

## Informal Relationships as Resilience during Covid-19: The Case of an Informal Neighborhood in Dhaka City

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### **Abstract**

The paper explores the concept of “Social Distancing” in its physical usage during the Covid-19 pandemic. By providing ethnographic data, the study shows how canceling large gatherings, closing schools and offices, quarantining individuals and even sequestering entire cities or neighborhoods were assumed to be the best ways to slow the spread of the coronavirus. However, health measures promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) created cultural problems in South Asia including Bangladesh due to cultural features of collectivity against Western biological assumptions. In addition, the paper shows how these health measures were considered as a crude and costly public health strategy. The paper argues that restricting shared spaces in turn forced families or individuals to lose childcare, emotional and social support. It also puts forth the argument that social distancing measures were insufficient to protect older, sick, homeless and isolated people who may have been the most vulnerable to the virus. What they needed was extra care and attention, social networks and relations as survival strategies in the city.

**Keywords:** Informal Neighborhoods, Urban Livelihoods, Informal Relationships, Social Networks, Survival Strategies

### **Introduction**

It has been over ten years since Jalil has moved into Dhaka city. He had to go back to his village during intermittent lockdown and other livelihood constraints since 2020 March. After a year and a half, he has returned with his family to stay in the neighborhood of Korail, and during this time he had to

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borrow money from his home village to survive. First, he tried to cope with the Covid-19 disruptions with his rickshaw in Dhaka and with the contribution of his wife as a domestic worker (*bua*) who was working in an elite neighborhood, Banani. They thought they would be able to make ends meet like this through the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with his *deshi* folks, he wanted to generate some money so that with his two kids could eat.

When spread of the virus was beyond control and the government called for a country wide lockdown, the pandemic signalled life threatening messages to poorer households in Dhaka city. Sobur was a local leader who had come forward to help the Korail residents in dire need during lockdown. He himself assisted with the supply of food, sanitizers and other medical support, including conducting funerals for the deceased. Taking food from the adjacent affluent neighborhoods, Sobur reached out door to door. Many charity organisations came to help the Korail dwellers via Sobur as well. Alongside Sobur, there were other Korail local leaders who also utilised their social and political networks to gain benefits from both formal and informal organisations for the community people. As a result, Korail dwellers were invited to receive benefits that included cash, oil, rice and lentils.

As the number of Covid-19 cases peaked in April 2020, a total of a hundred households in Korail were brought under a network of help from adjacent neighborhoods. Many people from outside the area and the residents of Korail themselves came forward to help each other, despite the caution given to maintain social distance. As is the custom in Bangladesh, the people were not familiar with the distance maintenance that was advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Moreover, it was difficult for this huge population, most of whom were dependent on an informal economy, to comply with the lockdown and stay home. Many of them had to procure food from their daily income. City dwellers from different neighborhoods came to Korail to assist. The wealthy neighboring households gave rice, oil, flour to their poorer neighbors at Korail. It was an impressive display of charity: conspicuous doing something for the ones who were in dire need, generating cultural merit as well as social obligation.

From this brief vignette of the nature of assistance that took place during the pandemic in Korail, it would seem that this is only possible for poorer people when they are in need of help during a crisis. The help provided by the kind-hearted people both within and outside of the Korail neighborhood was noticeable. The help had manifested in the guise of financial support, distribution of food and medication that showed an important dimension of

the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable people who lost employment during lockdown. In times of this crisis, such assistance brought them close to each other despite the suggestion to maintain social distance as part of health measures. For households who worked for the wealthy neighbors as domestic workers, night guards, or drivers, such assistance and care was common sight. We can thus see how such informal relations were a significant form of insurance for the Korail dwellers against total destitution when Covid-19 hit Dhaka city.

Amongst WHO's suggestions, maintaining social distance was said to be the only way to escape virus contamination. But social relationships and the networks that people got involved in, often described as "informal protective mechanisms" (Sabates-Wheeler & Waite, 2003, p. 17), or "informal safety nets" (Kabeer, 2002, p. 5), were not uncommon in Dhaka city. Yet generalised discussions of social distance during the pandemic did not talk much of social solidarity that might have provided an informative framework for consideration of social responsibility in society. Indeed, debates centred around social distance have so far largely failed to engage with the cultural dimension of help and support that goes beyond medical solutions to the pandemic. Help and support between Korail and wealthier neighborhoods highlights not only "the cultural and moral dimensions of help" (Ahmed, 2021), but also the forms of classical anthropological patron-clientelism in which informal relationships and networks took place.

In what follows, I shall discuss not only how relations, linkages and networks play a pivotal role in receiving help and support from wealthy neighborhoods in Korail, but also the social and political meanings of such assistance during the pandemic. By providing ethnographic examples, I will show that various kinds of help during strict lockdown and fear of corona virus, are rooted in specific ideology. As we see, against WHO's prescription to social distance measures, informal relationships between patron-client indicate that social solidarity comes at an obligation: in return for the help of richer patrons, the Korail dwellers have a long standing quasi kinship which is rarely found in other contexts explicitly. It is this that I would term –"pervasive ideology," a cultural appeal and obligations which were contrary to WHO's assumption of social distance; and which has a positive correlation between patron and client (Ahmed & Rahman, 2021; Gardner & Ahmed, 2006). I will now discuss selected scholarship that has discussed informal social relations beyond institutional arrangements of providing services.

## Theoretical Discussion

This section provides a basic overview of the literature that explains the informal dimension of help and support at times of crisis. Some scholars present the poor as apathetic and vulnerable, whereas some scholars show the power relations between the poor and elite citizens (Lewis, 1961). Across Latin America, increased fear of crime, widespread residential gating, death squads, and popular vigilantism mark the return of the “dangerous classes” (Rentfrew, 2013, pp. 202-203). In this context, Rentfrew argues that the urban elite have mobilized the culture of poverty and marginality myths, which first were popularized in the 1960s as a means of governance by placing responsibility for the “pathologies” of poverty on a criminalized urban poor (Rentfrew, 2013, p. 203). For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, urban poor were widely portrayed as lazy, dependent, hypersexual, and potentially criminal members of a “scething, frustrated mass.” Most of the time, their neighborhoods are characterized as a parasitic “social cancer” taking the form of “filthy disease-ridden shantytowns” (Perlman, 1976, pp. 1-20). Therefore, ideological and political debates started over the character of the urban poor, who were represented as lazy, criminal, apathetic, and “permanently redundant” (Harvey, 2000).

On the other hand, some theories analyze how the ideologies of urban elite, power holders, bureaucrats, urban planners and decision makers help them justify their attitudes towards the urban poor. Childe's, who coined the term ‘urban revolution,’ discussion on the political economy of cities is relevant here. Childe described the process by which agricultural villages or societies developed into socially, economically, and politically complex urban societies (1950, pp. 1-10). He argued that naturally priests, civil and military leaders and officials absorbed a major share of the concentrated surplus and thus formed a ‘ruling class’ (1950, pp. 12-13), which meant the rest of the population was ruled by this ‘ruling class’. This ‘ruling class’ formed structured hegemonic institutions through the dominant discourse, planning, policies and tactics (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Foucault, 1991; Gramsci, 1971; Sharma & Gupta, 2006).

For example, Hickey (2005, p. 1001) shows how political discourse and poverty policies not only help the urban dominant group to construct the chronic poor in Uganda, but also to justify their action from a higher level of the state. This may form a useful strategy for the dominant class whereby the failings of the poor are exaggerated to justify their continued dominance over poorer groups (Gupta, 2001, pp. 92-93). Scholars of political anthropology (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993) have analyzed how different socio-political networks and organizations facilitate the ability of the urban poor to gain power, decision-making, and policies that assist them to achieve inclusion.

In the context of the Covid-19 situation, Greenaway et al. (2020) have stressed on maintaining social solidarity rather than social distancing and have appealed for emphasising social connections than ever. This means that people need to be connected with their links in families, communities and wider society during a pandemic. They further argue that people in pandemic situations were at a distance, because people were strongly instructed to stay at least 1.5 meters away from others where possible. Everywhere restaurants, gyms, schools, offices and many gatherings were restricted. On the contrary, Greenaway and others (2020) think that the label used to describe these measures- "social distancing"- is a misnomer. They have further argued that people must be physically distant, but it is also crucial to maintain, or even increase social contact with others during this unprecedented time. Inspired by this argument, this article also explores how Korail people increased their interpersonal, social and political relations and networks during the pandemic to gain inclusion in the city.

Many researches have shown that in a pandemic, people need support and social contact. Banulescu-Bogdan and Ahad (2021) found that a wide range of volunteering, mutual aid, and other grassroots forms of solidarity emerged during the pandemic; however, they were worried about the change which can make the switch from emergency response to longer-term engagement. It is scientifically claimed that social distancing measures sought to limit the spread of Covid-19 by reducing physical contact between people. And there is evidence these measures work. But social science research also shows being isolated can have negative effects on a person's mental health (BIGD, 2021). Specifically, periods of quarantine have been shown to increase negative emotions like anxiety, confusion and anger.

Long before, sociologist Emile Durkheim (1933) coined the term 'organic solidarity', which is social integration that arises within individuals out of the need for each other's services. In a society characterized by organic solidarity, as Durkheim argued, society relies less on imposing uniform rules on everyone and more on regulating the relations between different groups and persons, often through the greater use of contacts and laws. These laws are not mandatory but pose as norms - a form of customary laws.

Durkheim's perspective resonates with the crisis of Covid-19 in the context of Bangladesh. Yet while Durkheim was correct in stating that the common values and beliefs constitute "collective conscience" that works internally in individual members to cause them to cooperate, he did not talk about how specific cultural ideology enables local people to take life threat to support. It is not difficult to

characterise the nature of help that took place by even elite neighborhoods in Korail in terms of the financial, physical and social costs they involved.

In an article on the importance of social solidarity during pandemics in American society, sociologist Klinenberg argues that we need social solidarity rather than social distancing to survive (Klinenberg, 2020). He argues that any during kind of disaster or pandemic, people have to rely on resources like social solidarity that marks interdependence between individuals and across groups. He further argues that 'this is an essential tool for combating infectious diseases and other collective threats. Solidarity motivates us to promote public health, not just our own personal security' (ibid. p. 2). Drawing from Klinenberg, I will show how social solidarity in Bangladesh society compelled us to knock on our neighbor's door during the pandemic.

In the first section, I have discussed the context of Korail and its location to wealthier neighborhoods in order provide a clear picture of the relationship between them. In the second section, I discuss the mechanism of help both within and between neighborhoods. The third section examines the nature of connection between neighborhoods in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In conclusion, I have argued that help and support are important aspects of Bangladesh that are embedded in social, cultural and moral ideology.

### **Korail and its Neighborhoods**

Korail is located in Dhaka's city center and is the largest informal neighborhood in Dhaka, both in terms of area (90 acres or 3,920,539 sq ft) and population, with more than 175,000 inhabitants (Khan, 2022). This neighborhood is adjacent to the Gulshan-Banani Lake; it can be accessed by multiple roads and by water. The three well-known adjacent elite neighborhoods of Gulshan, Banani, and Mohakhali have much affluent residential housing with sophisticated glass houses of corporate offices, restaurants and embassies. People say that the price for land in these residential areas is the highest in the city. Adjacent to these affluent areas, Korail's location is very desirable for commercial purposes. Because of its appealing position, important property owners have created new land areas by dumping garbage in the lake and have occasionally invaded portions of the neighborhood. Let me now explain the ethnography of social relations that I was able to draw from the field research site, i.e. the Korail neighborhood.

Situated only a few kilometres from Mohakhali, with its close proximity to an elite residential area Gulshan Lake, resplendent shopping malls, fast food outlets and multi- storied buildings, Korail is a "bastee" par excellence.

Alongside the affluent residential hubs, Korail is filled with the number of thatched tin shed houses of migrants. These may be up to three stories high and are invariably surrounded by high brick walls. Many have satellite dishes and almost all own TVs, fridges and smart phones.

Most of the people living in Korail are tenants. However, there is an abundance of property owners as well. Residence at a place like this always entails a risk of eviction. There are three distinct neighborhoods referred to when someone utters the name 'Korail'. They include: (i) The neighborhood encompassing the "slum," (ii) The T&T (Telephone and Telegraph Staff's Colony) neighborhood, and (iii) The Gulshan-Mohakhali- Banani neighborhood. There are intangible but real walls separating these three neighborhoods. Although there is a clear demarcation between the T&T colony and the Korail neighborhood, since many of the T&T staff have put up rooms for rent in the adjoining "*bastee*," they are protective of the Korail settlements for their own interests. For instance, when the Korail dwellers put up a human barricade in demonstration against Korail decimation in 2012, the T&T staff had given them a boost from behind the scenes, which contributed in making the demonstration successful. Let me explain further details in the discussion below.

Korail dwellers are neighbors to T&T government colony dwellers. They often experience a tense relationship in periodic conflicts over territory. Ethnographic data shows that both Korail dwellers and T&T colony residents are laden with conflict and competition. Accounts of jealousy among neighbors, of the dominance of T&T colony dwellers over Korail dwellers and quarrels between both dwellers provide some of the most common examples. But sense of unity comes to them when there is a perceived threat of eviction from the city authority. This is "provincial morality" in the words of Abu-Lughod (1997).

During severely adverse situations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic such as lockdown and unemployment, I found that the relationship between Korail and T&T colony dwellers did not detach mentally. I observed that the strongest sense of "community" did exist in the case of the defending neighborhood, when Korail dwellers faced problems in responding to the lockdown. From this standpoint, both Korail and T&T colony dwellers perceived the concept of "community," which is embedded in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh.

According to Siraj, "The relationships among residents in this neighborhood have two sides. Most of the residents are busy with their own livelihoods,

jobs or businesses. So, an upside to this is that no one is nosy about what anyone else is doing or where anyone is going, or what someone is buying, etc. But the downside includes reciprocal relations in the form of clientelism. Siraj's words were strong when he told me that their richer patrons in the neighborhood came forward to help during the pandemic. This is contrary to 'lacking' in the urban city life hypothesis where the reciprocal personal acquaintance of the inhabitants was prevalent to mediate the risky virus situation in Bangladesh society in general and Dhaka city in particular.

Although by listening to Siraj it may seem that T&T colony residents are oblivious to the Korail dwellers necessities, in reality, that is not so because many of the T&T colony staff own around ten to twelve houses at Korail from which they collect a hefty rent. Therefore, they remain vigilant about what happens in Korail.

During the pandemic, it was evident that when Korail dwellers face any crisis like eviction or the threat of Covid-19, the sense of communal cohesion becomes very apparent. In other crises as well, such cohesion comes forth such as when Korail catches fire (and it spreads like wild-fire), the dwellers do not wait for the Members of Parliament, Minister, or local Commissioner's assistance. They all unite to help their fellow friends and neighbors.

### **Informal Mechanisms of Support System**

During Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, Korail dwellers had to move to their many home villages due to a strict lockdown. Since there were no employment opportunities, the residents had to take shelter at their ancestral homes. It was difficult for the tenants to survive in the city, because on the one hand there was no work due to the lockdown, and on the other hand there was increasing pressure to pay rent. However, some respondents reported that in the first two months of the lockdown, many house owners waived tenants' rents though it depended on the interpersonal relationship between house owners and tenants.

There are many home district-based committees: Barisal district, Cumilla district, Faridpur district, Noakhali district, and so forth. These organisations help to make their roots firmer. "In perilous or troublesome times, we seek help from those who had migrated from the same district as ourselves," says Hasib. "Sometimes we read in the newspaper that residents in affluent neighborhoods don't know each other even though they live in the same apartment building." Many respondents have told me that the human relations in Korail are not as fragile. He further narrates, "we were not as scared about the corona virus as the rich people. Because we don't have time to be scared,



if we don't work one day we don't have food at home. Despite this, our residents help each other to provide whatever we had." Kamal, a long time chauffeur of an aristocrat, says,

Over the decade I've worked as a driver, I seldom see relatives coming over to my employer's house. They literally have no ties with their native village. Not even their next door neighbors come and visit; I doubt they even know each other. There is no cordiality or exchange of good-will among neighbors. The elites are devoid of any compassion for poor people.

Shefali talks about her experience at the hospital in Banani, where most elite class seek treatment. She told,

During the pandemic, I felt pity at the helplessness of the patients. Their relatives did not come to visit their relatives. On the other hand, when a resident of mine was infected by the corona virus, all of us immediately gathered to offer help. At the hospital, I saw no such communal cooperation or compassion. Once, a patient cried to me when I went to his bedside and said that his son and son's wife did not come to visit in the two days subsequent to his admission. Some wealthier residents died in despair, devoid of the simple desire to see their children's faces one last time. Comparing ourselves, the Korail dwellers, with the upper class, I would say we are better off.

Then she illustrated her point with the example of her daughter, "It is with this communal effort for which I've been able to marry my daughter off."

To understand this further, we need to apprehend the ideologies of care and help in Korail. Helping their own relative during the pandemic was not unusual for the Korail dwellers. When they were forced to go back to their home villages, ancestral home and relatives were their only hope. They lost their livelihoods due to a country wide shut down. Getting shelter from home relatives was directly related to local ideologies of relatedness and obligation, which are common to Bangladesh. At the most general level the duty of care to the poor was normal, whatever the form. This kind of charity indicates the degrees of connectedness to each other. One's relationship to the home village is therefore central social capital in mediating risk when livelihoods are threatened. It is this that Wood (2005) has termed "perverse social capital," a system of complex, overlapping obligations and reciprocity, which is a key social resource for the poor. To explain this in more detail, let us turn to the dynamics of relatedness during intermittent lockdown.

### **Connectedness and Patronage: From Adjacent Neighborhoods to Korail Inhabitants**

The majority of the inhabitants of Korail come from different districts. They work for a particular household, restaurant, or office in neighboring Banani and Gulshan for many years, and it is important that relationships of trust develop. Besides working as drivers or domestic workers, they may also have major responsibilities in managing property and other managerial responsibilities like shopping and so on. Female domestic workers work permanently within some households, doing domestic labour, or, in some cases, taking care of kids as baby sitters.

The relationship between workers and their employers contains many elements of clientelism. During a family crisis, the employers might also give them loans, or other forms of financial support. None of these exchanges are formalised in a contract. In the following, we can see how Korail dwellers develop patron-client relations with their employers during Covid-19 crisis and thus are subject to variable levels of social protection.

During Covid-19, many wealthier families came from Gulshan-Banani neighborhoods to help them out. They came with everyday necessities such as rice, vegetables, oil, sugar, groceries, and medicine. Halima told me that since she was confined to her house, charity was around her. She stated that “two women from Banani neighborhood came with a car and offered some bags containing full of groceries.” Kalam also gained some benefits from the elite neighborhood. From NGOs, Korail residents received masks, gloves, hand wash, sanitizers, etc. Few NGOs had established some permanent and temporary basins besides the road for washing hands with liquid soaps.

Political networks played an important role during that unusual time. The local leaders were active to gain benefits for their clients from the city corporations or other formal actors such as Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). Owing to increased community support for local leaders, residents could bargain to safeguard their community's interests. These local leaders talked with numerous NGOs, local government officials, and elected officials on ways to address Korail's critical situation during and post the Covid-19 situation. Helal, an influential local leader, told me that due to political and economic activities, Korail community leaders and general people had established themselves as active citizens by providing informal services in elite neighborhoods and political networks through the voting bank. They had also expanded their socio-political networks with NGOs and civil society. Because many Korail inhabitants had been in the city for a long time and were connected to a variety

of socio-economic and political networks, they used these networks during the pandemic to gain benefits.

The man or woman who migrates from rural areas to Dhaka, might be alone in this city. But after settling down in the town, he/she tries to find a job or business. For a job, an individual needs to have a relationship with others, or networks. On the other hand, to start a small scale business, one needs to have economic capital. Sometimes one might have some money to start but most of the time people go to NGOs to borrow money. My ethnographic data shows that people also borrow money from other sources based on their informal relationships. For example, Rahima gets 30,000 Taka (\$375) *zakaat* (Muslim tithe which the rich are obligated to pay the poor before Eid) money from the house where she used to work as a home maid before the pandemic. Like Rahima many respondents informed that they received a good amount of money during the crisis. Therefore, we may deduce that the subaltern build friendly relations with the elite masters while working for them, which helps the subaltern in their crisis.

From the above ethnographic discussion, it is obvious that during the pandemic, many employers and elite people came from different neighborhoods to help the people in informal neighborhoods. Sometimes they provided groceries and other products for everyday life. Many respondents also informed that some employers who had either parlours or other businesses came forward as many girls used to work in their institutions from Korail. Respondents reported that many residents who used to work for giant industries or organisations: they called their owners and requested them to help Korail.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have not only examined how linkages and networks play a pivotal role in receiving help and support from wealthy neighborhoods in Korail, but also the social and political meanings of such assistance during the pandemic. By providing ethnographic examples, I have shown that various kinds of help during strict lockdown and fear of the corona virus are rooted in specific ideology. As against WHO's prescription to social distance measure, informal relationship indicates that social solidarity comes at an obligation; in return for the help of richer patrons, the Korail dwellers have had a long standing quasi kinship which were rarely found in other contexts explicit. Social relations and networks between Korail and wealthier neighborhoods highlight not only social, cultural and moral dimensions of help, but also the forms of patronage in which informal relationships took place.

Such understanding of social solidarity or support at times of crisis depend not only on how universal physical distance was constructed in WHO's discourses but also upon the history, culture and ideology of the 'victims.' As the pandemic got worse day by day, the community people and adjacent rich households, for example, came forward. Community help has been considered as a risky decision to be infected. The extent to which the nature of "risky help" operated within and between communities is an interesting research question, which I have empirically addressed in this paper.

## End Note

The paper is based on my PhD research work conducted in Korail. I was virtually connected with my respondents in Korail when Covid-19 hit. The main aim of my thesis is how people in poor neighborhoods can use their social, economic and political networks and organizations to achieve greater inclusion in the city. Since I was writing my thesis during Covid-19, I kept in touch with the respondents on a case-by-case basis for crosscheck of my obtained data and recorded the pandemic time experiences from them. This article is based on those experiences and data. In addition to my PhD research, many of the insights on which this paper is based on my post PhD everyday experience on issues of livelihood and impact of post Covid-19.

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## managing-the-Covid-19-pandemic/

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