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What COVID-19 Tells Us about Spatial Injustices in India

Frédéric Landy | Camille Noûs

Courriel de contact : frederic.landy@ifpindia.org | contactjssj.org@gmail.com
Frédéric Landy, French Institute of Pondicherry/University Paris Nanterre-LAVUE
Camille NOÛS, Cogitamus laboratory

ABSTRACT

In India, the COVID-19 epidemic, or more precisely the lockdown, has highlighted the country's social and spatial inequalities. The disease has brutally made the "invisible" visible, by revealing the scope of these circulatory migrations which are at the root of India's economic growth. After recalling the facts of this lockdown, which was both impossible to implement and deadly in its consequences, we present the foundations at the origin of the tragedy, in particular the structure of internal migrations. The article then describes the closure of internal borders, through three burning issues: special migrant trains, the dilution of the labour laws, and internal food aid. We then test what we call the "DIDI scale", based on a Disparities<Inequality<Domination<Injustice gradient. Spatial injustice seems less pronounced than social injustice. We conclude by trying to explain why all these dramas has not lead to hunger riots, so few revolts and no revolution. Is the feeling of injustice so pronounced? The fact remains that increased visibility of migrants has allowed to move towards greater recognition, an essential component of justice (Fraser, 2008).

Keywords: India, justice, internal migrations, COVID-19, informal sector.

RÉSUMÉ

En Inde, la COVID-19, ou plus exactement le confinement, a mis en lumière les inégalités sociales et spatiales du pays. La maladie a brutalement rendu visibles des

« invisibles », en révélant l'importance de ces migrations circulatoires qui sont à la base de « l'émergence » de l'Inde. Après avoir rappelé les faits – ce confinement, tout à la fois impossible et mortel –, nous présentons les fondements à l'origine de la tragédie, en particulier la structure des migrations intérieures. L'article décrit ensuite la fermeture des frontières internes, à travers trois sujets brûlants : les trains spéciaux de migrants, la dilution du code du travail, et l'aide alimentaire. Nous testons alors ce que nous appelons « l'échelle DIDI », fondée sur un gradient Disparités<Inégalités<Domination<Injustice. Les injustices spatiales semblent moins prononcées que les injustices sociales. On termine en tentant d'expliquer pourquoi tous ces drames n'ont pas engendré d'émeutes de la faim, si peu de révoltes et aucune révolution. Le sentiment d'injustice est-il si prononcé ? Toujours est-il que la mise en visibilité a permis d'avancer vers davantage de *reconnaissance,* une composante essentielle de la justice (Fraser, 2008).

Mots-clés : Inde, justice, migrations internes, COVID-19, secteur informel.

Disclaimer: This text was finalised on 9 July 2020. The COVID-19 tragedy in India is therefore far from over. Not enough time has elapsed for there to be the hindsight necessary for truly scientific research. The authors live in India but have relied heavily on the English-speaking media for their information, given the inability of conducting field investigations[1].

The COVID-19 epidemic in India is having paradoxical effects. In epidemiological terms, the consequences are limited, at least at the time of writing this article: 21,129 deaths reported officially as of 9 July 2020, for a population approaching 1.4 billion. While this figure undoubtedly underestimates the reality, the fact remains that the epidemic has a low direct mortality rate. On the other hand, the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 are truly tragic: an economic catastrophe for poor populations without social security or state aid worthy of the name, migrants desperately trying to return home by embarking on an exodus on foot of sometimes several hundred kilometres, reminding Indians of the black and white images of the bloody migrations due to the Partition of 1947 at the time of the country's creation. COVID-19, or more precisely the lockdown, has highlighted India's social and spatial inequalities, inequalities that can often, as we shall see, be described as injustices. The disease has brutally made these "invisibles" visible, by revealing the scope of these circulatory migrations (Breman, 1985) which are at the root of India's economic "emergence" (Landy, Varrel, 2015). COVID-19 abruptly revealed the lives of all these shadowy workers, showing them to be either victims whose economic fragility was suddenly discovered or confirmed, or a threat, since trudging along roads without respecting "social distancing" they risked spreading the virus. A priori, the injustice against them thus appears to have two facets: they have suffered most from the lockdown; but even before the crisis, their invisibility prevented any real recognition of their rights.

After recalling the facts of this lockdown, which was both impossible to implement and deadly in its consequences, we will present the foundations at the

1. Some telephone surveys have taken place within the framework of research projects already underway at the French Institute of Pondicherry. Thanks to R. de Bercegol, V. Dupont, A. Goreau-Ponceaud, S. Moreau, and the anonymous reviewer for their reading.

origin of the tragedy, in particular the structure of internal migration in India, which according to the 2011 census had 79.5 million urban dwellers of rural origin. The third part of the article describes the closure of internal borders, through three burning issues: migrant trains, the dilution of labour laws, and internal food aid. We will then test what we call the "DIDI scale", based on a Disparities<Inequality<Domination<Injustice gradient. Spatial injustices seem to be less pronounced than social injustices. We will conclude by trying to explain why all this drama has not led to hunger riots, so few revolts and no revolution. Is the feeling of injustice so pronounced?

The world's greatest lockdown

Reducing space in order to gain time: in India, as in France and other countries, this is the logic of the lockdown, intended to allow the discovery of treatments and vaccines, and, in the shorter term, the flattening of the infection curve so that healthcare services are not overwhelmed. India has followed the same strategy as other countries that were deficient in tests, masks and hospital beds: an extremely strict lockdown on paper, but all the more brutal as it was only announced four hours before it came into force on 24 March 2020. The English term used expresses this forcefulness well: lockdown. If "confinement" forces us to move only within narrow limits (Latin *fines*), within imposed margins (de Bercegol *et al.*, 2020), clearly the lockdown double-locks us.

On March 25, it was chaos. For the working poor in the "informal sector", the concept of being locked-down was completely impractical. There are two reasons for this: the most basic being the limited space available in their dwellings or even in their neighbourhoods (Dewan Verma, 2002; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Khatua, 2020), which made it impossible to respect the requirement of "social distancing". How can one stay at home when it is one's housing that makes one sick?[2] Another, perhaps more

2. Phrase taken from C. Robert (Fondation Abbé Pierre) about precarious housing in France (*France Culture*, 25 May 2020).

important reason: many people in the city had only one job a day, hired in the early morning by intermediaries after they had stepped into a "job market" – hence they did have to get out. Yet the police forced them to stay put in their neighbourhoods or even in their homes, with physical barriers and strong measures, sometimes violent (beatings with batons) and often vexatious: deflating the tires of a rickshaw, breaking the headlights of vehicles, forcing offenders to do push-ups, etc.

However, going out was of little use to most workers in any case since the entire economy was at a standstill, except for a few "essential services". There was no need to go out for work; there were no jobs anymore. It was necessary, however, to go out to obtain food, thanks to the food distribution organised primarily by associations and citizens of good will. But the police went so far as to put some of them in prison because the distributions were allegedly causing crowds to congregate.

From then on, for many of the workers, getting out meant leaving on a journey on a completely different scale. Since no work or food could be found on the spot, the immigrants had to return home to the village or the small town where they came from. "If I must die, I might as well die with my people, with the people whose language I speak", or "I'd rather die of coronavirus in the village than of hunger here". These were words reported by the media. It was not an easy choice: many poor households stayed shut up in their homes for long weeks when they could, not only from fear of the disease but also because the journey had an economic and psychological cost. Leaving meant giving up pay arrears that the employer might owe. And some hoped that the lockdown would last only three weeks.

But in the end, it was a good part of the Indian population that set out on the road (Denis *et al.*, 2020). Paradoxically, the lockdown led to forced mobility for populations who would have preferred to stay in place, as they had been told to do. Bus stations, notably Anand Vihar on the outskirts of Delhi (3 km of queues on 28 March), were stormed by migrants hoping that buses would leave for their regions of origin. For want of anything better, even though the final destination could be more than 1000 km away, some set off on foot or on bicycle, or tried to stow away on one of the few lorries on the road. Physical exploits, such as the 15-year-old girl who

allegedly cycled 1200 km from Gurugram (a suburb of Delhi) to Bihar in nine days, with her injured father on the luggage rack (the father carrying the luggage), delighted some from the media. They reported that the Indian cycling federation wants to recruit the heroine. For the rest, the most horrific news stories are still being reported today: people dying of fatigue or dehydration a few kilometres from the goal, migrants run over by a freight train because they were sleeping on the tracks, overturning trucks overloaded with people, etc. The legend of the graph below (Fig. 1) is self-explanatory.[3] Up to April 6, the deaths from COVID-19 were fewer than the deaths from the lockdown.

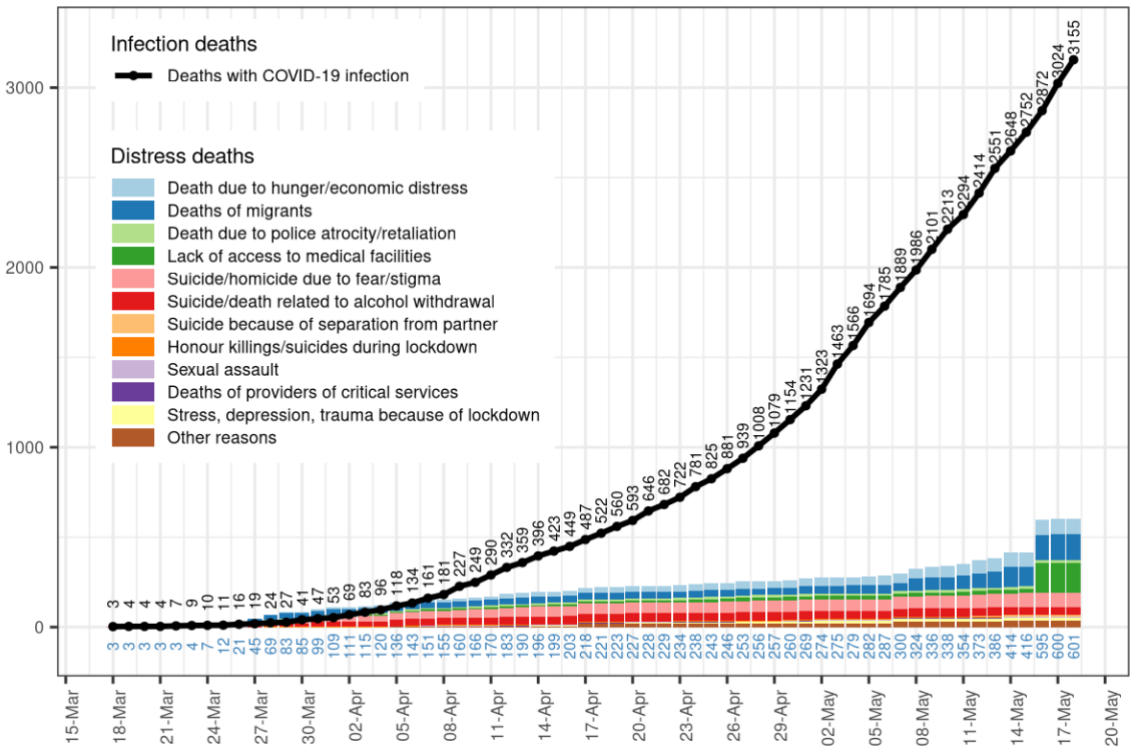

Figure 1: Direct and indirect mortality of COVID-19 in India (https://coronapolicyimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/distress-deanths.jpg).

Many migrants were intercepted and arrested by the police, then sent back home or locked up in makeshift shelters: schools, stadiums, shopping centres, theatres,

3. The mortality figures are obviously below reality, as the website explains.

wedding halls, etc. As of 5 April, 630,000 workers were in state-run shelters, and 450,000 in shelters run by associations, temples, etc. (Srivastava, 2020). As of 26 May, 2.3 million people were in quarantine. The conditions are often harsh and the difference between regulatory quarantine and arbitrary confinement is not always clear, but references to Foucault biopower are obvious in all cases.

Figure 2. Result of a *Google images* search with the keyword "quarantine stamp" (Pondicherry, 18 May 2020). The hands of those subject to home quarantine were stamped.

Who are the "migrants"?

While the term migrants, or migrant workers, is commonly used in the English-language media, in reality the term encompasses quite diverse categories, which may explain, if not the invisibility of these individuals until now, their difficulty in making their voices heard. It is not a strictly defined category. Very often reports are based on data from the general population census, overlooking the fact that sometimes it strongly overestimates the number of "migrants" by defining them as individuals who have left their places of birth, while sometimes it underestimates this number by omitting many seasonal workers. The 2011 Census counted 18 million immigrants who had been settled for less than a year, and 135 million for less than ten years. According to Imbert's (2020) estimates, 22 million people were therefore likely to leave. By 10 June, according to the federal government, 5.7 million "migrants" had already returned

to their place of origin. However, some of these returnees may not have been immigrants. This is because many of the workers in the informal sector or slum dwellers were born in the city itself. Some of the second or third generations may have kept links with their parents" village, and may have had the possibility of going there. Others did not even have the prospect of "returning".

So ultimately, these "migrants" represent a very heterogeneous group, differentiated by places of departure and arrival, duration of migration, type of employment, or migration channels often defined by caste. Only 20% of the people who changed residence between 2001-2011 corresponded to a movement from rural to urban areas: in India, the rural "exodus" in its strict sense makes up only a small part of migration. People rarely move to the cities *ad vitam aeternam*, with the result that in 2011 the urban population officially accounted for only 31% of the total population. Rather, it is a question of circulatory migration (Dupont, Landy [éd.], 2010), mobility based on more or less regular returns to the area of origin, and in any case on maintaining strong territorial ties with it. People leave in groups, mainly following previously established channels, not only to megacities but also to smaller towns: the silk and diamond industries in Surat are said to employ 800,000 workers from Odisha, the looms in Bhiwandi near Mumbai operate with 200,000 workers from Uttar Pradesh and 100,000 from Andhra Pradesh, etc.

People are also "migrating" to the countryside. Return migration has involved many workers employed in rural brick kilns in Tamil Nadu or coffee plantations in Kerala. In India, about 5% of households, or 10 million people, are estimated to migrate seasonally (Tumbe, 2015), mainly to work in construction, though a fifth of them do so for agriculture. These are all migration channels, often caste-based, with more or less drastic forms of indebtedness and wage advances, which have been revealed by the COVID-19 crisis as workers have tried to return to their places of origin. These are all movements towards areas that are relatively well marked out (thanks to the channels) but which often remain alien, if only because of the difference in language and its written script in many cases. Let us recall that India with its 28 federated states is a true sub-continent, comparable to Europe. Hence many flows are

based on regional development differentials that provide a non-negligible income to migrants in normal times, but which are proving to be sometimes death traps during the COVID-19 crisis since, as we shall see, the few social rights that exist in India apply above all to sedentary people, officially registered in a place. The closure of internal borders made it impossible for migrants to regain the benefits and rights of their full citizenship in their places of origin, without the "house arrest" of lockdown being paradoxically possible in the place of immigration.

Migration and epidemic

The areas of emigration are, unsurprisingly, the poor regions of India (downstream on the Ganges plain – eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar –, desert Rajasthan, mountainous Himalayas, tribal Odisha, etc.) (Fig. 3, Tumbe, 2015, Imbert, 2020). It should also be noted that relatively rich states such as Kerala can also be important emigration areas, but internationally to the Gulf countries. Incidentally, international migration has played a key role in the arrival of the epidemic, which again serves as an indicator. Kerala was the site of the first case of COVID-19 in India. Delhi was an early focus of infection due to a conference organized by an international Muslim organization (Tablighi Jamaat). The millions of Indians working in the Gulf countries can also be considered stranded migrants since they could not be quickly repatriated by air.

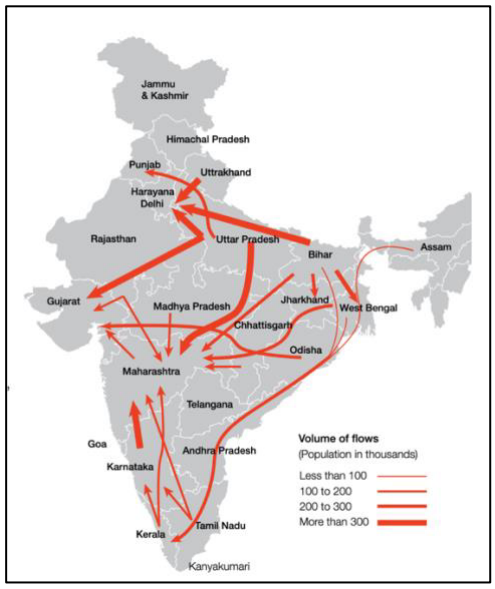

Figure 3. Internal migration flows in 2001. Source: WEF, Migration and Its Impact on Cities, 2017 (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/Migration_Impact_Cities_report_2017_low.pdf).

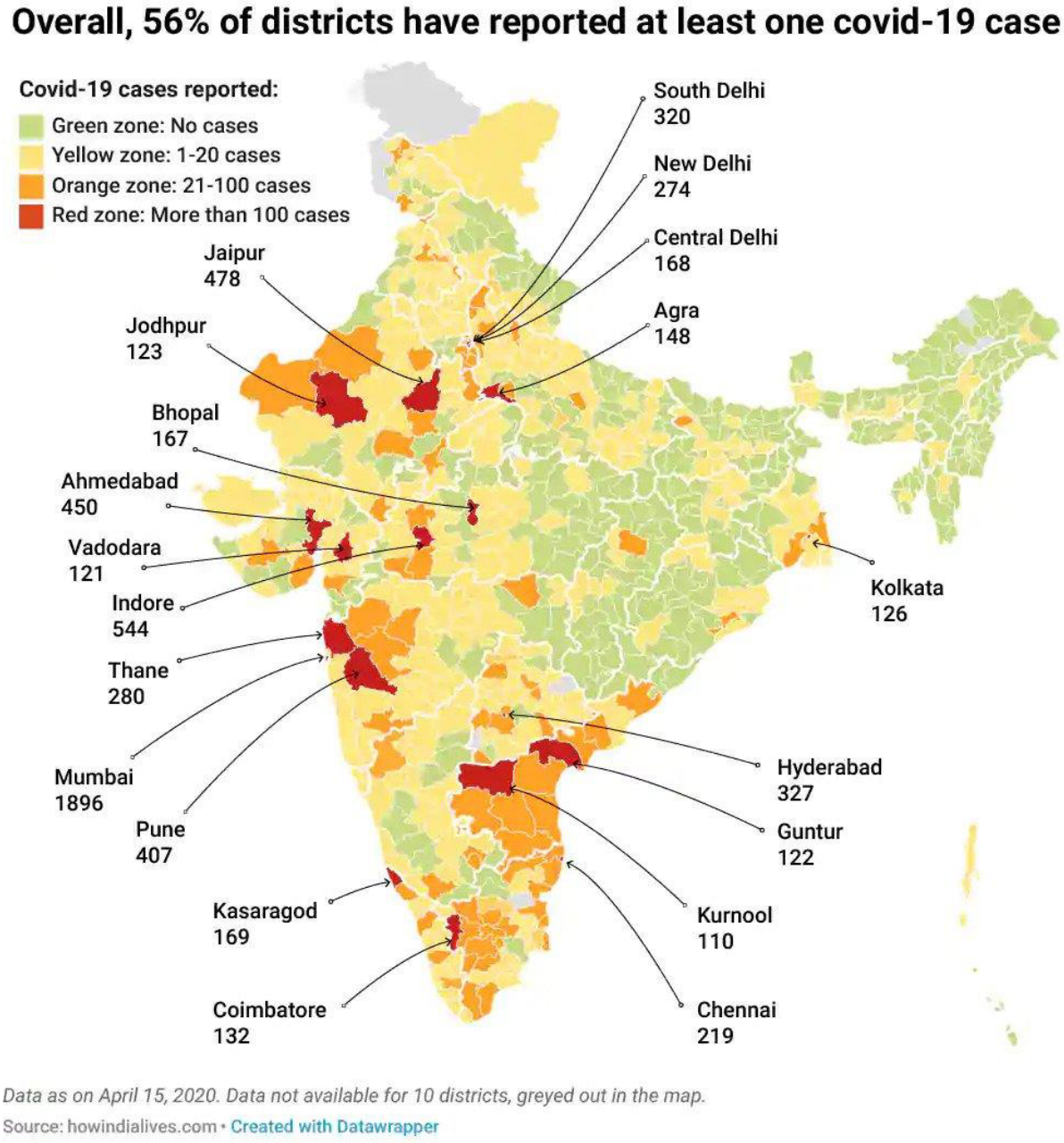

Figure 4: Map of COVID-19 cases as of mid-April 2020[4] (https://www.livemint.com/news/india/mapped-the-spread-of-coronavirus-across-india-s-districts-11587179250870.html).

The migration maps are undoubtedly linked to those of the epidemic, but the relationships are not easy to characterize rigorously, especially since correlation is not

4. https://covindia.com/ provides updated raw data per district.

causality. Figure 4 above shows that the most urbanized and attractive districts in terms of migration were affected early on. A report of 29 May noted that four urban areas with only 4.4% of India's population (Mumbai+Thane, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Delhi) accounted for more than 50% of cases and mortality. All these data are of highly questionable quality; it is clear that testing is more commonly conducted in urban and developed areas. But when the population is taken into account, the relative infection figures highlight the same areas: Delhi and Maharashtra have the highest percentages of cases, and the highest rates of test positivity.

So the implications for "migrants" are twofold:

- Even if precise data are not available, it is likely that they represent a population that is particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of their poverty which has been aggravated by lockdown, their precarious or insecure health situation, their type of habitat in the large cities that are particularly affected;

- Their departure to their regions of origin risks the carrying of the virus along the migration channels that are well-known to the authorities, hence the fears of the government in the areas concerned, and even of the villages of origin, which have sometimes rejected their own emigrants.

Lack of concern for migrants: trains, labour laws and food aid

In India, "social distancing" pre-existed COVID-19 (Kesavan, 2020). It is even a characteristic of the Brahmanic caste society based on an alleged scale of purity, which avoids contact between hierarchized communities or individuals. On another scale, this social distancing was aggravated by the lockdown, which revealed how these migrants – generally from lower castes or Muslim minorities – were forgotten and shunned by politicians (Fig. 5). We provide three illustrations: repatriation by train, dilution of labour laws, and food aid.

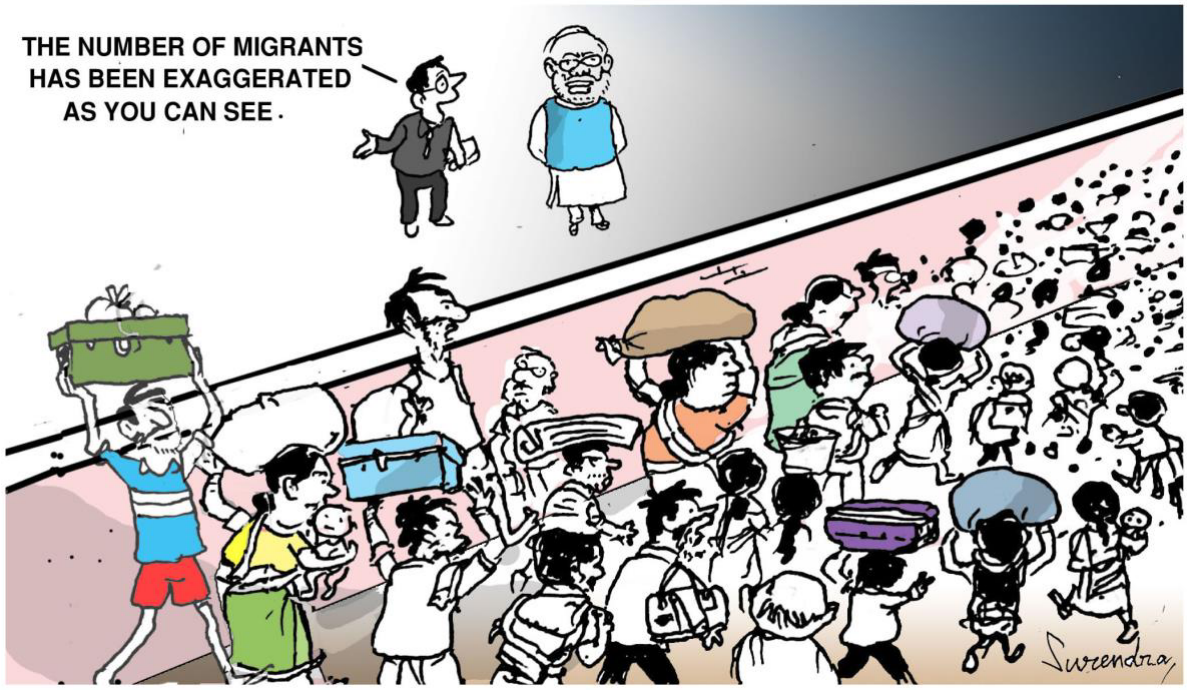

*Figure 5. Narendra Modi's blindness illustrated by cartoonist Surendra. The wall is an allusion to the one built to hide a slum during Donald Trump's visit to Ahmedabad on 24 February (*The Hindu*, 21 May 2020).*

The trains

While the movement of people irrespective of the means of transport was officially banned throughout India, this blanket injunction soon became untenable as migrants were still taking to the roads in large numbers. By the end of March, Uttar Pradesh was already chartering buses to bring back its migrants. The Narendra Modi government therefore decided to run special trains, not only for migrant workers (*Shramik Special* trains), but also for stranded students, tourists and pilgrims. By mid-May, they were transporting about 200,000 workers a day. As of 23 May, 48% of these 2600 special trains had been destined for Uttar Pradesh and 31% for Bihar, confirming that these are the two main labour-sender states.

The first issue to arise was who should pay for the train tickets of the migrants.: the central government, the state of departure, or the state of arrival? On 4 May, the main opposition party, Congress, announced that it would pay for the tickets. The central government, realising that it would be perceived as insensitive if it did not pay,

changed the rule: the national railways would pay 85% of the ticket, the states would pay the rest. However, at the end of May there were still many disputes between governments about this.

The second issue was that for a train to be run, the destination state had to give its approval, often through a complicated procedure. Even within states, the district borders were so tightly sealed that it was not much easier for buses to travel, even within a state. Tragedies occurred within the trains themselves: they sometimes took the wrong route, taking four days instead of two to cover certain distances, and there were deaths from hunger or thirst in the trains.

The third issue centred on the selection of passengers. After several days of chaos, the states gradually began to open Internet check-in sites, one for departures, one for arrivals. But migrants were asked to produce several documents, the sites often malfunctioned, were in a sometimes unknown language or script. In any case, many workers did not own smartphones.

The final issue was that states were not very eager to repatriate migrants by train or bus. As far as the states of arrival were concerned, they watched in horror as these masses arrived, potentially carrying the virus and certainly unemployed. On 17 May, Bihar announced that 26% of the returnees from Delhi had tested positive. Migrants are now returning from highly contaminated areas to resettle in areas with very poor healthcare facilities (Imbert, 2020). Some states increased the bureaucratic obstacles: Orissa and Bengal required Karnataka to send them passenger lists for approval, with migrants divided in each train coach according to their final destination district. As for the states from which migrants want to leave, they are reluctant to undertake the complex management required to make these transport mechanisms work and, above all, do not want to lose part of their workforce.

Dilution of labour laws

These migrants are indeed "workers". Their "indispensable" status was revealed when, on 5 May, the Karnataka government cancelled the departure of ten trains to Bihar following a meeting with a lobby of developers and builders. This lobby had

persuaded the Chief Minister of the necessity to keep sufficient manpower available on the spot for when economic activity would resume. These trains were finally able to leave a few days later, but the damage was done. Within a few hours, many states, especially those led by the BJP party in power in New Delhi, announced in quick succession the dilution of their labour laws, generally with the transition to a 12-hour day and a 72-hour week. The duration of the measure is supposed to be limited in time: between three months and three years, depending on the state. But it is clearly a race for the "lowest social bidder", i.e. a competition between states that can be interpreted in two non-contradictory ways: a fear of a worsening of the economic crisis due to a lack of workers, or a strategy to use the current tragedy to accelerate the liberalization of the economy and attract foreign investment that would like to leave China, in the perspective of a "shock doctrine", to use Naomi Klein's term. "It's now or never. We will never get this opportunity again", frankly wrote the CEO of NITI Ayog, the institution that replaced the Planning Commission in 2015. This coincided with the media coverage of new lock-ups of workers by their employers on construction sites, in factory barracks or at airports under construction. If a worker manages to sneak out, the police are waiting on the street to return him to his "prison".

Food aid

If migrant workers have wished to return home, it is not just to "go back home", "help the family that has no one to farm" or "because we could no longer pay the rent", it is because many migrants do not have access to the subsidized food of the Public Distribution System (PDS). In India, in theory, every household has a "ration card". But this card is attached to a single ration shop. If the migrant has left his family in the village, he has often abandoned the card, and therefore does not have access to grain (5 kg of rice or wheat, or more in some states), oil, sugar, etc., which are sold at very low prices in these special shops. The lifeline represented by the PDS, although it is far to be working efficiently (Landy *et al.*, 2014) became even more useful for the needy

when the central government announced the doubling of quotas on 26 March[5], with some states adding also their own subsidies. Belatedly, some states announced that even households not enrolled in the local PDS would be eligible for food aid. This was at a time when the food situation for immigrant families had become all the more precarious since the mid-day meal for schoolchildren, which is free in India, had stopped with the closure of schools.

Had the COVID-19 crisis come a little later, the situation could have been very different. Since 2019, India had been adopting, state after state, the One Nation One Card "portability" programme, which allows a cardholder to go to any ration shop to collect his or her food quota, regardless of where he or she is officially registered. But before the lockdown began, the system had only been adopted in a few states. In any case, its operation had already seemed very problematic, given the difficulty of planning stocks and demand for mobile populations. Furthermore, the scheme's reliance on technology required continuous electricity supply and Internet access, which was a problem in rural and some urban areas. Above all, the system is based on biometric authentication, which has temporarily been suspended in PDS shops for fear of contagion via fingerprint readers. The payment of cash aid into bank accounts is also being tried, but not all poor households have an account despite the recent policy on the matter, and disbursals are not always easy to manage.

It is therefore no surprise that the central government's MNREGA public works programme, which guarantees at least 100 days of work per rural family, seems set to reach new heights. At the end of May, 40 million people are reported to have applied, even though the lockdown had banned the functioning of MNREGA worksites for a whole month, until 20 April. Moreover, it is well-known that the State does not respect its own rule of a 100 working days, and often pays late. Finally, to benefit from the programme, one needs a job card, which many "returnees" do not have. MNREGA was

5. The measures announced for the next three months were the free distribution of 5 kg of wheat or rice in addition to the usual quotas and 1 kg of lentils per family with a card, Rs 1000 (€12.60) for the elderly, widows or disabled, Rs 1500 paid over three months for women with a Jan Dhan people bank account, a free cylinder of gas, and Rs 2000 for farmers.

designed to reduce the rural exodus and seasonal migration (Jacob, 2008), but will it be enough to feed returning migrants?

Disparity is not injustice: the DIDI scale

All these illustrations of the human drama seem to suggest that situations of injustice are the norm rather than the exception. They have to be analysed as rigorously as possible. Hindu society was described by Louis Dumont (1966) as *Homo hierarchicus*, but not all hierarchies are unjust. Yet, has not this crisis aggravated the inequities? We propose here a synthesis grid, the DIDI scale: Disparities<Inequalities<Domination<Injustice. Indeed, "injustices", whether social or spatial, should not be considered more or less synonymous with "inequalities". There is a gradient, which can correspond both to a process of analysis for a researcher, in successive stages, or to a causal process inscribed in time, for a society in which disparities end up generating injustice.

First step: the observation of simple *Disparities* between territories, individuals or social groups. These differences, often qualitative, can be ethically neutral: for example, wheat is cultivated in the north of India, but not in the south. This is a fact, which in itself is not a source of injustice. Equity does not necessarily mean equality, neither socially nor spatially (Harvey, 1996).

But these disparities can also be translated into *Inequalities*: we reach this second rung of the ladder with the inclusion of the domain of quantity, of measurement. Some rural areas have irrigation, which allows two crops per year or lucrative cash crops such as sugarcane. These rural areas will tend to attract, for a few months or several years, immigrants from rural areas that only have simple rainfed agriculture. In 2011, 43% of migration took place between rural areas. Now – the third rung of our ladder – in India these migrations are often structured according to relations of *Domination*, where power relations, exploitation, oppression, discrimination and violence play a role. Migrants commonly leave in groups, recruited by an intermediary (*contractor*) paid on commission, to whom the migrants are

indebted (Guérin, 2013; Picherit, 2012). The contractors may belong to the same village, and may be no less poor than others. But there exist also quasi-slavery relations, with bonded labour for debt, sometimes hereditary, as is often the case in brickworks or rice mills (Breman *et al.*, 2009), or for metro construction sites or factories in megacities, when the contractor controls even housing and food. This is a situation that can be described as *Injustice*, not only by the researcher but also, more often than not, by the victims of the system. This is the last rung on our ladder, that of ethics and values, social mobilization and politics. Laws do exist in India to regulate migration, but they are poorly enforced (e.g. Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008) (Sivaraman, 2020).

As can be seen, this DIDI grid distinguishes between domination and injustice. The first three levels, Disparities<Inequalities<Domination, are all based on observation. Injustice, on the other hand, is more in the domain of judgement, on the part of the external observer (e.g. the researcher) as well as on the part of the victim. Domination may not be unjust in its gentlest and most normalised form (as in the case of the teacher-student relationship). It may also give rise to different feelings of injustice depending on groups and individuals, or even to no feelings of injustice at all – which is perhaps the height of inequity when the dominated no longer even have the means to realise their oppression. Yet some people who are victims of injustice perceive their situation only in terms of inequality, and present it as such, at least in the public space, without verbalising it in terms of injustice (Ginisty, 2015). For Honneth (2006), the moral norms of the dominated classes are less abstract than those of the dominant classes and are more a matter of feelings than of great axiological principles, hence different expressions of justice. The fact that his theory has been called into question (Guibet Lafaye, 2012) does not prevent it from illustrating the difference in levels that we believe exist between these two rungs of the same ladder.

In the case of migrants, there is much criticism in the media and opposition parties, but they remain a minority and governments, both central and states', are not challenged enough. There have certainly been some riots, notably in Surat, several arrests, but no deaths. There is no spreading movement of migrants. Of course,

injustices do not require public and collective demonstrations of indignation or a powerful political debate to be considered real. Yet in the COVID-19 case it is important at the very least to distinguish between social and spatial injustices.

Limited spatial injustices

Reasoning in terms of spatial injustice has its pitfalls. Can one do so by opposing the city and the countryside, with the latter providing the battalions of labour exploitable by the city? One has to avoid the limitations of an outrageous "spatialism", of the old problem of urban bias that has already come in for criticism (Landy, 1999), not only because many poor slum dwellers are urban dwellers without rural origins, not only because there is a large amount of intra-rural migration, but also because levels of power and population management overlap with urban-rural differences. For example, large and very heterogeneous states contain both areas of high immigration and areas of high emigration (e.g. east-west flows in Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh).

Incidentally, while it is clear that India's official urbanization rate is underestimated (Denis, Marius, 2011), current events prove that emphasizing the country's rurality still makes sense. The return of migrants in 2020 show how many of them were only half-urban citizens, whose urban belonging was still threatened by a sword of Damocles: the virtual absence of social rights and compensation for short-time work. For reasons of security, they could not sever all links with their regions of origin. The old expression coined to evoke the neo-citizens of Africa, "one foot in, one foot out" (Chaléard, Dubresson, 1989) is still valid for India. It is a little paradoxical that while India has always avoided a true rural mass exodus, it is currently experiencing a very real urban exodus.

COVID-19 reminds us of this, too. Yes, the Indian village "is vanishing as an agricultural entity, or even as an imagined rural arcadia" (Gupta, 2007, p. 230). But it continues to exist in another form. Thanks to the returnees of lockdown, deserted Himalayan villages are even coming back to life! Would the return of migrants then be an opportunity to relaunch rural development policies by trying to stabilize some

of these populations? Some voices have been raised to propose a return to what in France would be called local territorial development policies: "Allow reverse migration to happen. This is the best thing to happen for India. Our communication and power infrastructure has improved. So, now is the best time to decongest our urban areas which are highly unplanned and decentralize our industrial clusters"[6].

This is reminiscent of the small- and medium-town development policies of the 1980s and 1990s, which were a relative failure. When compared with China or South-East Asia, India lacks the development of a rural non-farm economy, with a major reason being the low levels of training and schooling of village populations (in 2011, half of rural women were illiterate). Will the world "after COVID-19" be different from the one before, and if so, will it be the policies that will shape it, or the returnees? We can allow ourselves to be pessimistic. India now finds itself with a labour-wealthy countryside but without enough jobs, while the cities are already suffering from the opposite imbalance. And it's not just a question of employment. People also migrate as a family so that their children can get a better education in the city, or even to better care for their grandmother's illness. The decision to migrate is rarely an individual one; it's a collective choice at the level of the household, the joint family, the clan, the village. Even if the emigrant swears that he will no longer leave, he may be forced to do so by the community. The flows will soon be reversed again.

If the injustice is not between town and countryside, is it more clearly between Indian states, especially at the expense of emigration states? Clearly not, since immigration states, for their part, will find themselves in the grip of a labour shortage. By definition, an injustice exists only in comparison with other unduly favoured groups or areas. At present, however, *all* states seem to be victims. The senders of emigrants have no interest in receiving them back; the returnees will be unemployed, demand food assistance, will stop being a source of remittances, and will carry back the COVID-19 disease. In addition, the cost of trains has sometimes to be paid. States that are receivers of migrants, for their part, are no more enthusiastic about encouraging these returning flows. While it certainly relieves them of the burden of setting up quarantine

6. R. Sarangan (https://www.linkedin.com/feed/news/talking-about-the-migrant-crisis-4839532/).

camps and providing food assistance, it deprives them of essential manpower when the economy picks up again. What a headache for states that are both!

In fact, it seems that spatial injustices are on a much finer scale: in the city, depending on whether or not one lives in a "containment zone" under strict police surveillance, near a water point or a green space, etc. The stigma of living in a slum (Saglio, Landy [éd.], 2013) is very much alive when employers require their domestic servants to wash in the sanitary facilities meant for the building's guards before coming up to their apartment even though, some servants protest, that it is these employers who have brought the virus through their air travel.

Ultimately, space is certainly a major parameter in the tragedy. How does one travel hundreds of kilometres on foot, by bicycle, even by wheelbarrow. For migrants, originating from regions where a different language is spoken is an additional difficulty when it comes to returning home or negotiating with the police. At a deeper level, the non-recognition by the State of this social group, its "invisibilisation", has been generated through its attachment to territorialised public policies. Not only can migrants no longer cross district and state borders, they cannot even enjoy their rights because they are not de jure attached to a space, even though the lockdown blocks them there de facto. This is the case with food aid, as we have seen, but it is also the case with the affirmative action policy that reserves jobs in the administration for local lower castes. We are thus in a case of injustice caused by what Nancy Fraser (2008) calls "misframing"; migrants suffer from political and administrative divisions of space which do not correspond to their space of circulation. By definition, they are caught between two places: they therefore tend to fall outside the ambit of the highly territorialized state rationales. And given this strong spatialization of social rights, they were already marginalized even before COVID-19.

Table 1. The COVID-19 tragedy, a source of injustice: a DIDI analysis[7].

	Disparities	**Inequalities**	**Domination**	**Injustice**
		Spatial injustice		
States vs. states	GDP/capita differences of 1x to 4x or 5x between Bihar and Karnataka or Haryana.	Fiscal resources. Wages from 1x to 3x for workers.	Reciprocal dependency: remittances vs. labour	Reciprocal accusations of unwillingness of the receiving or sending states to organise trains and buses, and manage the burden of migrants.
Centre vs. states	Differing levels.	Constitutional prerogatives of the Centre.	Centre > States (allocations, tax redistribution).	Fiscal and budgetary precariousness denounced by the states in opposition. The centre should not interfere in intra-state flows.
Urban vs. rural areas	Health and education infrastructure in cities.	Contrasted poverty rates. Triple wages in cities.	Reciprocal dependency: remittances vs. labour.	Low: disappearance of the "villagist" narrative (Landy, 1993) since the 2000s.
		Social injustice		
Social groups	India "iceberg country" (10% of households have a private car).	Increasing Gini coefficient. Slums. Fear of the virus carried by the poor because of their poor access to health care.	Informal sector without social rights. Power of employers.	"Modi-ji has forgotten us", say some migrants. Speech by Rahul Gandhi, 11 May.
		Socio-spatial injustice		
Migrants	Differences in jobs, places of origin and work, languages, etc.	Low-skilled jobs risk exclusion (eviction from housing and forced return).	Broker-arranged migration (debt). Returnees sent back from the	Official territoriality of rights vs. circulation of migrants = "misframing" (N. Fraser)

7. The metaphor of the iceberg comes from the fact that only 10% of its volume of ice is seen above the waterline. India's emergence also remains partial, and in similar proportions (Landy, Varrel, 2015).

			village by higher castes/classes.	

Considerable social injustices, but relatively little denounced as such

Workers who have managed to return to their families remain an available labour pool. The others, left behind during lockdown, are trapped, immobilized, whether at the state, city, slum or construction site level. These populations, whose "right to the city" was already so little respected (Zérah *et al.*, 2014), are being denied the right to return to their places of origin, the "right to the village" (Landy, Moreau, 2015).

More generally, the lockdown may appear to be a case where the upper classes protect themselves from a disease by making the poorest pay the price (Noûs, 2020). On 21 May, for example, 142 people officially died of COVID-19 in India; before the coronavirus, tuberculosis alone killed around 1000 people every day. If migrants are allowed to return, it is less in the name of democracy or charity than because one is afraid that their presence in the cities will accelerate contamination. Because of the lockdown, the poor die more from hunger or other diseases than before, but for what and for whom? So that the rich don't die of the coronavirus, as Krithika Srinivasan writes in *The Hindu* (18 April 2020): "A lockdown adversely affects the vast majority of people for whom this novel coronavirus is a smaller risk when compared to more serious and immediate issues such as hunger, domestic violence or eviction". But "the middle and upper classes are not accustomed to the risk of catching and dying of communicable diseases", while they "expect the poor to shoulder the burden of measures that don't really protect them, and worse, can actively harm them". The middle and upper classes could stay in their houses, not the poor – who may have built them.

For Young (1990, p. 58), injustice has "five faces", with the first three being linked to the "social division of labour": (capitalist) exploitation; marginalization (which can lead to exclusion); lack of power (and therefore authority or esteem); cultural imperialism (with the domination of some communities over others); and violence,

primarily physical. It is clear from this discussion how the situation of migrants cuts across all these five forms. Why then, in spite of their personal tragedies, in spite of the obvious contempt shown to them by the central and most state governments, why were there only a few demonstrations by workers overwhelmed by expectation, fear and hunger, and a limited number of riots, which were suppressed by the police with wooden batons and tear gas, with no need to fire shots? If not a revolution, we could have expected hunger riots, or a movement on a scale comparable to the yellow jackets in France. Could it be because the very feeling of injustice remained limited? In our DIDI scale, hasn't the final "I" remained the preserve of certain journalists and observers, more than of the people concerned?

In the world of social science researchers, the denunciation of injustice is of course unanimous. Some press reports make them think of pages by Geremek or Foucault on the Europe of the *Ancien Régime* and its poor, except that here, the "great confinement" does not aim to put proletarians immediately to work in workhouses or reform centres. It is instead a matter of preserving them as productive forces, keeping them if possible just above what economists call the reproduction line. Indian activists also use the term injustice. Many petitions are circulating (e.g., http://chng.it/Nk46qJKLb4 to demand the return in decent conditions of the "1.2 million migrants" wishing to leave Mumbai).

But what about the victims? We have not been able to undertake any personal research, but it is clear that the narratives, reported by the media, imbued with a sense of injustice ("Modi has forgotten us, we exist no more for him than insects, only the rich can afford to lockdown", etc.), had to be complemented by others, more cautious. See the Delhi dwellers of Hanuman Mandir slum, surveyed by de Bercegol *et al.* (2020), who are still in a terrible situation. The fear of disease was indeed in everyone's mind, and "Modi-ji", for many, had been right to implement the lockdown. The virus is deadly, people know it; they probably even overestimate its lethality. "This is a dangerous disease and the government is doing its best but the poor people are suffering" (April 2020). Criticism was measured at the time. The landlord was accused

of being inflexible over the rent, the employer of not paying salaries, but this did not necessarily go as far as denouncing the government.

Things changed after successive extensions of the lockdown. In a Sri Lankan refugee camp in Tamil Nadu (de Bercegol *et al.*, 2020), no one supports the government's policy any more, especially since no one has fallen ill. The dwellers in Hanuman Mandir slum complain about the government (although many others are still afraid of the disease and are calling for a return to strict lockdown as COVID-19 cases continue to increase). Similar are the narratives of these migrants who had been looking for a bus for days to leave Delhi: "The city was pitiless towards us. We gave it our sweat and blood. It had nothing to give us the day we became useless for it". It is a question of dignity: "For people like me, there is only the free grains and *chana* [chickpea]. But do I have no other need than grains? Does the government think we are cattle who need nothing more than feed?"[8]

But there can be no doubt that large-scale collective revolts will not happen. There are many reasons for this.

1. *Populism* has the fearsome characteristic that it is strengthened by criticism of it, and that it can free itself from any objective assessment of the actions carried out in its name. Despite his failures, Modi remains relatively popular, even charismatic, in many circles. In these post-truth times, his re-election strategy was able to bear fruit in the last general elections, in 2019, based on fear (of Pakistan and of Muslims designated as scapegoats) and no longer, as in 2014, on hope (of economic growth and an end to corruption) (Jaffrelot, Martelli, 2020). The epidemic has reinforced this communalist trend of Hindu nationalism. An example is the international conference of the Tablighi Jamaat, which was highlighted by some media and the government as a COVID-19 outbreak hotspot. Many Muslims were then ostracized, even in remote villages, because they were accused of being contagious. Extremist social networks spread the rumour that a "corona-jihad" was being fomented. Fake videos

8. Other examples are in https://thewire.in/rights/ground-report-why-migrants-think-theyre-being-held-captive-at-delhi-shelter-homes

circulated showing bearded men blowing their noses on banknotes or spitting on vegetables meant for sale to innocent Hindus.

2. *India is not the country of revolutions.* Since Independence in 1947, the population has undergone some "development", but social gaps have widened – and the rural poverty rate has even increased recently: 30% in 2017-18. Why is it that after several years of "jobless growth", India has not experienced more revolts? They do exist, with the Maoist (Naxalite) guerrillas in central India, but they remain spatially limited. Is it necessary to blame the social hierarchy internalized in people's minds from childhood, based on class as well as caste? Admittedly, democratic discourse is very present in Indian society and education. Furthermore, a policy of positive discrimination exists in favour of the lower castes and tribes. However, all this is contradicted by the daily practices of the majority, whose psyche ignores more dominant paradigms elsewhere, such as equality (in France), equal opportunities (in the United States) or the possibility of getting rich (as in China). It seems that many returning emigrants who were denied access to their villages or neighbourhoods of origin, officially for health reasons, were in fact low caste, or religious minorities. This idea of domination is internalized on both sides, by the dominated as well as the dominating (Chandhoke, 2012). Think of Modi's speeches during the lockdown: On 29 March, he apologised "from the core of his heart" for the harshness of his measures for "the people" but without putting anything in place to compensate them other than evoking his "sympathy for the poor", in a very paternalistic vision where what had been decided was for the good of all. On 25 March, he called on each citizen to help nine poor families during the initial 21 days of the lockdown (comparing the fight against COVID-19 to the mythical battle of *Mahabharata* which lasted 18 days). So it is not for the state to intervene; it is for the wealthy (the only real "citizens") to be charitable and philanthropic because of their class superiority.
3. When you possess *no economic or cultural capital*, you know that by revolting, you risk losing what little you have, without being sure what you could gain

from it. We often prefer to bow our heads – or, in these times of crisis, to think of saving our own skin first. It is a similar logic that pushes one to vote for a politician who is known to be corrupt. Thanks to his/her corruption, the elected representative will have a lot of money to redistribute to his supporters. Hence the maintenance of populism and patron-client relationships (Harriss-White, 2003; Landy *et al.*, 2013). In India, the poorer you are, the more you vote:[9] this entrenchment of electoral democracy is undoubtedly a paradoxical source of the lack of social democracy.

4. *Migrants cannot form a single or unified social group* because of their economic heterogeneity (what do call-centre workers and sugarcane cutters have in common?) and cultural differences (segmentation of castes, but also and above all of languages and regions of origin). This atomization makes it difficult to apply theories, such as that of Marion Young, that accord a large place to communities. Claims in terms of justice are difficult, especially since, as we have seen, rights are linked to spatial allocations. To which government or administration do you complain when you are a migrant?
5. In fact, one last reason for the relative calm of migrants *is the very fact that they are migrants*. Their place of work is only part of their "circulatory territory" (Tarrius, 1993). A migrant's space of origin, often rural, includes an entire family and often other activities practised upon returning, usually concerning agriculture. The landholding is very small (the average size of farms in India is only one hectare), often non-irrigated, but it is enough to represent a haven, which is psychologically reassuring even though it may not be so economically. In the village, they don't let you starve to death. What was written three decades ago has certainly lost its relevance (Landy, 1993): nowadays, the "city lights" attract most rural people, who have largely entered the consumer society – in their dreams if not in reality. But their strategy remains to straddle two worlds – city and countryside, workplace and place of origin – by leveraging their

9. But it is often difficult for emigrants to vote because of the lack of a proxy system (https://thewire.in/rights/postal-ballot-votes-migrant-workers).

complementarities. Even if one has nothing to cultivate, the village represents security, a refuge. It also remains a place replete with values: there are the roots of the family, of the clan, the individual and collective memories.

Conclusion

> "For any young person growing up in middle-class homes, the poor are visible at every turn, but only in their instrumentality as people who exist to service our every need [...] Governments and business did not help them because they did not care, and because they did not want them to move. They did not see them as human beings in their fullness of the agency and humanity, but only as a factor of production, labour which should be obediently available on call whenever they were able to restart their enterprises."
>
> Harsh Mander, "A Moment for Civilisational Introspection", The Hindu, 30 May 2020

It was only on 9 June that the Supreme Court announced that migrants could not be prosecuted if they had not respected the lockdown by moving on the roads (they theoretically risked a year in prison). It also urged states to send the stranded migrants home within 15 days. The world's largest lockdown has shown that India is not "the world's largest democracy". All the inequalities that existed before the crisis led to terrible injustices, which were only exacerbated by the lockdown. The tragedy highlighted how the combination of migration + poverty was an essential component of India's "emergence". The low wages of workers, especially migrants, and their often miserable living conditions are the basis of much of India's competitiveness. Yet they remain poor, or at least vulnerable. The failure to facilitate their return or to allow them to continue migrating in reasonable conditions is an injustice, but it is also a strategic error on the part of governments and employers. Ensuring a minimum income, with guaranteed food and shelter, would have allowed migrants to stay and, in addition,

not jeopardized future economic recovery by their absence. When the lockdown was announced, they could also have been given a week to return home. Given that at the time there were only a few hundred cases throughout India, this would have prevented the current contamination by returning migrants to rural areas. While the government's lack of preparation (as in the demonetization crisis of 2016) has been cruelly felt, at the structural level, one should instead blame the lack of preparation for the crisis on the absence of mechanisms such as short-time working, the importance of the informal sector and subcontracting, the weakness of public health policies and facilities, and more generally the lack of social democracy (Jaffrelot [éd.], 2019).

Our DIDI scale has two uses. As an analytical grid for the researcher, it shows the limits of collective claims in terms of social or spatial justice, limits due both to the status itself of the migrant and to Indian society and its representations. As a model of a process over a period of time, in a society where disparities may eventually lead to injustice, the grid emphasizes that Stage 4 may not materialize into large-scale revolts. Is it because the coronavirus has only just struck, and mobilizations will happen in the future? Or is it related to structural reasons linked to Indian society? The question of temporality remains open: does the exceptional crisis situation act as an accelerator or a brake? Both are possible. But it is certain that the social group of migrants has appeared on the political scene and emerged from invisibility "thanks" to the epidemic. Media coverage and a certain collective emotion have enabled a first step in the fight against these injustices: making this particular invisible visible. According to Fraser (2008), this visibility itself makes it possible to move towards greater *recognition*, a component of justice that is as important as redistribution, since it ensures a social status of equal dignity and equal participation.

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spatiales en Inde »], *Justice spatiale/Spatial Justice*, 15, September 2020 (http://www.jssj.org).

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