ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Surviving COVID-19 in India: Transgender Activism in a Neoliberal–Developmentalist Assemblage

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Transgender and gender-nonconforming people, particularly communities from predominantly working-class and Dalit (oppressed-caste) backgrounds such as kothis and hijras, were among those hit hardest during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The COVID-19 crisis was exacerbated by the policies of the Indian state, which demonstrate an unstable assemblage or conjuncture of neoliberal and developmentalist tendencies, in keeping with long-term systemic patterns in the region. The article situates Indian trans activism during the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the neoliberal–developmentalist assemblage that characterizes governance in contemporary India and examines the possibilities and limitations of such activism. During the COVID-19 crisis, trans communities and activists contest and negotiate with the state in variable ways, sometimes bolstering and suturing neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance and sometimes challenging or undermining them, and even playing them against each other. This article traces these varied negotiations and analyzes how they not only enable the survival of trans people through the pandemic, but also demonstrate ways activists may push back against the state's simultaneous regulation and neglect of their communities.

"We became destitute... Why? The *jonogon* [general public] had no income. Buses, trains were not running. People were not... able to work." –Mousumi Saha, *guru* or leader of the transfeminine hijra community at Kalyani, West Bengal, India

"The government evaded its responsibility... It provided relief to our community mainly to earn a good name for itself. If a thousand of us needed relief, it provided only to three hundred... Also, it did not give relief immediately... but only when we had started raising our voices, when they heard that relief was coming in from abroad, that we were doing fundraising." –Silk, transgender activist from Kalyani, India

As elsewhere in the world, transgender and gender-nonconforming persons, particularly communities from predominantly working-class and Dalit (oppressed-caste) backgrounds such as hijras and kothis, have been among those hit hardest during the COVID-19 pandemic in India.[1] Journalists and scholars have documented a litany of impacts, including loss of livelihood, psychosocial isolation, lack of access to healthcare and relief, and intensified social stigma due to fears of COVID-19 transmission from these communities (Choudhary 2020; Datta 2020; Ghosh 2021a). As Silk's opening quote suggests, these impacts were not merely due to the pandemic itself, but also partly due to the state's response to it.[2] This response was spectacularly exemplified by the first phase of the lockdown declared by the central government on March 24, 2020 with just a few hours of notice, which was meant to contain the transmission of COVID-19 but might have ironically fostered its spread from urban to rural areas due to the exodus of migrant workers who lost their employment in cities (Bhattacharyya 2020). The early phases of India's lockdown, dubbed the harshest and most extensive in the world, imposed an almost complete ban on industrial, commercial, religious, and cultural activity (except some essential services) and exerted severe restrictions on people's movement, which particularly affected the working poor (Daniyal 2020). Ironically, infection rates were low when the lockdown was first imposed and it was gradually eased (though not entirely lifted) when infections were increasing later in 2020, reflecting its poorly planned nature (Bhattacharyya 2020). Harsh restrictions were reintroduced in many places in India during the second wave of the pandemic between April and June 2021, although this time the central government left decisions on specific measures up to the states, given the devastating and widely criticized effects of the first lockdown (The Hindu Net Desk 2021).

1   In keeping with activist usages in India and transnationally, I use "transgender" as an umbrella term for a diverse range of people and communities whose identities and/or expressions differ from the gender assigned to them at birth. However, the transgender rubric has complex implications for gender-nonconforming people in India and may serve to circumscribe or exclude preexisting identities through biomedical and binary framings of gender, even as it is adapted and modified by Indian activists and communities (Billard and Nesfield 2020; Dutta and Roy 2014).

2   I have retained the real self-chosen names of trans activists with their consent, rather than using pseudonyms, as a way of recognizing and documenting their contributions during the pandemic, as well as acknowledging their analytic insights that have crucially shaped this article.

While measures related to physical distancing are essential to containing the pandemic, Indian public health activists have critiqued the centralized and top-down imposition of the lockdown, which involved police violence and coercion, and treated unprivileged people like "criminals or subjects under colonial rule" (Jan Swasthya Abhiyan 2020, 3). In perhaps the most notorious instance of such action, migrant workers attempting to leave for their rural homes were sprayed with disinfectant during the early days of the lockdown (Daniyal 2020). Consequently, many leftist, feminist, and trans scholars and activists in India have taken a critical stance toward COVID-related containment measures (Chatterjee 2021; Datta 2021; Ghosh 2020). This markedly contrasts with left-liberal opinion in the West and particularly the USA, which has tended to support state-instituted lockdowns (Green 2021)—although scholars have critiqued various aspects of containment measures in the West, too, ranging from biopolitical surveillance to adverse gendered and sexualized impacts (Brown 2020; Corrêa 2020; Kitchin 2020). In the Indian context, the leftist economist Jayati Ghosh (2020, 519) argues that "the nature of the government response... destroyed the economy and forced millions into poverty and hunger, but did not control virus transmission." Further, as suggested by Silk's opening statement, the first lockdown's severity and ultimate inefficacy contrasted with the inadequacy of relief packages announced by central and state governments, many of which merely repackaged or added to provisions that had been already announced before the pandemic (Ghosh 2020; Kapil 2020).

In this context, this article examines the role of transgender activists and communities in addressing the pandemic and negotiating with related governmental measures, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in eastern India and particularly focusing on the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020. As Silk indicates, the debilitating effects of the lockdown and inadequate or tokenistic relief prompted a flurry of organizing and fundraising by trans and kothi-hijra (transfeminine spectrum) activists and organizations. Scholars have documented how this burgeoning sphere of COVID-related activism addressed not just their own communities but also other marginalized social groups and thus helped mitigate the intensified socioeconomic marginalization of trans and other vulnerable people during this period (Chatterjee 2021; Ghosh 2021b; Goel 2020). However, this process also highlights how, in Silk's words, "the government evaded its responsibility," which was instead transferred onto civil society and non-state entities—a phenomenon also noted in other regions during the pandemic (Hossain 2022; Morelock, Listik, and Kalia 2021). As Ayona Datta (2020) notes based on research in South India, "in this absence of state, civil society stepped in to address... the knock-on effects of subsistence rupture to the urban poor and their families." Since the immediate need for relief took precedence over challenging state policies, such mobilizations may be seen as inadvertently accelerating the process of responsibilization—a phenomenon wherein "civil society" and individuals take up responsibility to make up for the decline of state infrastructure, welfare, and social security that characterizes neoliberal capitalism (Burchell 1996; Morelock, Listik, and Kalia 2021; Sharma 2008).

However, as I argue, trans, kothi and hijra mobilizations during the pandemic also evidence several ambiguities and contradictions, rather than completely fitting into the narrative of responsibilization within neoliberalism. As Sayan Bhattacharya (2021, 6) notes, working-class, Dalit, and trans activists "fiercely contested this neo-

liberal orthodoxy through consistent grassroots-led movements and have forced the state to commit back to some of its welfare roles." Yet, the grassroots-led contestation of neoliberalism is also but part of the story, given that the Indian state has long instituted authoritarian forms of developmentalism and welfare from above (Sinha 2021). Indian central and state governments utilized the pandemic period to establish or rebuild developmental mechanisms for trans welfare, such as transgender development boards and councils (Anandabazar Patrika 2020; Dhrubo Jyoti 2020). Following long-term patterns of state-led development in India, such mechanisms were constituted in non-transparent and hierarchical ways, and thus, working-class and/or Dalit trans activists also had to contest and negotiate with the developmentalist facets of the Indian state, sometimes leveraging their expanded welfare roles within neoliberal responsibilization to do so.

Against this backdrop, I build on extant scholarship on neoliberalism and developmentalism in India and the Global South to argue that the functionings of the Indian state, and its relation with marginalized communities during and beyond the pandemic, belie any universalizing conception of neoliberalism, and rather, suggest a patchy—though impactful—incorporation of certain typically neoliberal policies such as deregulation, privatization, and reduction of social safety nets alongside continuing ideologies of the developmentalist and welfarist state (Legg and Roy 2013; Sharma 2008). Studies of governmental measures related to COVID-19 note contextually varied tendencies of neoliberal responsibilization and authoritarian or technocratic forms of state-led development during the pandemic (Leach et al. 2020; Morelock, Listik, and Kalia 2021; Ngcayisa 2021). Exploring how the specific conjuncture of neoliberal and developmentalist policies in the Indian context have impacted structurally marginalized groups, I argue that both independent trans initiatives that substitute for state welfare and the incorporation of trans activism into the state's developmental mechanisms have reinforced profound inequalities among activists and communities based on class, caste, and geographic location, as evident in unequal access to private funding, as well as in the prioritization of elite trans activists within undemocratically-constituted state bodies for trans welfare. However, I show that trans activism has also directly challenged or subtly counteracted both neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance—and even played them against each other where possible—in order to maximize opportunities for survival and empowerment, which suggests how trans communities ensure their sustenance through improvisatory, contingent, and uncertain engagements with the state (Bhattacharya 2021). Not all trans people or activists, however, occupy similarly uncertain terrain vis-à-vis the state; some are in more secure positions. Indeed, a relatively small section of privileged trans activists have tended to bolster and suture neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance and thus help consolidate state power, whereas activists in more precarious positions have utilized fractures in state governance to push back against the state's simultaneous regulation and neglect of their communities, even as they must compromise with the state for survival.

The following sections explore these contradictory and frictional tendencies based on qualitative research, specifically ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, conducted in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal in 2020 and 2021. I particularly focus on a spectrum of feminine-identified people usually assigned male (or less com-

monly intersex) at birth, who go by various names including transgender, kothi, and hijra. Kothi is a term used by a spectrum of gender-variant people, including those who describe themselves as feminine males, as women, and as a third or separate gender, as well as those who express fluid or mixed identities (Dutta 2013; Dutta and Roy 2014). Hijra communities comprise a similar range of subject positions but are more typically associated with formalized kinship systems organized around *guru–chela* or leader–disciple hierarchies, and also with certain typical professions such as blessing people for money during auspicious occasions like childbirth or in public spaces like streets and trains, based on their cultural association with the power to confer fertility on people (Reddy 2005). Some kothis and hijras also do sex work, which generally occupies a lower status among community professions (Reddy 2005). There is also considerable overlap between these communities: some kothis may join hijra kinship systems and professions either temporarily or permanently (Dutta 2013). My cumulative ethnographic engagement with these communities stretches over a period of fourteen years, and as a nonbinary transfeminine person, I have come to be included as a community member, although my interlocutors are cognizant of my relatively privileged position as a middle-class, dominant-caste, and English-speaking person. For this article, I draw on participant observation conducted in several spurts between June 2020 and December 2021 in three districts of West Bengal, as well as interviews of key activists in these regions. My long-term involvement and partial inclusion within these communities allowed me a close look at how they negotiated with the COVID-19 crisis, and also enabled me to collaborate with them in some COVID-related activist initiatives.

In the first section, I build on the work of scholars such as Aradhana Sharma, Srila Roy, and Stephen Legg, who have theorized the Indian state as being simultaneously neoliberal and developmentalist, to argue that governance during the COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as an assemblage or unstable conjuncture of neoliberal and developmentalist policies and strategies (Legg and Roy 2013; Sharma 2008). Andries du Toit (2018, 4) argues that an "assemblage of discourses, practices, institutions and projects that... we could call 'late liberal' or 'neoliberal' developmentalism" has played an important role in "the government of subaltern populations... in the 'postcolonial' world." In drawing from such theorizations of neoliberal developmentalism as an assemblage, I differ from approaches that either subsume developmentalism as a stage of neoliberalism (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021) or see the two phenomena as opposed (Abers, Rossi, and Bülow 2021; Rugitsky 2020). Sharma (2008, 2) argues that neoliberal and developmentalist ideologies of empowerment in India form an assemblage in the sense of a "conjunctural and evolving ensemble-like formation... made up of heterogeneous elements that are not necessarily internally coherent but are brought together for specific strategic ends." Sharma's approach to empowerment may be extended to a broader gamut of neoliberal and developmentalist tendencies which, rather than functioning as a unified whole or as oppositional forces, are related in contingently shifting ways—both converging in some cases and presenting tensions or ruptures that may be used to contest state governance. I contend that the evolution of state policies and its relation with marginalized communities during the pandemic suggest the continuing reconfiguration of neoliberal and developmentalist elements within the assemblage of governance practices in India in keeping with long-term sys-

temic patterns, rather than being either wholly contained within or marking a radical departure from neoliberalism.[3] The second section draws upon ethnographic observations and interviews to specifically situate trans communities and activism within this neoliberal–developmentalist assemblage, and it explores the resultant contradictions and opportunities negotiated by these groups and activists. I conclude by suggesting some structural limitations and potentials of trans activism in context of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

SITUATING INDIA'S COVID-19 GOVERNANCE: A NEOLIBERAL–DEVELOPMENTALIST ASSEMBLAGE

The Indian state's heavily interventionist response to COVID-19 citing the collective end of public health, combined with inadequate welfare provision, require some contextualization of India's position vis-à-vis neoliberalism. As a term describing transformations in the relation between states and markets since the late 20th century, neoliberalism has been debated and critiqued as an imprecise, multivalent concept that may become vaguely totalizing in being mutably used across vastly different geopolitical contexts (Eriksen et al. 2015). While there are varied articulations of the concept, definitions tend to commonly stress the deregulation of capital, privatization of public services, and the reduction of state support for development and social welfare programs, even as the state might take on strong roles to secure the interests of capital (Abramovitz 2012; Fouskas and Gokay 2020). As Kiasha Naidoo (2020) states, neoliberalism "promotes individualism and includes the belief that unregulated free markets yield efficiency and prosperity… the state is expected to act minimally (to secure) the conditions necessary for the market." Neoliberalism is often distinguished from developmentalism—itself a broad label for a set of ideologies and policies wherein the state plays an active role in planning and managing national economic development, capitalist production, wealth redistribution, and/or social transformation (Prates, Fritz, and Paula 2020). Developmentalism as practiced by the postcolonial Indian state has included welfare provision as a strategy of poverty reduction and redistribution, which poses a potential contradiction with neoliberal logics of welfare reduction (Sharma 2008, 59). However, as scholars such as Ong (2006) and Sharma (2008) have argued, the growing transnational influence of neoliberal ideology over the last few decades has not resulted in a uniform retreat of the state or retrenchment of welfare across the Global South, and continuing variations in the nature and extent of state intervention trouble the supposed global homogeneity of neoliberalism and its seeming break from developmentalist paradigms.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have further disrupted the state's expected role within neoliberalism (Naidoo 2020). Neoliberalism is typically associated with the propagation of individual liberties, entrepreneurship, and responsibilities over the collective or social good, and with a shift in the state's role from the provider of social services to the financier and regulator of so-called "free markets" (Mehra 2020).

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3   This point echoes the argument made by Siddharth Sareen and colleagues (2021) in their study of the reconfiguration of governance in India and other nations. However, they do not specifically study the articulation between neoliberal and developmentalist tendencies.

However, Naidoo (2020) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic compelled governments across the world to take strong "decisions in collective solidarity." Puja Mehra (2020) describes how the pandemic caused states to ramp up welfarist measures and even flirt with socialist policies. For instance, in India, "the Narendra Modi government will foot the bill for the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) contributions... for 8 million organized sector workers... [although] the package leaves out millions of informal workers" (Mehra 2020). Some assert that the return of state interventions to provide social security portends the decline of neoliberalism (Rugitsky 2020). In contrast, such measures may also be seen as a form of "emergency Keynesianism" marking a temporary resort to social provisioning rather than a long-term departure from neoliberalism as such (Šumonja 2021, 216).

While theorizations of the pandemic as prompting a temporary or long-term departure from neoliberalism might well be valid in certain contexts, they inadvertently totalize a particular idea of neoliberalism as the overarching current phase of capitalism from which countries are now compelled to deviate due to the pandemic-induced crisis. Countering the idea of the state's retreat in late capitalism, some scholars argue that governmental bureaucracy and spending might even increase in neoliberal regimes, although this serves "not to promote majoritarian objectives but values like 'competition' and 'efficiency'" and the "outsourcing of public services to capitalist enterprises" (Jones and Hameiri 2021, 6). Some scholars further argue that the developmental state has become repurposed to serve neoliberal aims and that an authoritarian form of developmentalism, led by right-wing leaders such as Donald Trump and Narendra Modi, marks the latest stage of neoliberalism (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). Governmental intervention during the pandemic might, then, mark not a break from neoliberalism but an intensification of neoliberal developmentalism. Others, however, note a more contested negotiation between developmentalist and neoliberal political camps during the pandemic in countries such as Argentina, which belies the generalized subsumption of contemporary developmentalism as a stage of neoliberalism (Abers, Rossi, and Bülow 2021, 341).

Such uneven theorizations suggest that the relation between neoliberalism and developmentalism is perhaps better understood as contingently evolving, evidencing both convergent and conflicting tendencies depending on context.[4] Scholars note how the contemporary Indian state evidences complex and ambiguous negotiations between developmentalism, state welfare, and select neoliberal principles (Raonka 2016; Sharma 2008). Drawing on Sharma's work, Legg and Roy (2013, 468) state that even after the liberalization of the Indian economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Indian state has continued to be both "developmentalist *and* neoliberalizing." Under pressure from international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), successive Indian governments have profoundly, yet selectively adopted certain policies typically associated with neoliberalism, while deviating from other elements. Conformity with neoliberal principles is clearly evident in cases like the deregulation of markets to enable greater foreign investment, privatization of sectors like banking and aviation, and the reduction of agricultural subsidies (Murthy 2013).

4   This articulation is adapted from Amrita Chhachhi's (2020, 50) exploration of the "convergence and contradictions" between Hindu right-wing politics and neoliberalism.

However, the Indian state has evidenced a more fluctuating treatment of welfare, as well as socioeconomic individualism. Sharma (2008, 43) notes the numerical increase in quasi-state and non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in post-liberalization India, sometimes aided by the state itself, which serves to shift the direct responsibility and "burden of poverty relief and grassroots development" to non-state bodies. This translates to a gradual responsibilization of non-state actors for social services (Sharma 2008). However, as she states, "the contemporary Indian state cannot fully relinquish its development and welfare functions because its legitimacy rests on precisely such functions. ... The developmentalist imperatives of the state have meant that the Indian government continues to run, and has even expanded some large-scale welfare-based programs" (Sharma 2008, 43).

The state's wavering stance toward welfare becomes clear with respect to India's Public Distribution System (PDS), which delivers subsidized food grains to about two-thirds of the population and was a crucial part of COVID-19 relief measures (Boss et al. 2021). Post the liberalizing economic reforms of the 1990s, the Indian central government seemingly followed a typical neoliberal path in trimming the PDS system from universal to targeted coverage aimed at poorer demographic sections who had to show Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards to qualify for subsidized prices, which led to the exclusion of large numbers of working-class and Dalit people from the system given errors in documentation and the low poverty line (Bedamatta 2006; Murthy 2013). However, in the 2010s, several state governments, particularly Chhattisgarh, moved back to a less targeted and almost universal PDS following electoral pressures and push from social movements like the Right to Food campaign, which eventually led the central government to adopt the 2013 National Food Security Act which propelled the PDS system back toward broader coverage (Kishore and Chakrabarti 2015).

After the current Hindu right-wing and corporate-friendly National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government took over from the previous regime in 2014, there were indications that the PDS might be replaced with a targeted direct benefit transfer or DBT system that would require beneficiaries to open bank accounts and obtain biometric Aadhaar cards, which again would potentially exclude many poor people with uneven access to such documents (Kapoor 2017). However, the in-kind distribution of food grains through the PDS has remained and, in fact, its coverage has been expanded in scale and made free in many states during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pandey 2020). The NDA government also threatened to dismantle the rural employment guarantee act instituted by the previous regime which guarantees employment to the rural poor for a fixed period per year, but in the end, it rebranded the act as a gift from the Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a benevolent patriarch (Chhachhi 2020). This demonstrates how the idea of the state and politicians providing welfare has remained ideologically important and how Indian state policy has repeatedly touted welfarist claims contra neoliberal ideology (Raonka 2016), while also reducing public expenditure in some sectors in typical neoliberal fashion (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2019).

Developmentalist and neoliberal tendencies might work in both tense or frictional and conciliatory or convergent ways. On the one hand, developmental mechanisms may work to counteract or temper the effects of neoliberal principles. Pallavi Raonka (2016) argues that the exigencies of electoral democracy and people's movements compel the post-liberalization Indian state to "temper the excesses of neolib-

eral claims by maintaining and extending welfare programs," allowing the growth of corporate capitalism while mitigating "the ill-effects of primitive accumulation… with anti-poverty programs."

On the other hand, developmental and welfare initiatives might also work in tandem with or extend certain neoliberal policy agendas. Aradhana Sharma (2008, 44–45) notes how government-sponsored rural women empowerment programs reconfigure the "state's commitment to national development… through its ability to empower marginalized subjects to care for themselves and to participate in the project of self-rule," thus ultimately serving the end of individualized responsibilization. Amrita Chhachhi (2020) notes that the current government has redesigned welfare mechanisms to draw in unprivileged populations into webs of finance capitalism by mandating beneficiaries to apply for the so-called JAM trinity of bank accounts, biometric identification or Aadhaar cards, and mobile phones, which increasingly brings the rural poor into the ambit of private and public banks and credit schemes. This also suggests how developmentalist and neoliberal tendencies work in tandem to extend state surveillance of recipient populations through biometric identification and digitized records. Relatedly, the state has also linked some government schemes with the provision of credit meant to encourage individual entrepreneurship among cisgender women and Dalit people (Chhachhi 2020). The use of developmental mechanisms to foster neoliberal ideals is also evident in recent schemes for transgender people, particularly the central government's Garima Greh project, which funds selected transgender community organizations to run shelters for homeless trans people where residents cannot take part in sex work or begging and are trained through skill development programs to become "productive" independent entrepreneurs (Social Defence Bureau 2020).

However, the typically neoliberal push toward economic individualism and entrepreneurship is accompanied by a contentious relation with individual liberties and freedoms associated with late capitalism, as is also true of right-wing forces in the Global North (Davidson and Saull 2017; Tambe and Tambe 2013). Exclusionary forms of Hindu collective belonging and solidarity and related social moralities have been encouraged during the rule of the NDA government, leading to the curtailment of individual and group rights for religious and gender/sexual minorities (Tambe and Tambe 2013). These varying tendencies suggest that the overall trajectory of Indian society and polity in the post-liberalization period does not neatly fit any overarching concept of neoliberalism but is perhaps better understood as an assemblage of several "heterogeneous elements that are not necessarily internally coherent but are brought together for specific strategic ends" (Sharma 2008, 2). These ends, ranging from corporate appeasement to electoral gain, are sometimes convergent and sometimes more frictional.

Neoliberal and developmentalist elements in the COVID-19 lockdown

The Indian state's governance during the COVID-19 crisis might be seen as an evolving moment in the long-term assemblage of neoliberal, developmentalist, and welfarist policies in India. Critics of neoliberalism note that the lack of adequate state expenditure on healthcare, and policies promoting privatization of and individual responsibility for healthcare, precipitated the COVID-19 crisis across many countries including

India (Fouskas and Gokay 2020). Yet, during the pandemic-induced crisis itself, the government took on a strong interventionist role in enforcing lockdowns and collective behaviors for the putative social good, contra the elements of neoliberal ideology that valorize individualism and a minimized state (Naidoo 2020). The public health activist network Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (2020, 3–5) points out that the Indian state's lockdown in 2020 generalized containment strategies that were not well suited to the Indian context and ultimately did not promote safer behaviors, and recommends that local populations be treated as partners in controlling COVID-19 rather than as subjects of power. Discussing similar lockdowns in parts of Africa, Lumanyano Ngcayisa (2021, 96) argues that they constitute a form of developmental authoritarianism characterized by "illiberal measures" such as banning vehicle movement and "invasive surveillance systems," intensifying pre-existing modalities of state intervention that prioritize socioeconomic development over civil rights. The imposition of abstract technocratic models without regard for context is a hallmark of such authoritarian developmentalism. Drawing on Rob Kitchin (2020), Ayona Datta (2021) suggests that the reliance on lockdowns and digitized surveillance for disease control, while neglecting the multi-dimensional issues faced by the poor in the period, suggests an approach of "technological solutionism" toward COVID-19. While some technological aspects of pandemic control are new, the top-down application of abstract and putatively objective professional knowledges and technologies without adequate local input or partnership is a hallmark of pre-neoliberal developmentalist policy (Escobar 1988). Development scholars point out that standardized "top-down measures" undertaken during the pandemic that did not heed the diverse situations and needs of marginalized groups reflect the "blindness to inequality and social difference of much technocratic development" (Leach et al. 2021, 5). Further, the import of abstracted containment models from other nations (such as China) invokes the idea of modular development, which, as Sharma (2008, 107) says, "entails building models of programs that have succeeded in a particular Third World location and transferring these models to other Third World settings," often through institutionalized networks of professional and expert knowledge. Andries du Toit (2018, 7) contends that the institutionalization of expert knowledges "held to be politically neutral and transportable from context to context" is a central feature of the assemblage of neoliberal developmentalism.

While the lockdown was typically developmentalist in some ways, it also demonstrated some key neoliberal elements. As Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (2020, 1) points out, the Indian state enforced the lockdown as its main strategy while not adequately backing it up with other expert recommendations such as investment in healthcare, large-scale testing, or resource provision for lockdown-affected people. Thus, in effect, the government evaded or minimized its responsibility for healthcare and other social provisions but unleashed state power to enforce the responsibility of ending the pandemic on people affected by it. This reinforces the tendency of neoliberal responsibilization, which renders "subjects [as] individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another—usually a state agency" (O'Malley 2009, 263).[5] As Che Gossett and Eva Hayward (2020, 528) note in the US context, "the socially

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5   This tendency parallels Mohan Dutta's (2020) description of COVID-19 management in Singapore as a form of authoritarian neoliberalism.

distant subject of neoliberal health care is under an injunction to enact proper conduct and protocols figured through personal responsibility alone. … [A] neoliberal response is necessitated through a lack of a state response." In the Indian context, responsibilization is not just enforced at the personal level, but collectively on oppressed-caste and working-class people, who were the ones punished most brutally for violating the lockdown (Daniyal 2020).

Neoliberal tendencies were also evident in the developmental and welfare measures meant as pandemic relief. While the state has touted its welfarist image during the crisis by announcing a slew of relief packages including the provision of free food grains to the poor through the Public Distribution System (PDS) for over six months, commentators have noted that more than half of the measures announced during the 2020 lockdown were merely repackaged versions of support that had been already included in the pre-pandemic budget (Ghosh 2020; Kapil 2020). This suggests that such relief measures were a temporary, insincere effort at crisis management. Moreover, there were significant exclusions in the delivery of services and benefits, for instance, due to the use of outdated census data in selecting PDS recipients (Kapil 2020). Reports note that for several direct cash transfer schemes, the state required recipients to hold bank accounts and biometric identity cards, which excluded significant sections of the rural poor from these packages (Kapil 2020). This also specifically affected transgender and kothi-hijra communities, since many trans people do not have updated identity documents or bank accounts (Amnesty International India 2020; Choudhary 2020). The routing of relief through biometric identity cards and bank accounts also continued the process of extending digitized surveillance through welfare (Chhachhi 2020). Apart from parsimonious and exclusionary welfare measures, the leftist activist Harshvardhan (2020) critiques how the state also used the pandemic period to roll back environmental regulations on businesses and to relax labor laws, especially in states ruled by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that leads the NDA government. The state is thus rolled back in the case of relief provision, labor law enforcement, and corporate regulation, but enhanced in the case of surveillance and regulation of (especially poor) people (e.g., through the control of public mobility). This combines the worst of neoliberal responsibilization with top-down developmentalism and welfarist posturing.

However, a more fraught negotiation between neoliberal and developmentalist tendencies is evident in the state's aborted attempt to introduce "far-reaching neoliberal reforms" in Indian agriculture during the pandemic through laws meant to deregulate agricultural markets, withdraw minimum price support for farmers, and facilitate corporate control over agricultural supply chains (Sinha 2021, 331). Facing stiff resistance from farmers, the ruling regime initially responded with brutal suppression but eventually withdrew the laws, with Prime Minister Modi issuing a quasi-apologetic address stating that he had failed to convince farmers that these laws would ultimately serve their economic interest (Moneycontrol News 2021). The eventual retention of mechanisms such as government support prices that guard against high price volatility, a legacy of developmentalist planning in agriculture, suggests limits to the state's neoliberal ambitions and its ability to combine developmentalist and neoliberal forms of governance during the pandemic.

TRANS ACTIVISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL–DEVELOPMENTALIST ASSEMBLAGE

Transgender activism in India during COVID-19 fits within the process of responsibilization by filling in for the aforementioned lack of adequate state support, but it has also linked up with the state's developmentalist mechanisms through which sporadic welfare has been provided to these communities. Reports note that the direct cash transfer relief packages announced by the central government for the general public were inaccessible to a lot of transgender people due to their lack of required documents (Amnesty International India 2020). While some essential food grains have been provided free of cost to eligible recipients through the Public Distribution System (PDS) during the pandemic through a combination of central and state government allocations, Silk, Silk, the aforementioned trans activist based in Kalyani, told me that many trans and kothi-hijra people in her area did not have ration cards (required to access the PDS) or had left them at home under male names prior to migrating to undertake hijra professions. In this scenario, some transgender activists have advocated for specifically targeted schemes for trans people through several appeals to central and state governments, including two letters signed by trans activists and community members that were submitted to the central government early in the pandemic in March and April 2020 (Shiraz 2020). The second of these letters explicitly references the welfarist functions of the state: "in a welfare state, it is important that vulnerable populations are... entitled to equal rights and share in the schemes... declared due to the lockdown" (Banu et al. 2020). These efforts may be seen as pushing the state to uphold its welfare roles at a time when it was evading them, thus contesting neoliberal tendencies (Bhattacharya 2021). They also extend a longer history of trans mobilizations, accelerating after a 2014 judgment by the Indian Supreme Court that recognized transgender identity and rights, that have resulted in "some concrete gains and developmental rights" such as legal promises for trans-specific welfare mechanisms despite "neoliberal... reductions in welfare" (Kumar 2021, 236).

The state did partially respond to such advocacy, and sporadic trans-specific welfare measures were announced by both central and state governments, though falling short of activist demands for regular support (Banu et al. 2021). This response manifests both parallels and discrepancies relative to the state's treatment of other structurally marginalized groups during the pandemic. Central and state governments, for instance, have also announced relief packages specifically directed toward cisgender women and farmers, even though the poorest among these groups often remain excluded (Kapil 2020). This suggests that retaining the state's welfarist image has remained important for ideological and electoral reasons (Sharma 2008), which trans activists can evoke to contest the neoliberal retrenchment of welfare. The state, however, has taken a more hardline stance to the demands of other communities, such as Muslim protestors against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, a law that facilitates fast-track citizenship for Hindus from neighboring Muslim-majority countries but withholds such eligibility from Muslim immigrants (Sinha 2021). The central government did not give in to demands for the act's withdrawal and brutally persecuted protestors as "anti-national," which marks the continuing construction of binaries between the "people" and its putative "enemies" that has characterized Hindu right-wing authoritarianism in India (Sinha 2021, 330). Subir Sinha (2021, 331) notes that while Muslim-led mobilizations become subject to such violent exclusion, other people's

movements, such as the aforementioned farmers' protests, have proved to be harder to reduce to a people–enemy dichotomy. Although the context of trans activism during the pandemic is rather different from the farmers' protests, the state's relative openness to trans mobilizations suggests that they, too, benefit from their irreducibility to an absolute otherness despite the presence of Muslims within trans-kothi-hijra communities, given that the right-wing has cited Hinduism's putative tolerance of gender variance in contrast to Islam's supposed intolerance to shore up Hindu nationalist agendas, even as Dalit and Muslim trans activism has resisted such cooptation (Upadhyay 2020).

While trans activists face a relatively more receptive state compared to some other mobilizations, relief measures announced during the 2020–21 period have been largely tokenistic. The central government's National Institute of Social Defence (NISD), housed under its Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, announced a cash transfer package of Rs. 1,500 (less than $50) per head for transgender applicants, which was first disbursed in April 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19, and then again in June–July 2021 during the second wave. Individual state governments also announced relief measures. For instance, the West Bengal government provided relief packages thrice over 2020 and 2021, comprising the distribution of essential food items to trans people in the state: once over late April and early May 2020 during the first phase of the lockdown, then in September–October 2020 during the annual religious festival of Durga Puja, and also in June–July 2021 during the second wave. These packages thus provided sporadic relief and not regular monthly support.

There were also many layers of exclusion and hierarchization in the ways these welfare schemes were designed and implemented. Only about 4,500 people, or less than one percent of the trans population counted in the 2011 census, received the minuscule NISD grant of Rs. 1,500 in April 2020 (Shiraz 2020), even though a government official claimed in May 2020 that 6,000 beneficiaries had been reached (Sharma Tankha 2020). By the end of the year, the number had expanded to only about 7,000 (Dua 2021). Further, applicants were required to fill out online Google Forms in English or Hindi. This reinforced longstanding linguistic hierarchies that have historically favored languages associated with transnational capital (English) and North Indian nationalism (Hindi), despite the inaccessibility of these languages to a large number of Indians and the equal recognition of so-called "regional" languages in the Indian constitution (Kuffir 2014). Such linguistic hierarchization meant that those not well-versed in these languages, or lacking internet access, had to rely on more formally educated and internet-enabled activist intermediaries to fill out the form, thus reinforcing hierarchies of class and caste given that such access is more typically available to middle class, dominant-caste community members. In the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal, a trans- and kothi-identified community member told me that no one received the NISD grant in the entire district in 2020 because such an intermediary was not available. In the Coochbehar district in northern West Bengal, Sumi Das, a transgender activist from an oppressed-caste background, told me in an interview,

> in 2020, I filled the NISD form for 60 to 70 people, but about 30 to 40 people got it; not everyone did. In 2021, I sent in a list of about 80 to 90 people, but no one got it!

Meanwhile, in the district of Nadia in southern West Bengal, Heena, a Dalit trans- and

kothi-identified activist, told me: "in 2021, I filled in the details for 105 people for the money from NISD, but only about 45 people got it; about 50 percent did not." Both activists critiqued the complete lack of transparency regarding the disbursement of the NISD relief; there was no explanation why so many were denied despite applying with the required details. Such gaps in the disbursement of welfare are consistent with the overall parsimony of COVID-19 relief packages (Ghosh 2020).

In keeping with the aforementioned tendency of expanding digital surveillance through welfare, applicants also had to supply their biometric Aadhaar card number and bank account details. Although NISD released a version of the form in March 2020 for trans persons without Aadhaar and bank account details, several community activists, such as Heena in Nadia, told me they did not receive any information about how to access this version. The labor that these activists had to perform in filling out the forms was totally uncompensated. In effect, this amounted to an outsourcing of government work to the unpaid labor of activists who became responsible for the implementation of state welfare and subsidized related costs, which suggests how strategies of neoliberal responsibilization are incorporated into welfarist schemes. Such incorporation reconfigures and extends preexisting forms of exploitation of trans, kothi, and hijra workers from oppressed-class/caste backgrounds within the Indian and transnational development sector. For instance, Heena and Sumi have both worked within transnationally funded HIV-prevention projects overseen by the Indian state, where low-tier staff are typically paid below minimum wage (Dutta 2013).

The intensification of class and caste hierarchies through a combination of developmentalist and neoliberal strategies becomes even clearer in the case of the relief packages provided by the state government in West Bengal. The first round of relief distribution over late April and early May 2020 was mediated through the West Bengal Transgender Development Board (WBTGDB), housed under the state government's Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare. The WBTGDB was initially formed through exclusive and restricted consultations with larger metropolitan NGOs in 2015 (Bhattacharya 2015) and subsequently reconstituted without consultations at all in 2020 (Anandabazar Patrika 2020). In both iterations of the board, mostly metropolitan and/or relatively elite activists were selected to represent the communities at the state level. Several community members and activists told me confidentially that they suspected that board members had been chosen on the basis of their prior closeness and contact with the government and ruling party. Activists have also critiqued the manner in which national-level bodies such as the National Council for Transgender Persons were formed undemocratically during the pandemic. In one media report, Santa Khurai, an activist based in Northeast India, states: "there was no transparency in the manner in which the members were selected" (Dhrubo Jyoti 2020). The undemocratic selection of certain activists as members of transgender development boards and councils parallels a transnational tendency within developmentalism where select cadres of experts and professionals become authorized to guide developmental policies and institutions (du Toit 2018; Escobar 1988).

Predictably, the selection process for the National Council for Transgender Persons favored Savarna (dominant-caste) and middle-class activists, especially Brahmins (the putative highest caste). As Kanaga Varathan, a trans activist and computer engineer based in South India, stated in a public post on social media: "[the] Trans

movement built on the sweat, blood and body's [*sic*] of DBA [oppressed-caste] trans people, especially trans women, gets their first national council full of savarna members, mostly brahmins" (Varathan 2020). Similar to the aforementioned linguistic hierarchies between putatively global or national languages like English and Hindi and so-called regional languages, the constitution of developmental mechanisms that incorporate relatively elite trans persons as members reinforces multilayered hierarchies between "national," "regional," and "local" levels of scale (Dutta and Roy 2014). Relatively privileged transgender activists often get to represent the "national" (the National Council for Transgender Persons) or the "regional" (the West Bengal Transgender Development Board) and occupy positions of greater proximity to the central and state governments, whether consciously or inadvertently. Meanwhile, activists with less fluency in English or Hindi and located in small-town or rural areas—who are also, often, working class and/or Dalit—are relegated to "local" levels of activism and lower tiers of institutional power.

This hierarchization became particularly clear in April 2020 when two representatives of the West Bengal Transgender Development Board, dominant-caste trans activists based in or around the metropolitan city of Kolkata, sent an e-mail to activists and community-based organizations (CBOs) across West Bengal. Their e-mail urged "all CBOs and NGOs who are working on TG [transgender] welfare in the state to partner in this Covid Response and come forward as nodal organisations at your area who will lead this distribution."[6] CBO activists from districts were asked to volunteer to draw up lists of names of needy community members and to take rations to them—often at personal risk, since the state did not provide them with any protective equipment, paralleling a transnational tendency where health workers are expected to take uncompensated risks to serve "the social good" during the pandemic (Morelock, Listik, and Kalia 2021, 183). While CBOs and activists working in non-metropolitan areas were called in for channelizing COVID-related relief at the local district level, they were neither consulted on the state-level process of board formation nor during the design of COVID-related measures.

This combines the process of neoliberal responsibilization through the outsourcing of state functions to unpaid trans-kothi-hijra workers with hierarchies of scale reinforced through top-down and non-consultative developmental mechanisms. Whether consciously or not, the relatively elite trans activists who were selected for the WBTGDB thus served to bolster neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance and suture them together.[7] Significantly, one of the WBTGDB members who wrote the aforementioned e-mail leads a CBO that was selected during the pandemic to run a transgender shelter under the central government's Garima Greh scheme, which, as noted earlier, seeks to train trans people as productive workers and entrepreneurs, and thus again sutures developmental schemes to neoliberal ends (Social Defence Bureau 2020).

6   I accessed this e-mail through members of Nadia Ranaghat Sampriti Society, a trans-kothi-hijra CBO, which I assisted by translating and explaining the e-mail.

7   My use of suture is adapted from Vinay Gidwani's (2008, 198) theorization of capitalism as an uneven formation where "heterogenous value-creating practices" are "sutured together," applying this concept to heterogenous modes of governance.

A more contested negotiation with developmental mechanisms is evidenced in the ways that less elite trans and kothi-hijra activists challenge the potential forms of surveillance and exclusion implicated in the state's use of the transgender category to demarcate and qualify gender-nonconforming persons for COVID-related relief. As mentioned earlier, kothi-hijra communities in eastern India encompass a variety of gendered subject positions, including feminine males, trans women, people identifying as a third or separate gender, and various fluid combinations of such identities (Dutta 2013; Dutta and Roy 2014). While South Asian communities have adopted and hybridized the transgender category for purposes such as gaining transnational funds and building solidarity networks, the state's definitions of transgender identity tend to presume a binary between cisgender and transgender categories, which tends to separate kothis as feminine males who have sex with males from hijras as transgender, thus eliding overlapping subject positions within such communities (Dutta 2013). Since the process of legal transgender recognition began in the 2010s, the Indian state has also attempted to police inclusion in the transgender category through psychological and even anatomical criteria, despite activist protests and limited legal recognition of gender self-determination (Orinam 2019).

In this context, there was much ambiguity and confusion in activist circles regarding whether legal proof of transgender identity would be needed for accessing relief, particularly the NISD grants provided by the central government. The Google Form for direct cash transfer released by NISD in March 2020 asked for the Aadhaar card numbers of applicants. As both Sumi and Heena noted, many community members in their respective districts have their Aadhaar cards under the "male" rather than the "transgender" category. The form also asked if the applicant was associated with any transgender community-based organization. While filling out the form for applicants who did not have their Aadhaar card as transgender, Sumi and Heena indicated that the applicant was associated with their respective CBOs. This trick seemed to work, as some such applicants did receive the money despite their legal identification as male; their CBO affiliation seemed to qualify them as transgender for purposes of receiving state aid. However, as Sayan Bhattacharya (2021, 7) points out, the reliance on CBOs for the disbursement of aid also meant that "those transgender individuals not within the circuits of NGOs did not know about these various measures of relief and were left high and dry."

In the case of the distribution of the state government's relief packages, district-based activists were the people actually disbursing the relief on the ground, and they used this position of responsibilization to exert their agency in choosing a wider range of recipients than those who might be recognized as transgender by the state. Several activists across districts told me that they extended relief to community members who lacked trans identity documents or did not fit official understandings of trans identity (e.g., kothis who mostly wear male attire or are heterosexually married but are recognized as sisters within the community). Aruna Nath, a trans activist based in Murshidabad, recounted: "during the second round of aid, I reached over 80 people in my area. 30 or 40 were visibly kothi; others were hidden. So many kothis had beards, some were married. Government officers only reached visibly feminine hijras." She laughed at this recollection, suggesting pleasure in the subversion of normative assumptions regarding trans identity. In Nadia, where some officers expected photo

Figure 1. Disbursal of relief by the community organization Nadia Ranaghat Sampriti Society in May 2020

documentation of aid disbursal, I saw activists casually passing around an *orna* (a scarf typically worn by women) for kothis in male attire to loosely drape over their shirt when posing for pictures. These instances show how activists are not merely passive responsibilized actors but might use their enhanced role within responsibilization to counter the state's regulation of transgender identity and frustrate the exertion of surveillance through trans-related developmental mechanisms in whatever limited ways possible. Activists also utilized these opportunities to further expand their diverse community networks beyond the confines of official trans identity in ways that potentially outlast the pandemic. For example, Aruna noted that her increased contacts with both "visible" and "hidden" kothis provided a useful base for future activities of her CBO. As Sharma

(2008, 43) notes, responsibilization is often seen as a shift of governance from the state onto the society. However, these negotiations and ruptures show how responsibilized agents may exceed or subvert their stipulated roles to challenge both neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance.

Non-state trans initiatives for relief

Beyond activities conducted under the aegis of the state, there was much trans-hijra-kothi mobilization separate from the state in the 2020–21 period, encompassing relief distribution, fundraising, and advocacy, given the inadequate and sporadic nature of state aid. Some of this mobilization, as noted above, addressed the state and directly challenged the framework of neoliberal responsibilization by appealing to the developmentalist and welfarist promises of the government, such as a petition signed by more than 2,000 trans activists that critiqued the inadequacy of the NISD grant and urged the central government to provide greater and more consistent relief (Shiraz 2020). However, since such appeals went largely unheeded, in many cases activists had no option but to step in and fulfill responsibilities toward affected communities that the state did not. However, rather than a unilateral case of responsibilization, this activism both reinforced and sometimes ruptured or challenged neoliberal–developmentalist frameworks.

In the districts of Coochbehar and Nadia, the CBOs Moitrisanjog Coochbehar and Nadia Sampriti Society provided support on a more continuous basis and reached many more community people than those covered by central and state government schemes, relying on money raised through online fundraisers. Sumi, the activist from Coochbehar, told me:

> The rations from the state government reached about 120 and 60 people over two times in 2020. ... We reached out about 15 times. ... We covered about 400 to 500 people total across the two districts of Alipurduar and Coochbehar. We also provided cash support of Rs. 1,000 per head to 80 people... [and] ran a community kitchen for four days per week for four months from June to September, feeding 30 to 45 people regularly."

Sumi added that during the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021, neither central nor state government relief reached the community at Coochbehar, whereas her CBO provided relief to almost 1,200 people across Coochbehar and two neighboring districts. Similarly, the activist Silk in Nadia described how her CBO, Nadia Ranaghat Sampriti Society, ran a six-month long community kitchen in 2020, regularly serving about 25 of the most vulnerable hijra and kothi community members who had lost their livelihood of blessing people for money on public transport. This CBO also provided relief three times to about 200 people in 2020 and expanded its operations further to cover around 1,000 people in 2021, reaching them much more frequently than the state. As Sumi noted, such fundraising initiatives allowed them to network and build contacts with people and organizations both inside and outside India: "our *jogajog* (connections) increased a lot!"

This mobilization of funding and support networks allowed both Sumi and Silk to explicitly critique metropolitan and dominant-caste activists who dominated development mechanisms like the WBTGDB in public posts on social media. Further, Silk noted that the mobilization of non-state support also permitted her to refuse pa-

Figure 2. Community kitchen for hijra-kothi community members at Madanpur, West Bengal, India in June 2020

tronizing offers of relief from local politicians, which she suspected they were extending only to gain political credit before the 2021 assembly elections for the West Bengal state legislature. As she told me:

> a BJP leader told me that they would give us *chaal-daal* (rice and pulses);
> I told him, we won't be able to take it if you give it in your political capacity. If you give us non-politically as an individual, we can take it.

Sharma (2008) observes that state development programs in India are often conceptualized through a gendered script of paternalistic benevolence extended by representatives of a masculinized state toward rural and Dalit communities who occupy a relatively feminized position. Welfare may also be branded as a gift from politicians like Modi, projected as benevolent patriarchs (Chhachhi 2020). The success of Silk's CBO in raising funds for relief enabled her to disrupt this gendered script by refusing the benevolent welfare extended by a male BJP leader toward the trans-kothi-hijra community, even as she remained critical of the state's evasion of its responsibilities, as evidenced in her statement cited at the beginning of this article. Silk noted that the CBO's fundraising and relief work, which was covered in local media, also granted them leverage in negotiating welfare from the state: "we gained respect from the local administration. The name of the organization was highlighted." Building on this recognition, Silk successfully lobbied the district administration in Nadia to provide free COVID-19 vaccines to over a hundred community members in 2021.

These negotiations demonstrate how neoliberal and developmentalist modes of governance may be played against each other. Activists such as Silk not only carry out their neoliberal role as responsibilized agents who fill in for inadequate state relief, but also build on and exceed this role to both contest paternalistic forms of development or welfare and to lobby the state into performing its developmentalist and wel-

farist responsibilities, countering the neoliberal retrenchment of such functions and the resultant neglect of their communities. While, as noted earlier, elite activists may serve to suture neoliberal and developmentalist tendencies, such negotiations with the state capitalize on the frictions between neoliberal and developmentalist logics of state power.

Of course, such responsibilized activism also comes with its dangers. Just like inclusion within the state's developmental mechanisms like transgender boards and councils, access to private funding is also hierarchically striated in terms of class/caste status and the national and transnational reach of activists. For instance, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, arguably the best-known transgender and hijra activist in India, is from the dominant Brahmin caste and is publicly supportive of the Hindu right-wing government's policies (Upadhyay 2020). In 2020, Tripathi was able to mobilize celebrity endorsement by the Bollywood actor Vidya Balan for her fundraiser for COVID relief, and Balan's image accompanied sponsored posts of Tripathi's fundraiser on Facebook. Meanwhile, activists like Silk and Sumi had to rely on social media posts made from their personal profiles and word-of-mouth publicity. Some sections of the hijra community, particularly *badhaiwali* hijras, who perform during auspicious occasions like childbirth for money, also tend to be better off than their kothi or hijra counterparts who ask for money in streets or trains and/or do sex work. Such *badhaiwali* hijras, such as Mousumi Saha, the aforementioned hijra *guru* or leader in Kalyani, were able to draw on their savings to do welfare work for other poor people beyond trans communities, and even gained media attention for doing so (Goel 2020). As Mousumi Saha told me: "when the corona pandemic started… we also provided rations like rice, pulses, soap, [and] sanitizer to people." Meanwhile, many *chhallawali* hijras and kothis, who solicit money in public spaces, were dependent on CBO initiatives like the aforementioned community kitchens for sustenance and survival through the pandemic period.

Such inequalities of access, income, and privilege have prompted competition and jealousy among activists and ruptured collective solidarity, bolstering the tendencies of individualism and economic competition associated with neoliberalism. Kothi and trans-identified activists like Sumi and Silk, who had less access to savings than relatively secure trans or hijra leaders and thus had to reach out for aid for their communities, were sometimes accused of self-promotion through their fundraisers. (Ironically, such accusations were leveled by metropolitan, dominant-caste activists with much greater skills in English proposal-writing and thus greater access to transnational funds.) Such critiques miss that the imperative of self-promotion and advertisement is part of the limitations imposed by the hegemonic framework of trans representation in the media and public sphere. Rural, working-class, and/or Dalit trans activists typically gain media coverage when they can assert themselves as pioneers, as manifested in reports on the "first transgender judge" or the "first transgender police officer" (India Today Web Desk 2018). Such narratives suggest that trans persons from unprivileged locations must be framed as exceptional achievers to get public recognition. Neoliberal and capitalist individualism restricts how working-class and/or Dalit trans people can access representation, even as activists who do gain attention on these terms may use their position to shore up welfare and relief for collective ends.

CONCLUSION

The article has sought to situate the Indian state's management of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of an evolving assemblage of neoliberal and developmentalist policies and strategies, and to analyze the role of transgender activism within this neoliberal–developmentalist assemblage. While trans negotiations with state power and governance are diverse and sometimes contradictory, I have contended that they demonstrate the potential of utilizing tensions and gaps in the neoliberal–developmentalist assemblage of COVID-related governance to both push the state toward fulfilling its developmentalist promises and responsibilities on one hand, and to push back against statist surveillance, top-down mechanisms of development, and paternalist relationships of welfare on the other. These potentials are endangered and structurally circumscribed by tendencies toward individualist fragmentation and competition. Significantly, despite the success of several community-based organizations (CBOs) in both raising funds for independent initiatives and negotiating with the state to expand welfare, there is a conspicuous absence of collective networks in eastern India led by non-metropolitan, working-class activists that could build on these gains beyond the pandemic. Transgender activism is also threatened by the Indian state's recent amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which has tightened the hold of the state on foreign funding for non-governmental organizations and CBOs, even as political parties and corporations enjoy increased freedom in the transnational movement of capital (Singh 2021). The efflorescence of both domestic and transnational funding for trans activism during the pandemic might thus be a short-lived phenomenon. Trans activism in India is therefore positioned between a tumultuous present fraught with multifarious possibilities and a precarious future.

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