

# – IMPROVISING COVID RELIEF IN NEW DELHI: Rehearsal and Improvisational Capacity in Informal Student Networks

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## Abstract

*Building on qualitative interviews, this article brings into view how New Delhi university students organized improvised forms of Covid relief during the Delta coronavirus wave in the spring of 2021. Responding to a lack of care due to state negligence and a breakdown of public and private healthcare infrastructure, students coordinated access to crucial resources such as masks, other personal protective equipment and even oxygen through the use of social media, existing social networks, and practices developed in earlier moments of organizing. Using the lenses of improvisation, rehearsal and repair, this article documents how students improvised informal Covid relief. Conceptually, the article offers the framework of transposition to look at how improvisational capacity in a social network was shifted from one crisis to the next.*

## Students responding to crisis

This article examines the informal infrastructures set up by students in New Delhi to improvise Covid relief in spring 2021. At this time, Covid cases in India were surging steeply after a period of relaxed lockdown regulations (Samarasekera, 2021). This was the beginning of the country's devastating second wave of Covid, with new case counts rising to a documented 400,000 a day at the wave's peak in early May 2021 (Phartiyal and Pal, 2021). In response, university students coordinated attempts to connect people to resources, coming together as volunteers at the frontlines of the crisis to collect and share information about where supplies such as medicines, beds and oxygen could be obtained. While much of this voluntary work took place online through social media, it had a direct impact on life and death outcomes for those infected with Covid in New Delhi.

The student networks that came into action during this crisis had been loosely constituted through contacts developed during earlier moments of political engagement or mobilization within and outside of university spaces. In December 2019, after the enactment of the highly controversial and exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA),<sup>1</sup> university students in New Delhi and elsewhere began organizing in ways that were unique to university spaces. They formed loose and diverse connections opposed to the mission of 'saffron India' (Martelli and Garalyt , 2019),<sup>2</sup> the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).<sup>3</sup> These students found themselves the targets of police brutality and right-wing mob-led violence that was often supported or purposely

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- 1 The CAA laid down the definition of access to citizenship along religious lines (Martelli and Garalyt , 2019), sparking protests across the nation against this non-secular move.
- 2 Saffron is the color of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Here 'saffron India' denotes the vision of India that the BJP pursues in policy and elsewhere—that of a Hindu state.
- 3 The NRC is an initiative by the Indian government to document and remove 'illegal immigrants' (Agrawal and Salam, 2019). This requires that citizens prove their claim to citizenship with select documents.

ignored by state officials. There were repeated attacks on student organizations and spaces frequented by university students, including university libraries, hostels and campus premises (*ibid.*). Various informal networks of students were active at that time, circulating information about protests, warnings of police action and requests for mutual aid. These informal networks brought together student organizations already involved in campus politics with students who were new to participating in protests and demonstrations. Networks springing from this resistance to the CAA and the NRC came into action when the government response to the Delta wave failed.

In this article, we assess these informal networks and the resources circulated in them as forms of improvisation and repair, contributing to the growing literature on urban improvisation (Simone, 2019; 2021) and repair as a ‘Southern urban practice’ (Bhan, 2019). Based on qualitative interviews with students who were involved in Covid-relief networks during the Delta wave in New Delhi, we argue that (1) moments of crisis preceding the second wave of Covid constituted crucial junctures for the *rehearsal* of practices developed to meet the needs of each moment; (2) informal relationships and repertoires developed in these preceding contexts were tweaked, repurposed, elaborated and reused in the context of the healthcare crisis of the second wave, a process we call *transposition*; and (3) these moments of rehearsal and forms of transposition shaped the tangible interventions students made when they improvised infrastructure in response to a lack of adequate healthcare in the second wave. Theoretically, then, this study builds on rich analyses of urban improvisation and repair to explore how people and networks become ready to improvise and how a certain *transposition of improvisational capacity* between situations can take place. Empirically, the article examines accounts of student networks in New Delhi and how they responded in concert to crisis. Our analysis of these accounts—collected through qualitative interviewing—shows how students repurposed ways of knowing and doing developed in one situation to attend to a new crisis.

Besides these contributions, this article aims to archive and document the experiences of young people who protested and organized in a context of severe media censorship and brutal suppression of student movements in New Delhi (Martelli and Garalyté, 2019). Shining light on the responses of ordinary young people in a city in crisis also makes apparent the failures of the Indian and New Delhi governments and formal infrastructures to care for the people they were intended to serve.

The unpredictability and severity of what was initially called the ‘Indian variant’ (Mueller, 2021)—eventually named the ‘Delta variant’ after the prevalent strain of the Covid virus—led to unprecedented growth in new cases, outstripping the capacity of the existing healthcare infrastructure even in prosperous urban centers such as New Delhi. During this second wave, the city experienced not only a second harsh lockdown and significantly more infections and deaths, but also a shortage of healthcare facilities, hospital beds, medical personnel, medicines, ventilators, intensive care unit (ICU) availability and, most importantly, oxygen supplies (Schmall, 2021). This scarcity was met with inaction from the central government (Mishra, 2021), putting pressure on civil society to fill in the gaps where healthcare infrastructure seemed to be crumbling.

University students are a particularly important group to study in terms of their involvement at this time. There is a long history of political mobilization occurring uniquely within university spaces in India, including the movement for freedom from the British, opposition to the Emergency declared in 1975, and various other moments in the history of democratic India. In the case of Delhi University, since the 1960s there has been a robust culture of political engagement through an electoral system for the Delhi University Students Union (DUSU) and various volunteer-run groups in campus spaces (Oommen, 1974). The same is true for other public universities in New Delhi, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), from where students have even been imprisoned under colonial laws against ‘sedition’ (Majumder, 2016) for conducting

political demonstrations that oppose the Hindu right-wing agenda of the ruling party. Student politics in campus spaces in New Delhi have been widely discussed in national media and have shaped political discourse, especially in recent years.

### **Infrastructures, repair, rehearsal and improvisation**

#### – Incomplete infrastructures

Urban infrastructure has been theorized in many ways. Often the tangible and material articulations of urban infrastructure are accompanied by more ephemeral, relational analyses of what and who exactly comprise or even make infrastructure in the urban domain. Amin's (2014) conceptualization of urban infrastructure as something that is premised on a certain sociality—that shapes and is shaped by the people that use, improve and erode it—is particularly helpful in grasping how students in New Delhi acted to hold together fundamentally incomplete and broken infrastructure. In New Delhi, the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of services is characterized by a substantial degree of informality, which complicates the provision of essential entitlements such as sufficient food or even healthcare (see Bhan, 2024). In approaching infrastructure in New Delhi as existent and active, even if incomplete, we recognize its characteristic sociality and informality.

Urban infrastructures in many Southern cities, including New Delhi, share this incompleteness, which is characterized by Guma (2020: 728) as 'a constitutive feature and explanatory category for urban infrastructure'. Drawing from numerous works within urban studies of the global South, including Simone (2004), Guma (2020: 732) examines various provisional and temporary mechanisms through which urban inhabitants of the global South actively 'create possibilities of patchwork mechanisms' that enable them 'to connect to new infrastructural worlds'. In many ways, the incompleteness of formal infrastructures was necessary for university students to be able to do what they did, as became apparent in the Delhi riots of February 2020 and the migrant workers' crisis of March 2020 during the first wave of Covid in India. These crises themselves were premised on the inability of formal infrastructures to provide bare necessities such as food, water, sanitation, shelter and transport. Therefore, university students, alongside other civil society actors, were indeed required to develop 'patchwork mechanisms' for coordinating relief, sourcing essential supplies and providing them to those affected to ensure the circulation of basic entitlements that infrastructure is meant to facilitate.

During the Covid crisis, public infrastructure clearly failed the people of Delhi. Infrastructure, as Berlant (2016) argues, connects us to movement or comprises the channels through which life-sustaining circulation can take place. Sometimes urban residents have to repair infrastructures so that such circulation becomes possible again, albeit provisionally. New Delhi residents and university students invented many ways to hold together infrastructure in such forms of repair. This holding together and repair are performed through improvisation. Drawing from the urban South, Simone's (2004) early conceptualization of 'people as infrastructure' aims to make room for the various provisional and fleeting ways that connections among urban residents sustain infrastructures for subsistence. This conceptualization moves away from a definition of infrastructure that focuses on physical and tangible dimensions, as something that renders cities productive, to a more relational understanding of the way resources are distributed and deployed through the city so that people can use them. For Simone (*ibid.*: 408), infrastructure is a 'platform providing for and reproducing life in the city'. He centers the repeated collaboration of diversely situated actors in the urban landscape in varied temporal and spatial contexts. The outcomes of such improvisational collaborations—or, as he calls them in more recent work, 'strange accompaniments' (Simone, 2022)—remain unpredictable.

Returning to his theorization of people as infrastructure more than two decades later, Simone (2021) elaborates how these collaborations between people facilitate a sense of moving from one thing to another, of ‘forward momentum’, by ‘working’ the situation. Thus, people as infrastructure is really a set of practices grounded in the moment to ensure the endurance of something that is held in common. In other words, taken together, provisional practices developed for one moment comprise a repertoire of practices that carry forward, though with some differences, into new situations. Simone (*ibid.*: 1344) calls this a ‘collective choreography’ and a ‘dynamic infrastructure’. For our purposes here, reading this ‘collective choreography’ as people acting together provisionally under shifting circumstances enables us to chart the various inventive moments and connections that New Delhi students made to repair and improvise infrastructures of care and survival. Such are the potentialities of improvising infrastructure within the city that incompleteness leaves space for.

– Rehearsal and repair

In this incompleteness, as healthcare infrastructures were collapsing around them, students had to improvise. Yet, they did not do so out of nothing. The calibration and generative relationality required for improvisation to happen (Ingold and Hallam, 2007) depend on rehearsal and training, just as improvisation in music requires trained musicians (Wilf, 2012; Ramshaw and Stapleton, 2017). Musical improvisation, after all, is only possible when there is a practiced musician, a structure, a rhythm, a key, and an informal organization or a repertoire to start with. Improvisation requires a certain level of rehearsal or practice, equipping participants with the skills to respond in the moment. Improvisers, in short, ‘start off’ or ‘make their move’ *with something* (Ramshaw and Stapleton, 2017). One of the ways that musicians are trained for improvisation is through practicing *aural transposition*: bringing a certain tone structure or collection of notes up or down in pitch at a constant interval. Transposition, therefore, is the practice of using the same structure but shifting it. This is one of the practices through which musicians learn to play by ear (Wilf, 2012; Sarath, 2013). Indeed, the rehearsal of transposition is necessary for musicians to be able to improvise. This article carries these insights from music theory into the field of urban studies in a way which connects to Simone’s (2019) theories that draw inspiration from improvisation in music.

Improvising in a moment of rupture, such as the Delta wave, depends on rehearsal. The students in the networks that we studied had practiced providing forms of relief in earlier moments of crisis. The students were enacting what Gilmore (2021: 3) calls ‘life in rehearsal’: the rehearsal of a social world where care may be possible. They rehearsed a certain potential of responsiveness and practices of tending to the needs of others. We will shortly present and discuss several concrete examples of how this took place. But for now, we wish to emphasize that whatever improvised care was provided—however incomplete, provisional and chaotic—became possible because of the students’ rehearsals and their cultivated radical consciousness (*cf.* Gilmore, 2022).

Built on enduring repertoires of practice that had been rehearsed in other crises, the students’ responses to the Covid emergency can be conceptualized as forms of repair. Bhan (2019) suggests that the concept of repair, rather than construction, foregrounds the holding together of things, as a way to meet immediate needs without building anew for the longer term. Repair as a concept foregrounds people’s everyday practices while acknowledging the incompleteness of their worlds. Repair in Southern urban contexts such as New Delhi relies on public knowledge that is contextual, encompasses lived experiences and is situated in networks of people in a particular context gathering around a particular need. Often it is the same actors in the same setting over long periods who gather to repair and hold things together (Bhan, 2019). There are elements of repair that endure and persist alongside novel aspirations. Writing from the vantage point of the streets of Mexico City, Boudreau (2022) conceptualizes repair as daily acts aimed

towards actively producing different and interdependent futures within the city. Acts of repair are rooted in solving the issues of the moment, in the here and now—not in a way that moves towards a specific vision of the future, but as something that is guided by expectations shaped by the past. For Boudreau, the presence of the future is already felt through these reparative practices that are carried out in the everyday, and repairing itself is dependent on the ability ‘to accept the cunning of contingencies, to work from surprise and wonder’ (*ibid.*: 858). Following these insights, we conceptualize the improvisational actions of students attempting infrastructural repair as not necessarily reflecting an aspiration of improvement, but rather as maneuvering provisionally across varying scales of crisis and responding to differential contingencies, thereby ‘producing the future by making the city work’ (*ibid.*).

– Temporality and transposition

Forms of repair and improvisation that make possible the reproduction of life within infrastructures that are characteristically incomplete and buzzing with exchanges facilitated by their inherent sociality are practices of responding in proximity (see Simone, 2004; 2019; 2021; 2022; Bhan, 2019; Boudreau, 2022). These responses consist of everyday exchanges, speculations and joint practices that together weave a fabric of everyday social life. The improvisations studied in this article, however, needed to take flight suddenly and in the face of an enormous health crisis. This urgency involves another temporality. Simone’s conceptualizations of improvisation introduce temporality as an urban rhythm that residents can move with to act in concert in a manner that allows for everyday practices to persist. In confronting the Delta wave, New Delhi dwellers needed to act suddenly and in new, out-of-the-ordinary ways. The students’ efforts to improvise did not entail finding the rhythm and improvising within the ongoingness of urban life. Rather, students faced the question of how to *start* improvising and how to do this in a context of crisis and tumult. The infrastructure that was expected by many to be there did not materialize and a new kind of improvisation was needed.

Owing to the onslaught of one crisis after another, when the Delta wave arrived there were already loose networks of ‘relief’, or rather student networks that were already inclined to respond provisionally to different types of needs that arose within and beyond these networks. Often the provisional networks of relief were reconfigurations of the same people who found themselves resorting to what Simone (2004) calls ‘provisional problem solving’ as the protests against CAA took place, as the riots broke out in North East Delhi, as the migrant workers’ crisis burgeoned in the first wave of Covid, and so forth. They were provisional because these were not long-term networks designed as an organization or a structure to perform a particular type of formal function. They are more accurately viewed as regroupings with familiar people willing to ‘help out’ whenever and wherever they could. These relief networks began to appear more consolidated as more time passed. Because the students had an expectation of which players and instruments would join their networks, they were able to play by ear and generate new improvisations. With their experience of previous moments of crisis, and of having to rely on relationality as a resource, these students were already well attuned to the ‘rhythms of endurance’ necessary to live under dire circumstances (Simone, 2019). The readiness to improvise is necessarily specific to political context and place—in our case, readiness was built in a context of preceding moments of activist organizing and student body mobilization in opposition to policies made by the central government, during the Delhi riots in 2020, and at the very beginning of the pandemic when migrant workers were left unemployed and stranded all over the country (Dhillon, 2022). In the political climate that preceded the spring of 2021, many students relied on similar improvised relationality. They had rehearsed in such a way that they were ready to take on a new improvisation: that is, they had developed repertoires that were repurposed

with the collapse of healthcare under the stress of the Delta wave. While this crisis required a new set of improvisations, a transposition of existing skills and networks to a new situation made such improvisation possible.

### **Case and approach**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online by Anushka with 10 respondents, who were studying at different universities in New Delhi in April and May 2021 and were involved in the improvisations of Covid relief examined in this article. Marguerite acted as the supervisor of this research project at the time. Access to interviewees was facilitated by the author's earlier involvement as a university student in various student networks that were engaged in political organizing against the CAA and NRC, and during the migrant workers' crisis of the first wave of the pandemic. After a first round of phone conversations about the research with a variety of young people in Delhi from the author's own networks—conversations that informed a preliminary interview guide—online in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 selected students. All our interviewees were university students in New Delhi who had engaged in protests, demonstrations and relief efforts prior to the second wave of the coronavirus and who then actively intervened in diverse ways to collect and share information about resources during the second wave. Some of our interviewees were organizers who worked in close contact with workers at the grassroots. Others were feminist organizers or student activists at the ground level. Still, others were more focused on digital activism and data sharing. Therefore, our sample brought together narratives from various levels of political engagement, and there was significant overlap between our respondents' networks.

Given the tendencies of India's government at this time, with its anti-student approach to any form of protest or demonstration by university students and its consistent denial of any reportage on high death tolls and shortages of adequate healthcare infrastructure (Dash and Priya, 2021), we made it a high priority to ensure that respondents' identities remain anonymous. We refrain from using any identifying markers in this article such as names, religious beliefs, institutions, and so on; all names used are pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted via Google Meet and Zoom but were not recorded on those platforms. Explicit consent was taken from the participants to audio-record their interviews and these recordings are now deleted. We retained full transcripts of the interviews using pseudonyms only.

We also note that while conducting these interviews online, the interviewer was pursuing higher education in the Netherlands where she was located at the time. This is significant not only because of the implications that virtual interviewing has for research but also because it indicates that the interviewer possessed a significant amount of privilege by virtue of being able to study in the West. The interviewer's social location, as an upper-middle-class, Hindu-born woman with an upper-caste last name, coupled with geographical distance from the interviewees, made it feasible for her to speak only to students with relatively similar social locations. Another issue worth noting is the digital divide in India. Because of a consistent lack of access to the internet and other digital resources faced by most non-elite public university students in India, the recruitment of participants was limited to those who did have stable internet connections, personal computers and space to do the interview from, all of which indicates a relatively comfortable social location. The interviewees were generally not asked specific questions about their identity or location to help keep them anonymous in the data.

The richness of the information gained from the interviews—in terms of the detail with which participants shared the intricacies of their actions during the healthcare crisis, their transparency in explaining to the interviewer every step of what they were going through at the time, and their own intellectual considerations when

speaking to the interviewer—contributes heavily to how we extrapolated the data to make it theoretically relevant. Our analysis of readiness for improvisation in a crisis and what this readiness may be comprised of is made possible by participants actively collaborating with us throughout the interview process and by helping us think about this time together, in each interview.

### Starting an improvisation and carrying it forward

We aim to understand how certain improvisational elements, gestures or modalities are carried forward into new situations and new improvisations. In other words, how does the rehearsal of improvisation that took place in response to a certain situated issue impact the capacity for improvisation in relation to a new issue that is notably different? This is an important question for understanding contemporary organizing. We attend to this question with the theoretical contribution of *transposition*: we look at which elements of improvisation can be transposed to a new situation and get a new improvisational sequence going. Transposition allows for a view on crisis response while also taking into account continuities in organizing. In this section, we outline how social networks and infrastructures such as the use of social media were transposed from one improvisation to the next, and how preceding moments of crisis afforded a rehearsal of certain practices that constitute improvisational elements.

#### – Social networks

One of the most important elements that were transposed and that enabled improvisational relief to take place were the social networks of students that were formed in response to previous crises. Specific social networks were mobilized in spring 2021 and certain practical knowledge was already established within these networks, demonstrating how existing networks turn relationality into a resource (Simone, 2021). These networks were essentially politically inclined social circles that stemmed from university spaces, aimed at organizing resistance against the CAA-NRC and India's ruling regime more generally in December 2019. Arising out of friendships or shared political beliefs, these networks underwent an evolution of sorts, from coordinating protests and demonstrations to coordinating material relief. The demonstrations and protests allowed for repeated interactions among these politically inclined university students and culminated in various WhatsApp groups, Twitter networks and Instagram acquaintanceships. Students in these groups and networks coordinated the timing and logistics of demonstrations, relayed information about potential or occurring police violence, and collected necessary items for peaceful demonstrations such as speakers, drums, and so forth. These relationships were eventually leveraged to coordinate medical relief in the second wave. Prashant, one of the student activists, noted how these provisional networks, which had regrouped with familiar faces to give aid wherever and whenever they could, began to look more consolidated:

These networks were established from before Covid; they were active during CAA in a very different capacity. During CAA there were people who were organizing protests and people who were also helping out with things required. These were translated into relief networks during the violence that took place in the riots of February 2020 in North East Delhi. The same people who were in the CAA protests ended up doing relief work then. This is where my journey with relief also started.

Another interviewee, Sophie, noted that the choice she made in terms of who to reach out to in the second wave was a natural one:

We have done this [relief work] with friends from college before [for] various things over the past few years, whether it was things happening on campus, or the Delhi riots, or the migrant workers' crisis. It was always a natural response to reach out to that kind of solidarity network that existed in our groups ... people who were like-minded and cared about these things. Largely, it was not formally organized ... it started from our first year of college, so when you see things around you, you also turn to people around you. The natural response was to always look within my classroom spaces. It was literally just people I became friends with in the process of doing this kind of work. Then it became natural, it was convenient to figure it out with them.

Both Prashant and Sophie recalled the social networks they were part of and how social relations built in one crisis became crucial for responding to another. For Sophie, improvised Covid relief 'became natural', by which she meant that her involvement in certain social networks flowed into participation in new improvisations. This was also a conscious choice: Sophie stayed connected to people whom she knew would organize again because they had done so in the past. When formal infrastructure failed to adequately meet the needs of urban dwellers in New Delhi or did not extend into spaces where it was required, such as in the aftermath of the Delhi riots, students had to regroup existing networks to coordinate relief.

– Infrastructures

The student networks endured and were maintained through messages within WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp groups have a long history in the lives of the university students who were interviewed, as they were all part of informal but institutionally affiliated WhatsApp groups for courses or departments or as a cohort pursuing the same diploma. These WhatsApp groups became the site of university life as Covid upended in-person classes indefinitely. These groups became a platform where individuals could ask for help as the Delta wave exhausted the existing healthcare infrastructure. Indeed, some interviewees noted that messages pouring in asking for medicines and oxygen came even from people of a socio-economic status similar to their own. So, while these WhatsApp groups were not initiated to respond to the public health crisis, the established networks were transposed to the new situation. Prashant recalled the moment he apprehended the severity of the second wave as it unfolded on his WhatsApp groups:

Everything was in full swing, on Zoom. There was no such acknowledgement [by the university] of something that was happening; classes were happening on time, as usual. A lot of students and their parents were getting Covid and they were suffering, so eventually the university decided that they would give us a 15-day break on account of the cases rising. All the news was coming in online through WhatsApp and phone calls. Students were calling and asking each other for help and eventually even requesting the department WhatsApp group for various things.

This is an important moment in the timeline: it was a concrete acknowledgement of the shortage of medical resources and acted as a catalyst, sparking the desire to help compensate for the breakdowns in healthcare infrastructure. It also shows that when infrastructure failed in a moment of crisis, students reached out to their own circles and institutionally affiliated networks first. For Simone (2021), this 'looking out' for each other requires not complete congruence in values or the ends to be achieved (this kind of awareness was not even available at the time of the onset of the Delta wave) but rather the feeling of care and of having each other's backs. The initial requests for help on what our respondent Sohini



called the ‘message boards’ of university spaces demonstrate that people in a situation of extreme crisis make do with what they think is available, and they expect that people in their networks will ‘have their backs’. Their response can be characterized as a way of moving forward, of not being immobilized by a health crisis but knowing that support of some sort lies in these networks. These WhatsApp groups thus constituted an infrastructure for communication, sustaining what Simone (2021: 1343) calls ‘architectures of endurance’, and are essentially ‘affiliations’. Going to class together online or going to protests and demonstrations in person: these created networks that students first approached when they needed help, transposing this provisional infrastructure of sustaining social networks on social media from one improvisation into the next.

– Practices

Students already embedded in networks of arranging relief were familiar with the practices necessary for creating access to resources or coordinating assistance. Students who coordinated relief after the riots became familiar with sourcing and distributing rations, which was an important requirement for affected communities at the time. As a result, the students gained practical knowledge of how to identify groups in need, source reliable vendors for ration distribution, transport rations in personal vehicles and vehicles of volunteers, and distribute them. When describing their efforts in the aftermath of the riots, Prachi recollected:

After the pogrom ... we just undertook one really big relief exercise, which was in hindsight a little naive for us to do because as students we didn't know the level and the intensity of these kinds of things and the urgency with which resources are needed. We're working at our own pace and learning things while doing it; it's not like we have faced these kinds of situations before ... we were doing things like ration distribution, distributing sanitary pads, diapers and baby food. As the days kept going forward, new needs kept cropping up, which we tried to keep meeting ... We had a warehouse kind of thing where the supplies came. The supplies team and I would organize the rounds of distribution to riot-affected areas all on a volunteer basis. So people would come with their cars and be willing to do rounds and we would fill their cars with rations, and they would go distribute them.

Prachi's recollection demonstrates how students were actively taking part in the circulation of necessities and becoming a reliable structure for affected communities in a way that was completely improvised. They were responding to needs as and when they arose, and it is this readiness—to always learn from a new need and implement new practices based on what was emerging out of the immediate context—that characterized future efforts. This is how students practiced repair, accounting for the ‘cunning of contingencies’ that Boudreau (2022) writes about. Students worked with the novel and unexpected situations brought by swiftly changing circumstances in order to practice acts of repair. For a few weeks, these practices facilitated access to necessities just before the first nationwide lockdown was declared on 20 March 2020. This experience familiarized them with the process of arranging aid on short notice when the state's involvement was negligible.

In coordinating access to bare necessities such as food, shelter and money, these students became part of a process of circulation of various types of services and goods that render the sustainment and reproduction of life in New Delhi. For the Muslim communities affected by the riots and for the migrant workers stranded without guaranteed employment and housing on the declaration of the first lockdown, the lack of basic access to food and shelter was a disruption in the supply of what is supposed to be guaranteed by formal infrastructure. University students found themselves becoming the

vehicles through which access to necessities was possible for affected communities. This placed the students in the infrastructural process of circulation; they became a ‘platform providing for and reproducing life in the city’ (Simone, 2004: 408). It is these enduring social networks, the social media infrastructures that sustained these networks, and the practices that emerged out of preceding crises that were then transposed into the health crisis of the Delta wave.

### **Transposition: rehearsing improvisation**

In order for the above elements—social networks, infrastructures and practices—to endure as they did, rehearsal was needed. It is through repetition and trial and error that these repertoires of practices were consolidated enough to be repurposed. Earlier activities served as rehearsals: the students had learned who to call, what to ask for and which (online) networks to mobilize. They had, in essence, learned to *transpose*. Here the concept of transposition foregrounds how acting in concert can be moved to a new situation, and how there is change and continuity at once. A new improvisation took off in spring 2021, but it could do so only because of the available resources and connections already made in response to earlier crises.

When the first lockdown of 2020 was put in place, the migrant workers’ situation became a burgeoning crisis. Students who, alongside other civil society actors, had already coordinated relief after the North East Delhi riots now started coordinating the distribution of groceries to migrant workers who found themselves stranded in various places. Beyond coordinating efforts to make sure rations reached those affected, students started coming up with other infrastructure to tend to needs that arose for migrant workers and their families, such as the need for transport across the country at the time of one of the world’s strictest lockdowns. They also established ways to transfer money to families that had lost their livelihoods, and they raised funds for various Covid- and non-Covid-related issues facing affected populations. Ajit, an interviewee who was closely involved in relief provision for stranded migrant workers, recalled how he accessed networks that had circulated necessities during the first wave, which he then repurposed for use in the spring of 2021:

We had all helped migrant workers in the first wave together, so we had the infrastructure and now I could also be a part of it. So one level of work was to contact the migrant workers who we had reached out to in the first wave. I would call them on a daily basis. We had certain contacts of migrant workers from the states of Delhi, UP [Uttar Pradesh], Bihar and Bengal. I would contact them either through WhatsApp or a phone call and let them know that we had a helpline, which they could circulate in their networks. Those conversations led to the discovery of a lot of problems and issues coming up that needed to be immediately addressed as far as rationing was concerned or involving money or travel costs or booking tickets home. Also, relief on the ground ... [because] we have been living in Delhi for a few years now and we are aware of a few places where a lot of migrant workers were settled, so we visited those places and some of the workers also contacted us through the helpline, so we visited and assessed the situation there ... We collected funds from different sources and provided workers with the resources needed. We also had to deal with the health crisis, so we released a helpline just for the health situation. For at least one-and-a-half weeks we received a number of calls. We did not cater to immediate or critical health concerns, wherein someone was dying or something. It was for medicines, masks, sanitizer for a whole slum, or something. Obviously, oxygen, etc., came in later.

Because Ajit had improvised relief in the aftermath of the first lockdown, he knew who to call or message at this moment and how to get relief to certain people and communities.

His experience enabled him to understand some of the practical aspects of coordinating relief work, though this was largely centered on ration distribution, transport and shelter coordination, and fundraising for the same. Ajit and other students became part of a process of circulating services and goods that sustained life; they were a kind of infrastructure. Students' responses became necessary because of the organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2022) of New Delhi's residents by its formal infrastructures and the lack of government support. This was true for earlier improvisations for migrant workers as well. The practices through which students were able to situate themselves in/as infrastructure were developed through methods of trial and error and were carried forward into new contexts. The preparedness that was cultivated through lived experience is what Ajit, among other interviewees, understood to be a knowledge base for future practices:

The logistical coordination is historical. The first lockdown we already learned a lot ... Mobility was extremely restricted for a month or two. Workers would call from remote locations, and we would either help them through transferring money to their accounts, which is risky and unreliable, or we had to figure out what network to contact and direct them to the remote regions workers would be calling from, or call the district magistrate, sub-divisional officer, police, of this region. We already learned a lot here.

In terms of rehearsing how to improvise, each crisis can be understood as a new key to which the students' existing repertoire or structure was shifted or transposed.

### **Practices of transposition**

In the health crisis of the second wave, characterized by a shortage of oxygen and lack of an action plan from the state (Gettleman *et al.*, 2021), students transposed their improvisation in a number of ways. They gathered contact details of various vendors of medical equipment and oxygen, both legitimate and on the black market, as well as points of contact in hospitals. They posted this information on publicly accessible spreadsheets (Google Sheets), allowing people in their immediate circles to access all this information in one place. They collaborated with their college administrations, both formally and informally, to set up small-scale help desks for students, faculty and staff to access Covid-related resources. They also responded via phone to individual requests shared on social media or received from friends, family, acquaintances, and so on, on a case-by-case basis.

Transposition also took place to verify in a timely way the availability and location of resources identified by networks and online sources. By circulating messages in student-centered WhatsApp groups, participating students started recruiting volunteers to call resource vendors and hospitals to confirm and update the availability of specific resource categories (such as oxygen, medicines, beds and ambulances). This is yet another example of how social networks and social media infrastructures were transposed into this new crisis and repurposed in a contextually specific way. Sadiya recalled the urgency of this moment of recruiting volunteers:

Messages in WhatsApp groups were literally like ... this [healthcare crisis] is going to happen now. How do we renew these groups? If there are people who feel like they have done enough and are exhausted, then can we add more people? Who can continue right now? Questions like: a show of hands, for those who are in it now? That clarity was very crucial.

Existing improvised repertoires/relationships were also transposed into the key of this crisis when students trying to arrange for urgent healthcare were doing so on a

case-by-case basis by being in direct contact with affected citizens and catering to specific, individual, time-sensitive needs one at a time. In such cases, interviewees dedicated entire days to solving a single problem individually before moving on to the next. Sometimes they would move on to a new case because the person they were trying to help had tragically died. Sometimes students would scan Twitter for the contact details of people who either had access or knew people who had access to necessary medical resources. Students who had coordinated earlier relief efforts had established open lines of communication with the communities that they had assisted. Sadiya, who had taken part in documenting the aftermath of the Delhi riots, recalled how she utilized existing connections to find medical relief in the second wave:

Community members from North East Delhi reached out to me because their family members had caught Covid ... and whatever requests were coming were very specific to our interactions ... I would get calls around the beginning of an ailment asking what they should do, as all hospitals were refusing them due to the shortage of beds.

These earlier connections, forged in providing support after the riots and during the migrant workers' crisis, were thus used to facilitate medical relief. Existing networks, and the social media infrastructures in place that sustained them, were at this moment transposed to meet new needs that arose during the Delta wave. Upon receiving calls for help, students would consult a spreadsheet of information, glance through social media to see what the latest available resource was, or call their own contacts in the medical community, such as relatives who were doctors—mixing and matching all their practical and contextual knowledge of the evolving situation to get the best possible aid to the person in distress. In a practice of repair, these interviewees held infrastructure together with their very own selves and all their contextual knowledge, their emotional capacities and their networks of connections. Bhan (2019) says that there can be no 'right' practitioner of repair, as repair is not a technocratic domain wherein the 'expert' is relied upon for information. Rather he sees repair as a practice that draws from 'public and proximate' information, which doesn't mean that this knowledge is not complex, only that it is accessible (*ibid.*: 646).

Improvising at this moment was also highly time sensitive and evolved with the changing situation, and different days often demanded different things of these practitioners of aid. One interviewee recalled how she maneuvered as availabilities in infrastructural capacity changed from day to day:

There were varying degrees of availability of certain resources more than the others. There were days when there was zero oxygen and a good three days when there were no ICU beds, no oxygen beds in the entire National Capital Region [NCR] ... I had to refer people to AIIMS Jhajjar [hospital complex] ... an hour away from NCR. That was the best I could come up with.

Here we see improvisation taking place on a case-by-case basis, which entailed keeping track of the pulse of the situation to gauge the most urgent needs on any particular day. Everyone—all of the volunteers and any of those who circulated the contacts of these interviewees beyond their intended reach—was part of this process of repairing the gaps between medical resources and people who needed them.

Because there was no long-term network created to perform a particular type of organized relief, the students *provisionally improvised* relief by regrouping with familiar people to provide assistance as and when they could, drawing from earlier

improvisations. There was an *ongoingness* of this provisionality. Consider these comments from Sohini, one of the students involved:

I asked myself, who would be able to help? I didn't know anyone at all. In Delhi, all I had was the community of students I knew. I think this is true: that because of the recent years of attacks against the student community in India, we have coalesced into a community that just turns up. If you can say one thing about the student community, it is that it shows up.

This trust in 'just showing up' is what made transposition possible. The familiarity and rehearsal of the network enabled improvisation. Moments of rehearsal in preceding crises consolidated these networks, infrastructures and practices so that they could later be used in other relief interventions. University students at this moment leveraged their networks and turned their knowledge into infrastructure that worked, even if just for the moment and only for a few.

### **Conclusion: transposed provision in response to lack**

In their incomplete, provisional and varied ways, responding to specific needs in specific situations, New Delhi students improvised care for those in need during the Delta wave. Of course, informal improvisations are not an alternative to public infrastructure, especially in the midst of a devastating pandemic. The students could not compensate for the lack of publicly organized care in the spring of 2021. Their improvisations, however, were a careful response deserving of our attention. Building on Simone's work (2021), we do not consider these practices of infrastructural repair to be resilience. Resilience presumes a 'bouncing back' (Bracke, 2016) into a previously existing shape, an ability to be impacted yet come out intact. This is not what was at stake here. Rather, in their organizing efforts the students bring forward the vulnerability and brokenness of things. They call for more attention to the details of how infrastructures work in the urban South and to what extent they can be stretched until they finally break (Simone, 2021). The practices of the students exemplify a type of agency that is activated by vulnerability and brokenness—they are indeed the backup plan of the welfare state in times of infrastructural failure.

As a loose collective, New Delhi student networks knew how to start an improvisation because they had rehearsed care in earlier, political crises. There they had developed an improvisational repertoire: they knew how to find their social networks, how to connect with WhatsApp groups and where to find sources for concrete care, services and products. This is how they were able to set up a new improvisation, and how they were able to apply to a new crisis what they had learned from earlier responses to very different crises. Using the concepts offered in this article, they shifted the provisional structures that they had built to a new situation so that social life in New Delhi, at least for some, could go on and could be reproduced. We call this shifting of improvisational capacity *transposition*.

The crises preceding the Delta wave constituted crucial junctures for the rehearsal of practices that were used *in* the Delta wave, notably social networks, social media infrastructures built around these networks, and specific practices from preceding crises. Built and elaborated in response to student organizing against the ruling regime, they became building blocks for informal healthcare provision. These preceding crises were politically charged, affected the capacity of ordinary people to go about life in New Delhi, and created experiences of using social networks and infrastructures either to organize on the streets, provide relief after the riots or coordinate sustenance. These were moments of rehearsing the very capacity to improvise responses.

'Practice makes different,' Gilmore writes (2021: 4), and indeed students and their social relations changed along the way. As earlier elements of improvisations,

networks, key people and techniques returned, the students started a new improvisation that was a response to a new crisis. Their rehearsed capacity allowed students to set up new and concrete interventions. The students themselves were changed by earlier responses to crises, sometimes at great cost. The improvisations as such were about setting up networks and responsive practices, and through this, students became attuned to and ready for the possibility of responding to other crises too.

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