Pandemic Governmentality and Houselessness: Interrogating Management of COVID-19 through an Analysis of Dwelling

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its response eroded the survival mechanisms that precarious populations have at their disposal in enduring urban dispossessions. Centring a politics of dwelling, this paper examines how pandemic governance fractured inhabitation practices to uphold hegemonic notions of home and housing. As the 'home' was seen as an important site to shield from the virus, those inhabiting the streets were perceived as contaminators, and coercive and carceral measures were introduced to confine these groups physically, economically, socially, and politically. As an analytical framing, we centre *biopolitics* and *hygienisation* to argue that pandemic governmentality reiterated the 'more-than neoliberal' trajectories of urban transformation and the disproportionate impacts on the vulnerable urban groups. With an empirical focus on Mumbai, this article examines the impact the COVID-19 governance, particularly the sudden lockdown, had on the unhoused in Indian cities. By highlighting how developmental ontologies of housing have shaped the politics of houselessness in urban India, we argue that pandemic governmentality has ruptured incremental practices of inhabitation and inventive modes of survival in the city through: the destruction of dwelling, the inadequate provision of shelter, and forced spatial confinement.

Keywords: Houselessness, dwelling, COVD-19, governmentality, biopolitics, Mumbai

Introduction

The imposition of lockdown to curb COVID-19 in India was not only sudden, but also violent. The state's response to the pandemic has produced new structural conditions for cities. Bhan *et al.* (2020) stress that the responses and management of the pandemic is embedded in a Northern and elite ontological position of managing cities and urban crises. They have argued that the 'pandemic has not, as is sometimes inferred in recent commentary, made residents newly vulnerable…. What the pandemic has done is profoundly erode the arrangements that they create and recreate' (Bhan *et al.* 2020: 2). Advancing this argument, this paper asserts that people's housing practices are a crucial frame to understand how all other aspects of survival – such as livelihood, and access to basic services such as food, sanitation, and health and relief measures – were intricately linked to the governance of the pandemic and the ability of the vulnerable urban populations to cope. As the 'home' was seen as an important site to shield from the virus, those inhabiting the streets were perceived as contaminators, and several measures were introduced to confine these groups physically, economically, socially, and politically – leading to a disruption of existing socio-spatial arrangements of dwelling in public spaces and the tenuous political claims to the city that the houseless had incrementally established over the years. Thus, social distancing administered through control over bodies and policing of densities became a political tool of governing the pandemic (Banerjee & Yacobi 2021; Bhan *et al.* 2020). In centring a politics of dwelling, this paper not only highlights alternative practices of inhabitation in the city, but also critiques a developmental notion of housing that fractured the pandemic response.

For a majority of the urban residents in the Global South, the pandemic was not a health issue; rather, it was an issue of deprivation of inhabitation exacerbated by authoritative governmentality. It was also an issue of hunger, loss of livelihood, and erasure of social networks and collective forms of life that enable people to survive in an already harsh city. With an empirical focus on Mumbai, this article presents the findings of the research project 'Interrogating (Un)safety', which examined the impact of the COVID-19 governance, particularly the sudden lockdown, on the unhoused in Indian cities. We use 'unhoused' (rather than 'homeless') as a terminology to understand the lockdown impact on urban inhabitants who live on streets, open spaces, and what is generally understood as public spaces. This terminology recognises that that home is subjective, and that people have varied practices of making, feeling, and being at home, even though they may not have a permanent address or a roof over their heads. In dominant planning imaginations, a very market-based (physical, interior, and often perceived as 'safe') space gets circulated as 'home'. It is important to distinguish this category of urban inhabitant, and their dwelling practices, because often they get *invisibilised* in the narratives of urban poverty and informal housing that are predominantly focused on slum settlements (Banerjee 2018), which houses almost 42 percent of the city's population (2011 Census). In the 2011 Census, the homeless population of the city was reportedly 58,000; this number is refuted by activists, who claim that the homeless population is closer to 250,000. Thus, this paper focuses on the unhoused not only because they are some of the most-vulnerable groups in the urban sphere, but also because their presence has been deeply obscured in mainstream development and crisis-management imaginations. This invisibilisation during the pre-pandemic times was evident through the various negative labels of identification, such as that of 'vagrants', 'encroachers',

'homeless' and 'beggars'. As Banerjee (2023: 15) articulates, 'These perceptions produce a material effect in the way these groups are treated by powerful actors, such as administrative and law enforcing authorities, upper-class residents, NGOs and charities, and so forth.' During the pandemic, this apathy was manifested through initiatives like the *Dharavi model*, where the focus of the pandemic response was entirely on slum populations (Bhide & Kamble 2020; Kaushal & Mahajan 2021).

In order to understand the ways in which the houseless community was experiencing and coping with the pandemic-induced lockdown, we conducted an interpretivist qualitative study, employing reflexive thematic analysis, to understand participants' experiences of the pandemic and the meanings they assigned to them. The research study was conducted between September 2020 and August 2021 in Mumbai. In order to gain access to the extremely vulnerable urban groups, we consciously collaborated with one of the co-authors of this paper, Brijesh Arya, a grassroots activist who has a long history of engagement with houseless groups and who was also involved in the relief efforts. This collaboration helped us understand the context and define the methodology and parameters of our study, enabled access to the community and other stakeholders for data collection, and helped us to collectively analyse and interpret the findings through multiple iterative discussions once the data was codified and themes began to emerge. This research called for reflexivity, empathy, and understanding positionality, given that we were studying marginalised and stigmatised groups who were now coping with the sudden loss of livelihood, the wilful neglect from the state, and threats of eviction and displacement – a disruption of their 'collective life' that had been tenuously constructed through their agency and resourcefulness before the pandemic struck. Documents such as newspapers, government orders, notices and non-government reports, and court cases were analysed to build an understanding of the unfolding situation and identify stakeholders who could be interviewed over digital mediums or in person. We focused our field observations and interviews in three separate houseless communities that had been living on the streets in different locations in central Mumbai for at least the past two decades, and conducted 12 in-depth interviews with their community members. Separate focused group discussions were conducted with the women from each of the three houseless communities to understand gendered differences in the experience of the pandemic. We concurrently generated and analysed data using reflexive thematic analysis, which involves reading the transcripts and field notes, and inductively generating interpretive themes reflecting commonalities in participants' experiences. The following paper is drawn from our analysis of the data, which focuses on how dominant ideas of housing and public health shaped pandemic governmentality and, consequently, the treatment of the urban houseless. For retaining the anonymity of research participants, names and all identifiable markers have been changed.

In the subsequent section, we engage in theoretical reflections on the evolving state ideology to understand the pandemic governmentality. The final section of the paper is structured in two ways. We first provide a context to understand the official framing, the general disregard for the dignity of the urban houseless, and the politics of developmentalism that have shaped interventions around homelessness in India, which in turn shaped the state and urban response to vulnerable urban inhabitants such as the unhoused. We then extend our understanding of the pandemic governmentality to analyse

how disruption of marginalised dwelling was at the centre of state's response during the pandemic.

Evolving state ideology and governance of dwelling

Globally, governance of COVID-19 was centred on the notion of production and maintenance of 'safety' through the 'stay-at-home' ideal, which wrongly assumed that everyone is adequately housed (Brickell 2020). Thus, COVID-19 and its management have accelerated and further exacerbated the crisis of urban inhabitation. Fenley (2020) has argued that stay-at-home order is one that assumes all citizens have equal ability to co-produce a public health value of containing the spread of the disease, and those who do not have the resources to follow the order are immediately compromised in their ability to actively and equitably participate in the production of citizenship. In India, the strict regulation of public spaces during the pandemic, especially the street and those who inhabit the street, follows from the existing urban development trajectories entrenched in a neoliberal, revanchist, entrepreneurial state, which has from time to time exercised its power to assert control over the use, the access to, and the behaviour within public spaces through gating and exclusion, through beautification of pavements, through the design of bus shelters or park benches that prevent sleeping or resting, through the hyper-surveillance of these spaces through CCTV cameras, and through periodic eviction drives of the houseless clusters or street vendors occupying public spaces. Often, such efforts at sanitising and beautifying public spaces in cities are justified on grounds of moral arguments put forth by middle-class, propertied residents who often hold stereotypical views of the houseless and other 'undesirable' citizens as lazy, criminal, dirty, immoral, and prone to dangerous habits such as drugs and violence (Kundu & Satija 2023). Thus, management of the pandemic through the creation and maintenance of 'social distancing' was not just epidemiological but biopolitical. As Banerjee and Yacobi (2021: 6) have argued, 'This narrow vision of distance invariably excluded populations who did not inhabit conventional homes. Street dwellers, homeless people and those living in informal settlements were particularly impacted.'

Burte and Kamath (2023) argue that cities in the Global South, such as Mumbai, are facing unprecedented forms of socio-spatial restructuring under the more-than-neoliberal forms of urban governance. Grandiose plans of urban redevelopment and spectacular urban infrastructure projects are central to the restructuring of urban land and the web of social relations. The state and the market are deeply implicated in these transformations, which invariably and disproportionately harm the poor and the marginalised. Yet, the authors argue, such violence against particular vulnerable social groups in the city is normalised 'as a step towards achieving a new social order [producing] a wider moral consensus on what kinds of city spaces, modes of inhabitation, and values are to be legitimately furthered and dismantled by state policy, planning and investment, and societal action' (Burte & Kamath 2023: 454). These state-led and market-driven projects of spatial restructuring are decoupled from notions of public welfare and alleviation of urban poverty. On the contrary, they act as projects of social engineering, where particular urban groups are disciplined with the actual or threatened use of legitimate or sanctioned force by the state. More importantly, this kind of socio-spatial restructuring of our cities involves producing symbolic consent for the use of violence amongst different societal actors, simultaneously co-opting and

excluding those who do not confirm and thereby fracturing possibilities of collective resistance. However, studies of everyday practices of the houseless inhabiting the city, of making and experiencing a home, of negotiating with the police, shopkeepers, and other residents to occupy and transform public spaces have not only revealed resistance to the revanchist city, but have also challenged and widened our narrow definitions of what comprises a home (Banerjee 2022). Alliances with civil society actors have also led to certain legitimisation of claims through access to government-approved identity documents (such as a voter's ID or an Aadhar card) that allude to the street as their residence. The houseless have coped against the revanchist tendencies by building strong relationships to their locality, using public infrastructure such as toilets, lamp posts, and water outlets for their daily needs, and by simply continuing to inhabit and make these spaces as their own.

We argue that the pandemic precipitated, catalysed, and consolidated neoliberal trajectories and exacerbated the suffering and harm of the urban houseless while delegitimising their everyday practices of home-making. Pandemic governance was predicated upon the need to conduct strict surveillance over bodies and settlements in order to check the contagion. Therefore, by enacting the colonial era Epidemic Act, the state took visible control over the city and its inhabitants by dictating the terms of everyday mobility, social distancing, and regulations over maintaining hygiene in public spaces. The police became the most visible organ of the state during the pandemic. In India, the Epidemic Act was used instead of the more recent National Disaster Management Act, thereby circumventing a more participatory process wherein non-state actors, such as civil-society organisations and trained civic guards, could support the urban local government in its efforts to mitigate the disaster and distribute relief in an organised and citizen-friendly fashion (Bhide & Kamble 2020). This too, we argue, follows from the overall trajectory of a more-than-neoliberal state trying to ensure compliance to the ways in which the city is to be ultimately governed. As Kidambi (2020) articulates:

> 'In February 1897, the colonial government introduced the Epidemic Diseases Act to combat the plague pandemic. This law gave the state a range of intrusive powers that allowed it to control both the dwellings and bodies of urban residents. These powers were used disproportionately against the poorer residents of the city. As it happens, it was this very act that was invoked by the current government when COVID-19 came to be designated a pandemic.'

We argue that violence is embedded in the ways the state-market nexus works in the territorial reconfiguration of city spaces and in disciplining particular groups to establish hegemonic urban visions (Ghertner 2011; Bjorkman 2014; Banerjee 2023a). In the governance of the pandemic, the state used overt violence over the bodies of people it considered a threat to public health, safety, and public order – migrant workers fleeing the city, homeless persons looking for food and water on the street, and street vendors struggling for their livelihood were summarily beaten up by police forces in the name of keeping the city safe from possible 'super-spreaders'. This, we argue, simultaneously reinforced the hegemonic ideas of 'home' as a safe space, as a physical structure of dwelling, while policing, displacing, and disrupting any other forms of precarious dwelling

arrangements in the city that did not conform to this idea of the home, which added to the vulnerability of houseless groups in the city. There is a continuum in the way housing has been increasingly packaged as a commodity for exchange and investment in a city caught up in cycles of restructuring and value-extraction from land and real estate. This way, the governance of the pandemic privileged the housing stock produced through state-market interventions, while destabilising and delegitimising auto-constructed dwelling arrangements of the poor, especially those that do not adhere to the form or aesthetics of a home.

Following the biopolitical power of the state, the period of pandemic governance only served to consolidate and intensify the surveillance and policing over people's bodies. This has precedence in the recent governmental logics to entangle social security measures – such as the Aadhar card, which is based on digitisation of unique bodily identification – with techniques of state apparatus. As Swatie and Mehra (2022:3) argue: '[T]he biopolitical governmentality of the Indian state operated at several levels to politicise "life itself" – the logic of contagion [is] based on ideas of threat perception and risk, racism through the notion that certain sections of the population are disposable, as well as through economics and governmental refusal to participate in citizen welfare…. [T]he invaluable relief work done by nongovernmental actors such as NGOs, gurdwaras, unions, and individual citizen-volunteers also follows the biopolitical logic of *making live*, yet departs from the raison d'état of the biopolitical Indian state. This is a state invested in itself and [it] uses the logic of human life as a means to justify its own existence.' But not all citizens were considered as threats in the same manner. 'The threat caused by the perception of risk and danger to other bodies from a contaminated body is viewed through a clinical gaze. Yet this gaze is differently applied to various sectors of the population, as certain sectors are deemed riskier than others' (*ibid.*). Certainly, in the governance of the pandemic, while the *citizens* were being persuaded and mandated to stay at home, the houseless were subject to coercive disciplining through the disruptions of their dwelling. This is because they were regarded as possible carriers and spreaders of their disease, in tune with the popular (mis)conception that they are dirty and live in unhygienic, crowded situations in the street. This Focauldian analysis thus offers an understanding of the intersections of contagion and the racist logic of the state to rationalise why the houseless were high in the risk assessment, and were treated as 'threats' to be managed to protect the wider city.

We advance the biopolitical analysis of pandemic governance to argue that logics of *hygienisation*, which pathologised marginalised urban inhabitants, were at the centre of the coercive and carceral responses in relation to dwelling. Hygienisation is a particular mode of urban displacement that is directly informed by legacies of colonialism, racial and class stigma, informality, and state violence characteristic of the cities of the postcolonial 'Global South' state (Garmany & Richmond 2020). It emphasises the 'state's' role in systematically and violently displacing low-income housing and informal economies to justify neoliberal urban development, exclusionary urban planning, and dispossessive interventions around public health, environment, and other forms of welfare (*ibid.*: 129). While not used explicitly as a primary justification, colonial hygienist theories of disease and bacteriology inform policies that treat the urban poor as an infection harmful to the greater social body. The pandemic response of the urban India state draws parallels with the way the colonial administration managed plague in the late 1890s, which eventually shaped contemporary

city-planning logics of producing and maintaining divided cities through the rationale of *cordon sanitaire* (Kidambi 2004).

Disruption of dwelling

How do then-developmental ontologies of housing help understand dwelling dispossessions caused by the governance of the pandemic? In order to understand that, it is imperative to briefly examine the gaps of homelessness activism in India. In India, there is no official definition of 'homelessness', and activistic mobilisation around the issue has been relatively recent. To be precise, it is not that informal living and squatting are new phenomena of the Indian city, but that the recent emergence around homelessness and shelter-centric activism can be associated with the apathy of the state towards the most glaring forms of urban dispossession on one hand and streamlined organising around houselessness on the other (Banerjee 2023a). The Census of India have, instead, defined 'houseless households' as those 'which do not live in buildings or Census houses but live in the open or roadside, pavements, in hume pipes, under fly-overs and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, etc.' (Census of India 2011). This official framing of the urban housing crisis is noteworthy, as it acknowledges the socio-spatial realities of dwelling. Banerjee (2023a) argues that such framings not only highlight the non-Western realities of urban living, but also suggest that home is experienced in a variety of ways. However, there is a disjuncture in the way the official census definition enumerates houselessness and in the way recent civil-society mobilisations around 'homelessness' in India advocate for it. We assert that this disjuncture is manifested in the varying ideological positions of responding to houselessness in India. This also provides us a context to understand the governance of the pandemic through the management and control of people's practices of inhabitation.

Findings from the 2011 census revealed that houselessness has increased significantly in cities, rendering it a predominantly urban character (Singh *et al*. 2018). City-specific estimates revealed that there were 57,416 houseless people (15,274 households) under the MCGM. Activists and civil-society organisations with long-term engagement with houselessness in the city claimed that the census majorly undercounted the number of houseless in the city (HRLN 2021). They also pointed out that the majority of the houseless in the city are multigenerational families: people who have settled in the city for generations and children who are born houseless into these families. Homeless Collective, a group of civil-society organisations and individuals in Mumbai, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 2012, citing the gross inadequacy of the number and condition of shelters in the city (Homeless Collective vs. MCGM and Ors 2012). The petition pointed out that according to the Shelters for Urban Homeless (SUH) scheme under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM), for every one *lakh* of urban population, provisions need to be made for permanent, all-weather community shelters for a minimum of one-hundred persons. Currently, there are less than 15 operational shelter homes in a city of 1.24 million people (Sodhi 2021; Surve 2023).

Considering the historical presence of houselessness in Indian cities and the gravity of the marginalisation of the houseless, policies and schemes available to safeguard the rights of the houseless have been relatively recent and limited in scope (HRLN). Critiques argue that

there are gross deficiencies in quantitative availability of shelters and, qualitatively, several provisions of national shelter guidelines are in contravention, making living conditions deplorable for inhabitants. In many of our interviews, during the project and in previous research (Banerjee 2023a; b), people have expressed that even in times of crises that make street-living conditions excruciating, moving to a shelter is not an option. This is due to the bureaucracies involved in admitting inhabitants in a shelter; but, more importantly, institutional shelters jeopardise basic freedoms and lead to further deprivation of the quality of life. Thus, historical inadequacy of shelter became a key focus of housing activist's opposition to the state during COVID-19. In a PIL hearing regarding the condition of the houseless communities during COVID-19, Bombay High Court remarked that if the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) wished to raise the standard of the city to an international level, as is so often publicised, it is required to put up shelters in every ward of the city (Sequeira 2021) (Brijesh Arya vs MCGM 2021). The court pointed out that if there were enough shelters, then so many people wouldn't have to remain out on the streets during the pandemic.

This context around shelter-centric politics provides a useful framework to analyse pandemic governmentality and its management of urban poor populations through three key lenses of disruption of dwelling: i. destruction of dwelling through forced evictions; ii. inadequacy of shelter, and iii. punitive spatial confinements

i. Destruction of dwelling

Respondents recounted increased forced eviction, wherein several state and non-state actors coalesced to displace and evict them from urban spaces and sites they considered their homes. As a result, the presence of houseless populations (in their own homes) in urban spaces were regarded as violation of the lockdown order that severely restricted and regulated citywide movement. In many places, therefore, the public health emergency was turned into a law-and-order issue wherein the police enforced the lockdown as a coercive punishment rather than as a preventive remedy.

> 'During lockdown, the police wouldn't allow us to live here. We were asked to leave our regular settlement out on the road and hide behind the barricade, in the little space next to the railway lines, so that we would not be seen on the road. We lived there for 5-6 months. Some of them would say that it is for our own safety from the disease. The railway police did not want us to live inside. They would drive us outside. So, we would roam around the whole day here and there and then come back in the evening to sleep inside the barricaded area. We would stick to each other, praying. There were so many nights we didn't sleep, couldn't sleep because of the mosquitoes, so many nights we slept hungry when we did not manage to get anything to eat.'
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> *- Notes from interview with respondent V*

The priority of the state machinery seemed to want the streets 'clean' (Shantha 2020). Unprovoked attacks on the houseless, eviction, displacement, and keeping bodies in a persistent unsettled state of movement (Kawash 1998) meant that, within the larger agenda of keeping the city 'safe', the houseless did not figure. For the majority of the houseless

research participants interviewed, this 'outside' was the only home that they had ever known in the city. In cities of the Global South, squatting is a historical feature of urban formation (Nakamura 2014; Banerjee 2023b) and, as Banerjee (2023a) demonstrates, public dwellings are a generational feature of South Asian cities. However, official discourses on urban housing have deliberately invisibilised these versions of home, and the pandemic was a stark moment to witness this apathy. Violence seemed to be fairly common though, not just among the houseless but among all marginalised communities in cities (Ekka 2021). In many cases, those who made the desperate decision to move out of their dwelling spaces in search of food and ration or work were looked at as offenders and meted with police violence.

> 'We were not allowed to even sit outside. The police would immediately start beating [us] up, saying "Don't be seen on the road!" My shack is on the other side of the road, and I couldn't even come over this side to stretch or get fresh air. We had to remain cooped up in our little space the whole time. If one went walking to work, whatever one could find, even for a small distance, the police would directly start hitting us with their *lathis*, if they saw us. They would talk about the matter later; first, they would shower us with their blows.'
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> *- Notes from interview with respondent W*

Cycles of regular evictions continued in urban locations despite the interim stay on all demolitions and evictions proclaimed by a Bombay High Court (HC) order in the context of the pandemic in March 2020 (which got extended several times, including till 30 Sept 2021). While passing the order, the presiding judge had said, 'We are not inclined to grant any relief (from the stay order), as we do not want anyone to be dispossessed and without a home during the pandemic' (Dodhiya 2020).

ii. Inadequacy of shelter

Civil society actors, such as housing-rights activists, lawyers, and academics, urgently demanded the government to make provisions for temporary shelters for urban communities who were exposed and rendered vulnerable as the disease intensified. As noted earlier, COVID-19 was a crucial moment for housing-rights activists to draw attention to the continuing inadequacy of shelter provision by the state. In addition to demanding immediate shelters, it was asserted that shelters should be equipped with basic facilities, such as kitchen spaces and regularly sanitised washrooms, and be ensured that they do not become crowded. It was also suggested that families be rehabilitated together with their belongings, and not be separated (Mahale 2020). Following pressures from legal advocacy, the Government of Maharashtra passed an order to convert government schools into shelters for those left exposed so as to shield them from the virus, ostensibly after the highly televised and internationally covered 'migrant crisis' (Ashar 2020a). However, the most obvious policy that was targeted towards the urban houseless was rooted in a shelter-centric understanding. For instance, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MHUA), on the 28th of March, issued a nationwide order for the distribution of free food three times a day in the DAY-NULM shelters. The inherent assumption in such provisions was that the urban houseless reside in shelters, which, as argued previously, is not the case. Neither do such

policies question the gross violations in the provision of shelters. Thus, those urban groups who were likely to benefit from these orders got excluded from basic relief provisions such food, sanitation, and healthcare.

Interviews with housing-rights activists and with houseless respondents revealed two noteworthy aspects about the politics around the availability of temporary shelters during crisis. First, the list of temporary shelters released by the MCGM was not made easily available anywhere in the public domain, where it could be accessed by people who would have needed it most. The list(s) kept changing, and were usually shared over online platforms like Twitter or messaging apps like WhatsApp, which remained inaccessible to most of the houseless community. Essential and practical signposting was missing, therefore, for those who needed to use the facilities most had absolutely no idea about the temporary shelters put in place during the time. Thus, lists, as information circulation mediums, that were produced to carry out relief provisions, were themselves political tools of governing the pandemic. Second, the heightened stigmatisation of the houseless was palpable in the way (upper-class) local residents and political representatives opposed temporary shelters in their localities. For instance, a local ward corporator expressed her bias in the most exclusionary and discriminatory tones: 'If such people are brought near your home, would you welcome them? I do understand that there is a need to find safe accommodation for the migrant labourers and the homeless, but why should all of them be sheltered in *my* ward [emphasis added]? (Ashar 2020b)' Upper-class residents worried about their own safety, claiming that the 'street-side dwellers' were gathered in one place, next to their residential buildings, without being tested and allowed to 'wander around freely' (*ibid*.). Thus, the decision to utilise schools as temporary shelters had to be redacted later because concerns were expressed with respect to possible 'damage' to school properties and, more importantly, the threat from disease-carrying bodies.

iii. Spatial confinement through forced shelterisation

While shelter-centric mobilisations gained pace and proved to be a crucial point of refuge for urban communities, such as recently-made homeless migrants, the pandemic ruptured ongoing ideological tensions around dwelling in the city. This determined focus on shelter once again underscored the disregard for people's experiences and habits of homing (Banerjee 2023a).

In India, as in many other contexts, the conceptualisation and implications of the pandemic quickly extended from the 'physio-social' to the 'psycho-social' realm wherein people belonging to lower-income groups, castes, and minority religions were erroneously implicated as super-spreaders of the disease and treated unequally (Biswas, Chatterjee & Sultana 2021). Existing studies have argued that interventions for the houseless communities in developing countries are frequently negative and unhelpful, primarily because they tend to exist in an environment of suspicion, hostility, and apathy towards the houseless – which is supported and maintained by discourses in the public space and media (Speak & Tipple 2006). Without correcting the popular misconceptions about the community, exacerbated especially during a crisis, even the most well-meaning interventions cannot have their intended effects. Since the popular perception had marked the houseless as disease-carrying bodies, the limited support extended was confronted with hostilities.

The urge for containment took its most extreme form through instances of forced sheltering. This approach highlighted the hygienising tendencies of the state on one hand, and people's resistance on the other. In several places, the houseless were forcefully moved to establishments far away from their place of inhabitation and kept under carceral conditions. All such attempts were resisted actively.

> 'We were taken to a huge tower in xx. BMC and police told us that they will give us homes to take shelter against the Corona disease. We were also happy (because in the initial days we feared the disease since we didn't know much about it)…. Since we reached late at night, we thought preparing food would not be possible, so we slept off hungry. In the morning, young kids started feeling hungry and calling out for food…. 10 o'clock passed, then 11, 12, and even after 1pm there was no sight of food. So, we went and told them the kids were unconsolably crying for food, and if you don't give us something to eat, how will we survive? Then they got us *khichdi*. They didn't even give us *chai*. Later on, slowly, they started giving us instructions: eat whatever we give you, don't come down, don't go outside your room. They put a mesh around the building and locked it from outside. The *khichdi* they gave us all the time was such that it was unpalatable and caused many of us to get diarrhoea. Many of us stopped eating that and sat hungry. We were not the only ones there, there were people from all over; the whole building was full. Everyone got so bored; five days seemed like five years. Then, at the end of five days that we somehow spent there, we fought with the police, broke the lock, and all rushed out.'
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> *- Notes from interview with respondent X*

Such violent and forceful sheltering was also reported from other cities in the country in India (Sirur 2020). The policy of forced sheltering executed through violence and coercion, although implemented in the name of safety, made the houseless feel unsafe. Due to the lack of attention to maintaining wellbeing and protection against the disease – such as proper arrangements for nutritious food, water, sanitation, provision to arrange one's own meal, or even awareness drives about the disease itself – in addition to the prison-like environment, it can be inferred that the objective of this measure was to segregate the houseless community to ensure the 'health' of the city, and not due to any safety concerns for the houseless themselves.

Hygienising tendencies were palpable in the way the houseless, after being forcefully displaced, returned to find their dwelling spaces appropriated by urban forces through efforts such as beautification.

> 'They had prepared it all. They cleaned up the place and filled it up with soil. I feel they had deliberately planned to send us away so as to steal our place. When we returned, we removed the soil and asked them, why should we go? We won't go. For you, it's a footpath; for us, it is our home.'
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> *- Notes from interview with respondent Y*

In all our interviews, and in many of the initial news reports during the early phases of the pandemic, the houseless community preferred to be on the street, in their familiar spaces, not only because of access to ration and other things provided by civil society and other do-gooders, but also because of their networks and social relations. This was specifically true of intergenerational houseless families, who did not want to be separated from family members, pets, and their everyday familiar environment. Moreover, women and girls felt unsafe in being sent to shelters, where they knew no one else and lacked the informal protection of members of the community. The complete lack of agency in such shelter homes, and the overcrowding, also prevented the houseless community from actively seeking shelter away from their streets. The state disregarded this understanding of 'home' embedded in social reproduction and the sense of safety and resourcefulness associated with it. If 'stay-at-home' orders were interpreted more sensitively and enacted in spirit to ensure safety against the virus in relation to the houseless, it would have meant for them to be left in the spaces they call 'home', albeit with conducive arrangements for clean drinking water, nutritious food, accessible sanitation services, and medicines.

> 'We were taken somewhere… It was a big centre around Goregaon area. They told us we would be safe from disease, and we will get food. We were dropped there. We took our kids and belongings and came back. We could not live there. We get our livelihood and money from here. In the new place, who knows us, who will give us work? Would only food suffice? We would need money/jobs too, right?"
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> *- Notes from interview with respondent Z*

Conclusion

Internationally, early on in the pandemic, housing had been pronounced a frontline defence against the coronavirus, to the extent that evictions in the face of the pandemic were characterised as amounting to a 'potential death sentence' (Farha 2020). But the local government in cities failed to recognise the different housing efforts of the poor as their defence against the virus. Our paper argues that homelessness, being unhoused, and other forms of deprivation in relation to inhabitation are historical continuities of structural violence embedded in urban spatial transformation (Burte & Kamath 2023). It is more than a lack of adequate shelter. The state has played an active role in exacerbating the crisis of inhabitation in Indian cities by deploying plans and laws favouring a neoliberal urban transformation ideal. Thus, not only were particularly dwelling arrangements discriminated upon, but the governance of the pandemic was shaped by existing socio-economic inequalities, stigma, and prejudices against the urban poor. The dominance of shelter-centric activism in India conflates home and house, often disregarding the functional and cultural uses of dwelling for people (Banerjee 2023b). This got manifested starkly during the management of the pandemic, where the urban houseless were rendered hypervisible owing to their spatial status. Management of houselessness was rendered necessary through forceful spatial confinement (such as through forced shelterisation), displacement, and spatial erasures in order to invisibilise the hypervisible urban populations. This is not surprising, considering that during the span of the pandemic in the year 2020, the Indian

state was engaged in evicting at least 20 people every hour, and that over 16 million people lived under the threat of evictions and displacement (HLRN 2021: 16). In some of the houseless clusters, in fact, the people interviewed welcomed the coronavirus pandemic due to the temporary respite it provided from the timely eviction cycles, hence indicating that, for them, the timely violence of evictions is more problematic than the pandemic.

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