

# Silent cities, silenced histories: subaltern experiences of everyday urban violence during COVID-19

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*Abstract:* The public health containment measures in response to COVID-19 have precipitated a significant epistemic and ontological shift in ‘bottom-up’ and ‘action-oriented’ approaches in development studies research. ‘Lockdown’ necessitates physical and social distancing between research subject and researcher, raising legitimate concerns around the extent to which ‘distanced’ action-research can be inclusive and address citizens’ lack of agency. Top-down regimes to control urban spaces through lockdown in India have not stemmed the experience of violence in public spaces: some have dramatically intensified, while others have changed in unexpected ways. Drawing on our experiences of researching the silent histories of violence and memorialisation of past violence in urban India over the past three decades, we argue that the experience of subaltern groups during the pandemic is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. Exceptionalising the experiences of violence during the pandemic silences past histories and disenfranchises long struggles for rights in the city. At the same time, we argue that research practices employed to interpret the experience of urban violence during lockdown in India need to engage the changing nature of infrastructural regimes, as they seek to control urban spaces, and as subaltern groups continue to mobilise and advocate, in new ways.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, India, cities, urban violence, GBV, subaltern, memorialisation, urban disaster response, informal settlements, urban space.

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## Introduction

It was a momentous scene. On 28 March 2020, hundreds upon thousands of daily-wage migrant labourers gathered at the Anand Vihar Bus Terminus and the immediately surrounding areas to be ‘evacuated’ (Mahaprashasta & Srivas 2020) out of India’s capital, New Delhi. It had been only four days since India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in a television broadcast ‘a total ban on coming out of your homes ... every state, every union territory, every district, every village, every town, lane and neighbourhood in the country will be locked down’ (see *India Today* 2020a from 0:40s to 1:01s). With only four hours’ notice, this was seen by many as ‘the most severe step taken anywhere in the war against the coronavirus’ (Gettleman & Schultz 2020). Later in the broadcast Modi warned Indians would have to bear the economic costs of lockdown, and pleaded for all to ‘stay where you are’ (see *India Today* 2020a from 2:13s to 2:30s). As construction sites, businesses, and markets up and down the country closed, migrant labourers were left stranded in urban centres as even the local and national transport systems shut down. It had taken only a few days for their savings, already depleted by the disruptions caused by the Delhi riots a month earlier (Gupte 2020a) and demonetisation, to evaporate. With hunger and fear setting in, the promise of state-provided bus transportation back to their rural homes in neighbouring states had sparked the sizeable gathering.

As these spectacles of human suffering unfolded, the impacts of lockdown were also playing out on the very structures of social interaction, community mobilisation, and accountability between citizens and the state, that have been integral to subaltern experiences in Indian cities. The brutal enforcement of lockdown carried out by the police and other local urban authorities across many countries, has unleashed a more direct violence, prompting the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to note that there has been an alarming rise in police brutality and civil rights violations under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures (OHCHR 2020). The experience across Indian cities was no different. Reports noted rising levels of violence directed towards those employed in already stigmatised labouring relationships, including those involving waste picking, garbage dump management, solid waste clearing, cleaning, and sanitation labour (see, for example, HRW 2020). *The Lancet* also noted minorities faced heightened risks given that ‘the spread of misinformation driven by fear, stigma, and blame [have been used] to fan anti-Muslim sentiment and violence’ (*Lancet* 2020). For the urban ‘subaltern classes’ (as theorised in A. Roy 2011), the lockdown was yet another experience of violence and subjugation, understood as part of the ‘terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics’ (224) that have come to characterise cities of the Global South.

Lockdown and the enforcement of social distancing have also meant that community organisations that represent or work with the ‘subaltern’ have found their usual methods of mobilisation, gathering for solidarity, and daily routines to check-in with community members have been curtailed. Certain types of ‘action-oriented’ and ‘community-driven’ (often known as ‘bottom-up’) research practices too have had to cease (see, for example, the impact on research amongst vulnerable groups during COVID-19 in Townsend *et al.* (2020)). Many have switched to using online or other distanced methods. This raises legitimate concerns around the extent to which ‘distanced’ action-research can be inclusive and address citizens’ lack of agency. Public health containment measures in response to COVID-19 have required significant epistemic and ontological shifts in ‘bottom-up’ and ‘action-oriented’ approaches to development studies research. However, subaltern groups continue to reshape their connections with and within the city. Their memories, practices, and personal narratives continue to challenge the hegemonic narratives and practices of violence and the collective amnesia around violence. Drawing on our experiences of researching the silent histories of violence and memorialisation of past violence in urban India over the past three decades, we argue that the experience of subaltern groups during the pandemic is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. Exceptionalising the experiences of violence during the pandemic serves to silence past histories and disenfranchises long struggles for rights in the city. At the same time, however, we argue that research practices employed to interpret the experience of urban violence during lockdown in India need to engage the changing nature of infrastructural regimes, as they seek to control urban space, and as subaltern groups continue to mobilise and advocate, in new ways.

The following section summarises how we understand the memorialisation of everyday violence, building to an understanding of memorialisation practices as tools subaltern groups use to uphold the often silenced and forgotten violence inflicted upon them. The next section presents the experience of what has come to be known as the ‘first wave of COVID-19’ in Indian cities. We then present two moments of historical violence, the citywide riots in Mumbai and a gang rape in Delhi that gained nationwide attention, to highlight the continuities between the violence experienced by subaltern groups historically and during the pandemic. We then reflect on the implications for researching what we term the violence ‘of’ the pandemic.

## **Memorialisation of everyday violence**

Sumatha,<sup>1</sup> a housemaid, refuses to bandage her leg. She would rather the wound from a rat bite fester, than show that she is injured. To her, a bandage is a sign of weakness; a sure way to signal that she is losing whatever footing she has in her day-to-day survival in the neighbourhood. ... She says there are vultures out to get her and her jobs; she must not allow them to get near. During the last riots, she had got hurt, and lost all her jobs. (Gupte 2011b: 190).

How must we understand the memorialisation of everyday violence as a cultural or societal response? Memorialisation practices are central to societies and, in turn, play a critical role in social research that centralises culture and symbolism in understanding social worlds (Harvey 1979, Tuan 1979, Cosgrove 1998). As practices of cultural production and meaning-making (Macdonald, 2013, Ashley 2019) memorialisation ‘signifies aspects of the past as important: the making-valuable, through conscious acts, those objects, places, events, practices, memories, ideas, even sensibilities that are attached to the past in some way’ (Ashley 2019). Memorialisation ‘helps us string past events in our minds, providing them with historical meaning’ (Zerubavel 2003:13). Such practices are, however, defined and perpetuated by gendered roles, particularly where these intersect with the everyday experience of subaltern groups, that may or may not afford men and women the time and resources to reflect or partake in memorialisation practices. Time-consuming responsibilities of unpaid care and domestic work, predominantly carried out by women and girls, and various forms of exploitative labour relationships can leave little time or energy for reflection.

While academic research predominantly focusses on tangible cultural products and landscapes to commemorate violence, conflict, and their victims (Lunn 2007, Gillen 2018, Wise 2020), memorialisation is also an affective experience that evokes ‘strongest emotions’ (Read & Wyndham 2016: 13). We therefore define memorialisation as both tangible and intangible practices which help in dealing with loss, suffering, and grief, and provide multiple ways in which violent experiences can be transcended over time. By extension, memorialisation for us becomes both an individual and collaborative practice and experience. We recognise it as a spatialised practice, even when the spaces of memorialisation are not static and fixed in time. The selection, design, and location of memorialisation spaces are all central and political oriented to the acts of remembrance, honouring and sharing the memories of violence. On the one hand, “[m]emorializing” [i]s an important way that society organises and valorizes space’ (Ashley 2019: 29), and on the other, space can enable, hinder, and regenerate memories and narratives of violence (Petersson & Wingren 2011).

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym.

As a socio-cultural practice, memorialisation is too often understood to be ‘outside of the political process—relegated to the ‘soft’ cultural sphere as art object, to the private sphere or personal mourning, or to the margins of power and politics’ (Brett *et al.* 2008: 2). In our view, this misinterprets the politics of memorialisation and its role in social justice, peacebuilding, and the development of a collective sense of self (Wang 2008). Social groups employ memories and recollections to (re)constitute experiences of violence, particularly in post-conflict societies in order to ensure transitional justice and peacebuilding (Ruwanpathirana 2016, Rolston 2020). Yet, their practices can be deeply structured by political relations such as colonialism even when the ‘affective and conscious space-making’ practices are transformed by the communities over time (Ashley 2019: 33). Similarly, the State can critically hamper or enable memorialisation practices (Naidu 2004: np). For instance, Read & Wyndham (2016) argue that Chilean transition to democracy has been an incomplete and bitter journey for the survivors of the Chilean military dictatorship because of many state-led obstacles to memorialisation attempts by the victimised social groups. In turn, memorialisation practices undertaken by the state have the potential to reinforce specific, and dominant, narratives of violence. However, the state can also actively use memorialisation practices to overcome a contentious and violent past by performing its ‘duty to remember’ (Rolston 2020: 320). Memorialisation practices are thus deeply political and ‘intersect with power relations and inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society’s political and economic resources’ (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004: 349). As a political practice memorialisation inevitably reflects the socio-political context in which it is undertaken (Holloway 2020). Questions such as who gets memorialised, how, why, and by whom hold significant political value and shed light on socio-political constructions, tensions, values of the past, present, and possibly of the future (Foote & Azrayahu 2007).

Important to the arguments of this article, memorialisation practices not only provide insights into socio-political processes but also serve as useful methodological tools. Violence is often researched post facto and is often narrated as fixed events that *had* happened in the past. In grounded research on violence, memorialisation practices act as heuristic devices in understanding histories, narratives, and effects of violence on individual and collective identities and social (power) relations (Keightley 2010, Ashley 2019). The combination of subjective/objective and tangible/intangible aspects of memorialisation allows for analyses of how members of the communities perceive, live, and alter the memories of violence and conflict (McIlvenny & Noy 2011). Memorialisation practices as methods unearth the hidden dynamic of violence from the past through the present into the future (Springer 2011, Tyner *et al.* 2014).

As a result, we recognise memorialisation practices as political tools used by subaltern groups to remember and remind us of the silenced and forgotten violence

inflicted upon them. Subaltern groups ‘struggle from below’ to undertake and get their memorialisation practices and interpretations acknowledged within hegemonic narratives. These struggles are not grandiose expressions like war memorials yet are central to making their voices heard and recognised, both within and outside of the research context. Ethnographic methodologies that centralise memories, participation, and co-production of knowledge are particularly useful in bringing subaltern groups together and making their voices chronicled and heard. In turn, memorialisation practices play a central role in producing spaces of resistance by subaltern groups (Pinkerton 2012, Suarez & Suarez 2016; Haripriya 2020).

### **The exceptionalisation of COVID-19 in Indian cities**

As we write this article on 18 September 2020, more than 5 million people have been infected by COVID-19 in India.<sup>22</sup> India introduced a national lockdown between 25 March and 31 May 2020, and a gradual reopening to slow down the spread of the pandemic. Three cities—Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai—account for more than 40 per cent of the total cases (Rukmini 2020, Sharma 2020). During the pandemic, India’s gross domestic product declined to 23.9 per cent with a projected negative growth rate of 4.5 per cent in FY 2020–21 (NSO 2020, Dave 2020). The impacts have been felt the hardest in the informal sector, which accounts for more than 86 per cent of India’s workforce which is largely uninsured, with limited savings, and minimal worker rights such as workplace health and safety (Bonnet *et al.* 2019). Daily-wage earners were amongst the first to experience extreme hardship. As work opportunities for manual labour began to dry up, the police also dispersed the regular spots at which workers gather in the mornings to seek employment (Daniyal *et al.* 2020). Informal wage workers in the construction sector are a particular example where impacts of ‘the non-availability of regular work, shortages of food, burden of large family size, and social evils of living in a slum, [harassment] by goons as well as contractors with minimal support from trade unions and government’ (Dhal 2020), were exacerated by a near complete lack of employer responsibility or labour rights.

There have also been major disruptions in access and supply of food, healthcare, public transport, and education and associated nutrition programmes, especially for

<sup>22</sup> India experienced a ‘first wave’ of COVID-19 from June to September 2020. During this wave, seven-day national rolling averages of positive cases peaked at just about 60,000 cases. This article is based on our critical reading of this period of the pandemic. However, as we submitted the final version of the article, much to our dismay, India is undergoing a far greater ‘second wave’ of infections from February 2021 continuing through to May 2021, with the seven-day national average of positive cases well above 120,000. See <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in>.

the marginalised population, in addition to issues like overcrowding, heating, and poor to non-existent options for self-isolation, especially in low-income and slum areas (Golecha & Panigrahy 2020) which aggravated the socio-economic insecurities and inequalities of urban living during the pandemic. These factors have led to mass reverse migration from cities to villages and small towns, with most migrants leaving cities by any means, including walking, due to the suspension of public transportation. In turn, migrants have faced impacts such as deaths due to hunger and exhaustion, lack of access to healthcare when needed and unsupervised childbirth, and inhumane treatment such as spraying of chemical disinfectant on returnees (BBC News 2020a, Choudhari 2020, Kumar 2020).

Direct forms of violence, such as police brutality, violations of human rights and gender-based violence (GBV) have been common during the pandemic (Gupte 2020b). Police brutality was seemingly endorsed as a necessity ‘to safeguard interests of the general public’ (Chaudhari 2020). The militarised enforcement of the national lockdown exacerbated existing patterns of police brutality in many Indian cities, which has been upheld under the guise of enforcing the lockdown restrictions. According to a Public Interest Litigation filed at the Bombay High Court, at least fifteen had died of police brutality as of 3 July 2020 (Chaudhari 2020). The primary victims of police brutality are minorities and marginalised communities, such as Muslims and working-class migrant workers, daily-wage earners, and street vendors (Kalita 2020, Nazeer 2020). GBV, especially domestic violence, also increased during the lockdown. According to the National Commission for Women, there was a 94 per cent increase in complaints about domestic violence with a total of 587 cases reported during the period 23 March to 16 April 2020 (Nigam, 2020). The lockdown considerably heightened the proximity of survivors with abusers, limited survivor’s access to support services, and limited their physical mobilities and access to safe physical spaces (Erskine 2020). Many GBV services, in the absence of concerted government policies, have shifted to online and phone-based systems, which raises critical issues of access, and the trackability and confidentiality of the survivors of GBV (*ibid*).

As palpable as they were, these experiences of violence were exceptionalised as they came under the gaze of 24/7 news media. As an estimated ten million migrant labourers began walking hundreds of kilometres from their worksites in cities that were locked-down to their villages, ‘carrying children, clutching their meagre possessions, crowding disrupted transport networks, beaten and resourceless, [facing] hunger, destitution, the wrath of the police and suspicion of communities and tragic death’ (Sengupta & Jha 2020: 153), their journey became the subject of a media spectacle shown live by 24-hour live news channels. International and local news networks alike showcased the momentous and immense movement of vulnerable people. Reports chronicled hundreds of migrant deaths (see, for example, Wallen 2020), while

interviews were conducted with the labourers as they stopped momentarily to rest, or even as they walked tirelessly (see, for example, BBC News 2020b). Video reportage showed labourers being made to crawl (see *India Today* 2020b) or huddle on the road as they were forcefully sprayed with disinfectant by overzealous authorities (see BBC News 2020a). The episode of a 15-year-old girl transporting her injured father hundreds of miles on a pedal-bike stands out. The girl, Jyoti, was dubbed ‘India’s Lionhearted Daughter’ and even approached by The Cycling Federation of India (Gettleman & Raj 2020). Prime Minister Modi called on Indians to clap, ring bells, or bang on steel plates as a way to show collective appreciation of the migrants, amongst other emergency responders (*India Today* 2020c).

We note however that, alongside the exceptionalisation of violence in the media and in many organs of popular discourse, it was simultaneously invisibilised in official data. According to available provisional information, 81,385 accidents occurred on the roads (including national highways) during the period March–June 2020 with 29,415 fatalities (GoI 2020). Despite this, in Parliament, the government revealed that no official data on the specific circumstances of the migrant labourers walking back has been collected. Similarly, the National Commission for Women noted that, despite the increase in anecdotal reporting of domestic violence, almost 86 per cent of the survivors did not officially report it (Kapoor 2020, Nigam 2020).

### Everyday violence in Mumbai and Delhi

The violence under the everyday of the pandemic is not exceptional. It fits within a much longer trajectory of everyday violence as experienced by the subaltern. We describe below two monumental episodes of past violence, a deadly bout of citywide riots in Mumbai lasting from early December 1992 to mid-January 1993, and the brutal gang rape of a young middle-class woman in Delhi in 2012, which triggered countrywide protests.

Nilu,<sup>3</sup> a resident of an inner-city neighbourhood in Mumbai, had lived through several serious incidences of rioting, including the citywide riots. When asked why he thought riots and public disturbances were such a common phenomenon, he replied:

Nilu: All this [referring to the various episodes of local violence I had described to him] needs to be done around here. Something or another comes up to *bhadkao* (incite) everyone, then people take *fayda* (advantage) of the situation. Everyone has their own problems. And this happens very easily, you don’t know, suddenly people act like they are mad. But they are not really mad are they? They are just taking

<sup>3</sup>Pseudonym.

advantage of the situation. And let me tell you, people do take advantage, things they wouldn't get done (as quoted in Gupte 2011a: 112).

The 'everyday-ness' (Scheper-Hughes 1993) of this violence is a relational and interactive reality that is separate from but intertwined with the physicality of death, injury, and destruction. Even when describing the devastating violence of the 1992–93 citywide riots, respondents recalled ordinary everyday interactions as meaningful experiences intertwined with the exceptional circumstance of the riots. One respondent recalled:

one day one chap would come banging on the door, so I would quickly give him some money, or food or whatever the neighbours were giving ... the next day someone else would come. ... My neighbour's son would go out and he knew who actually had control during the nights ... then we knew who to pay [for protection]' (Gupte 2011a: 113).

These everyday experiences that so significantly shaped the experiences of those who did not benefit from the protection of the city police seem, however, to be lost in official accounts. As Chatterji and Mehta argue on the basis of rich and detailed ethnographic research, 'we do not find a sustained effort to put together these events of violence, much less reflect on their common modalities' (Chatterji & Mehta 2007).

Two decades later, on 16 December 2012, Nirbhaya, a middle-class young woman, was gang-raped in a moving bus in India's capital city of Delhi. Nirbhaya was returning after watching a movie with her male friend. After being refused auto rides, they boarded a private bus to return home which was occupied by six men, including the driver. The men beat up the couple and 'brutally assaulted, gang-raped and eviscerate[d]' Nirbhaya before leaving her and the friend on the sidewalk (Kaur 2017). Nirbhaya died of her injuries a few days later. The widely reported incident caught the sentiments of the entire country; thousands of women and men protested the lack of the state's ability to provide safety for women while demanding fast-track legal trials and death penalty for the perpetrators. And yet, the Nirbhaya case also rekindled personal and collective memories of violence and trauma that many women suffer in silence every day. Violence against women in public spaces is highly normalised in Delhi (Zahan 2020a). Fear and violent experiences shape women's lives, and there is a tacit acceptance that violence is a part of life that women have to adjust to by making conscious decisions about how they access public spaces. In turn, many women modify their spatial practices in the city to produce safer geographies (Vishwanath & Mehrotra 2007, Zahan 2020b). The social acceptance and distancing of violence against women (VAW) from public debates are achieved through practices such as censoring, silencing, victim-blaming, and the use of fear as a discursive tool of control (Zahan 2020a). The protests became a catalyst for the recognition of normalisation of violence that

*all* women undergo in Delhi and other Indian cities. In other words, recognition and justice for Nirbhaya were considered justice for all women. Nirbhaya soon came to be recognised as ‘India’s Daughter’ (see DenHoed 2015) who stood for *all* women—potential and actual victims of violence—in public spaces. At the same time, many argue that the emerging forms of feminist activism which focus on the occupation of public spaces have the tendency to fall prey to neoliberal agendas of individual choice and responsibility (S. Roy 2011, Taneja 2019); that actions to mobilise a reclaiming of public space do not challenge the power relations that produce VAW in the first place. For instance, Datta (2016) argues that there is a ‘lack of critical reflection on the spatiality [non-urban] and intersectionality’ that shape VAW which stifles ‘progressive interventions’ in the area (Datta 2016: 173; see also Rajalakshmi 2020).

### **Researching the violence ‘of’ the pandemic**

There are epistemological, ontological, and safeguarding repercussions for researching the violence ‘of’ the pandemic. Proximity between the researcher and subject, between the subaltern and the state, and importantly, between and within communities themselves, is a legitimate health risk in present circumstances. This bears significantly on the ethical considerations of research on the urban condition, and poses a legitimate challenge to long-standing participatory action-research paradigms (as in Chambers 1994). Epistemologically, what does it mean to conduct research on subaltern urbanism ‘from a distance’? Ontologically, how is ‘proximity’ related to ‘participatory’, ‘community-driven’, or ‘action-oriented’ research? These questions require urgent and continued visitation. Equally, safeguarding concerns of conducting research in marginal spaces, and with marginalised people living and working in precarious urban spaces in low-income neighbourhoods in the Global South (as elaborated by Aktar *et al.* 2020), also need to be revisited in light of heightened risks and vulnerabilities (see, for example, Stranded Workers Action Network 2020).

We are noting here the violence ‘of’ the pandemic as violence that has in some direct or indirect way been caused or reshaped by the pandemic. Its (re)occurrence is not exactly aligned, spatially or temporally, to the pandemic. On the one hand, we very much expect its trajectory to be long lasting, particularly for subaltern groups, and amplified beyond the pandemic by unequal infrastructural, labour caste, and class relationships in the city. On the other hand, and as the previous sections have already articulated, subaltern experiences of violence of the pandemic thus far have not been exceptional but fit within everyday negotiations and other power relationships within the city that predate the pandemic. And while these negotiations and

relationships are characteristic of subaltern urban experiences, they are also silenced by top-down institutional responses to city making. As Datta (2020) has artfully shown, the time and speed with which top-down interventionist regimes mobilise the logics of a 'technological fix' to violence in the city, leave behind 'those in the urban peripheries [who] encounter and negotiate [the city's] spatio-temporalities through a slow violence of life that is invisible and unfolding over time and space' (1318). It is notable that techno-utopian interventions by the state, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, also displayed a similar socio-temporal mismatch with subaltern experiences. While they were quick to identify dense informal areas as high risk, tech-based interventions such as mobile apps with track-and-trace functions were uncritical and unnuanced towards the deeply unequal socio-economic relationships that also characterised these areas. The solutions proposed assumed access to digital infrastructures, whereas access is deeply gendered (World Wide Web Foundation 2015); they assumed people's movements were voluntary and that isolation was easily enforceable, whereas the labour and other socio-economic relationships of the subaltern are often *compulsory* in nature (Gupte & Mitlin 2021) and isolation is not possible (Wilkinson 2020).

The nature of such interventions notwithstanding, grass-roots activity of and in relation to subaltern groups in low-income urban settings has not ceased during the pandemic, even if it has responded to the pandemic in many significant ways. Community groups in low-income across various contexts in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa have continued to provide links and interactions with and between state agencies to address local needs (Gupte & Mitlin 2021). In Indian cities, too, self-organisation by subaltern groups has continued to meaningfully shape the urban condition (see, for example, Auerbach & Thachil 2021), in continuation of the mass mobilisation movements that have historically advocated housing rights in the face of eviction and demolition drives by 'neoliberal populism' (A. Roy 2010) seeking to redevelop informal spaces in the city. Similarly, Patel and Gupta (2020) noted that women-led grass-roots organisations in various countries, including India, Nepal, and the Philippines in Asia, and Kenya, South Africa Nigeria, Malawi, and Zimbabwe in Africa, generated practical responses to the coronavirus pandemic, from disseminating information, to relief and assistance funding, even when these women were themselves the victims of the pandemic.

### **Concluding reflections**

The public health containment measures instated in response to COVID-19 in urban India have inflicted a particular kind of violence on subaltern groups. This violence,

which we term the violence ‘of’ the pandemic, has been direct in its physicality, manifesting through the brutal enforcement of an infrastructural regime seeking to control urban space by the state, the police, and other urban local authorities, as well as dominant non-state groups. But it has also indirectly permeated the everyday experiences and infrastructural interactions of subaltern groups in the city. We have highlighted two noteworthy dynamics in this regard. First, the violence of the pandemic experienced by subaltern groups is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. For this reason, exception-alising their recent experiences belies a much longer and deeper experience of violence and silences their long-standing struggles for rights in the city. Second, the modes and mechanisms by which subaltern groups express agency and advocate for their rights has been impacted by physical and social distancing.

These impacts notwithstanding, community groups have continued to operate through the pandemic to deliver essential services and advocate for rights. For this reason, it is important for action-oriented participatory research methods to navigate the significant epistemological and ontological shifts with care. It stands to reason that researching the violence of the pandemic requires a continued engagement with the habitation, livelihoods, self-organising, and memorialisation of subaltern groups. And that not privileging this continued reality bears the risk of misinterpreting, or worse entirely silencing, the experiences of the violence of the pandemic in the city. Indeed, it is at this precise moment when heightened vulnerabilities are being faced with new agency, that research and advocacy need to jointly transcend the obstructions from lockdowns, and physical and social distancing measures.

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