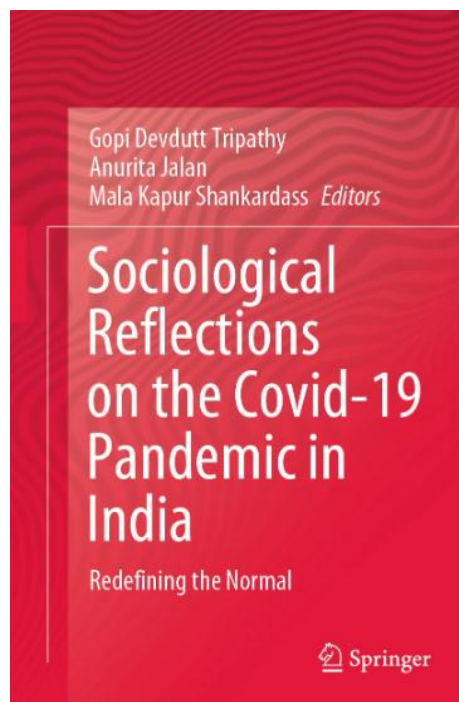*Book Review*

Sociological Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic in India: Redefining the Normal

Suraj Beri*

Department of Sociology, Central University of Nagaland, Lumami
*Correspondence: criticalsun@gmail.com

Gopi D. Tripathy, Anurita Jalan, and Mala Kapur Shankardass (eds.) *Sociological Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic in India: Redefining the Normal*. Delhi: Springer. ISBN: 978-981-16-2319-6, 2021, pp. xiii + 148. Hard Print.

This volume is a compilation of sociological essays on various elements of our life that were impacted by the Covid-19-led lockdown and the profound changes it brought about in terms of how we relate to individuals, institutions, events, and environments. Focusing on specific areas such as the health system, the educational field, the media, household life, the sufferings of migrant workers, and marginalised social groups, editors Gopi Tripathy, Anurita Jalan, and Mala Shankardass have woven papers on diverse themes into this volume to analyse social life during a covid-driven pandemic. This volume aims to describe the reorganisation of our lives, our relationships, and our social and cultural norms as a result of the unfolding medical crisis in the social and cultural environment in India. This volume is comprised of eight critical essays followed by an epilogue. The essays in the volume, examine how the pandemic affects social life, people's settled sense of identity, new notions of mediated notions of consumer goods and behaviour, gendered notions of work, belonging and labour, experiences

and troubles faced by elderly and disabled, socially and economically excluded sections, those who were affected by the virus, the sense of fear and stigma, and the painful experiences of domestic workers, informal sector workers, and informal sector employers.

Gopi Devdutt Tripathy's introduction to the collection, develops the concept of crisis, as we have always understood it, and investigates the unique problems and challenges posed by the Covid-19 epidemic. It examines both theoretically and philosophically, the various narratives, that came up during the crisis concerning how individuals engaged with and navigated these crises. The Journal further probes to explore What new human story is forming to make sense of this pandemic-induced social epistemic rupture? What happens to the current way of life during a crisis and how a new normal of daily life emerges, which has stabilised the crisis, allowing people to adjust to it and get accustomed to it?

Rashi Bhargava's chapter on domestic space, home, and sense of labour via a gender lens offers a critical perspective on a pandemic that, in many ways, reconfigures existing hierarchical and unequal, gender relations. Based on narratives of married couples about their experiences, everyday work behaviours, domestic lifestyle, changing perceptions of work and gendered 'duties,' this chapter opens the pandura box of domestic space where 'work from home' and 'work for home' have become ambiguous while maintaining sharp boundaries of gender identities and the labour associated with it. It offers vital insights into the concept of domestic labour and the significance men and women ascribed to it during the lockdown time, when maids could not be present. It alters their perception of locations, identities, and homemaking standards.

Mala Kapur Shankardass focuses on the social experiences and additional difficulties that vulnerable groups endured during the epidemic, emphasising elderly or senior populations. Due to the freezing of social and geographical mobilities, older individuals found themselves in a unique situation, which affected their sense of self, family, care, and support. The common response to this new normal was to 'isolate, maintain social distance, minimise human association, and reduce transmission.' This posed a lot of challenges since the attitude of the majority was to 'isolate, maintain social distance, reduce human association. This approach, which has become the conventional method for preventing the spread of the virus, has profound social, emotional, and cultural ramifications for the elderly. Aged and handicapped populations that require particular attention, care, and caretaker carers to preserve a sense of self and well-being have been negatively affected by this new norm of fewer social connections and the physical presence of people.

Pratisha Borborah and Jyoti Das examine the significance of the media and marketing for fashion and beauty items on the evolution of consumerism during the epidemic. They reflect on the changing notions of digital consumption, leisure, social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram), and online platforms (e.g. Netflix, Amazon Prime), which have become the only source of social interaction for segments of the middle class, based on their mixed-methods study. The authors suggest that during the covid-19 lockdown, middle-class segments experienced rapid changes and preferences for online shopping, the importance of essential goods such as food groceries, personal hygiene, medicines, etc. over other consumer goods, and a redefined notion of weekend leisure activities, which consists primarily of watching movies and web series via online platforms.

Aruna Grover discusses the experiences of various segments of online education throughout the epidemic in her chapter. She examines studies on the role of internet in connecting the masses through online education despite the existing social, economic, and cultural gaps. In addition to these divisions, technical and institutional exclusions prevented a substantial portion of the population from continuing their education. She blames the lack of technical

skills and inaccessibility to digital and social infrastructure that creates challenges not just for pupils but also for teachers' ability to carry out their duties. When one examines the classroom environment, gender once again influences the teaching and learning dynamics. Online spaces posed issues of patriarchy and ongoing gendered exclusions for both female students and female teachers. Home and domestic space limited their options, accessibility, and participation in online education.

Anurita Jalan writes about the effects of fear and stigma on medical responses to covid-19 during the shutdown in India. With the spread of the virus, she focuses on how the common lexicon and conception of illness are evolving. She examines the shifting discourse on health and medicine and the increasing emphasis on a combination of steps that contribute to the disease's prevention, if not cure. She discusses various aspects of social behaviour related to health, including the meaning of illness, 'medical professionals being viewed as potential threats,' 'fear of the unknown,' a sense of isolation and social exclusion when quarantined, the perception of infected individuals as criminals, and the use of local remedies for daily health and immunity, among others.

The article by Pawan Harsana is a political economy thesis concerning the departure of social groupings from the informal sector. He argues that existing social and economic disparities exacerbated the effects of covid-19 vulnerability for these populations. His chapter contends that lockdown without enough consideration and planning, subjected these disadvantaged groups to the dangers of unemployment, poverty, and lack of means of survival during the life-threatening disaster. It provides a historical background of the socio-economic classes from the colonial era to the post-independence age, highlighting the patterns of inequalities that form the positions, vulnerabilities, and sufferings of contemporary working-class communities. These populations were faced with the existential decision of avoiding the covid virus or falling into poverty and unemployment due to the lockdown.

The chapter by Sana Khan delivers ethnographic information about the world of everyday wage earners, migratory labourers, and those engaging in humanitarian operations during the lockdown. Khan underscores the argument that the pandemic brought twin tragedies for this segment by describing the pitiful situations of domestic employees, who were not only fired but were reinterpreted by middle-class households as potential virus carriers. They battled to subsist without assistance from the government or their employment. Their predicament is compared to the groups of individuals we all watched on television walking thousands of kilometres, when the city disowned these migrants with the arrival of the epidemic. Some of these migrants perished on the journey back and were never able to return home. Using concrete examples of these migrants, this chapter recounts their misery, powerlessness, and the disintegration of the concepts of fellow human beings or citizenship.

This work is a useful contribution to the sociological understanding of an event with its varied personal, public, and societal implications. It opens up avenues to the study of risk and crisis caused by the epidemic by challenging perceived social wisdom about the disease, medical knowledge, and health preparedness of society. It draws our attention to the study of everyday life and its embeddedness in broader social forces thereby alluding to how this sense of everydayness becomes complicated, altered, or even collapsed when an event such as coronavirus occurs. I would like to read more articles on issues about religiosity and the relevance of science in addressing the challenges posed by pandemics, the media's coverage of virus spread through a communal lens, the (mal)-functioning of the state, and the rise of farmers' movements during covid-19, in the subsequent volumes of this book.