Pandemics Politics: Class, Gender and Stigmatized Labor in Bangladesh's Garment Industry

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Abstract

The effects of Covid-19 dramatized yet again the fragilities and asymmetries built into global supply chains and the marginal structural location of Bangladesh – the world's second largest clothing manufacturer – within the apparel supply chain. It was a reminder that the distribution of risk is highly asymmetric and falls disproportionately on gendered, classed, and raced laboring bodies at the bottom of the chain, usually located in the Global South. Against this backdrop, this article asks why and how pandemic discourses of stigmatization and othering largely congealed around the bodies of garment factory workers in Bangladesh. At the heart of the paper is the question of how ostensibly essential labour is *made* expendable through governmental techniques and discursive practices that draw on gendered and classed tropes with strong colonial precedents. We argue that Bangladeshi garment workers' shadow inclusion into or evacuation from this elastic and troubling category hinges on a complex assemblage of market rationalities, global supply-chain contingencies and national governmental determinations.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Pandemic, Garment Industry, Supply Chains

When the Bangladesh Inland Water Transportation Authority (BIWTA) unexpectedly announced the resumption of ferry services on 31 July 2021, migrant workers from across the country scrambled to return to Dhaka. The majority were garment factory workers responding to news that the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers' Association (BGMEA) had secured government permission to reopen its factories immediately. Hundreds of thousands of men and women poured into ferry terminals and bus stops (see Figure 1). At one point, all major entry points into the capital city were choked and inaccessible. Evidently the 24-hour notice, prevailing fears of the Delta variant of Covid-19 and memories of being stigmatized for 'irresponsible' behaviour the previous year (in disturbingly similar circumstances) were not enough to deter the workers. The latter's obvious desperation, corresponding scenes of 'multitudes' on the move

in the Covid-19 period and the apparent indifference of the state to workers' well-being captured the imagination of social media and the public alike. Viral images of a seemingly endless flow of bodies crammed cheek to jowl on ferries and in rickshaws or on foot generated intense anxiety and discomfort among segments of the capital's middle- and-upper class inhabitants, fearful of the further spread of Covid-19 in their otherwise sheltered environments.

What can we learn about racialization and boundary-making projects in times of crisis from the stigma that came to be attached to these laboring bodies during the pandemic? In what ways are newly emergent forms of stigma continuous with or distinct from the social stigma to which garment workers in South Asia are subject in 'normal' times (Hewamanne 2008; Kabeer 2002; Lynch 2007; Siddiqi 2009)? How are such modes of Othering connected to the

Figure 1. Garment workers on a ferry crossing the River Padma on Saturday, 1 August 2021. Source: Anonymous, on Facebook

construction of garment workers as essential at one moment and expendable at others? Finally, what does the ensuing distribution of 'blame' conceal, and what does it magnify? In what follows, these questions are addressed through a transnational, multi-scalar analytic that reveals the global dimensions of what appears to be a local or national crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a brutal reminder of the many ways 'crises' or 'emergencies' play themselves out along existing material and ideological fault lines, even as the latter are reconfigured and structurally re-inscribed (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Corresponding to the fear, panic and uncertainty generated by pandemic conditions, 2020 saw an alarming increase in the (re)production of stigmatized bodies and communities along well-worn racial, ethnic and religious fissures (Carswell, de Neve and Yuvaraj 2020; Ruwanpura 2022; Siddiqi 2022). Like the pandemic itself, these developments have been global. Targeted as dangerous and irresponsible vectors of disease, 'Asians' in the United States, or Muslims and others (those who 'look Chinese') in India, for instance, were vilified in dominant nationalist imaginaries and frequently targeted with violence (Ahmad 2020). At the same time, mobile transnational citizens found themselves framed as racialized threats (Gill 2021). Indeed, the pandemic has produced a fertile environment for redrawing social, political and spatial boundaries of insider and outsider, normal and pathological, familiar and foreign (Ashraf and Mol 2020). Fear of the contagion's border-crossing propensities rendered suspect otherwise unmarked bodies, making them dangerous 'enemies within', as happened with expatriate populations (*probashi*) who were forced to return to Bangladesh from viral hotspots, such as Italy. As one scholar notes, the purported 'misconduct' of the *probashi*, rather than the lack of preparedness of the state, initially dominated images and imaginations of the coronavirus outbreak, in large part due to media depictions of 'ignorant, selfish, and unruly returnees' unwilling or incapable of following public health protocols (Ahasan 2020).

The pandemic also threw into sharp relief fundamental paradoxes embedded in the category of the essential worker. The very people deemed essential – so called frontline workers – also appeared to be the most dispensable and most vulnerable to the disease. There is now a substantial body of scholarship on migrant labour, essential workers and the politics of expendability and othering. Most of this work focuses on international migrants in Europe and North America. This paper moves the focus to the Global South, specifically to Bangladesh and the internal migrants who constitute the bulk of the labour force in the garment export industry.

The effects of Covid-19 dramatized yet again the fragilities and asymmetries built into global supply chains and the marginal structural location of Bangladesh – the world's second largest clothing manufacturer – within the apparel supply chain (Saxena 2017; Siddiqi 2020; Tighe 2016). It was a reminder that the distribution of risk is highly asymmetric and falls disproportionately on gendered, classed and raced laboring bodies at the bottom of the chain, usually located in the Global South (Mezzadri 2017; Miller 2013; Prentice and de Neve 2017; Wikramasinge and Coe 2021). The impact of the cancellation and non-payment of existing orders (around 90%) was immediate and devastating. In a cascade effect, hundreds of factories closed down more or less overnight, leaving over a million out of a four million strong workforce jobless or furloughed. The material consequences for the national economy and for workers in this critical industry, which accounts for around 80 percent of Bangladesh's total exports, have been well-documented (see, for instance, Anner 2020; Ali et al. 2021, Siddiqi 2020). The government and factory owners have been rightly criticized for policy decisions that prioritized safeguarding the industry over the welfare of its workers.

Little attention has been paid to the ways in which pandemic discourses of stigmatization and othering congealed in and through the bodies of garment workers, or the relationship between Bangladesh's Covid-19 containment policies and its marginal structural position in the global apparel supply chain. Represented as productive, desirable citizens in non-emergency times, garment workers found themselves deeply stigmatized and made expendable, even as the garment industry and the workers came to be hailed as essential. At the heart of the paper is the question of how ostensibly essential labor is *made* expendable through governmental techniques and discursive practices that draw on gendered and classed tropes with strong colonial precedents. These contextually and historically specific techniques and practices intersect with the global racial hierarchies embedded in apparel supply chains, contributing to the racialization of Bangladeshi garment workers as dispensable labour during the pandemic.

What logics are at work in the making of the garment industry as essential, as a zone of exception, such that exclusionary state policies and the prioritization of the 'needs' of the garment factory owners over the welfare of their workers appeared to be necessary, indeed essential, in an emergency? How do we account for what appeared to be the state's apparent refusal to manage or regulate this particular population? We approach these questions using a transnational feminist lens, taking into account the mediation of nation, race, caste/class, imperialism and geopolitics in the production of difference (Abu-Lughod 2013; Alexander and Mohanty 1996; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Tambe and Thayer 2021). At the same time, we critically foreground the relatively neglected category of class in re-animating projects of Othering and racialization in the field of Bangladesh Studies, especially in relation to an otherwise excellent body of scholarship on the garment industry that takes gender as its primary organizing category.

As we show, state 'indifference,' public health-related governance techniques, corporate rhetoric and media discourses effectively re-distributed blame for the virus on to garment workers (and to a lesser degree on to foreign returnees, that is, on migrant labor also of 'lower class' standing). The redistribution of values attached to gendered labouring bodies relied on long-standing middle-class anxieties that separate and hierarchize manual from intellectual labour. Pandemic discourses draw on and amplify an enduring grid of valuation in which working-class populations are understood to be not quite civilized or developed, always on the verge of irrationality or unruliness, and who must be disciplined accordingly. In this respect, older colonial tropes are joined to newer classed anxieties and developmentalism. These discourses are neither timeless nor stable; informed by colonial modes of exclusion and vilification, they are critically reconfigured by the neoliberal logic that struc-

tures power along the global apparel supply chain.

The pandemic has dramatically reconfigured ethnographic research methodologies. This paper is based on multiple online and offline research rather than classic ethnographic fieldwork, informed by the dictates of digital ethnography.[1] Through social media platforms such as Facebook and Tiktok, we were able to track workers' responses to shifting policy directives, as well as to "misinformation" emanating from management and mainstream media. This entailed following individual status updates at times, and at other moments, a close reading of debates on popular threads. We also collected newspaper clips from major news outlets in Bangladesh (and selected international media) for the last eighteen months and tracked coverage on private television channels on Facebook. It soon became clear that the latter reported on incidences such as police brutality toward protesting workers that were generally ignored or intentionally avoided by more corporatized mainstream media outlets. In the early months of the pandemic, we also spoke on zoom with several labour leaders and workers.

Racialized Geographies of Supply Chain Capitalism

Scholars who are attentive to questions of race have long challenged the assumption of a colour-blind capitalism, positing instead that ideologies of racial difference have been co-constitutive with global capitalism (Ralph and Singhal 2019; Robinson 1983; Virdee 2018). Put differently, the maintenance of a capitalist social order hinges on the production and negotiation of social difference, including racialized difference (Jenkins and LeRoy 2019). While individual authors diverge considerably in terms of theoretical orientation, there is general agreement that racialization is a

modern phenomenon and that the production of capital takes place in correspondence with the production of difference (Kim 2013; Manjapra 2020; Prentice 2015). Rooted in the conditions of imperialist expansion, (settler) colonialism and slavery, racialization has always been a deeply gendered process that polices female labour and sexuality (Morgan 2021; Virdee 2018: 12-13).

In light of the above, how might we understand the production of racialized difference in relation to the operations of transnational capital today, specifically those of apparel supply chains? With exceptions, neither the vast scholarship on globalization nor the equally prolific field of gender and development addresses questions of race in any sustained manner. In the context of South Asia, at least, this absence could be attributed to the category of race fitting 'uneasily' into prevailing notions of difference and hierarchy (Khan 2019, 87; Shroff, 2020). However, as Mishal Khan argues, '[c]apitalism has demonstrated remarkable flexibility historically, exploiting each new frontier's unique logics of exclusion and exploitation, where and how it finds them (ibid.).' It is these logics of exclusion that are of interest to us.[2]

Various iterations of the civilized/uncivilized binary, produced through infrastructures of governing, such as the law and the census, secured colonial rule in British India. With formal decolonization, these always gendered and racialized civilizational distinctions between those who were morally and physically fit to rule and those who must be governed found a robust afterlife, mapping on to the binary of developed/underdeveloped. Denise Ferreira da Silva remarks that,

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[1] **https://iriss.stanford.edu/doing-ethnography-remotely**; https://anthrodendum.org/2020/06/12/home-work-homework-and-fieldwork/ https://anthrodendum.org/2020/05/01/introduction-fieldwork-in-a-time-of-coronavirus-new-series/.

[2] Feminist theorists have brought analytical attention to bear on the 'layered histories' and 'uneven geographies' of capitalist expansion, disinvestment and devaluation, shedding light on how connections across space and time 'are forged through processes of disjuncture and disruption that selectively transform or *disarticulate* existing social relations and forms of production (Bair and Werner 2011: 997, emphasis added).' A disarticulation perspective offers an important entry point into interrogating the logics of exclusion and inclusion in any specific context.

by the time the global development apparatus came into its own in the 1940s, notions of racial and cultural difference developed by anthropologists were part of sociological and popular common sense (da Silva 2014: 41). Race, understood as racial or cultural difference, allowed for the re-inscription of older civilizational binaries. Even as race went 'underground,' it was inscribed conceptually into discourses of development, implicitly reproducing gendered spatial and social hierarchies (Siddiqi 2021; Wilson 2011: 316; see also White 2002).

Kalpana Wilson (2011) contends that racialized power relations are inherent in the world of development, and that contemporary neoliberal constructions of third-world women as especially efficient naturalize and racialize existing gendered ideologies (see also Mohanty 1984; Roy 2010). Indeed, in dominant development narratives third-world women are assumed to have an inherent gendered propensity for hard work and altruism (Wilson ibid.: 325). With the rise of 'global factories' in Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere from the 1980s onwards, the racialization of third-world women workers drew on earlier colonial and orientalist distinctions and tropes (Ong 1987; Mohanty 2003). Here the ideal female factory worker, located in ex- and postcolonial spaces, was constructed as *naturally* submissive, repressed, dependent and docile, as numerous feminist scholars have pointed out over the last three decades (Pearson and Elson 1981; Mills 2003; Ruwanpura 2011). Corporations and policy-makers alike promoted women – and more recently girls – in the Global South as *especially suited* to assembly line work, endowed with nimble fingers, advanced hand-eye coordination and limitless patience for repetitive work (Elson and Pearson 1981; Siddiqi 1996 and forthcoming). With some exceptions, the existing literature no longer explicitly articulates these issues in terms of the biologization or racialization of women workers on the assembly line (Bonacich et al. 2008). Yet the international racial hierarchies already in place and their associated tropes of dehumanization provide a justification

for super-exploitation as well as for expendability (Prentice 2015; Salzinger 2003; Werner 2014; Wright 2006). Race/racism in overt forms may be absent or explicitly frowned upon, but racial and class-based understandings of labour and geography regulate value along the supply chain.[3] They allow for the cheapening of labour and determine which lives are worthy and which dispensable at any point in time (Datta 2021; Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006; Werner 2015). It is against this backdrop that migrants from the Global South have been so easily racialized as both essential and dispensable labour during the pandemic.

The stigmatization and othering of Bangladeshi garment workers during the pandemic results from the intersection of multiple processes of racialization at different scales, and folded into contextually specific logics of inclusion and exploitation. Indigenous concepts of class/caste, colonial and Orientalist tropes of submissive, oppressed Muslim women and international racial hierarchies of third-world backwardness intersect in complex and contingent ways with gendered nationalist ideologies and contested discourses of sexuality.

A pre-pandemic headline from the Los Angeles Times, '*Bangladesh Women Find Liberty in Hard Work*', captures perfectly the racialized assumptions and logics invoked on the scale of the global (Weiss 2014). The subheading reads: *The garment factory workers toil for paltry wages. But such jobs have also afforded Bangladeshi girls a measure of independence in a traditional Muslim society.*' Even as they are infantilized (in the slide between girls and women), the presumption at work is that 'hard labour' and 'paltry wages' are

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[3] Context is crucial here. We do not suggest that all women workers everyhere are always considered to be disposable. Goger et al. 2014 and Ruwanpara and Hughes 2015 offer counter examples to discourses of disposability in Sri Lanka and Pakistan respectively. In this paper, our aim is to understand how and why in the particular context of Bangladesh, where garment workers are often hailed as national heroes, constructions of their subjectivities can so easily slide into expendability.

justified by the supposed liberty factory work affords. Labour is literally cheapened and otherwise objectionable working conditions made acceptable through the invocation of Bangladesh as a 'traditional Muslim society'. In this world view, Muslim women must be saved at any cost, including hard labour and paltry wages, conditions that would be unacceptable in Euro-America. The racialized trope of Muslim societies as especially backward, with little freedom for Muslim women, is used to normalize violent practices that would be deemed intolerable in other, more 'civilized' geographical spaces (Siddiqi 2009).

These racializing discourses intersect with classed and sexualized Bengali tropes to further cheapen labour and the value of those who labour in Bangladesh, where the gendered labouring body is the site of deeply ambivalent and contradictory nationalist pride (Siddiqi 2009, 2020; Sen 2020). However else they are marked socially – Hindu, Chakma, Muslim, or Bengali – the body of the Bangladeshi garment worker signifies a specific set of classed and sexualized nationalist anxieties. On the one hand, as key protagonists in the story of Bangladesh's economic and social development, the labour of these women's bodies represents and enacts neoliberal aspirations to achieve women's empowerment. On the other hand, as sexed labouring bodies, these women are always already suspect, their visibility and mobility disruptive of urban middle- and upper-class sensibilities and socio-spatial hierarchies. As a result, within the national space of Bangladesh, female garment workers have long oscillated between being hailed as saviours of the nation and denounced as sexually lax lower-class others (Siddiqi 2003; see also Sara Shroff 2020). During the pandemic, this basic duality in meaning paved the way for garment workers to be hailed as 'essential' workers at one point in time and deemed expendable at another.[4]

'The essential worker', Andrew Lakoff (2020) writes, is a new form of social classification 'interacting in complex ways with existing forms of inequality.' Like so much else in our present, the origins of the concept can be traced to Cold War politics, in the idea of 'essential critical infrastructure' and techniques of classification arising from the world of national security planning (ibid.). As such, the category is an elastic one, with considerable interpretive flexibility, expanding or contracting in relation to shifting contexts on an ad hoc basis. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, anthropologists have paid particular attention to the work that the idea of essential worker and related notions of sacrifice does. Drawing on the situation in the United States in the first few months of the pandemic, Brown and Pearson (2020) argue that 'essential' had become a synonym for expendable, and that the sacrifice of 'essential workers' had been normalized in the name of the nation and its economy. Others have shown that the willingness of some in the US to dehumanize the aging and openly call on them to be 'sacrificed' for the sake of future generations does not necessarily resonate elsewhere (Sadruddin and Inhorn 2020). Acevido (2020) contends that the post-Covid-19 binary between essential and non-essential labor in the naming and regulation of work in the US is not so new. Protections and obligations have always been allocated based on the degree to which a particular job is considered essential. In her view, what has shifted is the referent: essential to whom? Rather than just the employer, 'essential labor' now refers to 'tasks that are essential to *society*' (ibid., emphasis added). This means, among other things, that an essential worker is obliged to work under the riskiest of conditions, without recourse, such that involuntary labor can then be cast as voluntary sacrifice. Acevido opens up urgent questions of what labour is truly essential for whom, and we would add, who has

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[4] The feminist literature on expendability is very much more nuanced that the binary analysis above suggests (Goger, Dutta, Hughes and Ruwanpura). We delve into this literature later in the paper. Here we make a particular point about the Bangladeshi con-

text and its normative conceptions of who is and is not considered expendable at specific moments in time.

the authority or power to determine the lines between essential and inessential labor, or even what constitutes society.

In a recent essay, Scauso et al. (2020) argue that the spectre of colonialism has made a 'spectacular (re)appearance' during the present pandemic (ibid.: 82). Colonial continuities can be seen not only in the myriad forms of inequality, discrimination and violence exposed, but also in the exclusionary responses of the state and society (Bhaskaran, Datta and Naidu 2021; Carswell and De Neve 2020). Such responses, they contend, mirror colonial vilification of natives, characterized as 'treacherous,' 'filthy' and 'unsanitary,' during the pandemics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Further, they note that egregious and ongoing material injustices are often hidden behind notions such as progress, even as ideal subjectivities (such as citizens) are constructed against racialized, gendered and geographical others. Enduring colonial logics sutured to neoliberal forms of reason and valuation produce a framework in which 'historical inequalities appear natural, necessary, or [a] temporary problem,' that will be solved eventually by 'the magic of trickle-down benefits (ibid.: 84).'

A similar logic is at work in Bangladesh, where recourse to a 'magical' narrative of progress and economic development renders the garment industry essential (Murshid 2020). Though it was not explicitly defined as such, garment work was essential work in pre-Covid-19 Bangladesh (see below for details). The garment sector looms large in the middle-class imaginary; as the second largest exporter of clothing in the world, next only to China, Bangladesh's garment industry is a source of considerable nationalist pride (Siddiqi 2022; Siddiqi 2020). The 'health' of the industry is critical for any government in power, since it brings in the bulk of foreign revenue. Globally, the three million young women who labour in the garment factories literally embody the success of neoliberal capitalist development and associated empowerment discourses.

From Disposable to Empowered but Expendable?

How might we think through the relationship between 'essential worker' as a political category and the ostensible disposability of female labour in global garment production? In this regard, Lamia Karim remarks that in Bangladesh the poor in general are regarded as disposable bodies that will bear the burden of modernization and the costs of development (Karim 2014). By extension, the exploitation of bodies rendered disposable can be reframed as a necessary sacrifice for the nation. In her classic text, Melissa Wright traces the making of myths of the third world woman's disposability under global capitalism through managerial discourses in particular (Wright 2006). Building on Wright's insights, feminist scholars have revised and nuanced the idea of workers as expendable or disposable. Among other things, scholars insist that the logic of disposability is not a necessary relationship; rather, it is 'produced and reproduced through specific historical and geographical contexts of social difference' (Goger 2013: 2642). Attention to specificity has led to research that shows considerable variation across national spaces in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Goger 2013; Mezzadri 2017; Ruwanpura and Hughes 2016). Studies of the Sri Lankan garment industry where, like Bangladesh, women constitute the bulk of the labor force show that disposability discourses take the form of moral panics, of the stigmatization of garment workers as a threat to national morality (Goger 2013; Hewamanne 2008; Lynch 2007). At the same time, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the contradictory effects of disposal logic. For instance, in the face of labor shortages, managers in Sri Lanka routinely mobilize discourses of empowerment, 'to disarticulate the myth of disposability' at least for that moment in time (Goger 2013: 2641; Ruwanpura 2021).

In Bangladesh too, disposability myths are deployed through managerial discourses and practices, rearticulating worker subjectivities in the process. More specifically, the language of sexual morality and the language of class con-

verge to produce stigma around the body of the female garment worker (Siddiqi 1996). At the same time, at the level of the government or the BGMEA (the official body representing the industry), the logic of disposability is replaced by imperial and liberal feminist myths of empowerment, especially of Muslim women (see Siddiqi 2021). Empowerment and expendability do not contradict each other in Bangladesh. Here it is worth taking into consideration another binary, that between replaceable and irreplaceable. The 'elastic supply of labor' means that individual workers are interchangeable, as easily discarded and replaced as the cheap clothing they manufacture. Yet, the industry itself is public-facing. Routinely confronted with global and national opprobrium, managers, factory owners and the state mobilize discourses of empowerment and upliftment on the shop floor, as well as in political and social discourse, even as their practices produce expendability. What appears to be distinctive about the logic and discourses of disposability in the time of Covid-19 is that social stigma attaches to both male and female labouring bodies. Inflected by the vocabulary of class distinctions, the moral panic that ensues is minimally gendered or sexualized.

Making Garment Industry Essential

By what logic does an industry that exports clothing become essential, including under conditions of crisis? What makes labour associated with the industry expendable?

Preconditions for positioning Bangladesh's garment industry in a zone of exception had been in place long before the pandemic 'played havoc' with global garment supply chains. Observant citizens and visitors may have noticed a variety of trucks and microbuses speeding through the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong and Narayanganj, deftly weaving though the dense mixed traffic, with the phrase 'On Emergency Export Duty' boldly painted on their sides (see Figures 2 and 3). Here is how a 2013 story on National Public Radio in the US described the existence of these 'emergency' vehicles:

The streets of Chittagong, Bangladesh, are overcrowded with cars, rickshaws, and big trucks. Traffic can be a serious problem for clothing manufacturers that need to get their shipments to the port on time, so the big garment factories here use special vehicles to cut through the traffic. The marking 'Emergency Export Duty' gives these trucks the same rights as ambulances: They don't have to follow any traffic laws and they can use alternate routes when roads are closed. *The timeliness of a T-shirt order is this city's livelihood.* [5]

The quote above nicely captures the centrality of the temporal – the heightened urgency in which all steps of garment export production seem to be wrapped. Indeed, time is a key structuring element in garment workers' experiences on and off the factory floor. Covid-19 or no Covid-19, if a factory is open, workers are expected to report for work at 8 am sharp. Late arrivals, even by a few minutes, are recorded on a time-card, and three late arrivals can result in a one-day wage cut. Time is a source of tremendous anxiety for workers and a disciplinary mechanism for management. Indeed, it was the fear of being late, and thus of lost wages or even of dismissal, that prompted the mass exodus of workers from their villages to Dhaka city on 1 August 2021, as described in the opening section of this essay.

The NPR story, authored in the months after the Rana Plaza collapse, takes for granted what constitutes emergency duty, and for whom. It does not question why the system as such is pressed into protecting and maximizing profits and minimizing losses for individual factory owners. [6]

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[5] https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2013/09/04/218890986/where-a-truck-full-of-t-shirts-gets-the-same-privileges-as-an-ambulance, emphasis added.

[6] One feature of the asymmetrical distribution of risk and power along the supply chain is that brands hold suppliers fully liable for any disruption or delay in shipment delivery. Late deliveries result in lower payments and risk cancellation of the entire order. Minimizing traffic related delays is therefore imperative for individual owners, who must otherwise pay for much steeper air shipment costs to make on time delivery.

Figure 2 Source: https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2013/09/04/218890986/where-a-truck-full-of-t-shirts-gets-the-same-privileges-as-an-ambulance

What renders the production of goods for export, and the private profits thereby earned, a performance of national duty? What is obscured by the logic that citizens have a duty to make a profit, for both self and nation? What narratives are naturalized by the assumption that meeting private shipping deadlines constitutes an emergency of national scope, that private profits must be protected for the sake of the nation, rather than squandered in time wasted on jam-packed streets? Granting these vehicles the same rights as ambulances clearly suggests that the health of the nation, its lifeblood, is at stake in the timely shipment of garments. By this logic, the health and wealth/pride of the nation and its citizens are inextricably linked with the health of the garment industry; saving the garment sector stands in for serving and saving the economy. Here we see neoliberal modes of governance and reason at work. The duty of private citizens, i.e., garment workers, to profit for the nation hinges on the promise of a trickle-down economic policy, of prosperity for all through unlimited economic growth. It also creates a particular distribution of value in which making a profit at all costs takes priority. This neoliberal criterion of value justi-

fies and naturalizes historical and contemporary conditions of inequality (Scauso 2020 et al.). In literal terms, the health of the national economy and that of the living, breathing individual garment worker is never commensurate. Unlike the clothes they produce, and no matter what the shipping deadline, garment workers are never entitled to emergency modes of transportation.

The folding of national interest into the fate of Bangladesh's garment industry – the logic of emergency and national duty – allowed the Bangladeshi government and the powerful industrial body, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Owners Association (BGMEA), to position the industry as essential during the lockdown. By extension, those labouring in garment factories could be understood as essential workers, even if the term was never used formally. The irony is that to be classified as essential in the time of Covid-19 is a risk rather than a privilege.

Bangladeshi garment workers' shadow inclusion into or evacuation from this elastic and troubling category hinges on a complex assemblage of market rationalities, global supply-chain contingencies and national governmental determinations. On the one hand, the rationality under-

Figure 3 Source: YouTube site targeted for a Bangladeshi audience, offering tutorials on using the program Illustrator. The choice of banner contents in the advertisement is telling.[7]

lying economization ascribes value to lives that serve the purpose of the national economy. One the other hand, the purpose of serving the economy superseded the necessity to protect the lives of individual workers. It is reasonable to ask what it is that changed with Covid-19 if garment work was already considered essential work. If only temporarily, the pandemic made visible quite literally the essential expendability of a working population otherwise hailed as national heroes, thus bringing to the fore a distilled version of the underlying logic at work.

Refusal to Regulate or the Ineptitude of Power[8]?

While formal Covid-19 management in Bangladesh largely pivoted around the figure of the foreign returnee, it was the garment workers, not the industry, that appear to have been the object of concerted non-management. This apparent

failure to govern and manage calls for an examination beyond the state's 'spectacular inefficiency' in managing the pandemic, examples of which abound (see Chowdhury 2020). Its bears asking who benefitted and how from the uncertainty and 'regime of confusion' that ensued.

Between the end of March and early April 2020, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed issued 31 separate directives on how to govern the lives of Bangladeshi citizens under pandemic conditions. These executive orders and a corresponding General Holiday – governmental euphemism for a lockdown – conspicuously avoided mentioning the garment export sector. This was a curious absence, given the apparel industry's disproportionate significance to the national economy and self-image, as well as its four million-strong workforce of largely female migrants from rural Bangladesh. Unstated but implicit was the assumption that the industry and its workers constituted a zone of exception (Agamben 2005; Cotula 2017). The state's apparent refusal to regulate produced uncertainty and hardship. Upon news of the General Holiday, most garment workers left Dhaka city for the safety and affordability of their village homes. Just days later, many of the same workers were instructed by their employ-

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[7] **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SoT0YDTC-E** last accessed July 30, 2021.

[8] We have borrowed the title of a powerful op-ed: 'Covid-19: The Ineptitude of Power' by Seuty Sabur and Shehzad M. Arifeen in *The Daily Star*, Saturday 4 April 2020. The authors' analysis and sentiment correspond to our analysis here.

ers to return to work immediately, unless they were willing to forfeit owed wages, or risk losing their jobs. With full knowledge that they would endanger themselves and others, thousands of men and women prepared to retrace their steps back to the place they had just left behind (Sabur and Arifeen 2020; Siddiqi 2022). The fear of retrenchment, even without receiving outstanding payment, compelled workers to 'defy' the lockdown openly and visibly. In the absence of public transportation – halted for the time being – they made their way largely on foot, often for hundreds of kilometres. Within days of reporting back to work the government abruptly ordered all factories to shut down production. Workers who had rushed to the city to protect their livelihoods found themselves trying to leave again. Many of the same workers were called back a second time, only for the factories to close down again.[9]

While civil-society groups condemned the callousness of the state and factory owners, the workers' (forced) mobility had deeply stigmatizing outcomes. Images of densely packed makeshift forms of transport, of flows of people on foot, all apparently rejecting quarantine protocols, quickly gave rise to rumour, stigma and othering. Mobility (albeit coerced) in this time of general containment generated profound fear, suspicion and mistrust.

The impossible choices workers faced – the risk of contracting the virus or losing their jobs, the risk of dying of starvation or of the virus – were obscured by a discourse through which they came to be identified as major vectors of

disease and stigmatized as reckless, selfish and wilfully endangering the lives of others. Landlords turned away imagined or actually sick tenants. Cast as undisciplined bodies disrupting and polluting safe spaces, many of those returning to villages also faced rejection and violence. The crisis of 'social distancing' in keeping the factories open had become a crude form of 'class distancing'. This re-distributed 'blame' constituted the real emergency for garment workers.

A number of unsuccessful lockdowns followed. These multiple and failed lockdowns not only fuelled ongoing regimes of (im)mobility,' they determined who was allowed to be mobile (those with special passes) and who was forced into mobility or immobility (primarily garment workers).

It could be argued that the state's navigation of what was undeniably a fluid, unpredictable and rapidly shifting situation was complicated by the inconsistencies between state policy and factory owners' interests. Instructions from the BGMEA or individual factory owners to report to work directly contradicted public health messages to contain or limit movement, leading to confusion among workers and the troubled mobilities that were the source of their social stigmatization. Yet, from the outset, the government left critical loopholes even when it declared a full shutdown, allowing factories with 'proper health facilities on site' to stay open throughout the so-called General Holiday. This is hardly surprising, given the blurred lines between state and capital that many scholars have pointed out (Miller 2014; Saxena 2014; Tighe 2016). The mainstream corporatized media, which actively shaped public discourse on the pandemic's effects on the industry, minimized the consequences for workers, effectively producing public consent to keep factories open to 'save the nation's lifeline'.

Government silence and the explicit refusal to name the sector in its numerous directives turned out to be critical tools for the industry and allowed maximum flexibility on the part of individual factory owners, who were already under considerable stress from the cascade of

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[9] Naomi Hossain contends that 'moral economy' thinking and a strong sense that the state is responsible for protecting people during crises shapes citizens' expectations, in turn consolidating or undermining the state's legitimacy (Hossain 2017). In other words, 'a powerful set of expectations about the rightful behavior of ruling elites in times of crisis, shapes public policy to a significant if somewhat invisible degree' (Ali et al. 2021: 105216). It is not clear the extent to which garment workers hold such expectations or trust any particular government, though perhaps expectations of 'relief' constitute a broader world view among citizens (see Winters et al.).

cancelled orders and unpaid shipments. Even as official BGMEA commentary blamed workers for defying explicit instructions to stay in place, workers received text messages and phone calls from factory managers instructing them to return 'on time.'

Here it is worth recalling the kind of time pressure that the 'just in time' production on which the global garment supply chain thrives places on suppliers in the Global South. In response to a precipitous decline in consumer demand, Euro-American buyers of Bangladeshi garments had cancelled or postponed orders worth $1.44 billion by the end of March 2020. Most refused to pay for cancellations, even when goods had been shipped and delivered (Anner 2020a: 5-6). Some retailers demanded steep discounts on orders that had already been produced at prices that were already some of the lowest in the world. With little negotiating power, and out of a fear of alienating future clients, few owners were willing to challenge the cancellations or demands for discount openly. The one exception, Mostafizuddin, whose factory supplied denim to high-end retailers, called such demands blackmail: 'That means I am making the jeans for free and my workers made the jeans for free. It's blackmail' (quoted in Pham 2020: 318).

Supply-chain contingencies (international orders that continued to trickle in or dry up) and the 'whims' of individual owners ultimately determined whether or not production would continue. In this light, the official refusal to regulate does not appear to be incidental but a conscious policy decision. Notably, while the government allocated a substantial sum of money to the garment sector as part of a post-Covid-19 stimulus package (which covered the first month of outstanding wages only), absolutely no provisions were made to vaccinate garment-workers as a part of a population of 'essential workers'. The rationality underlying the GoB's (non) decision-making is not hard to discern – the logic that the well-being of the collective/nation depends upon the health of the economy, which in turn relies on the smooth functioning of the

garment supply chain. In this calculus, timely shipments and profit-making constituted the emergency; considerations of individual worker health ranked much lower. This was a lockdown in which the value of making shipments on time exceeded the value of the lives of individual garment workers. This is the conjuncture at which the different layers of structural constraint faced by garment workers – the local, the regional, the national and the global – converge.

An anonymous reviewer for this article remarked that the trajectory of Covid-19 in Bangladesh was marked by temporal specificities; by extension, neither the state nor citizens exhibited singular responses. While this is indeed the case, what strikes us is the repetition and recursivity of government and BGMEA actions—factories declared open without much notice, shut down production with even less warning. This re-iterability seems to be specific to the garment industry.

The Pandemic and Its Disorders: Colonial Continuities

Perhaps in a bid to stem criticism of its handling of the pandemic, at certain moments the BGMEA invoked explicitly classed language. Then President Dr Rubana Huq declared at one point that '*sromikder shorire ekta alada shokti thake,*' which roughly translates as 'working class bodies possess a distinct kind of strength.' Colonial tropes of effeminate middle-class *bhadralok* Bengalis, too effete for manual labour, are turned around here to assert that working-class bodies are biologically less vulnerable to disease. The idea of working people possessing exceptional or singular strength maps on to widely shared middle-class tropes of divisions between mind and body. As noted earlier, historically, labouring bodies have been imagined in opposition to the *bhadrolok* classes. When asked why employees should not be paid even if factories remain closed, owners frequent invoked the phrase *'sromik pala'* (literally rearing or bringing up workers, as in animal husbandry) to mark their relations to their workers. The verb *pala* is used generally with

reference to pets or poultry, as in raising pets, raising children in the abstract, or fostering an inferior dependent. The implication is that paying wages under emergency conditions would be equivalent to treating workers like pets, who expect to be fed and housed but offer nothing in return. Here workers are constructed not as agentive contract bearers but in a relationship of dependence made possible only by the generosity of the owner. The lines between humans and animals become blurred in this imagery, even as racialized class lines are sharpened. Dehumanized and animalized, their subjectivities as workers with rights protected by unions or the state are completely erased. Bestiary tropes, as Frantz Fanon noted long ago, are critical to drawing lines between civilized and uncivilized. Colonial racialized tropes of the lazy native are also folded into *bhadralok* constructions of the labouring classes. In relation to paying wages, a question that workers and labour advocates faced repeatedly is why and for how long factory owners should 'support workers to sit idle and eat'. It is difficult to capture the layers and the nuances of '*boshe boshe khawano*,' a Bengali term that implies laziness and exploiting hospitality. Elora Chowdhury reports that labour organizer Taslima Akter was asked a version of this question on live television (Chowdhury 2020: 619). Such 'misrecognition' is made possible by prior associations and markers of class and labour. The English term 'freeloaders' comes closest to capture the meaning of both *sromik pala* and *boshe boshe khawa.* Here we see a complex intersectionality at work -- colonial racial tropes intersecting with classed and gendered discourses to produce a narrative that valorizes otherwise exploitative working conditions and constructs workers as non-agentic and animal-like, in need of paternalist disciplining.

The cultural and political category of *bhadralok* was crystallized in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, as an increasingly English educated, professional and salaried urban middle income group, largely upper-caste Hindu, sought to distance itself from 'backward' agricultural and cultivating classes, who came to be seen as *chotolok*

(literally 'small people'). As an emergent category, *bhadralok* self-presentation hinged on the rejection of manual labour, especially ploughing and cultivating the fields. Manual work set the boundary between those who associated themselves with the life of the mind and the so-called lower orders, the latter associated with unruliness and sexual/moral laxity. This took place at a time when Hinduism itself was undergoing redefinition, so that the binary between elite and non-elite also separated intellectual labour from ritual practices considered the work of *chotolok*. In short, *bhadralok* subjectivities were constituted through and against caste/classed, gendered, and sexualized others. This form of indigenous othering intersects with the racialized hierarchy in the global garment industry, contributing to the social stigmatization and troubled mobility trajectories of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

Bhadralok status refers to an ethos or world view as much as it does class or status (Roy 2016: 23). What might be called *bhadralok* sentiment or mentality saturates everyday interactions in contemporary Bangladesh, not least in phrases such as 'arguing like a rickshaw wallah's wife' (that is, in an 'uncultured', 'unladylike' manner, within hearing of the public, with no sense of propriety or privacy) or 'made-up like a garment worker' (a reference to garish make-up and clothing, aspiring to but failing to emulate middle class tastes). Class boundaries are constantly secured through such gendered and sexualized tropes.

Gender and class hierarchies materialized through spatial disciplining and distancing map on to dominant development and middle-class concerns over subaltern others. These discursive and spatial techniques of discipline have long enduring colonial legacies. Dhaka city has always had containment zones carved out on the basis of class: the elite Gulshan residential area is now proudly a 'beggar-free' zone, and the diplomatic zone of Baridhara was declared Lungi-free[10] for

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10 A sarong like garment for men, in which a host of ambivalent meanings, norms and practices are em-

a while (Begum 2020; Habib 2014; Lata 2020). These zones of containment, like urban planning practices in general in Bangladesh, are rooted in colonial modes of planning and dividing up the city (Baffoe and Roy 2022). They echo colonial urban-management practices that carved out spaces marked by racial and class segregation. The expulsion of 'undesirable' populations in the name of beautification or for ostensibly health and sanitation purposes also has its roots in colonial management ideologies (Chhabria 2019). In this backdrop, one scholar insists that official contempt for the poor constitutes a major feature of urban governance in Bangladesh today (Lata 2020). In her words, cities such as Dhaka, 'the poor do not fit well with a new urban vision', being subject instead to discourses that portray them as criminals, producers of filth and encroachers (ibid.: 4). [11] Expendable labour, even if it is also essential, must be contained in particular zones, slums being the most obvious. The project of disciplining and keeping out working-class bodies is explicit and open in contemporary Bangladesh.

'Garment Workers' Lives Don't Matter?'

The second wave of Covid-19 in 2021 coincided with the month of Ramadan. Over the years, it has become practice for garment workers to labor for longer hours than usual at this time, in anticipation of a long break at the end of the

bedded. Celebrated as an informal 'national dress' for men in Bangladesh, it is everyday wear for urban working-class men and rural peasants. *Bhadralok*/urban elites eschew it in public, though they may use it in domestic spaces. In this context, its attempted abolition was tied its association as not-modern.

[11] Dhaka's working-class migrant population reside in over 4000 slums, and are routinely subjected to violent evictions legalized through reconstituted versions of colonial era vagrancy laws. This form of accumulation by dispossession often occurs in the name of hygiene and orderliness. In January 1975, under the auspice of a 'Clean Dhaka' rehabilitation project, nearly 200 thousand people were forcibly relocated to the fringes of the city. In the 1980s during military rule, the second author recalls that it was common for police to pick up "vagrant" children from Dhaka streets and forcibly detain them in shelters.

month for Eid. Workers consent to a form of hyper-exploitation, working even on the weekly holiday of Friday, with these extra hours counted as 'general duty' rather than as overtime. This much-anticipated annual break is a time for reuniting with family left behind in villages, and literally repairing bodies depleted from the wear and tear of factory work.

In 2021, at the last minute, the BGMEA announced that workers would be granted only a three-day holiday including the day of Eid itself. This would have effectively precluded most workers from returning to their villages. The resistance and fury was immediate. Faced with a different kind of containment, workers organized spontaneous protests demanding full pay before Eid. The response from the state was equally unequivocal. In Gazipur police disrupted a peaceful demonstration and opened fire on workers without provocation (see Figure 4). At least twelve workers were hospitalized, and many were badly injured from beatings.

Workers' voices and resistance have been most legible in the numerous Facebook pages set up since the pandemic. In their individual Facebook statuses, as well as in various groups formed during the pandemic, despairing workers wondered why 'Garment Workers' Lives Don't Matter.' Online media was also the site of expressions of resistance. We reproduce below an especially powerful Facebook post that circulated widely at the time:

> 'Those [workers] who are saying, the factories are now opened, but how can I come without any form of transport, here is my two cents,
>
> This 'you' will come to the factory no matter what, on foot, walking for 24 hours without sleeping, endless changes of short distances, that industry owners already know. Workers will surely show up regardless of the lockdown or availability of transport. If it were the case that no one showed up for work, then owners would think about the lack of transport before reopening the factories. We had better fix ourselves first, before making comments like that. Until we re-make ourselves properly, the government and industry owners will continue to make fools of us.'

Laced with sarcasm, the above post can be read as simultaneously a lament and a 'call to arms'. These few lines capture with economy the basic structural predicament with which workers must contend, underscoring the compulsions and regimes of valuation that separate garment workers from others, not just in moments of crisis but in 'normal' times as well. The power of this post lies in the author's recognition of worker agency and implicit call to reject managerial discourses that amplify relations of dependence. Instead of the usual appeal to either the state or the owners of capital, the post addresses workers directly, holding them responsible, refusing passivity. In restoring workers' agency, the author opens the possibility of collective action and meaningful social and political transformation.

Conclusion: Troubled Mobilities and Moral Panics

This essay builds on existing feminist scholarship on women's labour and disposability in global garment production. It denaturalizes the 'exceptional' moment of the pandemic by locating the predicament of workers within longer histories of gendered labour expendability and discourses of development within the specific context of Bangladesh. As we show, Covid-19 conditions rendered it impossible to mobilize discourses of empowerment and upliftment; the logic of expendability on which the garment industry actually operates in 'normal' times, under conditions in which workers are easily 'replaceable', became impossible to deny. If only temporarily, the pandemic made visible the expendability of a labouring population otherwise hailed as national heroes and on the path to female emancipation.

Covid-19 literalized and materialized pre-existing social fears and anxieties through the invocation of public health concerns, effectively reinforcing middle-class boundary-making projects. Racialized, gendered and classed tropes became a narrative resource to paper over the contradictions generated by the postcolonial development state and its ties to global capital, contradictions

Figure 4: Wounds from rubber bullet fired at workers in Gazipur. Photo: Sheikh Sabiha Alam (Prothom Alo)

dramatized forcefully under pandemic conditions. The travails of Bangladesh's garment workers also bring to the fore the troubled concept of mobility in the contemporary moment. Movement, considered essential to modernity, can produce pathological panic in others. Following Arjun Appadurai, we could say that mobility itself becomes the disease, exhibiting a virulent quality that marks bodies as undesirable.

Movement becomes a method of killing, such that workers who set off en masse to secure precarious livelihoods find themselves on 'death marches'. Those on the move – immigrants, refugees, or garment workers desperately seeking refuge from a disease or seeking to save their jobs by ignoring lockdown orders – can easily become pariah citizens in the new global order. If the value of bodies is linked to the creation of wealth, then some workers must be allowed to die to save the economy and the nation.

This kind of necro-political logic ensures the oscillating construction of Bangladeshi garment workers as expendable and pathological bodies as well as productive, essential workers. Rather than asking what the lockdown prevents, it may be more productive to ask what the lockdown or so-called 'General Holiday' enabled. One thing it allowed was intensified biopolitics and multiple boundary-making projects to flourish.

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