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“Why Won’t You Stay at Home?”: Reports from Ramganj, Jaipur.

Vibhor Mathur and Aqueel Khan

May 2020

“We have two rooms of 100 square feet with 8 people each, how long can we stay inside?”

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown at us medical, economic, policy and social challenges unlike any we’ve seen. Policymakers and leaders around the world are still grappling with how to control the spread of the virus. Added to this already are the challenges of [migration](#), [unemployment](#), [economic slowdown](#), [broken supply chains](#) and [social tensions](#), amongst various others. Around the world experts have suggested, and governments have agreed, that there is a need to physically distance people. In most countries this has taken the form of government-mandated lockdowns of some description, along with pleas to #stayathome.

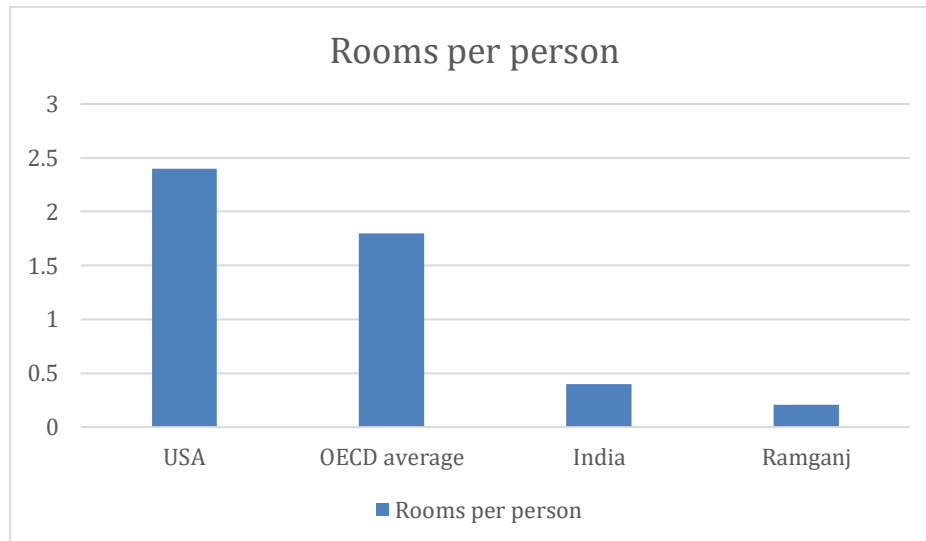
On the 24th of March PM Modi announced his decision to put all of India under lockdown. Movement was restricted to just essential services. India’s lockdown has been listed as one of the most [stringent](#) in the world, with some criticizing it for being [unplanned](#), and [brutal](#) and others [praising](#) it as the reason behind India’s (proportionately) low number of cases. This has been supported with state and local governments working diligently to provide relief, essential supplies and policing to their constituents, and the Prime Minister regularly motivating/requesting people to support the lockdown with regular [activities](#). What neither group of actors has been able to address however, are the challenges that certain groups or communities are facing in being locked down for what is now more than 35 days.

The community of Ramganj in Jaipur is one such community. Residents of Ramganj remain as respectful of the need for a lockdown and of the severity of the virus as they are of their needs as households and as a community. From lack of supplies, cash or just space to live in, the reasons provided seem to be a lot more material than political. As days go by, we’re [learning](#) that staying at home is a privilege very few can afford. Further that this chasm extends beyond just class, being compounded by religious and caste-based markers. One such situation is of the muslim neighbourhood of Ramganj, Jaipur. A densely populated area of almost 400,000 residents in 3 square kilometres, Ramganj is Jaipur’s single largest hotspot with over 600 positive Covid-19 cases. In spite of this, the streets of Ramganj are regularly populated with groups of people engaged in social and economic activities.

Current [narratives](#) in India have been stoking the islamophobic fire and blaming muslims for the spread of the coronavirus in India. This has ranged from calling Muslims uneducated or stupid, evil and the spreaders of ‘[corona jihad](#)’ or just [politically motivated](#) to make Modi’s lockdown unsuccessful. This has led to [violent attacks](#) on muslims and the amplification of vicious videos and images implicating muslims. A newspaper has even gone to the extent of publishing a [cartoon](#) that depicts the virus dressed in traditional muslim attire. This all began with the Tablighi Jamaat who conducted a missionary event in Delhi on the 13th of March, attendees of which went to different parts of the country, [some](#) of whom carried the virus where they went. As a result the government even had a [separate column](#) of Tablighi Jamaat

related Covid-19 cases, which only fueled the islamophobia around the virus. As multiple people have now [highlighted](#), this event was far from being the only religious or mass event happening at the time. The parliament was running in full flow and more than [15 lakh](#) people entered the country at the time. The narratives went so out of hand, that even unlikely actors like the UP police had to turn [fact-checkers](#)!

The story of Ramganj is not unique, nor is it atypical of other muslim neighbourhoods in Indian cities. At an intersection of [class](#) and [religious](#) marginalization, Muslim communities have long been pushed to the peripheries of society, both socially and geographically. The government's [Sachar Committee Report](#) highlights the educational and economic backwardness the community has long suffered. There now exists well documented [analysis](#) of the nature of spatial segregation that Muslims have had. On the one hand, there is the practice of arbitrary [eviction](#) notices and [hesitation](#) in even giving houses/commercial spaces on rent to muslims. On the other, [research](#) shows that over the last few decades, muslims have started to ghettoise certain areas, out of a fear of persecution and violence, to gather from the strength that comes from unity. This has however pushed them to either the peripheries of the city or forced the development of ghettoized neighbourhoods with congested housing and retail establishments. Recent analyses looking to understand the sort of spaces people are inhabiting has found that while in the US there exist [2.4 rooms to a person](#), in India that average is [0.4 rooms to a person](#). Our research in Ramganj shows that room access here is 47.5% lower than even the national average, standing at 0.21 rooms to a person. So while on an average in India there are 2.5 occupants per room, in an average Ramganj household, there are 5 people who occupy one room.



Source: OECD, Census of India 2011 and primary research

The residential make up of Ramganj makes living through a lockdown particularly harsh. Not just does it produce economic stifling and costs to mental health that billions in the world are currently living through, it poses unique logistical challenges for its residents. *“My two-bedroom house has 17 occupants. There are women and young girls in there, how long can I continue to be inside?”* said 65-year old Sikander*. These struggles are not whimsical. Family relations are strongly gendered, and norms of morality and appropriateness are based around physical and other non-verbal forms of interactions. Long periods of physical proximity across

genders and ages are both abnormal and uncomfortable. Equally, the sheer lack of space in houses that congested seems to be enough of a deterrent against staying indoors for long periods of time.



“We are not fools” says 43- year old rickshaw driver Imad*, *“We understand the gravity of this issue and want to save ourselves along with everyone around”*. He insists that we visit his house. This two-bedroom house in a four-storey building has roughly 12 rooms of a hundred square feet each, on each floor. This building is currently home to 134 people with no open space. As buildings get higher the, the gap between the façade of this building and the one in front continues to become much narrower than the meagre 20 feet it began with. Imad stays in his two rooms with his elderly mother, wife, a widow sister and five children.



A street in Ramganj

In houses this small there is no real distinction between shared and personal spaces, with people, objects and chores usually occupying all available space. Under 'normal' circumstances this is mostly manageable because at least half the members of the house (mostly men) leave in the morning only to return for the evening meal and again leave for

social interactions only to come back around midnight to sleep. *“After four days of lockdown, I had to ask my husband and son to move out since my daughter-in-law had severe stomachache owing to her female problem (periods). We are 7 members in a 150 square feet room which we have divided into two using a curtain.”* says 52-year old housewife Naghma*.

During the lockdown thus, the scope for leisure is reduced, with clothing, conversation and lifestyle having to be altered to the presence of all members of the (mostly multigenerational) family. The result is therefore deferring back the traditional demarcation of the private space of the home being reserved for women, and men stepping out – either at the pretext of chores or just to step out of the house, thereby violating the lockdown.



The other major factor highlighted in our research is one of keeping oneself occupied and/or entertained. Most of the residents of Ramganj do not do jobs that can be done from home, which as the world is slowly realising is a great divider along the lines of privilege. This predominantly artisan, petty business or informal-sector workforce is facing the harsh reality of not having money to feed their families. Not being able to work creates a whole horde of economic challenges that are beyond the scope of this piece. It does however, create the need to occupy/entertain oneself at home. For people to whom this is an alien concept, who are constrained by low technological proficiency and are constrained for space, this is an even bigger challenge. The burden for entertainment thus falls on the TV, which usually is one per household, and thus already a contested resource. Further with cash flows curtailed, a number of people are unable to recharge their cable connections and even avail that form of entertainment while being indoors. As Amaan says, *“The agent refuses to recharge my connection on credit. Where will I go with his money? With no TV what do I do at home all day long?”* The lack of options thus force residents to revert to their traditional source of entertainment – neighbours and members of the community. 35-year old Rashid* says, *“We are forced to make this ‘calculated risk’ by coming out for a few hours to entertain ourselves.”*



The pandemic is a time to reassess a lot of the fabric on which the world is constructed. The lockdown is a reminder that our world is sharply stratified. This is defined not just on the basis of access to not just supplies and ration, but even time, space, internet and freedom. The need of the hour is to understand how these impact daily life, and build bridges of support, not look for villains and burn them.

*Names changed

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