The Pandemic of Productivity

The Work of Home and the Work from Home

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ABSTRACT: Initially with the massive outbreak of COVID-19, physical distancing in the form of stay-at-home campaigns made the headlines. The most stringent lockdown period in India was envisaged by the privileged class as a productive time at home. I show that the home as a space of leisure and intimacy is also a site of caste and gender privilege that upholds the social division of labour. By looking at both the work of home and the work from home, I problematise the notion of productivity from home and argue for a renewed understanding of what constitutes work and what constitutes home as an intimate space.

KEYWORDS: crisis, gender, labour, pandemic, precarity, productivity

During the months of February and early March, the spread of COVID-19 was followed by most Indians as an event unfolding in the West. Although, the southern state of Kerala had a couple of confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease had not yet taken over the national headlines. The national news in the months preceding March were dominated by the central government's attempts to quell the nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Delhi state assembly elections, President Donald Trump's visit to New Delhi, and the riots that took place in the Muslim-dominated north-east Delhi. As super-markets in the United States and elsewhere ran out of toilet paper and hand sanitisers, the theories around COVID-19 ran fast. There were glib consolations like the virus may not be able to survive the harsh Indian summers or that it seemed basically a deadlier version of the common cold. There were discussions that were cognisant of the fact that physical distancing, which was the most important preventive measure, was a luxury in South Asia, given its socio-economic structures. However, nobody was prepared in the least as to how the pandemic was going to be a long-lasting phenomenon dictating a 'new' normal.

This article takes a closer look at the site of the home in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. The home

is popularly understood as a site of intimacy, privacy and leisure. However, the onset of the pandemic followed by the norms of physical distancing and home isolation has made the home a space of renewed activity and attention. Through a process of reflexive writing, I explore how for the economically and socially privileged middle- and upper-middle-class single women, in the absence of a support system, the notions of home have been complicated. Women have been thrust into the many roles of caregivers and home-makers as they continue with their professional careers. While the virus has collapsed our work and home life balance and partitions, it has glaringly brought out the skewed social division of labour. The pandemic has also contributed to a discourse of individual productivity and discipline. I argue that the work of home cannot be disengaged from the new 'work from home' culture. Through the course of this article, which is divided into two sections, I problematise the notion of working and productivity with the help of two simultaneous processes: the labour that goes into maintaining a home and the work we are doing from the confines of our home. By dwelling on both of these practices, I argue for a renewed understanding of what constitutes work and the intimate space that is the home.

The Work of Home

On 24 March 2020, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, appeared on TV at 8:00 pm and announced that from midnight the whole of India would be under a lockdown. It was seen as one of the most stringent lockdowns where markets, barring essentials, were to remain shut and no transport was allowed. Everybody was to stay indoors and function from home. Soon after, social media was rife with the many benefits of staying and working from home. However, I found myself in a very different state of mind vis-à-vis the notion of home. A few days before the lockdown was announced by the head of the state, I had to fly home to be with my father, who had to undergo an angioplasty. The lockdown, coupled with being the sole caretaker of my father and the house illuminated the many complicated relationships that single South Asian women have with the domestic sphere.

The home, historically and in the contemporary imagination, barring a few exceptions, have been the domain of women. There exists a rich literature that demonstrates how during the colonial period the upper-caste Bengali home was the prime site of social reform, placing the woman at its centre (Bannerji 2001; Chatterjee 1993; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Sarkar 2001). The Bengali middle class of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries responded to the Victorian ideas of the nuclear family and household management through the recasting of the upper-caste woman. The new genteel upper-caste woman was reimagined as an active agent of the nationalist movement from the confines of the home. She emerged as a combination of the Victorian discourses on women and home and the upper-caste ideals of being a chaste Hindu daughter/wife/mother.

The early twentieth century saw the rise of many women's magazines and manuals written by men and women extolling the virtues of an educated woman running the household (Walsh 2004). Women's magazines advised women on effective home management, covering topics that ranged from managing the household help to the pragmatic and aesthetic organisation of the cupboards and drawers (Majumdar 1988). The institutionalising of the work of home happened with the introduction of home science courses at the undergraduate level. Lady Irwin College was established in 1932 with the aim to produce better home-makers and partners in family life that would aid the nation-building process (Rao and Shalia 1986). The college initially offered courses in laundry, cooking, needlework, mother craft, first aid, hygiene, phys-

ics, chemistry and dietetics. Home science courses in 1938 also included courses in music, dance and other aesthetics. The idea, back then, was to make the home not just a thrifty, liveable space but also enable women to be regarded as 'goddess[es] of the home' (Avinashilingam Trust 1956: 11).

In this quick recapitulation, I am not suggesting that there is a direct continuity of the events and ideas from 1932. For instance, home science has been rechristened as home economics, and it no longer follows the erstwhile disciplinary outlook or pedagogy. However, what is undeniable is that in the face of a complete lockdown, women have had to disproportionately shoulder the burden of managing the home. The middle- and upper middle-class Indian household runs on the steam of a gendered and caste-based division of labour comprising of domestic help(s) managed by the woman of the house. The men and children do not involve themselves in the matters of meal planning, supervision of the help, laundry, etc. But with the lockdown and in the absence of domestic help, the automatic presumption has been that the women would be adept at taking care of the household along with their professional responsibilities.

In my role as the sole caregiver and a single woman, the notion of the home predominantly as a space of leisure and privacy has been transformed. It is significant to note that in privileged middle-class homes, where women are seemingly independent and educated, the structures of patriarchy are often subtle and dispersed. The benevolent side of patriarchy is not about pointing out your faults; rather, it is in the matter-of-fact expectation of being 'the' superwoman. The one who will whip up a gourmet meal, maintain a clean house and will also devote some time towards her professional work or university education. It would also be highly desirable if you are proficient in one of the arts. The working assumption here is that women have always managed such situations and are natural multi-taskers so that there can be no mental hindrance to pursuing one's research or professional responsibilities.

Single women in such situations of crisis are often the subject of much concern and bemusement for the larger society. Interestingly, the assumption is that only married women are good at being efficient home managers. Since their childhood, women have been taught to help with the household chores but somehow the idea of a fully functional and an aesthetic household is always associated with marriage. It is curious to note that, in the many Bengali domestic treatises written for women, efficient managing of the

shongshar ('universe') is paramount. Intriguingly, the word *shongshar* in Bengali, by default, implies the domestic universe. The cosmic universe is secondary.

It is not that single women are not aware of the drudgeries of domesticity or that one had not ever managed a house before; rather, it is that the difference is in the context. Managing a house that was conditioned to the traditional social division of labour implied women having minimal to almost no time to themselves. The home as a space for rejuvenation and intimacy transforms into an endless and repetitive saga of chores bound by a sense of duty.

The Work from Home

One of the buzzwords that has characterised this lockdown has been 'productivity'. As people began preparing themselves for an extended period of physical distancing, the Internet was all about the positive aspects of working from home. For instance, Isaac Newton's productive phase at home during the Great Plague of the 1660s was highlighted as an instance of utilising time wisely. The Internet had people waxing eloquent about the benefits of working from home. One of the dominant narratives was that of investing time in learning new skills. The culture of the WhatsApp messages that most middle-class Indians swear by chided the readers that if they did not emerge out of this period without having learnt a new skill, then it was not due to the lack of time but to a lack of discipline. The privileged middle class in India looked at working from home as a chance to spend quality time with one's family, conveniently ignoring all the labour that went in ensuring the making of quality time a pleasurable time.

For women to be productive, a partitioning of lives is often useful and desirable. Often for women, mired in household chores, work outside home and time taken to commute is almost like me-time. One could almost leave the daily grind of domesticity and family the moment one got ready and left for work. But with a lockdown in place, women are homebound with very little time for themselves. Additionally, with an overarching narrative of how the lockdown should be used to one's advantage, the quotidian and the mundane chores of domesticity never become a part of the discourse.

Despite there being tomes of feminist literature on gender and labour, I found myself thinking about how I had not done any work the entire day, a euphemism for writing my thesis. It left me slightly embarrassed, when I had to be reminded that all the chores

I was doing at home were indeed work and that I was being productive. True, as it might be, what is interesting to note is how deeply women are conditioned when it comes to thinking about household labour. While one acknowledges that there is manual and emotional labour that goes into the making of happy and nourishing families, what is a bitter pill to swallow is that we do not consider household labour to be 'work' that can be showcased – that is, the tangible outcome of productivity is still measured in the form of deliverables, published papers and promotions.

Thus, women have been working through the pandemic. They have been running households, cooking, laundering, taking care of the elderly, planning meals and activities for their children, performing emotional labour, and caring for their partners in heteronormative relationships without being able to show concrete results. As men and single women without caretaking responsibilities dominate this pandemic of productivity, the perceived intimate space of home becomes a site of resentment and frustration. In the ensuing cacophony of lockdown achievements, most women feel a sense of crisis and a poverty of imagination when it comes to work, leading to self-doubt and insecurity.

The pandemic in India has been a saga of the personal and political constantly intertwining with one another, moving in and out and leaving one with very little scope of disengagement. The lockdown witnessed a spike in the number of reported cases of domestic abuse, attempts at communalising the virus, caste-based discriminations in the form of upper-caste patients refusing to eat food cooked by lower-caste Dalits, and the classist apathy of the state and the privileged classes towards migrant workers as they walked thousands of miles to reach their villages in the absence of state planning and public transport (Allana 2020; Chatterjee 2020; Ratnam 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic set in motion a chain of events that revealed how dispensable the lives of the unprivileged and poor are. Images emerged of men, women and children walking and cycling for thousands of miles from cities to their villages, desperate for their homes and a sense of security. The pandemic has really brought home (pun intended) the idea that the home as a site of intimacy is a matter of privilege and luxury. Much like the nation-state, the home is a fragile space that is held together by a combination of caste and gendered labour and is quick to disintegrate in the face of a crisis.

It is also important to acknowledge that the idea of home as a safe space is a matter of privilege. The lockdown has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women

who suffer domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (Radhakrishnan et al. 2020). The rise in pay cuts, unemployment, and the number of men and in-laws taking their frustration out on women for not living up to their expectations when it comes to housework point to how conditions of safety and intimacy have been further compromised during the pandemic.

In a context where the idea of home now has multiple implications for people, it is important to stress the lopsided nature of productivity. The conditions that enable productivity from home hinge on one's gender, economic status, religion, class and caste privileges. But a more critical task is to unpack the very notion of productivity in the pandemic age. The urge to remain productive also comes at a time when the economy is crumbling, opportunities are shrinking and precarity is on the rise.

As more people are being laid off in the season of COVID-19, we see an entire universe of millennials and adults who are creating content by the minute. The availability of cheap data and a smart phone has enabled an enterprising digital and visual culture with minimal investment. Nandini Gooptu (2013) in her discussion of the neoliberal rationale focusses her attention on the enterprising citizen. The enterprising citizen is a self-governed and self-disciplined individual, who is prepared to take charge of her own well-being, knowing the risks and vulnerabilities, without making claims on the state. The spirit of neoliberalism that values the individual notion of self and enterprise undermines the value of public institutions that help bridge social hierarchies and inequities. The polemics of productivity are in fact the best illustrations of the hegemonic neoliberal subjectivity.

The scramble for being productive in the lockdown age also betrays a deeper sense of precarity, of appearing to be perennially engaged and useful. None of the motivational content of keeping oneself productive is ever about collectivising or deliberating strategies on demanding accountability from the system or reflecting on the very skewed division of labour; rather, it is about individual self-care. The current culture of productivity is a fragile montage of precarity-driven productivity that refuses to ask the difficult questions.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed how the middle-class household in India is actually held together by a fragile thread that is seemingly about an equitable social division of labour. Time and again, the media

cite examples of male partners and children sharing the load, but the transformation of the home sphere during COVID-19 has been illuminating. In the absence of domestic help and other support systems that keep the home economy going, I show how the power structure is not in women's favour. The assumptions of women being natural home managers have contributed to women feeling emotionally and physically drained and exhausted. This also leads to feelings of alienation and resentment as women witness their partners / family members function smoothly and flourish during the pandemic, while they try so hard to catch up. Resentment also makes room for guilt in a society where women have always been taught to put others' needs ahead of theirs. Thus, intimacies get tricky and complicated. The all-pervasive discourse of productivity, while completely undermining the invisible labour of home, ought to be revised. The emphasis on individual productivity must give way to a politics of empathy and solidarity. This means that we go back to the basics of socialist feminist politics and restructure our professional and personal spaces vis-à-vis work and the social reproduction of labour. 'The personal is political' needs to make a comeback not as a woke t-shirt but in actual practice.

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