a rickshaw to go to their place and both vehicles were empty except for the drivers who both wore masks. Not a lot of people are taking public transport for short distance travels. They prefer walking, which is also what I did when I was returning home. I came back home and washed all my clothes, sanitized the screen of my phone and so on. If I myself have not been infected, we are good to go. One of my friends was talking about watching a video which claimed that bodies were being removed, especially if they had died of COVID-19 in the hospitals. I asked him if he found it too conspirational to pay attention to it. He replied that in many cases families of people who have corona are not being allowed to see their loved ones one last time before sending them off to be cremated. Now that is a traumatic situation to be in and one which I do not want to put my family in. I asked my aunt to isolate once I return. Essentially it would be me and my mom isolating. My aunt simply refused to isolate.

I had an argument with my mother before leaving home and she is now giving me the silent treatment. Almost forgot what that feels like.

13.6.2020

00:08 am

Same as before. Staying at home. Mom is visiting aunt's apartment. Aunt isn't coming

down to ours.

15.6.2020

00:48

My friend's father has had a minor stroke and they had to fight with him for three days just to get him admitted to the hospital. This apathy towards institutionalized healthcare is not new among the middle classes in West Bengal. The same friend lost their mother because their mother would not admit herself to the hospital on time when she came down with pneumonia. Eventually, she died of sepsis.

I am trying to make sense of this apathy towards the medical establishment. Some of it relates to the very unscientific spirit of savarna society. Take this home remedy, believe in this Brahmanical medical theory. You have diarrhoea? Oh it must be because your stomach is hot. Drink such and such thing, it will make your stomach cool. Even while I suffered from chronic infectious diarrhoea due to a bacterial imbalance in my guts, I was repeatedly told by my family that it was due to my own lifestyle choices: eating this or that, sleeping late etc. Sometimes, a homeopathic medicine would be pushed down my mouth. These beliefs abound in all households. Accompanying this is the tendency to downplay serious illnesses. Once my aunt got a haemoglobin deficiency due to an infection and was walking around for months with her haemoglobin at 4. Finally, when she went for a check to a doctor, he and the testing facility where they tested her was alarmed. A lot of these tendencies in the middle class come from the need to save up enough and the medical establishment is known to be expensive. My aunt's doctor for example, is an affordable one and only comes to our locality twice a week. This means if she has an emergency issue, she will request others to delay taking her to the doctor until the affordable doctor is available. There is also a trust that the affordable, trusted doctor will not force her to

undergo too many tests and therefore save her money. This obviously comes from a financial need. But say, in the case of my friend, her parent's medical expenditure is covered by her corporate office benefits. In that case, it is simply a mistrust towards conventional medicine. COVID-19 of course has added more trouble for young family members dealing with such people.

My father too, happens to shrug off his age with annoying middle class machismo. He claims that his father lived to 90 and he too can't suffer anything too bad. This acting tough is part of a masculinity ingrained in men in this society. The same could have been what was driving my friend's father. On one occasion, he gave the miserable excuse that he did not have a stroke but a toothache and hence he was going to be fine. Not a lot of young people condone this behaviour though. And more so, because they have to deal with these parents.

16.6.2020

20:35

https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-are-states-testing-enough-compared-to-the-size-of-their-coronavirus-outbreaks/article31610777.ece

West Bengal has ramped up testing. Kerala is testing much less than West Bengal now. Recovery rates have crossed 50% in West Bengal and numbers seem to be looking better. West Bengal has more recovered cases than active cases now. And that is a relief, because the same does not apply to Delhi, Goa or Kerala. Gujarat is reducing its testing in order to keep its numbers limited. Kerala too does not have as much testing as before.

Ekabali Ghosh

21.6.2020

01:21

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3089771/coronavirus-may-be-here-much-longer-due-rapid-mutations?fbclid=IwAR06fZmKMBuxJB0PSOagvo3sCJliDWZW7O-H4LDQookjVCRqQV3M4hPZ4xo

So the coronavirus is mutating, has mutated about six times. A new mutation has been discovered in West Bengal itself.
https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/unique-virus-mutation-in-bengal/story-8E0zPECkt3K72PVCivEkxI.html

If the coronavirus becomes a cyclical event, and no conclusive drug is found, it would mean that vaccine development would become a cyclical or even annual affair. This would also mean that in developing countries not too many people will have access to the vaccine as governments are unlikely to be able to keep up in many places. If this continues, the worst case scenario might be (as pointed out by a friend) that our generation would get increasingly vulnerable as they get older and by the time we are in our fifties, many of us are going to die. It sounds like a particularly post human, dystopic vision, but if you told me about the pandemic and the lockdown last year, I would not have bought it either.

Active cases in Kolkata are slowing down. The total number of coronavirus deaths today in Kolkata has been 1. Which has unfortunately become a cause for celebration. But we can barely blame people for that. Even though not one death should go unmourned, but it is still a visible reduction in numbers. The lockdown has eased here, buses are plying and nearly all shops are open. Even the ridiculous, old school supermarket is our locality is open now. But this has also become a way to throw social distancing out of the window. At traffic jams, in roads with traffic bottlenecks,

you can see gatherings of about a dozen people trying to not touch each other but still standing in dangerous proximity. I went out today and I clicked one such picture in a street hardly 200 m from my home.

Ekabali Ghosh



“Life is an Uncertain Mess.”
https://boasblogs.org/de/curarecoronadiaries/life-is-an-uncertain-mess-living-through-the-coronavirus-in-kolkata/

Fig. 8: Street at night in Kolkata. Photography by: Ekabali Ghosh.

24.6.2020

00:04

I went to Raideeghi today as part of Amphan relief work. The area still has no electricity restored. The people are pissed with the local government. Saline water has entered the fields and ponds and made the pond water unusable. There is no potable water. One of the local people told us that COVID-19 is over. COVID-19 is of course not over, it just seems over to them there because of how overwhelming the effect of Amphan is. There is absolutely no social distancing on roads which are even close to the city. Buses full of hundreds of people are plying from the villages to the cities. Auto rickshaw lines with hundreds of people, autos with no distancing enforced. Traffic is back as usual. The only difference is the overwhelming presence of face covering and masks along with sanitizers. Tired to death. Will write more tomorrow.

25.6.2020

19:23

Continuing from what I wrote yesterday, we went to Amphan stricken Raideeghi yesterday. It is an area consisting of several villages (as opposed to what Wikipedia tells you), under the Diamond Harbour subdivision of South 24 Parganas. Geographically it is similar to the Sundarbans, it used to be a part of the Sundarbans, but now people have been settled and the area has been cultivated. Said cultivation is a bad idea as the river water here is salty, being so close to the mouth of the river.

Ekabali Ghosh

The local river here is called the Mridangabhanga. Mridangabhanga's embankments have broken and the river's salty water has overflown into local ponds and fields. This situation is not just the typical of Mridangabhanga and Raideeghi. The entirety of Sundarbans has similar problems. A friend of mine told me today that they are going to distribute mosquito nets, medicines, food and tarpaulin in Sagar Island. I asked her to check if the ponds there need renovating. Clearing out ponds in places with limited access to freshwater helps in improving the quality of life to some degree. For example, Raideeghi has a severe water crisis. The closest deep tube well is 4-5 kilometres from the village we surveyed. The freshwater is contaminated. There is no water in the taps of the local bathroom as electricity has still not been restored. In Mousuni Island reportedly, people have resigned to not getting electricity back within 3 months of Amphan. The rations and the finances (from the state government) that are due to the people of the village we visited are being looted by the local Panchayat Pradhan and his family. The same happens with other goondas with political clout in different areas of South 24 Parganas. When we distributed the tarpaulin, the recipients were asked to stand away from each other. Most of them maintained a good distance between them. The local club guy who was the one who had gotten in touch with my activist friend made it clear that we were not doing this as part of any political party. But the rhetoric being used throughout was that of charity. "We have begged them for assistance and they have provided us so." My smartass activist friend, broke the tension by casually joking that we too have begged in order to raise the money for the relief. This kind of jest neutralized some of the tension we urban folks were feeling, being hailed as the saviours from the city.

Since there is no water, I am assuming that regular hand washing and other measures too have been thrown out the window. I have written about this before with reference to Bangladeshi immigrants and other Muslims who live in ghettoes: if you do not have adequate water supply to your area, you will not be able to protect yourself from SARS CoV-2. And these villages do not. The only saving grace for these areas is that they are not cities, i.e. they are not as densely populated as say the

municipal areas of Baruipur and other suburbs in South 24 Parganas which are basically a petri dish. We saw buses go towards Kolkata from the suburbs on our journey. I saw people hanging from the doors of buses. To call these buses overcrowded would be an understatement. There was not an inch of space to squeeze in one more person in the bus. I asked my friend the reason for this situation. He replied that these people depend on the train to commute to Kolkata. They are labourers, they cannot afford to sit at home, and especially now that everything has opened (except universities and schools thank all the gods in the sky) they have to commute to the city. However, the trains are not plying, so the entirety of the crowd depends on buses. The same applies to the auto lines. An auto rickshaw here takes a minimum of 4-5 people, plus the auto driver in a space that is at most 3 ft by 4 ft. Auto drivers are charging extra for the commutes, but they are exposing themselves to the virus. The people in the auto lines stand without any social distancing whatsoever.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India has ruled that the Jagannath Temple at Puri can proceed with its “rathyatra”, which is its primary festival and attracts thousands of people to the temple. The irony is that that pulling the rope of the “rath”, or the chariot at the centre of the festival is supposed to bring you “punya” or good karma. It is supposed to make you go to heaven. A friend was joking that you could pull the rope, add on to your good karma, catch COVID-19 and then go to heaven. This is a Hindu festival. I do not expect any outrage from the Hindutva government at the centre. If the Muslims had dared to do something as irresponsible as this, I shiver to think what might have happened to them.

I remember that in a talk we organized, Dr. Aniruddha Dutta had pointed out that the Indian government’s biggest problem in the management of COVID-19 was that it depended primarily on the lockdown for preventing the virus. This is also why it imposed the lockdown so soon, in the early stages of its spread, thereby ruining too many livelihoods and creating the migrant crisis. They were of course talking with

reference to the livelihoods of transgender individuals who have been plunged into precarity by the government's half thought out policies. Now that the disease is actually raging on in the country (more than 4 lakh cases), services are being reopened. Even the West Bengal government which has decided they are going to carry on the lockdown till July 31st, is only pursuing a very limited lockdown. It is a lockdown in name only. And even then, one of my peers is frustrated that she cannot come to university. I am glad that I cannot go to university. It protects me even as I take random trips to places for relief work.

https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bengal-extends-lockdown-till-july-31-no-train-or-metro-services-to-be-allowed-2251649?amp=1&akamai-rum=off

25.6.2020

9:54 am

The area we visited comes under Mathurapur II block. The villagers complained that the local governmental honchos had been appropriating the state government's funds for Amphan relief. They claimed that Panchayat Pradhans come to survey the damage, gather the names of the villagers who have lost their homes, their fields and their ponds but then while entering the data online, they change it. The local councillor in Mathurapur II block has been accused of the same, appropriating finances for himself, his family and even his son's girlfriend. According to the villagers, he has been distributing relief to individuals who have two storeyed houses, over the ones who have lost everything due to Amphan. On the day we went to Raideeghi, there had already been a protest outside said councillors office where the villagers had forced him to beg for forgiveness. When the state machinery is non-functional, locals resort to mob justice. In Deganga, near Haroa too, protests had taken place which the state government is dismissing as orchestrated by Maoists and

BJP. I have not worked in Deganga, I do not know the local politics there. But have heard second hand that a couple of individuals who are on the state intelligence's radar were working in Deganga. But we should note that to dismiss said protests by villagers over genuine concerns about corruption is folly. This is what is leading to increased BJP presence in West Bengal. The Trinamool Congress (as much as I am rooting for them to win 2021) is giving West Bengal to BJP on a platter.

Depending on their occupation, the working classes decide which disaster has been more destructive for them. While in Raideeghi, it was mostly all about Amphan, I am told by Durbar that in Diamond Harbour, sex workers in brothels are mostly affected more by COVID-19. Sex workers everywhere have been hit hard by the pandemic because of the nature of their work. Their business has dried up. This makes me wonder how the sex work industry in the Sundabans would now operate. The local women are destitute due to Amphan and these are times when sex work is on the rise. But the first tourists in the Sundarbans would be concerned about the pandemic. Would they hire sex workers? And how would that sit with the oppressive social conditions (including exploitation by tourists) and difficult economic conditions? There is so little academic work in similar situations, particularly the post-Aila situation that there is no pattern I can figure out from home. I will have to go back again. And again.

The group of activists and social workers I went with hired a Scorpio car to go to Raideeghi. They had previously tried travelling in a matador and had been left exhausted by the end of the day. The entirety of the road was narrow and we sat there in a large-ish car, six people sometimes with or without masks. At home now, I ask my family to not come near me, because who knows if I picked up the disease on the way? A fellow activist, let's call him A, was claiming that the food habits of Indians are giving them better immunity. It seemed like the usual pseudo-science you hear every day. But he was also claiming that we have developed herd immunity or we would have had many more diagnosed cases by now. I will look into this later.

10:31 am

I fished out two articles from May and early June. One quotes the Medical Superintendent of Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi who claims herd immunity among Indians would develop in August after the tumultuous period of June-July when infections would rise high. Another article arguing against this trend claims that herd immunity is too large a risk and can only start appearing after 60 to 70% of the population has already been infected. So far, the government statistics claim somewhat more than 4 lakhs people. We are estimatedly a country of more than 130 crores. Herd immunity is too large a risk.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/health-news/herd-immunity-against-COVID-19-19-likely-to-develop-in-august-experts/articleshow/75820581.cms

https://www.bloombergquint.com/economy-finance/herd-immunity-as-COVID-19-19-strategy-risky-countries-must-make-timely-interventions-csir-dg

https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/diagnostics/no-point-in-saying-india-has-developed-herd-immunity-against-COVID-19-19-say-medical-experts/75818868

27.06.2020

00:49

Even as this diary is drawing to a close, the pandemic rages on. A new study which has not been made public claims that one third of Indians in containment zones and hotspots may have been infected by the coronavirus and may have recovered in

these months. The report is based on a serological study done on hotspot cities in the country, including Kolkata. Another epidemiologist, Jayaprakash Muliyil, claims that at its height, 50% of the country's populated will be infected by the coronavirus, most of these cases subclinical. Muliyil also agreed with Ashish Jha that India might see 200 million cases at its height. The healthcare system of this country is thoroughly underequipped to deal with such a scenario. Even as migrant workers carry the infection to their villages, rural India does not have the means to socially distance themselves from older members of their families, most of them living in close quarters. The low population density is the only safeguard in such a situation. Meanwhile, people from Kolkata have started travelling to tourist spots as the lockdown eases. The result is the spread of the infection to tourist spots, often in the hills and forests of West Bengal. These small towns and villages have minimal healthcare. What we need is a collective movement and consciousness raising exercise where people are asked and in turn ask others to not travel from hotspots to other places for tourism.

https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/icmr-serosurvey-coronavirus-one-third-infected-hotspots-COVID-19-exposure-india-1686984-2020-06-09

https://thewire.in/health/watch-karan-thapar-epidemiologist-jayaprakash-muliyil

Sometimes I wonder how it is possible that none of my friends have yet not caught the disease. I have a large circle in real life and an even larger one on social media. Sometimes I think that the absence of information on the numbers is scarier than the numbers. But then I visit one of the websites that track coronavirus cases and I am terrified all over again. We do not know if examinations will take place at all or not. We do not know what awaits us on the other side of the pandemic. Or whether there is even an other side. A friend once claimed that this is going to be our generation's 2008 recession. I remember replying that it won't get that bad. But it will. It will get worse than that. And we will be right at the centre of that precarity.

Ekabali Ghosh

28.6.2020

01:17

"Saala ye dukh kahe khatam nahi hota hai be?" ("*Saala* why does this sadness not end, mate?"; "*saala*" is a cuss word, now used colloquially by many) cried one man in a Hindi film called *Masaan*, which has since become a popular meme used by a generation of youngsters to address the existential dread, pain and fear that they feel. Perhaps the never-ending nature of pain and sadness along with the seeming randomness of life has been best demonstrated through the pandemic we are living through. Sometimes, I wonder when the pandemic will end, if at all it will end. Doing normal stuff like wearing new clothes, going out freely to another part of the city seems to have been left a world away. I keep hoping that things are going to change in another week, another month, another quarter, but nothing changes. News only gets worse.

India is almost touching the 5 lakh mark with 15, 000 officially dead. Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Delhi are all in a horrible condition. A friend in Tamil Nadu said that ultimately they are all going to get the disease. In West Bengal, as with many other state governments, the lockdown has been extended till 31st July. However, as it stands our lockdown is still loose, compared to the one in Tamil Nadu. Our night curfew ranges from 10 pm to 5 am. I am not sure what a night curfew is achieving.

https://www.india.com/news/lockdown-extended-till-july-31-list-of-states-that-announce-complete-shutdown-to-contain-COVID-19-spread-4068729/

Europe recovers even under the threatening glare of the second wave; this diary and this project draws to a close. Life has gotten usual, every day, and average, enabling our quotidian reality to remain unrecorded. Because why will I write a thousand

words if I do not see something that shocks me into writing it? What is there left to record anyway? Plenty, my reader. There are words in the silences of our lives that we struggle to give birth to. And there are structures that guide our silences. This project draws to a close even as the pandemic is just getting started in this part of the world. When they write the history of the pandemic, what will they consider as the starting point and what as the ending point? Whose pandemic will those dates be determined by?

But there is so much that remains hidden from my gaze, your gaze. Bodies and moments that defy our archive. There is more, so much more to these pestilence days that we cannot scratch.

3.7.2020

02:08 am

What do I write when everything that can be said has possibly been said? The country is in Unlock 2 even as the number of cases rise. Modi is playing off his scheme to distribute free rations, a basic human right, as a great success and the central government is advertising a failed lockdown as a successful one. A family near my dad's home has the virus and one person has died from it. There are 20,000 new cases every day and we are going about as if nothing's happening. We don't know if we will have examinations, what happens to our careers or whether we will still have humanities around when this pandemic ends. In a desperate attempt to boost academic productivity, people are writing diaries and attending webinars. My friends from the university are desperate to get out of their homes, even the ones who live with sick families. I would not judge them. Some of them are desperate for physical contact with other people. I started by saying that the pandemic has prevented us from enjoying the benefits that come out of capitalism. We are ending

by realizing how online life is never enough, we need other people physically present in our lives even as we are addicted to capital. I am going to go sleep for a while and by the time I wake up, a new lot of people would have fallen sick. I just hope that it is not anyone I care about.

Afterthought

As part of the editing process, I reread this diary and I was struck by my own naiveté. To hope that university would open by June or July, to hope that the peak would be over by May! It is late August now and we are still not sure if West Bengal has reached the peak, though the signs are promising. (In retrospect, August was not the peak as I realized while re-editing this dairy in November; we have more daily cases in November than we had in August.) To sum up, since I stopped writing the diary, Delhi reached its peak and cases started falling. Its R came down below 1. In West Bengal, testing has picked up and we have crossed the 40,000 tests per day mark now. We have 18,000 tests per million people. That is not enough, but definitely an improvement from before. We were getting as many as 3,200 cases per day, but lately we have been getting cases in the ballpark of 2900-3000 (3,800-3,900 reported cases regularly in November) . That is a good sign because testing has only increased. This state has taken up a policy of one complete lockdown per week. We are yet to assess how beneficial such a measure is. People have organized protests during the pandemic without masks but nobody I know seems to have caught the infection from these protests. Maybe they have developed antibodies, who knows. In the last month, three of my friends have fallen sick from the infection. One of them had a sixty-year-old dad to take care of, who too got the disease. My friend, who had just recovered from the disease, left home to buy food for his COVID-struck dad because the family of two simply did not have anyone else to do their groceries. Many prefer seeking treatment while staying at home. Meanwhile, the central government and the Supreme Court insist that students take their National Eligibility

Ekabali Ghosh

Tests in September. I am lucky I cleared it last year.

We have no idea where the economy is going to go from here or what is going to happen to our careers. Life is an uncertain mess.