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Interconnected Precarities: A Study of Class, Gender, and Ethics in *India Lockdown*

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Abstract: The sudden enforcement of lockdown in India aggravated the pre-existing socioeconomic divide, turning the regime of social protection into a tool for class and gender discrimination. While the elite section of society experienced the strict containment regime within the relative security of their homes, the already precarious and vulnerable sections like migrant labourers and the poor struggled for basic survival. Within the nation's marginalised sections, women suffered heightened forms of oppression during the lockdown coupled with unemployment and loss of income. Milet (1992) observes that the increased vulnerabilities produced by a crisis are rooted in pre-existing social relations and determined by intersecting socio-economic conditions. According to Singh and Kaur (2021), gender relations intersect with other forms of disadvantage rooted in class and caste, producing distinct and compounded forms of marginalisation. This study explores lockdown as a state of class-based precarity and vulnerability and how it is negotiated by gender, ethical relationships and narrative form by taking the film *India Lockdown* (2022) as a case study. It examines the intersectionality of class and gender while critically analysing the complex relationship of class and ethical behaviour during an exceptional situation. It further investigates how the hyperlink narrative technique employed in the film mediates the differentiated yet interconnected experiences of lockdown in India.

Keywords: Covid-19 Lockdown; Precarity; Class; Gender; Ethics; Hyperlink Cinema

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown in India unmasked and exacerbated pre-existing social and economic inequalities. Whether it curbed the spread of the virus in India or not, it apparently aggravated the social epidemic of prejudice and class and gender discrimination. The sudden suspension of economic activities and restrictions of mobility produced differentiated consequences across social classes based on their social position and access to resources. The intensity of class-based discrimination was witnessed during lockdown when the government arranged special flights to evacuate Indians stuck abroad, but failed to think of the migrant workers and the poor who had to herald the long walk to save themselves from dying due to starvation (Raina and Ananya). The upper- and middle-class people enjoyed the privilege of staying at home, and the deprived section was forced to move outside in order to sustain their lives (Chakraborty). The lives of the lower class have been more precarious due to economic and social vulnerabilities resulting from the sudden closure of all services and jobs. While class, caste, religion and the like are crucial determinants, gender surpasses all distinctions to operate on women from all sections of society. The lockdown worsened the conditions of especially lower-class women who managed to work as domestic workers and daily-wage labourers. Women found it difficult to navigate the patriarchal society with high exposure to gender-based violence during the lockdown (Raina and Ananya).

This study examines lockdown as a state of class-based precarity and vulnerability while simultaneously depicting that these conditions are negotiated by gender, ethical relationships and narrative form through the case study of the film *India Lockdown* (2022). *India Lockdown*, directed by Madhur Bandharkar, is a Hindi-language anthology film that depicts four parallel stories of different classes in India during the lockdown. It explores the varied social and psychological repercussions of the pandemic lockdown in India on different sections of society and their struggles and anxieties. The interconnected narrative brings together characters of different social and economic structures, including an upper-middle-class couple, a retired senior citizen, a sex worker, and migrant labourers. The first section analyses class precarity and vulnerability by examining the distinctive experiences of the characters belonging to different socio-economic strata of society. The second section analyses gendered precarity in the narrative, focusing on the lives of two female characters at the intersection of class and gender. The third section investigates the class-ethnic relationships, arguing that the narrative represents the complicated correlation between the socio-economic status and moral conduct of the characters. The final section explores the hyperlink narrative form of the film and how it negotiates class and gender experiences of the lockdown.

Precarity, Vulnerability and Class

Precarity has been driven by and is an inevitable product of neoliberal globalisation (Mendes and Lau 1). Louise Waite (2009) credits the first use of the concept to Pierre Bourdieu, where he “looked at the social divide separating permanent workers from contingent or casual workers and said that the latter were *précarité*” (414). Later, many scholars, including Michael Foucault, Judith Butler, and others explored the meaning and applicability of the concept. Butler (2009) distinguishes between precarity and precariousness. Precarity is a “politically induced condition, in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). It is the unequal distribution of a particular vulnerability through political and economic structures making certain sections disposable. On the other hand, precariousness is an inherent state of vulnerability and interdependence in which human life is analysed from a collective point of view (Arora and Majumder). Simon During (2015) finds precarity to be a “material consequence of post-Fordist, globalised capitalism” (21). Furthermore, these scholars point out that precarious employment is associated with precarious livelihood marked by unemployment, low wages and less economic and social well-being (Mendes and Lau 2).

According to Kuran et al. (2020), the term ‘vulnerability’ is “the result of different and interdependent societal stratification processes that result in multiple dimensions of marginalisation” (28). The vulnerable groups as populations in the country require more humanitarian assistance since they are excluded from the community and are left with limited resources. Vulnerability should be observed as one category but from multilayered dimensions like gender, class, race and others (Yazid and Wasisto). It is furthered worsened by the existence of social hierarchy which provides indiscriminate access to resources. Structural vulnerability refers to a condition of being at risk due to socioeconomic, cultural and political hierarchy that are produced and reinforced through institutional structures and policies (Bourgeois et al.).

India Lockdown interweaves characters that belong to different socioeconomic strata of society, foregrounding their disproportionate experiences, portraying how their survival strategies, precarity and vulnerability were shaped by their class position. It juxtaposes four distinctive stories to expose the unequal conditions of existence during the lockdown. The characters Dev, Palak and Moon Alves represent the anxieties, frustrated desires and loneliness experienced by the upper middle class during the lockdown. Dev and Palak are young, college-going lovers. Their plan to have physical intimacy is shattered by the lockdown which forces them isolate themselves within their homes. Moon Alves is an affluent commercial pilot whose struggles during the lockdown stem from isolation, confinement and altered intimacy. She adopts various coping mechanisms, like dressing up in uniform at home and

experimenting with new dishes, reflecting the urban privileged class. Being Dev's neighbour, Moon eventually interacts with Dev to overcome her loneliness. A feeling of deep vacuum of intimacy makes her flirt with him. Her character acts as a catalyst of temptation for Dev. The connection between Dev and Moon Alves is the result of extreme boredom. The happy ending of Dev and Palak reuniting without knowing his intimacy with Moon critically highlights the privilege experienced by the upper middle class without acknowledging the precarious conditions of the lower classes.

Mr Nageshwar Rao, a retired senior citizen, lives in Mumbai alone with his pet dog, away from his pregnant daughter Swathi, who stays in Hyderabad. He is vulnerable because of his age and isolation, which force him to follow extreme precautions against the virus. His hypochondriac nature is contrasted with the carelessness of his neighbour Mr Khosla. Mr Rao believes in precaution, avoids social gatherings and started wearing masks even before the lockdown. On the other hand, Mr Khosla ridicules Mr Rao for taking precautions and invites him for parties. He remarks that Indians have greater immunity and drinking alcohol kills all viruses inside the body. He refuses to wear masks during the lockdown and finally contracts the coronavirus and dies. The death of Mr Khosla terrifies him, but his precautions prevented him from contracting the virus. He is privileged because even though the flight to Hyderabad got cancelled, he managed to get permission to travel via car through his friend Sinha, who is a government official. His vulnerability due to age also depicts his dependency on the lower class, for instance, his maid and his driver. He found it difficult to manage his household¹ during the lockdown and to travel alone to Hyderabad.

The migrant labourers Madhav and Phoolmathi worked as a food-stall worker and a housemaid, respectively, in Mumbai and lived in the streets of Dharavi along with their two children. Madhav experienced a loss in his food-stall business due to the outbreak of the virus and was forced to shut it down completely during the lockdown. Phoolmathi, who worked as a maid in Mr Rao's house, temporarily lost her job since the society of the flat has forbidden maids. The lockdown has positioned them in a vulnerable situation where they have no job, no rations, and are not able to repay their rent to Rafique and loan instalment to the moneylender Vilas. Madhav struggles between injured pride and his duty to feed his family when he confronts Rafique on his way to buy the essential grocery. The landowner takes away the money he had and embarrasses him in front of other people. The class contrast is drawn when Mr Rao gives Phoolmathi some extra money and tells her to be safe. She replies, "What will we eat if we don't go out, Uncle? The poor will die of starvation first before the virus kills them, Uncle" (*India Lockdown* 13:03-12)¹. They decided to herald the long walk from Dharavi to Bihar on foot along with the group of migrant labourers from their village. One of the

¹ All translations from Hindi to English are done by the author.

migrant labourers Charandas, says, “Dead, not damned, if we stay. We have homes and farms in the village; we won’t starve to death... At least if we die in our village, our kin can light our pyre” (30:14-42). The migrant labourers are deprived of the basic necessities for survival in the city. Testing everyone and quarantine people with symptoms in Dharavi can curb the spread of the virus but cannot help them escape starvation.

Mehrunissa, or Meheru, is a sex worker in Kamathipura who lives a false identity as a nurse in Mumbai, lying to her mother. The whole Red Street is shut down with the introduction of lockdown, facing total loss of income, as their job is related to physical intimacy, which is hindered by social distancing. As they are ostracised by society and considered criminalised economies, governmental aid is far from reality. Gabru, a resident of Meheru’s village, exploits her physically and mentally by blackmailing her with the threat that he reveals her false identity to her mother. Going back home is an impossible decision for her as it may reveal her real identity to her mother and can also lead to starvation and death. The sex workers are approached by influential political party workers during the lockdown in ambulances, asking them to wear masks and to apply sanitiser on their body. Meheru comments on how these party workers use ambulances to indulge in sex with the prostitutes while the needy people are not getting the service and, in that manner, “we prostitutes are better than these party workers” (01:07:16-19). Meheru and other sex workers resort to phone sex as a way to sustain their lives.

Gendered Precarity

While migrant labourers are the most affected section during the pandemic lockdown, women migrant labourers faced extreme precarity and discrimination due to the intersection of class and gender. Many women faced gender-based discrimination at all stages of migration because it exposed them to serious risks of abuse and exploitation (UN Women). During the lockdown, female sex workers in India lost their livelihood, which plunged them and their families into starvation and extreme poverty. Sex work, by its nature, demands physical proximity, which has been restricted by the lockdown regime. They are usually from small towns who migrate to large cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata to find work in dance bars and brothels. Much of their earnings are sent to families for support. Due to the sudden lockdown, most of the sex workers lost their jobs and some were not able to pay rent and were forced to live on the streets. While the government provided relief measures to the disadvantaged sections of the society, the sex workers were excluded from social protection. They were left to seek help from various NGOs and civil society organisations. Migrating back to their villages was a difficult choice (Paul et al.). The gender intersectionality lens allows one to comprehend that the migrant women

experienced extreme risk and vulnerability, given their conditions before the pandemic (Arora and Majumder).

Phoolmathi and Mehrunissa are two migrant women characters who were highly vulnerable during the lockdown in the narrative *India Lockdown*. Phoolmathi is doubly marginalised due to her lower class and her gender. During the long walk, she was abused by an elder migrant labourer named Charandas. He invites her to have physical intimacy with him at night during their journey. When Madhav confronts his lecherous behaviour, he blames Phoolmathi for seducing him and trying to trap him in the racket run by them. Charandas' abuse is depicted through predatory behaviour, lecherous male gaze, inappropriate advances and utilising unprotected temporary shelters. Apart from Charandas, a few other male migrant labourers make lecherous statements. When a fellow migrant labourer questions them, they even threaten to kill Madhav for sexually abusing Phoolmathi. The entire group of migrant labourers deserted them; one of them even took money from Madhav's kurta while they were beating him. Phoolmathi and her family are so precarious that they were forced to eat rotten bananas and beg everyone to survive after starving for two days.

The need for money and survival makes the brothel runner Tipu and other sex workers start phone sex during the lockdown. They are even involved in physical acts of sex with influential political party leaders to earn money and prevent the residents of the brothel from dying due to starvation. They fear loss of customers over the contraction of the Covid-19 virus. The families of these female sex workers are also dependent on their income for their survival. Tipu plans to sell the young girl Titli, who has not even hit her puberty, to one of the party workers. Titli plans to escape from the brothel by stealing Meheru's purse, which is caught by her. Titli cries, "I don't want to be a prostitute like you" (01:31:41-42). Meheru associates herself with Titli and helps her to escape the tyranny of sex trafficking by sending Titli to her mother in her village in the truck where Gabru plans to take people. She helps her escape the intergenerational sufferings experienced by sex workers and their illegitimate children.

Meheru and her fellow sex workers had to innovate to survive the lockdown. It can be analysed through the lens of precarity as creative agency, rather than vulnerability or risk. Mendes and Lau (2019) observe, "This precariat reacts not with a desperate clutching at the assumed securities of social life, but counter intuitively, audaciously taking on more precarity, thus seizing the prerogative of choice rather than accepting relegation, insisting on the right to at least choose which precarities they will endure, if precarious their lives must be" (2). The lockdown does not merely affect the source of income of the sex workers, but it destroyed the conditions in which their labour is possible. Here creativity should not merely be understood as artistic creativity, but it is the ability to reorganise

everyday practices under the precarious conditions. The characters in this narrative are structurally precarious subjects, but they responded to the lockdown not by accepting passive suffering but through adaptation and improvisation. They did not wait for external aid; they reconfigured their labour to earn during the restrictions. For instance, Meheru and other sex workers utilised technology and adopted phone sex over the conventional one. Meheru experiments with digital performance or entertainment as a substitute, which becomes a mediated form of sexual labour. She even danced after her performance, enjoying herself. In the narrative, the sex workers do not search for another job but transform their form of labour through which their existing one is performed. Humour also acts as a form of precarious creativity as Mehrunissa and other women sex workers in the brothel share laughter, translating their precarious conditions into humorous interactions. This instance depicts how a precarious subject exercises their limited agency by creatively transforming and reorganising the very labour through which the precarity is produced and negotiated.

Ethics and Class

The ‘ethical turn’ in the humanities marks a major shift in both literary and cultural studies, where ethics became a central concern alongside textuality and historicity. This ethical turn in literary studies also reflects the literary turn in philosophy. There is an emerging trend for literary critics to embrace moral issues and defend them as a mode of criticism (Soeiro and Tavares). Amanda Anderson (2006) argues, “We must keep in mind that the question, How should I live? is the most basic one” (112), and this premise associates her with the ‘general turn to ethics’. Wolfgang Muller (2020) states that “what ethics in philosophy and ethics in literature share is their awareness of the problematic nature of ethical issues, which philosophy addresses by theoretical reflection and literature by artistic representation” (83). Literature is not only a medium that mirrors ethical issues but also a space where novel and divergent ethical possibilities emerge and challenge the dominant structure. Drawing on Adam Zachary Newton’s concept of ‘narrative ethics’ and Raymond Williams’ ‘the emergent’, Liang (2020) argues that the poets, storytellers, and film artists provide a space for “narrative ethics” to question and destabilise dominant ideologies as they encounter alternative values and relationships suppressed within the social order (8-9).

The conflict in the perception of the relationship between class and ethical behaviour has been a major debate in recent years. Trautmann et al. (2013), in their study of social class and (un)ethical behaviour, argued that ethical behaviour is determined by moral values, social orientation and the costs and benefits of taking various actions. Moreover, the factors that produce different conceptions of class, such as wealth and education, also create additional variation. Social class is by no means a

univariate construct. The relationship between class and ethical behaviour is never a simple pattern but a complex mosaic (487-488).

India Lockdown not only mediates the class experiences of the lockdown in India by the upper middle class and the vulnerable sections of society but also questions the network of ethical interdependence across class boundaries. It reinforces the idea that class and ethical behaviour are not only determined by moral values and understanding of what is ethical or their social interaction but also the causes and benefits of various actions, especially in a precarious state of diminishing wealth, unemployment, homelessness and starvation during the lockdown. The upper middle class had all the essential resources and facilities to survive but were denied travelling and stepping out of their house, which led to isolation, while the lower classes were deprived of basic resources to sustain their lives. Due to unemployment, migrant labourers were not able to buy essential resources or pay rent. This precarious condition forced them to embark on a long walk to their villages against the lockdown rules. The narrative complicates the class division of haves and have-nots through the characters of Mr Rao and the migrant workers Madhav and Phoolmathi. Mr Rao is a privileged but ethically responsible subject who helped his maid Phoolmathi by giving her extra money and also by helping one of the migrant families on his road trip to Hyderabad by providing food and money. However, he encounters Madhav and rejects his plea for help because he is terrified by his earlier experience of being surrounded by the group of migrant labourers while helping a migrant family. Panicked, Mr Rao refused to stop to help Madhav, which made him throw a stone at his car, which eventually led to Mr Rao's accident. Madhav then steals his food and money without helping the dying man. He emerges as a precarious subject whose helplessness and hunger produce ethically ambiguous actions. This does not indicate that Mr Rao, who belongs of upper middle class, is more ethical than the migrant labourer Madhav. Madhav heralded the long walk with a group of migrant labourers because he and his wife lost their jobs during the lockdown and were unable to pay rent and buy ration for their family. Later, they were excluded from the group by falsely accusing Phoolmathi of seducing a fellow migrant labourer, Charandas. Even his savings were stolen by other migrant labourers, and he was left in a condition where Madhav was forced to eat rotten bananas and even search for food in the garbage. Rao's aid was crucial for him to prevent him and his family from dying due to starvation.

The relation between class and ethical behaviour is further complicated through the character of Phoolmathi. She acts as a moral anchor in the narrative. She identifies Rao's lunch box and asks Madhav to tell the truth. She throws away the food and even vomits the food she had. Madhav's precarious conditions forced him to injure Mr Rao unintentionally to feed his family. He cries, "Phoolmathi, I'm not a bad person. It all happened by mistake" (01:43:18-28). The extremely vulnerable situation made Madhav choose survival over morality during the lockdown. Phoolmathi

refuses to accept the stolen food of her own employer and is determined to choose ethics over her survival. At last, Mr Rao is saved by the villagers, which again highlights that even though he is privileged due to his class, he is still dependent on other classes for his survival. Madhav and his family were able to travel by the truck using Rao's money. Similarly, Meheru, a sex worker, agrees to sell the child Titli in their brothel during the lockdown to have a source of income. But later, when Titli stole her money and tried to run away from the brothel, Meheru empathises with her situation and risks her life to send Titli to her mother in her village. Thus, the narrative highlights the complex relationship between social class and ethical behaviour under a "state of exception" like the lockdown (Agamben 1). It is far from a simple pattern of stating a particular class as (un)ethical, as the lockdown has exacerbated existing class inequalities and access to essential resources.

Narrative Form

The narrative *India Lockdown* employs a multi-strand, interconnected form, bringing together several parallel stories that gradually converge, which is a characteristic of hyperlink cinema. Hyperlink cinema is a film genre that creates an interacting network across space and time, which shows that people's lives can intersect and that pushes the boundaries of the medium to reflect contemporary life in the globalised era. It was coined by Alissa Quart in her review of the film *Happy Endings* (2005) and was later popularised by the film critic Roger Ebert. It is also called "fractal films" (Everett 2005) and "network narratives" (Quart 2005). Popular films like *Crash* and *Babel* belong to the genre of hyperlink cinema, which mirrors the modern post-industrial world where travel and communication technologies facilitate the creation of connections with complete strangers that can have a major impact on one's life. A hyperlink film typically features multiple characters whose distinct storylines collide and influence others, eventually with a prevailing common theme. This genre includes characters from different socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, races and ethnicities, whereby all of them are finally interconnected at the end of the story (Krems and Dunbar). Silvey (2009) states that these features of the genre show that the entire world is connected as a social network, whether one is conscious of it or not. This form ultimately reshapes our notions of human interconnection, social space and temporality in the contemporary era (Barnard).

India Lockdown follows several characters from different socioeconomic classes exploring their individual stories and their survival. These narrative strands later intersect, highlighting the interconnection of their lives. The narrative is multi-strand, where it focuses not on a single protagonist but on several characters that occupy different narrative strands. For instance, it has multiple protagonists - Rao, Madhav, Phoolmathi, Mehrunissa, Moon Alves, Dev and Palak. The narrative majorly focuses on four storylines: the senior citizen Rao and his fear of the virus and loneliness; the

long walk and survival of migrant labourers Madhav and Phoolmathi; the struggles of the sex worker Mehrunissa; and the isolation and personal connections of Dev, Palak and Moon Alves. These storylines are parallel as they unfold at the same temporal and social event, that is, the lockdown during the pandemic in India, but they characterise their different experiences. It depicts the lives of different characters just before the declaration of the lockdown and life during the lockdown phase.

The film employs an interconnected narrative form where each character intersects at some point in the film, and in certain instances, they are completely dependent on the other characters. For instance, Phoolmathi works as a maid in Mr Rao's house; Madhav encounters Rao at the end of the narrative; the girl child Titli of the brothel in Kamathipura, where Meheru works, meets Madhav and his family on their truck journey to their villages; and finally, Palak meets Mr Rao and his pet dog during her bike journey with Dev. More than their encounters, characters like Rao, Madhav and Phoolmathi are dependent on other characters for their survival. For instance, Phoolmathi being a maid at Mr Rao's house, was suspended due to the lockdown restrictions. Her life during the lockdown depended on the wage and the advance amount given by him. Similarly, Mr Rao was dependent on both Phoolmathi and his driver, who were from Dharavi. But the lockdown forced him to do the daily chores and driving alone, which made him vulnerable. Madhav steals food and money from Mr Rao after his accident to feed his family. At last, when the migrant family attempts to get into the truck to go back to their village using Rao's money, Titli shares her apple with Madhav's elder child, which satiated her hunger. The narrative form, thus, interconnects people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels to highlights how people from different strata of the society are interrelated and interdependent during the lockdown for their survival.

The hyperlink narrative mode enables mapping the experiences and survival strategies of different sections of society within a particular historical moment and revealing their material and ethical connections. The narrative form itself reproduces the network of existing class relations in India and exposes how the lockdown exacerbated the class dynamics.

Conclusion

This study explores the uneven social and economic consequences of the pandemic lockdown in India and how it exacerbated pre-existing inequalities through the narrative *India Lockdown* by placing its characters within the differentiated structures of class and gender. The upper middle class navigated the lockdown by negotiating the restrictions through privileged access to resources and wealth while also experiencing isolation, boredom, fear and anxiety. The deprived sections especially migrant labourers and sex workers, were denied basic resources even to sustain their lives. The characters of Phoolmathi and Mehrunissa demonstrate how class-based vulnerability is further intensified by gender. It

ultimately leads to social exclusion, gender discrimination and sexual abuse. At the same time, the lower classes are not depicted as passive victims; their efforts to negotiate lockdown reveal forms of agency and adaptation. The narrative shows precarity as a multi-dimensional condition in which social class and gender converge to produce and intensify different forms of vulnerability. It further exposes the complex relationship between class and ethical behaviour which problematises assigning (un)ethical conduct to a particular class through the characters of Rao, Madhav and Phoolmathi. Finally, the multi-strand, interconnected narrative form exposes how apparently separate stories intersect and how people of different classes are interdependent for their existence during the lockdown. Thus, *India Lockdown* juxtaposes different class-based experiences of lockdown to expose the unequal repercussions of the lockdown regime in India during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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