

Building street communities in the time of a pandemic

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The streets emptied themselves out into silos of silence. The giant machines went into anaphylactic shock. The cavernous malls stared into space looking haunted. The city withdrew into a fearful slumber while smaller towns and village continued to spin the daily warp and weft of life with little disruption. The skies burst open with stars and planets that sparkled with barely restrained glee. The air began to breathe. Time it seems ceased to move forward. And instead raced backwards into a future that vanished into uncertainty.

IT was the first few days of the lockdown. For a moment it seemed like the grand march of global capital had actually come to a grinding halt. The gluttonous consumer economy cowered and starved in the face of the world's most powerful terrorist to date – an invisible little virus. One that it seemed had even brought all the

* This article, drawing upon personal notes and social media posts, emerges from a surreal journey as one of the many volunteers with Naavu Baharateeyaru and Bangalore with Migrants, two of the many networks reaching out to migrant workers and daily wage earners during and after the lockdown in Bangalore, Karnataka.

world's religions to their knees. And hopefully humbled the government enough to actually do what they are elected to do. Govern. And not dominate, divide, control or exploit. Either the citizens or the natural resources of the country.

It was like a pause button had been switched on. And humanity, it seemed, had been given one last chance to revive, restore, rejuvenate and reboot itself.

But that was for one glorious moment. In the weeks that followed the announcement of lockdown, the government at the Centre, powered by testosterone, speedily went back to the business of consolidating power; preying on the growing fear and paranoia of the people; stigmatizing the poor, communalizing the virus, criminalizing the affected and impacted in dehumanizing ways; incarcerating all opposition that had reared its head during the anti citizenship protests of December 2019 to March 2020. And, of course, politically profiting from uncertainty and misery.

On the ground, even while the relatively more privileged retreated piously into their homes clapping hands and lighting lamps on the balconies to keep the virus at bay, the poor and the

less privileged scoured the streets for jobs and livelihoods paying little attention to pandemic. 'Hunger will get us before Corona will', was the simple philosophy. As a fallout of the thoughtless and brutal lockdown and in the near total absence of systemic safety nets, the economy went into a tailspin. A myriad livelihoods disappeared leaving millions who live and labour in the shadow economy scrambling around for basic food and survival.

And in the meantime from amidst this fear and crisis appeared an unexpected sight. That of the marching migrants who forcefully drew attention to their presence on the ghostly streets and highways of the metropolises.

Emerging silently from its underbelly, the city it appeared was purging itself off those who had laboured to construct its infrastructure, brick by brick, girder by girder. Those who had melded anonymously into a space they had made their temporary home. And when they appeared on the streets – the blank faced young men with their colourful plastic covers containing their precious identity papers and their bulging knapsacks, or anxious families with children slung across their shoulders pulling all their worldly goods packed into a plastic bucket or sack, something fundamentally shifted. In public consciousness and conscience. Even if not in public policy and our politics.

Locally, in the state, the administration fumbled around for appropriate ways to respond to the unfurling economic, humanitarian and health crisis and in the process unexpectedly reached out to civil society to come on board, including trade unions, citizen groups, women's and human rights groups with whom in normal peace times, it is at war. Others too came out to help including RWAs (Resident Welfare Associations), ordinary citi-

zens whether slum dwellers or apartment residents, workers and management, rotary and lions clubs, retired bank officers and housewives, school teachers and students, fashion designers and lawyers, actors and auto drivers, private philanthropies and social workers, sex workers and trans people, people of faith and radical activists of non-faith. All came together and flowed into a river of diverse volunteers working feverishly on the ground and online to reach out to those workers on the move paralyzed by the lockdown. Something about the migrant moved them.

It was a humanitarian response to a humanitarian crisis, both equally of epic proportions. And quite unlike any response seen in times of other humanitarian disasters, whether natural or man-made. Not devoid of contradictions and painful paradoxes and yet strangely hopeful even in the midst of extreme despair and dehumanization. For this time both the despair and hope revolved around three unlikely stories, each in their own ways the story of the devalued, the demonized and the discarded 'other' of global capital on the one hand, and a majoritarian nationalism on the other. One of course the story of the migrant and the others, that of the Muslim and the local.

For far away from the macro world and imagination where the Game of Thrones continued to be played, on the ground, on the streets, in shrunken micro worlds, broken and divided communities began re-weaving smaller webs of life, solidarity and interconnectedness.

And these webs proved to be cussed and resilient even against persisting xenophobia, Islamophobia, and globalized greed. For it was the 'other' – the migrant, the Muslim and the local that came together in unexpected camaraderie to fight back in strange

and unexpected ways. Restoring in the process some equilibrium and hope of surviving a pandemic that on the streets exposed social and political fault lines as much as it strengthened a common humanity forged in the fires of human solidarity. One day at a time. One meal at a time. One quarrel at a time. One story at a time.

Rejaul, West Bengal, 15 April 2020: *'Vaiya, hamlok West Bengal ka rehene bale he. Bangalore me kam ki sil sile me ayethe. lekin lockdown ki bajase pichle 37 din se atak gayahu. ham logo ke pas jitni paise thi sob khatam ho gaya vai. sir ek bakt ka khana nasip hota he vaiya. please kuch kijiye vaiya hamlok bari mushibad me hu. agar aplok kuch kar sake to please kuch kijiye. ham 2 log he vaiya.'*

'Brother, we are from West Bengal. We came to Bangalore in search of a job. Because of the lockdown for the past 37 days we are stuck. Whatever money we had it is over. There may be just one more meal in our fate. Please do something we are in great distress. If you can please help. There are two of us.'

A desperate message that came through WhatsApp from Rejaul, a young 18-19 year old migrant who had arrived in Bangalore barely a couple of days before the lockdown was imposed.

When asked if he could at least find his way to a ration shop so that provisions could be organized, he says that he is scared. That one of the boys staying next door tried going out and was beaten back by the police. 'Humko dar hai; hum bahut pareshan hai.' He remembers every single day of the lockdown. To the day. In a place he is not even able to describe. Or give directions to.

There is no official record of the number of migrant workers in the

country. Ironically enough perhaps the only statistics emerging are from records maintained by state governments about the number of migrant workers sent back to their home states through free Shramik trains organized after an extended period of denial by the central government about their plight. According to the Centre, 60 lakh migrants took 4,450 Shramik specials to reach their home states. The state of Karnataka is estimated to have sent back more than four lakh migrant workers in over 300 trains between the months of May and July 2020, after the lifting of the lockdown. Thanks to the pandemic, the migrants on the move could be counted. And seen. For till then they were unseen and unheard – dwelling in the shadows of cities, towns and even villages where everybody knows everybody. As Srikant, a Hakki Pikki tribal, a diehard nomad himself but now living a more settled life in Bannerghatta, 20 kms outside Bangalore city said: ‘It was only during the lockdown that we came to know that so many Hindi people are living amidst us.’

The lockdown pushed them out from the shadows and anonymity. Hundreds of migrant workers like Rejaul started desperately reaching out for help, both through the dysfunctional official helplines and the overstretched unofficial helplines that the personal phones of scores of volunteers became. Workers being driven out from their villages and towns by collapsing agrarian economies or driven by the aspiration to make a better life in a city that promises opportunities and mobility.

As more and more migrants began breaking out of their isolation and reaching for help, what became clear was that The Migrant could not be reduced to one homogenous identity – that of a Hindi, North Indian, male cons-

truction worker. As envisaged even by the government that initially released funds for their welfare through the State Construction Workers Board, which most could not access since they were neither construction workers nor registered in the states to which they had migrated for work. The workers not only came from, but also occupied multiple worlds which the official discourse could neither comprehend nor accommodate.

On the one hand were individual migrant workers like Rejaul who found themselves totally lost in the city. Those who overnight lost their earnings, were in danger of losing the roof over their heads after being evicted by landlords and had totally lost whatever little was left of their dignity. Having little or no money left after sending their earnings back to their villages many had no access even to food. Some who called had not eaten a proper meal for three to four days and were surviving on water and biscuits. They were afraid of even going out to get fresh food being distributed by the trade unions since the police were beating them back into their rooms. If lucky, they got some rations from some good Samaritans in the neighbourhood and across the city.

On the other hand were the anonymous migrant workers – hundreds of who are locked up like slave labour in invisible labour camps, and caught within a toxic contractor nexus that never enabled them to have a voice or a face. As for instance garment workers and metro workers. The report ‘Behind the Pillars of the Metro’ brought out by a local media group called Maraa, at the height of the lockdown, perhaps for the first time brought to public attention the plight of Bangalore Metro workers who are typical of this new form of indentured labour that no Bonded Labour Act can apply to.

‘While builders, engineers, supervisors are hired directly by the construction company, cheap labour is procured through a complex web of contractors. This makes it extremely difficult for the state or public to access the workers directly, making way for several labour violations. Safety conditions for workers have been neglected, which has resulted in several deaths on site the most recent deaths reported on March 4th, 2020. The workers work precariously on site without safety gear or supervision. None of the workers are registered with any trade union or the labour department. Over the last decade, the Metro workers that have passed the city, building the Metro, would easily be over one lakh workers.’

Between the closed world of indentured labour, like the Metro workers and the lost individual world of Rejaul, lies the diverse and multiple worlds of the migrant. Who not only do construction work on flyovers, roads and buildings as masons, carpenters, electricians, painters, and plumbers, but also do the finest of embroidery for chic boutiques and stitch the most stylish kurtas and shirts in the narrow bylanes of Shivajinagar; Who do masterchef style cooking in swanky food courts in IT parks, and make idlis on roadside restaurants on Mosque Road and sell crunchy golgappas in smaller layouts. Who thread eyebrows and wax legs in beauty parlours in downtown Brigade Road, and also drive autos and repair bikes in local neighbourhoods. Who work in the garment industry and as carpenter, electricians and plumbers and sell clothes on their cycles on the streets. Who play the guitar, belting out the gospel or swing to the raunchy beat of a Bhojpuri song. Who speak Bengali, Marwari, Manipuri, Assamese, Oriya, Urdu and languages and dialects per-

haps we don't even know the names of. Who live not only on the outskirts of the city in tin sheds and huts but also in remote villages and in the heart of old cities.

They are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Tribal and Dalit. Some are god-fearing; some god cursing. Some are Modi bhakts. Some are trenchant government critics. They are a reminder of the messy multiverse that is India. And most important, they are a reminder that home for most of India still survives in the village or small town. The home that they all universally wanted to go back to, rejecting the world that they realized, at least for the moment, had sold them broken dreams and illusory aspirations.

Harischandra, UP; 16 April 2020: *'Why should we stay on here... what is left for us here? We have our small field back home and we can survive by eating what we grow. We came out to the city to earn money. We came here to work. But now we neither have work nor money. Nor dignity. We are not even allowed to go out. Please do something and just send us back home. Hamein ghar jaana hai.'*

The world had not delivered. It was time to go back home where they would at least find some food to sustain their bodies and the familiarity of kinship to sustain their souls.

In a strange and twisted way, the pandemic that put up spatial barriers between people gave the migrant a persona and a presence. The worker emerged not just as an anonymous cog in the wheel. But a living, breathing and complex human being whose dreams could not be reduced to the deracinated desires of an antiseptic, aspirational economy and whose sweat and labour could no longer be ignored either by the state or the public.

For over the months, as the city emptied itself of the migrants, it seemed to have lost a palpable part of itself. And soon enough the abandoned projects and industries began feeling the need for 'labour' like never before. They were being wooed back by those same exploitative forces that had earlier harassed them with non-payment for months, pushed them to barely survive in abysmal living and working conditions and summarily discarded them during the lockdown. Stories now are being heard of how contractors and employers are enticing the migrants back with airfares, higher wages and better working conditions.

The tragedy is that even as the loss of labour was being felt, the central government, in the name of kick-starting the economy, introduced labour reforms that all but legitimize new forms of slavery where workers, with increased working hours, decreased wages, and little or no right to unionize, lose all access to collective bargaining which should be at the heart of any healthy economic system. And surprisingly enough this move has been protested not only by trade unions but also corporates like Azim Premji and Ratan Tata.

As Azim Premji said: 'Diluting these already lax laws will not boost economic activity, it will only exacerbate the conditions of the low wage earners and the poor. Such measures tend to pit workers and businesses against each other. This is a false choice. We need only look at the past few weeks of experience, the unjust treatment of migrant labour vitiated the social contract between business and labour. This triggered the mass reverse migration of labour, undermining businesses. Thus, such measures are not only unjust but also dysfunctional. The interests of workers and businesses are deeply aligned, particularly in times of unprecedented economic crisis.'

One hopes that when the world awakens from the virus, the lessons of the pandemic will not be forgotten – either by the migrants or the solidarity networks built up around the migrant. And new forms of resistance will emerge, central to which will not be the identity of the worker as an atomized and economized unit of production and consumption, but an expansive and inclusive notion of 'labour' as being central to a sustainable economy and world.

And Basavanna's radical philosophy of *Kayakave Kailasa* or Work is Worship, becomes not just a simplistic dictum but a transformative political philosophy that dignifies and values the worker as much as her work.

Nizamuddin, Orissa, 19 April 2020: *'He was one of 10 workers from Orissa holed up in Ashoknagar. Three couples with two children and four bachelors. They all are cooks working in small hotels. Their owners have abandoned them. And today they are struggling to get food to survive with some semblance of dignity. It just needed one question for the floodgates to open and the words to come tumbling out in a torrent. 'How are you managing to survive?' 'Actually, my friends are saying let us stop asking for food and rations. Once what we have gets over it is more dignified if we just die. Yes, people come and take our names and numbers and go. But we never hear back from them. We must have just become another number and name to be recorded in their registers. You too might just talk and go and we will never see you again.'*

'Do you know now there is more hate in this world than love? People don't want to talk to us. They don't want to even buy vegetables

from us. Why have people lost the capacity to think for themselves? Moorkhon ka majority ban gaya hai. It is like the majority has become mindless. When will people learn that the politicians to keep their seats are spreading all this hate? Everything has become about Hindu and Muslim. When will people learn that we all depend on each other and help each other out. The government has no intention of listening to and thinking of the poor when they are making all their plans.'

Nizamuddin was not merely a migrant or a worker, but also a philosopher and a political analyst with lots to talk about—especially since he was also Muslim. And if over the last months it was the invisible migrant who became visible in the labour landscape, it was the much demonized Muslim who became a heroic saviour in the humanitarian landscape. And the reasons are not hard to trace.

Not even six months back a great battle was on in the country and in our own state and city. A battle that many said was for the soul of India, since it was against the changes in the citizenship law that marked a shift in the secular character of the Constitution. And the Muslim community, particularly the women, were at the forefront of this battle along with every thinking and feeling citizen regardless of the faith or ideology they belonged to.

The many Shaheen Baghs that flowered across the country showed that as a people they were refusing to be systematically written out of its history, destroyed in its present and weeded out of its future. And as women they were refusing to be the mascots of either a patronizing hypermasculinized nationalism or a protective macho fundamentalism. Which is why perhaps the state which till last year was claim-

ing to protect the poor Muslim women from bigamous husbands through criminalizing the practice of Triple Talaq, this year at the height of the pandemic started to punish young women from the community who had dared to cross the lakshman rekha of political dissent by incarcerating all those who had been at the forefront of the anti-citizenship struggles.

It is not a coincidence that all those who came out onto the streets to lay claims to being an integral part of this country also stayed back on the abandoned streets to become part of yet another battle. This time they were at the heart of the humanitarian battle to reach out to the economic other through well organized networks from within the community, who with relentless generosity offered their skills, commitment and financial resources as part of the efforts of the state and civil society. This was not easy.

For at the national level, the project of communalizing the virus had been achieved almost at the very beginning of the pandemic. A toxic media deliberately whipped up the Tablighi incident, which ensured that in the public imagination Muslims became the primary carriers of the virus, defying every scientific and rational understanding of the disease. Locally, Hindutva networks of relief, by being agenda and not response driven, began to unleash a subtle and not so subtle campaign against Muslim relief workers, building on existing fears and paranoia about the spread of the virus. And despite the fact that the unholy virus had manifested itself in every holy space from Puri Jagannath to Tirupathi where scores of people have tested positive, the toxic truth of the 'Tablighi virus' totally poisoned public perceptions.

There were even instances in which workers from states like UP

refused to accept and eat food brought to them by a Muslim relief worker once again bringing home the fact that workers too cannot be organized merely on the basis of their economic identities, but as products of their cultural contexts which are getting highly communalized.

April 5, 2020: *Gulab is a volunteer with Swaraj Abhiyan and Naavu Bharateeyaru (Hum Bharat ke Log), who had endeared himself with his hard work and cheerful temperament to all those volunteers and workers he had connected with during the relief operations. He was on the road 24 hours a days, zipping across the city on his bike laden with rations and other relief material, come rain or sunshine.*

One night Gulab had gone to the edge of the city to deliver food to a desperate group of workers. Some local people from the community refusing the food sent back a message to the online relief worker they were coordinating with on the phone saying, 'please don't send jihadis to our areas'. When this went around in the group, some of us expressed our outrage. 'So angry and upset about what happened with you today Gulab...' His response was typical: 'Fine yaar, I don't really care' ... (with a smiley) ... I'm used to it.'

'That is your good nature and generosity of spirit Gulab! But please know that we are all in this fight together to save this country from this kind of bigotry and hate...' And Gulab replies with another smiley: 'Yes I like the way we NB (Naavu Bharateeyaru) work.'

But the story does have an unexpected twist. A month later, Gulab receives a message from another Hindu group saying that there was a poor pujari family in dire need of

rations, and asked if he could help. Gulab accepts readily, but wary of the reception he could get, he sends a message to the family saying that he is a Muslim and would they be ready to accept relief from him. They send a message back saying humanity is one, and how could they even think of saying no to somebody willing to help them.

And this incident followed quick on the heels of another one, in another area, where another relief worker Zarine Taj, her son, and members of her family were distributing rations. They were stopped and harassed by some local Hindutva workers who said: 'We don't want Muslims here... go and help your own communities', and then proceeded to complain to the police saying that the food and provisions given by Muslims should be checked. The local police took a strong view of this and told the volunteers to carry on with their work, even offering them protection. Despite this the volunteer and other members of her family, including son, were beaten up by the goons. But spunky Zareen Taj this time filed a formal complaint. Now undeterred, she continues to go around to vulnerable communities ensuring that they have food and rations. And nobody has dared stop her.

The conversations on nationalism, identity, secularism, faith, gender and sexuality that were evoked during the anti-CAA protests that so many of us were part of, have flowed seamlessly into the humanitarian work and are reflective of the comfortably confused common humanity we are all a part of. A vasudhaiva kutumbakam that the current dispensation is systematically dismantling in its self-defeating quest to build a Hindu Rashtra with no clue about the culture it has been born into and destroying.

As Basavanna prays with unerring wisdom to his Lord:

'Don't make me keep questioning the other... who is s/he, who is s/he. May I always feel s/he is our own, s/he is our own
Koodalasangama deva, make me feel that I am a child of your house.'

April 4, 2020: *Life it seems will never be the same again since 22 March. Yes, perhaps life as we know it. But not perhaps life as it is meant to be. Relief, respite, reconstruction seem impossible in these surreal times... and yet...*

#Chandar, a young nomadic Hakki Pikki calls to offer the ragi they have grown for anybody who is in greater need than them. 'Finally it seems that we will have to go back to the land and be sustained by the food we will grow to eat. We will have go back to the lakes to draw our water and drink. Thanks to the land we are on we have at least grown ragi to last us for the year and we can stay at home and not go hungry.'

#Chandrashri from Sadhana Mahila Sangha, the sex workers collective, worried about her women, sitting through the night and painfully typing out on the borrowed computer a list of the most vulnerable – women living on and off the streets, positive women needing ART and unable to go to hospital, single women single-handedly supporting large families – not knowing when their next meal is going to come from.

#People of conscience from small neighbourhoods like my own Cooke Town, reaching out to migrant workers living and working around them, finding out about their contractors, employers and payments and assisting them with buying and delivering provisions.

The pandemic, through imposing the diktat of social or physical distanc-

ing, on the one hand legitimized the worst forms of caste and gender discrimination in our society. But on the other, through limiting physical movement, it forced people to strengthen new forms of the local. A local that redesigned itself around an ethic of care and political solidarity; an economy of subsistence and sustainability; an ecology of mutual interdependence and the politics of democratic decentralization.

When the more privileged communities came out of the safety and security of their homes to reach out to their neighbour, who was the migrant construction worker, many this time did not deploy just their money, technology and expertise in an exercise of benevolent power. They pushed for more structural changes conscious of their own privilege within the system. They approached the local administrations to hold them accountable to extend relief that was the right of the dispossessed working class. They also came out on to the streets to protest when the Shramik trains were stopped by the state government at the insistence of the builder lobby which wanted captive labour they could use and abuse. They also came out to protest in small groups within their localities when the young students and women in Delhi who had protested the citizenship bill some months earlier, were being incarcerated under the draconian UAPA Act that criminalizes all forms of dissent.

When members of the less privileged communities like Chandar and Chandrashri came out to extend their solidarity in terms of sharing either their produce or their own labour with those who they felt were suffering more than them, they reminded us that the notion of solidarity is not just the luxury of the privileged classes but also the survival instinct of the not so privi-

leged. That the notion of subsistence grounding the ‘economy of the poor’ can be rooted in notions of production and consumption based on the more holistic economy of sustainability and not be reduced to the devalued and discarded byproduct of excessive consumption which grounds the ‘economy of the rich’.

Unlikely alliances began to form across barriers of state and civil society, across ideological and political divides, and across diverse constituents of civil society ranging from faith based groups, charity organizations, corporate philanthropies, rights based groups and unions that were forced to work together despite and through the clashes and contradictions of class, caste, communities and state power. A new, or perhaps old ecology of mutual interdependence tentatively (re)surfaced around ideas of solidarity that appeared to defy both feudal notions of charity that consolidates cultural capital and new age corporate social responsibility that legitimizes economic capital.

Like local neighbourhood, the ‘muster centres’ to which the migrant workers gathered in the hundreds and thousands while they waited for the trains to take them home, became another of the micro sites of this expansive notion of solidarity, where the ritual of sharing and caring played out in interesting ways.

All kinds of people stream in through the day. A group of women who have collected money from their neighbourhood, respectfully put it into covers that they then distribute to workers going to Assam. Some of the workers come and take charge of piles of clothes that people have sent to be distributed. They sort through and share those that are respectfully new while discarding with dignity those old ones donated with contempt. People

from the gurdwara quietly set up tables full of food, and without any fuss distribute it to all there and pack up and melt away. A relief group of lawyers that has tirelessly been packing food and water for the migrants to carry with them on the journey, set up a public address system and start an impromptu entertainment programme which breaks the palpable anxiety and tension of the waiting workers. An old man emerges from the crowd and starts to dance while a young man with an extraordinary Rafi-like voice sings – both enthrall the crowd. Even the space that could be totally dehumanizing hums with resilient dignity.

And all this while behind the scenes unions, lawyers and activists are fighting on the virtual corridors of power within the government and the courts to obtain progressive orders, ensuring for the workers and the urban poor their right to life, dignity, food, mobility.

Senior officers who normally remain inaccessible in their citadels of bureaucratic power, suddenly became relatively more accessible to the ordinary citizen. They were actually available at the other end of the phone – if not personally at least through WhatsApp. And this was not only for pesky activists but also desperate workers who wanted to know where their trains were, and if they could get on.

Even the police who were brutal and violent in the beginning months of the lockdown attempt to repair and rebuild their relationship with the workers with a more protective and empathetic bond. ‘I feel sorry for them,’ said a woman constable who was on guard there from morning to night. ‘They too are scared and want to go back home. Look at my plight. I am sitting here the whole day and when I go home, I cannot even go near my children. I just go home to have a bath

and sleep away from the family. My niece wants to know why aunty, who used to come home and give me a hug, has no love for me now.’ It was as though the pandemic had created conditions within which power got diffused and partially tamed to hold itself accountable in unexpected, if more humane, ways.

An epilogue: It is strange. On the streets adding to the continuing narratives of our multiple ‘others’, are other ghosts from the past who also refuse to leave – Gandhi goes on about how the earth has enough for everybody’s need but not everybody’s greed, while Marx critically deconstructs the unjust structures of class, and Ambedkar dismantles the cultures of caste and indignity. The unexpected visitors are Jane Jacob, the intrepid urbanist and activist from US, and Hannah Arendt the philosopher who fled Germany and Fascism in 1933. The former argues for a community based approach to city living and building neighbourhoods in which all local residents get more intimately invested. Hannah Arendt while warning us about the origins of a totalitarian politics urges us to find spaces of freedom, and freedom from tyranny, in active citizenship civic engagement and collective deliberation about all matters affecting the political community. And amidst all this one senses the ceaseless movement of the Jangama who strives for liberation and emancipation through a devotion to his/her livelihood.

The cacophony continues. At the macro level it seems the pandemic has taught no lessons. Among other architectures of power being reconstructed, labour reforms, the proposed amendments in the Environment Impact Assessment Act, and the relentless use of the authoritarian UAPA against activists and students, does not portend well either for labour, the ‘minorities’

or a sustainable ecology of mutual interdependence.

At this moment when it seems that the future is being swallowed up, one wonders what will prevail in a post pandemic world. Hubris, arrogance of power and entitlement? Or a more expansive if humble narrative of resistance nourished by the smaller stories of resilient human solidarities that keep coming back like cobwebs refusing to be swept away into the dustbins of time.

Postscript: Abdul, West Bengal, 28 July 2020: *Abdul has been incessantly calling over the last weeks, ever since he decided to go back to his home and village in Malda, West Bengal. Earlier it was to enquire about the timings of the Shramik trains on behalf of his friends. When my colleague asked him why he was not going, he said he was waiting to be paid his wages to take back home. He was so excited when he finally boarded the train to leave Bangalore that from the moment he got his berth (I am sitting on my seat) till he gets down (Malda is only few minutes away), there is a blow by blow account of the journey.*

Once he reaches home he calls and makes his children speak and sends photographs of his family and house of tin sheets and tiles that teeter over the river flowing behind the house. 'The river has flooded our fields and we could not grow anything he says.' He invites us to his village and promises to feed us with the famous sweet mangoes from Malda. His future plans include going to Thailand where he has been offered a job as a cable layer. In the message he sends this morning he is upbeat: 'Good morning, this is the house photo, this is my family. I bought it to make it home, see, madam, if I go to Thailand, maybe I will make a good house. God willing.'

The virus willing, I add silently.