The empathy to learn and fix

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Using the context of the coronavirus related lockdown, we suggest that empathy is crucial for the state to design policies and systems that work for the poor, and for the members of society to understand one another. Building an empathetic state and society requires a communication infrastructure that supports feedback processes and ensures fair representation of diverse viewpoints. The crisis during the lockdown ushered the provisioning of such an infrastructure in a temporary and rudimentary form, and which we argue must now be strengthened and institutionalized going forward. Our discussion relies on reports and testimonies of hundreds of users of the Mobile Vaani platform, a voice-based participatory media service running in several districts in rural North India and urban industrial locations. All links in the article are clickable voice reports from Mobile Vaani.

Fault-lines exposed

Our governance systems to engage with the poor were never perfect to begin with, and the coronavirus crisis has only brought the stark reality of these fault-lines into public gaze.

Let us begin with the villages of India.

Ration cards lists were systematically built based on the 2011 SECC, and leaving aside the question of how BPL/APL and other categories are determined, the glaring issue is that the socio-economic status of a household is never static and these lists need to be constantly updated. Families move out of poverty, many families fall back into poverty, new households emerge when youngsters get married and start their own family [3]. However the mechanisms to revise the PDS lists are much broken. Many people reported that they had put in applications for ration cards as far back as 2017 but have not heard back as yet. Families who possess ration cards but no longer need the provisions, continue to hold on to them. The Gram Panchayats are sanctioned with the rights to conduct surveys and provide revised lists, but this hardly gets done unless vehemently demanded by the people. No wonder many families were left out during the lockdown from being able to avail the ration related relief measures announced by the government. Our surveys conducted two weeks into the lockdown, reported only 6% access to PDS in Bihar. Jharkhand did much better at 27%, and Madhya Pradesh at 23% [1].

The problems have not just been with the enrolment for PDS. Power differentials between the ration shop dealers and beneficiaries have continued to persist. Dealers have continued to misguide people, as reported by many. Several people reported having to chase the dealers again and again to get their entitlements, and other cases of high-handedness, that even the authorities were forced to crack down on these dealers. States like Chattisgarh which brought ration shops under the administration of the Gram Panchayat or SHG members, have done much better in avoiding such issues [4].

Thankfully Aadhaar based online authentication of biometrics was suspended in some states during the lockdown period, though not all, to avoid technology-related unfair denial of

benefits [5]. However other related issues with the use of Aadhaar in welfare schemes continued to surface. Not being able to correct mistakes, like in the spelling of names and addresses, during the hurriedly executed Aadhaar enrollment process, and the mandatory use of Aadhaar for welfare schemes, has always meant that people have had to engage with agents and social workers to get these problems fixed, spending their money or time or both for correct enrollment which should rather have been provided to them at no cost [6]. These issues were reported at a large scale with cash transfers meant to provide immediate relief. Many people had their bank accounts deactivated when KYC failed due to incorrect Aadhaar seeding, as a result of which they stopped getting their pension DBTs. The same errors surfaced with the PM-KISAN scheme, where despite putting in applications many farmers have not received even a single transfer. Fixing bank account and Aadhaar linkages requires trips to the bank and filling out of forms, which is clearly unrealistic to expect during the lockdown. Jan Dhan accounts brought yet another dimension, where many women reported not having a Jan Dhan account, or what is more likely, that they do not know that they have a Jan Dhan account in the first place since these were opened up in a hurry and reportedly using secondary data sources about individuals without their knowledge. Our surveys reported only 40% people in Bihar having received such cash transfers, until more than two weeks into the lockdown. Statistics for Jharkhand were lower at 19%, and MP at 34%.

For those who have accounts and expected to receive the cash transfers, many were confused about the process – Jan Dhan transfers were meant to be automatic, the Ujjwala gas subsidy was meant as a reimbursement, and some chief minister top-up schemes announced by several states required a registration process – but hardly any information was provided about the process for these cash transfers to work. To make it worse, rumours started doing the rounds that if the transferred cash wasn't withdrawn quickly, then the government would take it back. All this, and the urgent need for cash in the absence of other income having dried up, led to significant overcrowding at the banks. Repeated trips were required when the Internet at the bank branches would not work, or similarly at the rural CSPs (Customer Service Points), or if the banks were far and ended up being closed when people arrived, causing much hardship. The problems with such dreams of flawless digital operations have been written widely [7], but these problems were never addressed and led to significant hardship during these times of crisis when the infrastructure was much needed.

Similar fault-lines have always existed even in the cities in the lives of workers, and these too cracked wide open during the lockdown.

Very few workers are documented. Those in industrial work should all have PF accounts and ESI health coverage, but our surveys among industrial workers showed that only 50% workers are actually registered under PF [2]. Jan Sahas reported an even lower number among construction workers who are registered under BoCW [8]. Many of these workers are also inter-state migrants which makes them especially vulnerable to the power of contractors who place them in different jobs, and do not easily provide them with proof of work which is needed to register the workers under relevant welfare boards. Most however do not even know about these boards. Naturally therefore when the lockdown happened, many state governments, both at the destination and the source, announced relief measures through cash transfers for the workers, but they were clueless about how to identify the workers. Apps were released, but not everybody has a smartphone, and not everybody is able to provide the right documentation, which led to many unfulfilled requests. Many workers do not even have a bank account in their own name, and when they provided bank accounts of their family members their registration was rejected and they were denied a second chance.

Ration distribution has been even harder because the workers do not have ration cards for their places of work, and therefore food kits and cooked meals are their best bet. However, our platforms have been flooded with cries for help from industrial workers in Gurgaon, Tirupur, Bangalore, Mumbai, Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and other places, who had not received any assistance from the state governments and were hungry. Widespread discrimination was also seen with the persistence of hunger hotspots in areas where migrant workers live but not in areas of resident workers, or migrant workers from one state getting rations in precedence over migrants from other states. Harassment at the hands of landlords who are demanding rent despite clear government instructions to the contrary, and running out of cash to procure medicines or other essentials, has hurt the dignity of people who have otherwise committed themselves to hard work to earn their own living.

The treatment of workers at the hands of their employers was also not surprising. 60% workers reported having been laid off by their employers, of those 57% reported not having received their wages. Daily wage workers are of course even harder hit, if they don't earn they can't eat, has been their refrain. When labour laws have been weak to begin with in holding employers to account [9], the stoppage of work has only demonstrated their shirking of responsibility even further. All arguments considered, that employers cannot pay unless they sell, and they can't sell unless somebody buys, does not deserve a response by industry associations with requests to the government to delay minimum wage revisions [10]. Rather had their intentions genuinely been pro-worker they would have raised demands for the government to help their workers and they would have stepped up to enumerate their own workers quickly so that cash and other relief measures could be mobilized for them. Employers however on the contrary have an incentive to underreport their workers to save on worker entitlements which they otherwise need to provide.

In rural and urban areas alike, the other constituency that has been badly hit economically are street vendors and small shop owners, like tailors, carpenters, wall painters, chat walas, kabadi walas, vegetable vendors, auto drivers, stationary shopkeepers, and others, who have proudly run their own businesses but in these crisis times they have had no social security to fall back on because they have not been registered under any welfare boards. As the lockdown eases, procedures for them to collect a pass for mobility are also unclear, and has led to harassment at the hands of the police.

This leads to the question, that these fault-lines were always known, but why weren't they ever fixed, to cause such hardship in people's lives during the lockdown?

It has much to do with empathy. Only a system which is empathetic to hearing voices of hardship, will make an effort to change itself to fix these problems. A system which shuts itself from these voices, will only dismiss them arrogantly or make a semblance of responding as tokenism, while the problems will continue to fester.

Evidence of (the lack of) empathy

Empathy has always been rare in the Indian state's engagement with the poor.

The Indian state chose to deploy the giant Aadhaar infrastructure as a means for access control for PDS, pointing towards an underlying assumption that beneficiaries will cheat and therefore they need to be controlled. This however has only led to disempowerment of the

people – at the hands of technology they do not understand, at the hands of officials who do not care to listen to them, and at the hands of ration shop dealers who will see their own gain at the cost of the weak. A solution however that provided them with information, like letting them know when stocks have been delivered to their ration shops [11], or putting the control of disbursement in the hands of accountable members from the community (eg. elected local bodies) [4], or even just making it harder for ration shop dealers to deny sales like by asking them to mandatorily record a voice testimony in the case of technology failure with authentication, will lead to greater empowerment of the people [12].

Similarly, labour laws that make it harder for workers and worker unions to engage in collective bargaining, and laws that allow companies to hire and fire at will but do not strengthen the enforcement of worker rights and entitlements, will only disempower the workers further [13]. Rather, technology that helps document the workers easily will go a long way in providing them with social security, the means of grievance redressal when their rights are violated, and empower them to demand their rights. In fact, workers returning to work should be given risk-compensatory wages and guaranteed health insurance, especially in sectors where wearing masks and social distancing is hard to follow, and funded through taxes on wealthy individuals [1].

Any technology needs to be designed appropriately though, keeping the least-powerful stakeholder in mind, ie. the poor [14]. Technologies like Aadhaar were designed for the state to make it easier for the state to enumerate people and control access to welfare and other provisions, ensure tax compliance, etc, but had it been designed sensitive to the context of the poor and their rights then it would have taken a very different form. It would not have dismissed false negatives of unfair denial of welfare benefits as a minor statistical error [5]. It would not have followed a hands-off approach of only strengthening the Aadhaar security infrastructure while letting the service providers using Aadhaar to follow non-existent security protocols [15]. It would have been the first institution to call out for stronger data and privacy laws. And it would not have assumed that biometrics and the Internet will work for everybody, it would have conducted rigorous pilots in diverse conditions before slapping a mandatory infrastructure on people about whom clearly they did not know much.

Many technology solutions even in the workers context have similarly been conceptualized from the employer's standpoint - how to take attendance and track worker credibility [16], or how to document the skills of workers [17] – but had the workers been kept at the centre then very different solutions would have emerged, which would rather track whether the workers got paid for the work they did, that they got paid fairly, they got work in line with their skills, they were registered under relevant social security schemes, and that any issues they faced were promptly redressed.

Empathy is therefore at the heart of designing services or technologies – is anybody listening to the poor, listening to the weak, and designing for them?

Clearly not.

In fact, even during the extreme time of this crisis, empathy has been lacking. Instead of reverting to a door-to-door delivery of cash to overcome the problems with cash transfers in terms of access and inclusion errors, most governments have turned a blind eye towards these issues [18]. Very few states have allowed universalization of PDS [19], or to include dal, oil, and other essentials in the PDS. Police officers have shown high-handed behavior to ensuring

lockdown rules without really understanding what the lockdown has meant for the people [20]. The problems faced by stranded migrant workers or those walking back home hundreds of kilometers has not gone unseen by anybody [2, 21]. Ignoring the desire of many of them to go back home, and instead commissioning a skills tracing exercise to match workers with work [35], or advocating for 12-hour work days [40], shows how the state does not see them as people but as mere resources in service of the economy. Being abandoned by their employers has similarly revealed that workers are seen as workers and not people [22].

This brings us to the question - why is empathy missing in the approach of the state or capital? Are they incompetent that they cannot think through all this? Are they running a race (against whom?) to force solutions without testing? Haven't they seen the same kinds of problems recurring again and again, that they should pro-actively now guard against them?

The answer has probably to do with ideology and biases, intentions, and a lack of respect for human rights.

An infrastructure to build empathy

Much has been written about the intentions of the state and of capital, and even the nexus between them. Much of it we see unfolding on a daily basis in front of our eyes. It is therefore not altogether surprising to notice the lack of empathy in their response since empathy doesn't do much to help them achieve their objectives. The state will want to make legible its citizens for taxation, to control them, and it will use technology if that helps [23]. Very rarely has the state seen citizens as partners who can be trusted, as people it has to work for, and therefore sees little need for empathy. Capital on the other hand does want to discover what people need, and provide them with these goods and services in an ever-expanding market and economy. This requires empathy. However it is limited only to the extent that it helps discover people's needs [24], and not judge which needs might be greater than others or universally provisioned or provisioned at affordable costs [25]. There is no moral compass to steer the empathy-driven learning gained by capitalist systems towards serving the poor. Regulatory mechanisms to provide such a moral compass to capital are routinely flouted through corruption and even legally [26]. The compass therefore always swerves, whenever it gets a chance, towards the exploitation of surplus value.

This lack of empathy to learn and fix systems is at the heart of hardships caused to many people during the lockdown. How can we ensure that empathy becomes a foundational value in the functioning of the state?

Empathy can only work through feedback, and ensuring an appropriate response based on this feedback. In looking ahead to the future, a critical need therefore is to strengthen feedback systems for the state to be more empathetic – it needs to draw feedback from the people, listen to their problems, and respond to them. Whether this feedback is sought directly or via representatives, through formally established commissions or ad hoc consultations, whether these representatives are from the civil society or experts or politicians, whether the feedback needs to be via scientific studies like RCTs or via qualitative reports collected methodologically, etc, are the questions that need reflection to safeguard against biased feedback and pseudo-science. It is not that feedback systems are altogether absent, in fact the parliamentary democracy is intended to serve exactly this purpose, but what also needs reflection is why many such pathways today stand broken. Non-parliamentary processes like consultations by the government, webinars with civil society,

new data collections methods, all need to be analyzed to understand whether these feedback processes are merely tokenistic or are they being acted upon. An audit is needed for how many letters written by the civil society have reached the echelons of power, how many questions asked have been responded to, what discussions have transpired behind the closed doors of the state, and which ones made their way to the parliament. If India instead pursues a strategy of less transparency, greater silencing of feedback, and concerted attempts to craft public opinion through manipulation of the media, it will in all certainty lose the ability to listen, and the capability to be empathetic to learn and to respond. This will undoubtedly lead to an economic and social collapse because no system can sustain itself without course-correcting based on authentic feedback.

Empathy is also significantly lacking in our society. The fact is that we are unfortunately a divided society having many different outlooks. Divisions exist not only on religion, where misrepresented data or misinformation easily fuels communalization [27]. Divisions also exist among friends, among neighbours, within communities, and across communities. Reports about the stigmatization of returned migrant workers, of recovered coronavirus patients [36], of health workers, and of people not following social distancing, without understanding their context [28], have been common. At the first pretext of fear of infection, many people chose to give up on their friends, their neighbours, their care givers. They did not even realize how naive they were being in destroying the trust of their fellow people. The Aarogya Setu app is a good example of how distrust can undermine positive outcomes. The app is loved by healthy individuals because they feel it will help protect them, but the app will really work only if the ones who are not healthy or are scared for various reasons will report their symptoms correctly. If people scare returned migrants, or those who work in jobs where social distancing is not easy to follow, and even violently attack the caregivers who are working for them [29], then people will not trust the others enough to feel confident in reporting themselves correctly, and the app will not be useful.

Bridging such societal division needs communication across the dividing lines for people to understand one another. The Internet, and then the social media, were believed to be such systems that could enable not just feedback for more empathetic and accountable government systems, but also for people to understand one another. However, content recommendation algorithms that reinforce biases and create filter bubbles [30], prioritize sensational news written by bloggers rather than news written by trained journalists [31], and business models that divert revenue from responsible content producers to irresponsible content distributors [32], serve to weaken a social contract that needs people to be empathetic to one another. Platforms for such communication should encourage healthy deliberation aimed at creating a shared understanding, a tone of mutual respect to build a culture of constructive debate, not foster echo chambers, and be representative of diversity. Such platforms need careful moderation and curation since entirely open platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been shown to devolve to uncivil conversations, disengagement, or silencing [34]. Mobile Vaani in fact aims to be one such platform [33].

It is only through such infrastructure of feedback systems and communication platforms that our society and the state can become more empathetic. With more empathy, it may even become possible to rein in capital, and align everybody's priorities to building a more just and equal economic system, a system that does not ignore public health and education, and does not pander to irresponsible elite interests.

A lack of empathy is also reflective of a lack of respect for human rights. Policies and services designed without empathy will violate human rights, as we have seen with unfair denial of welfare benefits or data privacy in the case of Aadhaar based services, or inadequate relief measures to deal with the lockdown [37], or the treatment of stranded migrant workers and the lack of any planning even weeks into the lockdown. Ensuring rights can only begin with first understanding the circumstances of the people, and responding accordingly in a manner which guarantees that the fundamental ethical tenets of the constitution are being obeyed. The infrastructure of well-functioning feedback systems and communication platforms therefore deems to be demanded as a right, so that it can help build an empathetic society and an empathetic state which respect human rights, and imposes a moral compass on capital to also ensure that human rights of workers and consumers are also met.

Building brick by brick

The fault-lines and lack of empathy exposed by the crisis must be built upon. Several fragile and temporary infrastructures have been put up during the crisis, after loud cries from the civil society, and can serve as a basis to create strong systems for the long term. For example:

- Helplines to listen to ration related complaints have been set up in most blocks in many states. These must not be turned off after the lockdown, and systems should be built behind them to bring PDS lists up to date. Surveys should be commissioned by the Gram Panchayats to complete the listing and social audits through civil society volunteers should ensure zero exclusions.

- These helplines must function in a decentralized manner. Centralized helplines have been extremely busy and unreachable, as complained by many users. Further, the civil society has demonstrated a strong role in helping the health system cope with the large volume of requests, both in terms of counselling and guidance of the community and in supporting health workers to expand their capacity. These processes which emerged in a bottom-up manner must be formalized for an effective integration of civil society volunteers and social workers into the governance systems [39].

- Some states have set up SMS token based systems for PDS universalization [38], and some states have done away with Aadhaar based biometric authentication. These steps should be adopted widely to universalize the PDS and stop the use of biometrics for authentication. Simple smartcard based authentications, or even social trust by somebody who can endorse on behalf of others, should be used. Any denials due to authentication failures should carry an audio or visual testimony of both the ration shop dealer and the beneficiary, acknowledging the failure and describing a plan for the next step to resolve the issue. These recordings should be accessible for social auditing purposes.

- Apps and helplines have been set up for cash transfers to street vendors, daily wage workers, agricultural labourers, construction workers, industrial workers, etc. These should be systemized going forward, so that all workers can be registered under relevant welfare boards and social security schemes. Inter-state integration of these schemes should ensure that benefits like health insurance operate seamlessly across the country. Mass awareness programmes should be undertaken for workers to understand their rights and methods to raise grievances.

- Door to door distribution of cash was initiated by some banks in a few districts. With an increased push for financial digitization for DBT and other services, this option should be institutionalized especially for the elderly and physically disabled, who may not be able to physically visit the bank or ATMs to get access to their cash transfers. Similarly, door to door delivery of ration was undertaken in many places, and should be institutionalized for households who find it hard to visit the ration shops.

- Communalization on religious and other grounds that happened during the early days of the pandemic, was finally criticized although just mildly. Stronger checks and balances should be established for the future though. Any research studies analysing data across sensitive attributes like religion or caste or gender, must be vetted thoroughly and transparently, and only then should they be released publicly. Any media communicating messages that prompt discrimination on these sensitive attributes must be censored immediately and legal action should be taken against the content creators.

Of course the requirements for an infrastructure for empathy go much beyond just these examples listed above. Today's highly connected world provides an unprecedented opportunity to build empathy-facilitating systems, and we would not only be naïve but also not rightful towards others if we do not institutionalize the necessary components to build an empathetic society.

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