The “living dead” within “death-worlds”: Gender crisis and covid-19 in India

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Abstract
The onset of the covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have not only impacted the political, structural, and economic systems in India but have also engendered the growing rift between the poor and the rich, the upper and the lower classes, and the rural and the urban sections of the population. Within the nation’s marginalized category, it is women who have suffered most forms of oppression. Having held a subordinate position to their male counterparts within the gender hierarchy, Indian women since the colonial times have had to bear systemic oppression at the hands of the state, caste, class, gender, and religious hegemons. During the pandemic, for women such forms of subordination were followed by socioeconomic uncertainties resulting from the economic shutdown, loss of jobs, and labor oppressions. Gender disparities resulting from class, caste and minority marginalization during the pandemic crisis have further widened the socio-cultural, economic, and political inequalities within the country. Taking cue from the gender crisis in India catalyzed by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, in this study, I aim to explore India’s “unequal” transition to the post covid-19 world order, studying gender inequality, violence and injustices from biopolitical and necropolitical lens. The framework of biopolitics and necropolitics, formulated by Foucault and Mbembe respectively have made significant contributions (following the pandemic...
1  |  INTRODUCTION

A new world order awaits us on the other side of the pandemic, and our “rites of passage” have already begun. With the lockdown, we have retreated from our mobile realities into small pockets of isolation. Our current human sphere now limited to “immediate family” units and individual dwelling spaces. Our world that once was distinctly made up of public and private spheres including “third spaces” of subversion has constricted into unfamiliar, intense and even ominous zones given the novel virus’ potency in wreaking havoc on a global scale. Withdrawing ourselves from the social structure, we have inadvertently completed the separation phase or the first phase of our rite of passage (Turner, 1995) into a new world order. We are now in the middle “liminal” stage. Our “waiting period” marked by uncertainty due to disruption of continuity and normalcy of everyday spaces is also one that holds promises of new possibilities and the unravelling of new potentials and perspectives. However, even as we wait out this storm in our individual waiting rooms, what has now become evident are growing sociopolitical and economic uncertainties as opposed to the onset of new possibilities in a post pandemic order.

This study aims to study the ways in which the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown prompted political, social, and economic precarity and how such predicaments affected the lives of the marginalized in India. In particular, it aims to examine the lived experiences of women who have suffered the worst forms of social, political, and economic oppression during the pandemic crisis. As one of the most subjugated within the nation’s marginalized category, women have not only held a subordinate position to their male counterparts within the gender hierarchy but have also suffered double, triple, and at times multiple oppression at the hands of the state, caste, class, gender, and religious hegemons and patriarchs. Such forms of oppression together with economic and political inequalities increased multiple times for Indian women due to economic shut down, loss of employment, labor oppression, and the fear of infection following the pandemic and the lockdown. The lived experiences of violence and subjugation borne by women during the pandemic crisis has further widening the socio-cultural, economic, and political inequalities within the country. The liminal stage (that in-between phase that which transforms and readies individuals for a new experience) has so far been ineffective for India’s marginalized and a privilege, and an escape point for urban India’s upper and middle classes (Chakraborty, 2020). Taking cue from the gender precarity in India catalyzed by the pandemic and the lockdown, this study will explore India’s “unequal” transition to the post covid-19 world order, studying gender inequality, violence, and injustices from biopolitical and necropolitical lens. The framework of biopolitics and necropolitics, formulated by Foucault and Mbembe respectively has made significant contributions following the pandemic outbreak. The dual frameworks of biopolitics and necropolitics have facilitated our understanding of how the state mechanisms of power that ideally should administer and foster life, guaranteeing health and productivity of populations is currently pushing them into precarious living situations and conferring upon them the status of “living-dead” (Mbembe, 2019). Employing the theoretical frameworks, this study will showcase how both state and the society following the lockdown and impending economic crisis systematically
exploits, stigmatizes, injures, and even eliminates women (from different social strata) who are shown to reside at
the bottommost of the biopolitical/necropolitical hierarchy. In order to do so, the study will begin by exploring how
women of caste, class, and religion are inscribed in the hierarchical order and under what practical conditions is the
right to kill, to live, or to expose to death exercised (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12).

1.1 | Indian nation state and the politics of biopower and necropower

With the onset of the pandemic, thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy declared the coronavirus to be a universal equalizer,
affecting us collectively as a "communovirus" that "(brought) us together to make a common stand" (2020). However,
the lockdown countered his utopia. It represented a reality steeped in "radical inequality, nationalism,
and capitalist exploitation (that found) ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones" (Lorenzini, 2020). In India, the pandemic crisis dispensed a perfect occasion for the right wing Indian state to impose
dictatorship on the population getting rid of all democratic obstacles under the pretext of "health," and governing
the population as pure "biomass." Prior to the pandemic, caste, class, and religion-based political discourse borne out of "state racism" (racism within the society based on racial purity and hierarchical categories) had systematically
differentiated and oppressed subalterns of the society to establish the order of power. The ruling Hindu fascist/
Hindutva narrative posited a repressive, high caste, chauvinist version of Hinduism that recognized the interests of the educated upper castes while ostracizing Adivasis, Muslims, Christians, and atheists who are seen as outsiders and a threat to the nation and the state and citizens only in a "minority" sense (Banaji, 2018, p. 344). Such a
narrative (before the pandemic) was responsible for incidents of everyday violence undertaken by upper caste Hindu vigilante groups against lower caste and religious minorities in India including lynching, extra-judicial killings, molestation, rape, and pogroms (Mander, 2015). Built upon caste and communal prejudices, this political narrative
took a new turn as the population was systematically segregated depending on the biopolitical governance of "who
gets to live" and "who must die" (Foucault, 2008). A further bigoted and divisive narrative of good citizen/bad
citizen was introduced. The aim was to preserve and cultivate for life (biopolitics) and reproduction those bodies that were deemed “productive” and “lawful” and annihilate or “mark for death” (necropolitics) those others/non-
subjects branded as "illegitimate" or "illegal." Such a discourse bears strong resemblance with the "good Muslim"/"bad Muslim" narrative initiated by western political discourses in the aftermath of 9/11. The purpose was to privilege those that bore their allegiance to western secularism and eliminate those that resisted the western world’s vil-
ification of Muslims as prone to affiliation with politicized and radicalized form of Islam.

One of the principal reasons behind the segregation of the population and the precarious living conditions
suffered by India’s subalterns during the pandemic was the lockdown which led to the economic shutdown in India.
On March 25th, 2020 India declared a country-wide lockdown for 21 days invoking the Epidemic Diseases Act,
1897 alongside the National Disaster Management Act, 2005. Such a stance had an adverse effect on the state’s
biopolitical governance. The biopolitical function of the state which is directed towards optimizing the life of the
population through economic activity, sustaining beneficial forms of circulation of goods and capital, and building urban infrastructures was drawn to a stand. As a measure, the lockdown was able to save lives by immobilizing the circulation of the virus by limiting contact between units of human circulation including those across households
and public spaces. However, such a containment measure caused tension within the "basic biopolitical logic of the
cultivation of human life which is to ‘make live’ rather than ‘let die’" (Foucault, 2003, p. 245). This is because
the mobility of goods, services, and finances which are a necessity for human survival was brought to a halt due to
the lockdown. In order to minimize an impending economic depression, the government at first was divided on their
debate on whether to privilege capital over population or to continue with the restrictive measures of the lockdown
to limit death toll. However, it became evident that whatever the decision, the risks and effects of the covid-19
crisis both pathological and socio-political, will be borne by the unwanted populations that is those that can be
controlled, harassed, and potentially killed. In other words, the lower classes, lower castes, and religious minority
groups in India. This differential vulnerability was tragically illustrated by the trajectory of the women—the invisible victims of the socio, political, economic, and pathological implications of the coronavirus. As Butalia confirms, “COVID-19 has had a gendered impact. But the State—perhaps struggling with many other ‘more urgent’ issues—had little time to think about women” (2020).

1.2 | Biopolitical repressions of upper caste, upper class urban women

Before I move onto examine the ways in which women of lower castes, lower class, and cultural and religious minorities have been subject to biopolitical repressions, I aim to portray the systematic control, and elimination of urban upper caste, upper and middle class women considered inferior to their male counterparts within the biopolitical hierarchical system. As per the biopolitical system, the state’s ability to control, confine, and potentially exterminate the “liable”/weaker section of the population is often expanded in society through a variety of social actors. In India, one among them are upper caste and upper and middle class, patriarchal hetero-normative, men. Following the pandemic and the impending economic crisis, these men have redefined “masculine subjectivities in terms of exalting violence as a mechanism of identity affirmation and empowerment” (Guzmán, 2019, p. 290). The intersection of socioeconomic precarity and gender-based violence was particularly visible within urban upper class households. Upper and middle class and upper caste women (both home makers and professionals) who although hold a higher position within the India hierarchical class and caste system due to their upper caste position and financially stable situation, where hit hard by the conventions of patriarchy during the lockdown. With little help from their husbands, some of these women were seen reeling under the pressure of child-care responsibilities, potential redundancy, and irregular work schedules. According to Urvashi Gandhi, the director of a global women’s rights organization, “The load of work [during the lockdown] increased in houses because everybody is at home. With housekeeping staff being unavailable, the expectation is for women to bear the load, and chances of violence increase if she fails to do so” (EPW Engage, 2020).

Trapped within the confines of the domestic space, upper caste and middle class women were at an increasing risk of physical and mental abuse at the hands of their hegemonic masculine partners. In a country where women’s subjugation is pretty much normalized by male-operated social and cultural constructs. It comes as little surprise that women throughout India were subject to yet another contagion—domestic violence and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands and partners, their virility emasculated by uncertainties post the lockdown, lack of social life, physical and social restrictions, and rising stress due to the impending economic crisis (Chakraborty 2020). As per the National Commission of Women such forms of “intimate terrorism” has seen a twofold rise since the lockdown. According to Schneider et al. loss of income for men leads to lesser control over economic security thereby making them exert more control on their partners. In addition, the stress generated from economic instability among middle and lower income families have led to substance abuse disorder including increased alcohol consumption among men resulting in domestic violence of women. Even though The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act enacted in 2005 (also known as the Domestic Violence Act) exists in India, little has been done both by the society, the state, and the judicial system to break down the strictures of the quintessential patriarchal Indian family.

Forced into the walls of domesticity with new roles to fulfill as full time cooks, house helps, cleaners, and teachers, their waiting spaces were converted to zones of chaos, overwork, and constant fatigue. This uncertainty of the liminal stage translated into fear and incapacitation every time the lockdown was extended and their “rites of passage” stalled. Despite seen as a safe haven from the contagion, the private sphere during the lockdown has proved itself far from a dwelling place, conveying “simple pleasures, familial togetherness, privacy and freedom, a sense of belonging, of security, a place to escape from but also to return to, a secure memory, an ideal” (Dixit, & Chavan 2020, p. 13). As Dixit et al. observes, leaving the conventional associations behind, the home needs to be also seen as an institution which has coexisted with other institutions such as slavery, feudalism, capitalism and,
most importantly, with varying forms of patriarchy. For both the housewives and the working women, the domestic sphere has continued to be the site of the production and reproduction of patriarchal ethos and experiences. It is marked by manifestations of power, dominance, violence, unpaid labor, and the reproduction of patriarchy as channelized through practices of child rearing and marriage (Dixit, & Chavan 2020, p. 14). The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown has clearly manifested that domestic violence is a vicious cycle for women irrespective of their caste and class and is a powerful tool used by patriarchal forces to disempower and marginalize women. More so, since most women even in urban India do not have access to helplines, shelter homes, and legal assistance against sexual abuse and domestic violence within the private sphere.

1.3 | **The biopolitical “othering” of lower caste and lower class women**

As seen above, even though upper caste and upper and middle class female lives have been highly gendered during the lockdown—their bodies and mind abused and subjugated by male oppressors, they have escaped the double and triple binds of caste, class, and religious oppressions due to their superior position within the hierarchical class and caste systems. Unlike them, women of lower castes, lower class, and cultural and religious minorities have been subject to biopolitical repressions and exposed to precarious spaces and positions as a result of the pandemic. At this point, it is important to note that the systemic and systematic oppression of lower caste and lower class women are not a postcolonial phenomenon in India. It is an extension of British coloniality’s establishment of homogenous hierarchical cultural and religious systems in India which sealed the fate of caste\(^1\) (as a hierarchical category) forever. While members of the lower castes and classes have suffered economic subjugation, social exclusion including limited access to public properties and resources, women have been marginalized and stigmatized through subjugation of their body and agency. Both upper caste patriarchs and male members of their community meted out sexual and domestic if women dared to redefine boundaries and disrupt patriarchal casteist norms. During the pandemic, such atrocities became several-fold as male social actors promoted by the state’s necropolitical forces violated women to the point of their elimination (death). While upper-caste communities stigmatized and humiliated female bodies as carriers of the covid-19 virus, lower caste men have given themselves to controlling and harassing women through physical and sexual abuse. While the Indian media was able to highlight the state’s necropolitical practices and the sociopolitical death(s) of the lower castes and classes, it is the lower class women who remained invisible from such counterpublic discourses.

Post the declaration of a month long national lockdown along with the suspension of mass transport services by Modi administration and the shutting down of all economic activities, thousands of migrant laborers working in the manufacturing and construction sectors in major Indian metropolises were left without jobs. About 90% of India’s economy is serviced by workers in the informal sector, who are people who have no contract and no job security (Agarwal, 2020). These people are mostly migrant labor and lower class women form a large part of this workforce. With no means of income for livelihood, they were forced to travel back to their hometowns in rural India. Labeled as the “greatest exodus” since India’s partition of 1947 by The Guardian, this movement in times of immobility was nothing short of a contagion for those migrants who succumbed to the long distance travel by foot coupled with hunger and exhaustion in the intolerable summer heat (2020). The class-based stigmatization of the lower class laborers was particularly visible upon their arrival to their home states (such as in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh). These migrant workers were humiliated by state authorities who took it upon themselves to sanitize the bodies of migrant workers (treated as contagions) by making them squat on the grounds and chemically bathing them in disinfectants. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, Yogi Adityanath too suggested that lower caste migrant workers returning to his state were carriers of COVID-19 (Ganguly, 2020). Women laborers including female family members of migrant laborers were not spared from such humiliation and stigma. The fact that this form of cleansing was not practiced in airports when the government brought back
thousands of stranded Indians from different parts of the world speaks volume about class hierarchy and lower class oppression in India (Chakraborty, 2020).

Furthermore, the state employed the “bad citizen” narrative to denounce migrant laborers for being too “impatient” and taking matters in their own hands to journey back to their home states despite state declaration of lockdown. The rationale behind the criticism and relegation of the lower class men and women to the bottom of the hierarchy is twofold. First, for the sovereign state those who reject their “victim” status and refuse to be sustained by biopolitical practices is considered a threat. As per the state, such people pose a fundamental challenge to the sovereign power’s prerogative “of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (Foucault, 2003, p. 254). The state therefore aims to persecute, imprison and eliminate these sections of the population so that political and social contestations can be neutralized. Second, with the economy coming to a halt as a result of the lockdown, it is the working class population that would further burden the state with its financial crisis and poor health conditions. In such a case, the Modi administration saw it is best to manifest its “necropolitical” praxis that is designed to eliminate an entire poorer section of the population in the name of the protection and survival of a nation, even though such state practices breached the right to equality under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. Mbembe’s observation of necropolitical practices fostered by white supremacy and borne in slavery plantations is useful to understand the necropolitics of caste and class supremacists for whom the lower caste laborer as an “instrument of labor… has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used” (2003, p. 21). Just like the slave, the laborer is kept alive but in a state of injury, that is with low wages and precarious, unhygienic living conditions. Just as a slave’s humanity is dissolved having been inflicted with both mental and bodily pain, so too daily wage earners’ suffer from intense cruelty and profanity whose life is possessed by the master. Forced out of lab our post the lockdown, India’s daily wage earners and laborers were driven at the “edge of life” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 39) by hunger, poverty, and incessant contagion driven social stigmatisations. The central and state governments on their part did little to transport the migrant laborers to their homes in India. Instead they chose to eliminate these laborers who were perceived as a burden rather than an asset for the economy. An instance of such necropolitical praxis by the government is the Prime Minister’s failure to address the hardships faced by migrant laborers in any of his speeches during the lockdown. Another instance is the lack of relief packages available for migrant laborers leaving them famished, physically vulnerable to the covid-19 contagion and unable to provide basic needs for their families.

Unlike the upper and middle classes who were contained within the private spheres of their homes to limit the spread of the contagion, the state confined the working class including the migrant workers and urban slum dwellers within precarious spaces. These included city sidewalks and tiny make-shift spaces with limited sanitation, lack of space for social distancing and inadequate ration for the families.

Besides the state, lower class migrant women laborers and female workers from lower caste communities also suffered harassment and humiliation at the hands of upper and middle class and upper caste social actors. The state’s biopolitical call for a lockdown along with social distancing directives and health security measures was at first welcomed by its citizens as a “constructive move” to conserve and control the population from spreading the contagion. However, this mode of governance soon pitted two sections of the population, that is, the upper/middle and lower classes against each other giving rise to state racism. The upper and middle classes were able to abide by the state diktats having had the opportunity to work from home and socially distance with immediate members of their families in their optimally spacious domestic spaces. Having followed the biopolitical norm, the upper and middle classes perceived themselves as superior to the lower classes including domestic workers, migrant and daily wage laborers (both men and women). The latter were looked down upon as inferior, “bad citizens” owing to their inability to follow social distancing measures, living in unhygienic, small, crammed home spaces, and travelling long distances to their home towns despite the lockdown instruction. Furthermore, most lower class communities in India also belong to lower castes and the Dalit/untouchable category. The lower castes, especially Dalits in India have been marginalized for centuries and are now at the forefront of the coronavirus pandemic increasingly discriminated against for the perceived threat of contagion they pose (Ganguly, 2020). Such pandemic-driven social
ostracism was not only practiced by the upper castes, its rhetoric was promoted by high ranking members of the ruling party who openly blamed Dalits for the spreading of the covid-19 infection. Consequently, biopolitical segregation and caste-based ostracism had a direct impact on women laborers and domestic workers who in some states were laid off by their upper and middle class employers without pay or even a month's ration. Many of these women were either wives of migrant laborers or single parents who have had to manage to keep their children alive in times of shortage and the lockdown induced destitution.

Divested of “political status and reduced to bare life” (Agamben, 1998) working class women (unlike their male counterparts who found masculine affirmation in violence and female subjugation within the confines of the home) were pushed further to the “outer edge of life” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 39). Working class including lower caste women shunned by the state, the society, and their male counterparts who constantly harass and marginalize them resided at the bottommost of the necropolitical hierarchy. According to Plummer (1984) for the working classes, the sense of masculinity is associated with hard labor along with distance from femininity. Just like their upper class counterparts, loss of employment and confinement with their female counterpart during the lockdown engendered crisis in the working class men’s masculine sense of self. Such tensions led to increasing physical violence and sexual abuse of women thereby placing the latter at constant risk of losing their lives as they became raw material for necropolitical production (Guzmán, 2019, p. 302). According to media reports, unlike their upper class counterparts who too were subject of domestic abuse during the lockdown, the number of domestic and sexual violence cases among working class and lower caste women were lesser as they were not able to reach out to helplines due to lack of phones. Besides their physical confinement within cramped spaces, lower class and caste women have been subject to invisible confinements/death worlds by the state, denying them basic hygiene products such as menstrual pads especially in the rural areas and contraceptives leading unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases post the lockdown. According to Butalia, “Reproductive and sexual health services did not come within the ambit of essential services, so women had no access to abortions (a right Indian women have had since 1971). Those ready to give birth often had to go from hospital to hospital seeking a bed and medical attention. SAMA, a Delhi-based women’s organization, was forced to file a petition in the courts demanding that pregnant women be given the right to have an ambulance carry them to the hospital” (2020). State, societal, and masculine necropolitics have not only led women to lose control of their bodies but also of their right to education especially in poverty stricken urban and rural areas. Young girls, burdened by domesticity and lacking digital tools for online education have had to prioritize home-making and child rearing over their dream of an upwardly mobile life. Moreover, as an oppressed gender living under the shadows of patriarchy, women in India according to patriarchal cultural diktats are instructed to consume nutrient-rich foods less frequently than men. Such traditions have worsened during the lockdown due to the impact of the economic crisis on the working classes. Malnutrition generated by the current economic crisis could lead to permanent exclusion from the labor market and government workfare schemes, contributing to a new cycle of poverty among working class women.

1.4 | Biopolitical elimination of Muslim minority women

For Muslims minorities, in India, the lived realities of biopolitical citizenship under the current governance are devoid of political participation, social responsibility, rights, and pride in shared national belonging. The anti-Citizenship Act1 passed in December, 2019 that discriminates against Muslim minorities, making illegal, persecuted Muslim migrants from neighboring countries ineligible for citizenship in India, was not concerned with the constitutional rights of citizens, nor with mapping out the relationship between citizen and state. It was designed to define, limit, and remove the entitlements to citizenship from Muslim nationals in India. The aim was not only to restrict illegal Muslim immigrants to India but also to create “aliens” within the borders of the nation state (Mbembe, 2003). The passage of this Act through parliament was thus a significant event in the history of Indian race relations. A moment when, through citizenship, racism was implicitly incorporated within the judicial body of
the state becoming an active component of its operational system of legal justice. The creation of such an Act that constitutionalized racism created palpable anxiety among Muslim minorities. The consequences were protests and demonstrations in India’s capital Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh area. Although the protests came to a halt amidst the pandemic and the nationwide lockdown, the state employed its necropower to persecute, imprison and eliminate, the protestors—its political enemy. The aim was to neutralize social and political contestations. The Hindutva narrative justified that the existence of the Other, in this case the Muslim protestors is a “mortal threat” and an “absolute danger”. The narrative further promoted that the security of the Hindutva nation state can only be strengthen with the “biopolitical elimination” of the protestors. Police officials under state directive arrested several Muslim activists who led the 101 days-long sit-in protest in Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh neighborhood. Among the detainees was a pregnant postgraduate student and activist, Safoora Zarghar’s arrested on charges of inflammatory speeches and instigating communal violence under the draconian anti-terror laws, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Her imprisonment in Delhi’s notoriously overcrowded Tihar Jail since 25th March (when the lockdown was declared) has called upon widespread media attention and global outrage. The incarceration of Zargar and the obduracy of courts in refusing her bail points towards constitutionalized racism while the state’s use of terror laws points toward an indefinite suspension of liberties and rights promised by citizenship. Such dehumanization was further aided by social actors including mainstream media and Hindutva groups who sought to vilify Zargar’s character and disseminated false information regarding her marital status and the legitimacy of her pregnancy. This dehumanized treatment which amounts to symbolic death for Muslim minorities was aided in part by racist stereotypes that flourished in the initial days of the lockdown. Indian Muslims were held responsible for a global Islamic congregation held in mid-March in Delhi by the Tablighi Jamaat that led to a surge in Covid-19 cases in India. Indian attendees were presumed to have been infected by the foreign delegates. Hashtags like “coronajihad” and labels such as “corona terrorism” and “talibani crime” were rampantly used on social media platforms and by Hindutva right wing nationalists on news media to systematically oppress Muslims all over India (Chakraborty, 2020). Such state and societal necropolitical praxes resulted in bloodshed, social ostracisation and eviction of both Muslim men and women from their homes in different parts of the country.

1.5 | Reading lived experiences beyond the single axis framework

The pandemic crisis in different ways has brought to light the socioeconomic, cultural, and political predicaments of women who are subalternized, invisibilized, and subjected to necropolitical praxes on the basis of gender, caste, class, color, and religion in India. The biopolitical techniques and social and moral practices that were designed and implemented to “control,” “classify,” and “oppose” (Foucault, 2003) religious minorities and lower castes and classes prior to the pandemic under the aegis of a Hindu nationalist government became several-fold under confinement and constant state surveillance post lockdown. Working class women who are doubly and triply unequally placed in the gender, class, and caste hierarchies have found it especially difficult to cope and sustain socioeconomically during the lockdown. Thus far, I have represented the predicament of women who have been invisibilized, biopolitically eliminated and disposed by the state, society and caste, class, and gender patriarchs during the pandemic. Such subalternization not only brings to question the idea of modernity and the nature of progress in India but also the dearth of discourses and public sphere deliberations on women especially from lower castes and classes and those from ethnic and religious minority groups. Such “subjugations of life to the power of death” (Mbembe, 2003, 2019) requires an immediate revisitation into Indian feminist theoretical frameworks and discourses that have overlooked racial, cultural, and historical specificities of lower class, caste, and ethnic minority women and homogenized the contemporary theory of gender. Before plans of adopting a more gender-inclusive policy planning and implementation in the face of pandemic crisis, before India enters into the postcoronavirus era, it is important to engage with an intersectional feminist framework that rejects universalized/homogeneous notion of “women.” Drawing from Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory, the intersectional feminist framework aims to unearth complex, varied, and often contradictory effects which
ensue “when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective, and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 76). Against upper caste feminist discourses in India who having had access to social and cultural capital choose to define their movement through the lens of gender, disregarding class and caste questions, the intersectional feminist framework aims to highlight both the diversity of women’s experiences and the multiplicity of their subject positions. In doing so, this theoretical paradigm attempts to manifest the obscured forms of class, caste, and gender oppression that operate within the postcolonial Indian setting. Such an alternative framework not only aims to emphasize on to the ways in which biopolitical and societal oppression works beyond gender for women marginalized by caste, class, race and religion in India but also the ways in which it can challenge the invisibilization of such oppressions from public sphere discourses.

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ENDNOTES
1 The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and the Shudras. Many believe that the categories originated from Brahma, the Hindu God of creation. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have come from Brahma’s head, then came the Kshatriyas, or the warriors and rulers, supposedly from his arms. The third slot went to the Vaishyas, or the traders, who were created from his thighs. At the bottom were the Shudras, who came from Brahma’s feet and were meant to do the menial jobs. Outside of this Hindu caste system were the Dalits or the untouchables. The system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups. Manusmriti, widely regarded as the authoritative book on Hindu law acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society. While the caste system was fairly malleable in the precolonial era, British colonialism fixed these social categories so that people remained trapped within these narrow social identities with no possibility to move up the social ladder.

2 Only 46% of Indian women have mobile phone access.

3 In rural India, only 14.9% had access to the internet with males being the primary users.

4 The Citizenship Amendment Act passed in December, 2019 amended the Indian citizenship to illegal migrants who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and who entered India before 2014 following the religious persecutions. The bill does not mention Muslims and other communities who fled from the same or other neighboring countries. The proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) will be an official record of all legal citizens of India. The amendment has been widely criticized as discriminating on the basis of religion, particularity for excluding Muslims. Protestors against the amendment demand that it be scrapped and that the nationwide NRC not be implemented.

5 Indian feminist discourse which ought to bring gender-justice to all Indian women has suppressed the caste question to such an extent that “feminism” itself has been seen as a modality of subjugating women from lower caste and poorer communities. By the 1990s, it became clear that mobilization of the feminist movement was occurring separately to caste issues. The feminist movement was marked by a Brahmanical (upper-caste) perspective, while lower-caste issues were ignored. With little to no political or economic power, Dalit women across India continue to face caste, class, and gender-based oppression with little support from mainstream feminist movements.

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