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Between hunger and contagion: digital mediation and advocacy during the COVID-19 emergency in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

When COVID-19 struck India in March 2020 the central government announced a nationwide lockdown to slow the spread of the virus. In Delhi, the suspension of normal economic and social life precipitated a crisis of hunger for the thousands who depend on daily wage labour to feed their families. Many of these workers were unable to access the city's Public Distribution System for subsidised food supplies because they lacked the correct paperwork. In response, the Delhi government implemented an online system, known as E-Coupons, through which those affected could apply for emergency rations. However, this digital system proved complicated to navigate for the marginalised people that it was aimed at. In the east Delhi neighbourhood in which this research took place brokers offering digital connections and online form-filling services proliferated in the crisis, but often provided unreliable or incomplete support to those in need. Recognising the need for digital mediation and support for the marginalised we argue that networks of reliable community advocates are required if welfare bureaucracies are to be digitised through mobile governance projects such as E-Coupons. The human mediation and advocacy, which underpins these schemes should be acknowledged and included in system design.

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Introduction

The research for this article took place in Trilokpuri, a former resettlement colony in east Delhi, and emerges from a project titled *Jaankaar* (Knowledgeable): Leveraging Everyday Innovations in Governance and Accountability. The project drew together a team of community advocates/researchers, postgraduate researchers, and academics based in Delhi and the UK who have collaborated in the field research, data production and analysis process.¹

Trilokpuri was developed to resettle slum dwellers evicted from central Delhi between 1975 and 1977 (Dupont 2004; Editor, *Economic and Political Weekly* 1978). Comprising 36

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blocks with 500 houses per block the density of the neighbourhood has increased significantly over time as the original single-storey resettlement plots have grown to four storeys housing multiple families. The neighbourhood also contains eight *kaccha bastis*, informal settlements squeezed into spaces between the planned developments. As Dupont outlines Trilokpuri comprises a mix of ethnic and religious communities, with some blocks segregated along communal lines between Muslims, Scheduled caste Hindus, and other ethnic and religious communities. Many residents are first- or second-generation migrants to Delhi (2004, 172). Significant numbers of residents rent rather than own property and work in industrial production, construction or occupations such as street hawking or domestic labour.

In Trilokpuri, the project team includes community workers attached to a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) who act as neighbourhood advocates, helping residents from across caste or community backgrounds to access their rights and entitlements to government-provided social protection schemes. Within the project, these community workers are known as *Jaankaar* Fellows, or *Jaankaars* for short. The *Jaankaars*, all women, come from Trilokpuri or close neighbourhoods and are from a range of caste and religious backgrounds. They have expert knowledge of the challenges faced by the people that live there, and their concerns have led the research focus of the project. They also mentor a wider network of volunteers connected to the CSO through youth initiatives and campaigns to enrol parents into the School Management Committees of local government-run schools.

In this article, drawing on data collected in Trilokpuri between December 2018 and December 2020, and through ongoing interactions between the members of the research team since 2020, we focus on a significant issue. That is the dynamics of exclusion and mediation produced at the intersection between the ongoing digitisation of welfare bureaucracy in India and the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown that was imposed between 23 March and 31 May 2020. In Trilokpuri, as reported from locations across India, the immediate effect of the lockdown was to prevent many people who depend on precarious daily wage employment from earning their livelihood. As many of these people are also migrants to the city and lack the documents to access food rations *via* the Delhi government's Public Distribution System (PDS) the sudden halt in economic activity presented an immediate threat of hunger.

As the lockdown was enforced charity and advocacy groups across the city responded by raising funds and distributing food. In early April 2020, the Delhi government introduced a digitised form of emergency welfare for those without access to food or documentation. The Delhi Temporary Ration Coupon scheme, more commonly known as 'E-coupons', was targeted at migrant workers who did not possess a 'ration card', a document that provides beneficiaries with food grains at subsidised rates under the PDS. However, as a digital system targeted at those least likely to possess the technological means to make applications online, the scheme effectively required the poorest in the neighbourhood to seek the mediation of those able to access and operate the technology required. The story of how this process of mediation played out at street level in Trilokpuri during the pandemic is at the heart of this article.

The March 2020 lockdown meant that the shadowing of the *Jaankaars'* everyday work by this article's co-authors had to be suspended, as they could not travel to Trilokpuri. The research collaboration was sustained through telephone and online meetings and the sharing of a rich stream of images and other audio/visual media *via* smartphone. The *Jaankaars* and their CSO quickly became part of the informal network of emergency food supply that

was developing within Trilokpuri. Initially, the CSO identified 40 vulnerable families who did not have access to the Delhi government ration system. Dry ration packs including grains, pulses, cooking oil and spices were prepared and distributed to these families. When e-coupons were introduced in early April the CSO started to log those they were helping to access the scheme in spreadsheets. As the work expanded these grew to include the family, contact, occupation and residence details of just below five hundred people. The precarious nature of work and dwelling for those listed became clear in these details and chimed with the findings of a community survey by the project team in 2019 which found that 90% of those seeking support from the CSO came from scheduled caste or minority religious groups.

As the lockdown was eased in May 2020 the research team reassembled. Drawing on the spreadsheets we carried out 18 recorded interviews with available e-coupons scheme claimants who had maintained contact with the Jaankaars. These interviews were augmented by focus group discussions about the experience of the lockdown among the Jaankaars, their network of volunteers and the management of the CSO. This data about the lockdown was added to the wider data collected across 2018–2020 concerning the sites and specificities of everyday digital mediation in Trilokpuri.

Our research team's experience of these events leads us to the overarching aims of this article, which are as follows. To argue along with a growing literature emerging from India that we must pay attention to the human infrastructures of mediation and advocacy that underpin digital welfare systems if we are to properly understand how technology changes the relationship between the citizen and the state (for example see Rao 2013; Rao and Nair 2019; Baxi 2019; Chaudhuri 2019; Chambers 2020; Carswell and De Neve 2022). The need for this attention becomes particularly acute in the light of crises such as that precipitated by COVID-19. Next, to contribute to a critical appraisal of the efficacy of digital welfare systems for the poorest in society through collaborative research grounded in the everyday practice of mediation and advocacy. Last, to argue that this case study and the literature that it contributes to has implications for a transnational understanding of how digitised welfare systems are implemented. The need for human infrastructures of mediation and advocacy to support engagement with digital systems is not peculiar to Delhi, or even to India, and we intend our collective work here to contribute to ongoing research projects concerning the relationship between technology, welfare, bureaucracy and marginalisation (e.g. see Bear, James, and Simpson 2020; Robinson et al. 2020; Eubanks 2018).

To develop our account of mediation in the pandemic, our overall argument, and contribution to the literature, the article will be structured as follows. We will begin with a discussion of ethnographic literature, which reveals the complexity and uncertainty that is produced when digital governance initiatives are introduced as a means to streamline and disintermediate the citizen-state relationship in India. The promise of seamless technological infrastructure and service delivery, particularly for the poor and marginalised, is shown to depend upon expanding human infrastructures of brokerage, mediation, and advocacy. We note the shift from computer-based e-governance to mobile phone-based m-governance. M-governance is intended to individualise citizen-state interactions but also has the potential to fragment and expand the field of brokerage and mediation and further marginalise those without access to the appropriate technology. We then develop the ethnographic context of the article by discussing how techno-moral discourses of digital citizenship and the anti-corruption politics of state reform have influenced the governance of Delhi, and India more widely. These act as a driver for the proliferation of digital solutions to citizen focused

service delivery of which the e-coupons scheme is just one example. We then introduce the context of the lockdown in Delhi in 2020 exploring the development of the hunger crisis and the Delhi government's response. In the technocratic imagination of the Delhi government, a digital scheme to provide access to emergency food rations in which the application process would only require the use of a personal smartphone might seem to mitigate the risk of social contact and viral contagion. This takes us to the specific context of Trilokpuri. Here we build an account of digital mediation before and during the pandemic and show how the e-coupon scheme actually required a proliferation of social contact, and thus an increased risk of contagion, for it to function for the intended beneficiaries.

Through this structure we argue that as the citizen-state relationship is digitised under m-governance those leading the policy should recognise that putting that relationship into the hands of an expanding number of intermediaries whose only necessary qualification is that they have access to the relevant technology neither fosters transparency and accountability nor streamlines governance or service delivery for the poor. A fascination with the imagined potential of digital technology to disintermediate citizen-state relationships makes policymakers look away from the ground realities of mediation. Looking towards these realities would require acknowledgement of the specificities of contexts, and the communities that inhabit them. This would be useful at any time but becomes essential in the context of a pandemic. As people's encounters with the 'everyday state' (Fuller and Benei 2000) increasingly become encounters with devices, links, webpages, and servers the need for reliable mediators, such as the Jaankaars, who can follow-up cases, build community support networks and sound the alarm when techno-utopian projects do not work as expected becomes essential. By accepting the fundamental fact of mediation policymakers could then recognise the value of advocacy.

Putting the digitisation of welfare in context

In India in recent years the means to access rights and entitlements to social protection have shifted towards what the Jaankaars call the 'online mode'. The introduction of digital citizen-state interfaces has been promoted as a means to streamline bureaucratic processes, prevent leakages in social protection schemes (Khera 2017), and make populations more legible to government (Rao and Nair 2019). As Bidisha Chaudhuri puts it

as part of this optimistic discourse, digital technologies are expected to create a direct link between user and information or service, implying the replacement of human intermediaries by digital technologies either at an individual or institutional level. (2019, 573)

The sense is one of purification as clean technology is imagined to sweep away the dirt of unreliable, corrupt or politicised forms of human mediation.

The best documented example of a project to digitise the citizen-state relationship in India has been the roll out of the *Aadhaar* Universal Identification (UID) Scheme. Using biometric forms of identification such as fingerprint and iris scans the scheme seeks to enrol every citizen of India and issue them with a unique 12-digit identity number. Aadhaar was initiated under the Congress Party led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in early 2009 and incorporated into the Digital India e-governance programme introduced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after their election win in 2014. It has become increasingly embedded as a master form of identification required to access social protection schemes

(Sriraman 2018; Rao and Nair 2019; Chaudhuri 2021). Its ubiquity has also prompted concerns about privacy, data security and the introduction of unreliable biometric identification technology into existing social protection systems (Khera 2019; Khan 2021).

Ethnographic research tracking the implementation of Aadhaar and its infrastructures has highlighted the role of human actors in making digital governance function in practice (see Rao 2013; Rao and Nair 2019; Chaudhuri 2021; Masiero 2020; Masiero and Shakthi 2020; Carswell and De Neve 2022). Everyday problems with power and internet connectivity and errors in identification details at enrolment or point of service require that human agents such as ration shop owners or e-kiosk operators intercede to develop workarounds that enable the completion of service transactions. As more forms of social protection become linked to Aadhaar further conflicts may arise between individual Aadhaar details and information held on older paper documents such as ration cards, particularly when these relate to a collective such as a family (Carswell and De Neve 2022; Chaudhuri 2021).

Rao's (2013) research into the process of Aadhaar enrolment for Delhi's homeless in the early 2010s found that their ability to comply with biometric registration was severely limited by their lack of existing forms of identification, requiring that they be 'introduced' by someone who could vouch for them, reaffirming their dependence on patronage in the process. The rush to enrol people to the scheme produced multiple errors as technicians had to find innovative ways to record fingerprints from hands damaged by tough lives doing manual labour and iris scans from eyes unable or unwilling to meet the gaze of the scanner (2013, 76). As Rao, and others, have shown. Even if the bodies of the poor are not easily legible to Aadhaar's biometric identification processes a laminated paper or plastic printout of the Aadhaar registration proof with an image of the holder, personal details and their 12-digit number can be valuable. This physical 'Aadhaar card' now serves as an accepted form of identification in many settings (Rao 2013; Ganeshan and Chaudhuri 2022). It is worth noting that in 2018 the Delhi government suspended the use of Aadhaar as a requirement to access a range of social protection schemes, including rations, because of the unreliability of the biometric identification process. However, the physical Aadhaar card and 12-digit number were temporarily reintroduced in 2020 as an individual form of identification, without the requirement for biometric verification, to manage the roll out of the e-coupons scheme for those not registered for the ration system in Delhi.

As Chaudhuri (2019) argues through her work on Aadhaar enabled ration services in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh these human mediations are not temporary fixes to an otherwise functioning digital system but rather a crucial human infrastructure that stabilises and interprets the digital system for users by ensuring that it works in local contexts. The effect of this necessary mediation however is to produce a digital citizen-state relationship that is often just as opaque and difficult to navigate for those accessing social protection as earlier analogue iterations, and similarly dependant on social connections or patronage (Rao 2013; Chaudhuri 2021; Carswell and De Neve 2022).

When routes to entitlements are digitised the range of actors involved in their delivery also expands. Private contractors and NGOs providing internet services, for example *via* e-kiosks, take on the roles of 'street level bureaucrats' providing access to government systems, particularly for the poor (Rao 2013; Baxi 2019; Chaudhuri 2019). We have noted this effect in our own research in Trilokpuri where the shift to digital service provision has produced a proliferation of actors and sites of mediation, and opportunities to extract rents from digital services.

This proliferation has been further accelerated by the development of government-to-citizen services managed through mobile phone networks and text messages (Masiero and Shakthi 2020; Carswell and De Neve 2022) and more recently through the use of smartphones. The existing e-governance ecosystem of fixed location e-kiosks run by contractors is being overlaid by a mobile 'm-governance' project in which government departments are expected to make their web pages and services available across all internet browsers and smart devices (Kadu, Bagret, and Verma 2015). M-governance provision, which includes the e-coupons initiative covered in this article, is intended to allow an even more direct relationship between the individual citizen and government mediated by the text and image making affordances of the smart phone.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic following the logic of the m-governance model it may seem that the e-coupon scheme would reduce human contact, and the spread of the virus, by creating a process which allows users to apply *via* their own smartphone and then download the e-coupon with its QR code on the same device. However, if those applying do not have access to a personal smartphone, or any other internet-enabled device, they must seek the help of those that do. Even if they do possess a smartphone they may not be able to manage the process alone. These factors are compounded by the target population of the e-coupon scheme, some of the most marginalised in Delhi, being the least likely to have unmediated access to a smartphone. As we will show, at street level in a neighbourhood such as Trilokpuri the shift from computer-based e-governance to mobile m-governance does not reduce the need for mediation. It actually opens up opportunities for novel actors and locations to be drawn into the field of everyday encounters and processes of mediation and with it the risk of spreading the virus that the lockdown was intended to prevent.

Delhi, politics, governance and the pandemic

As a Union territory within the federal system in India, Delhi is governed at three legislative levels. In the Union government power rests with the houses of parliament and the office of the Prime Minister, which in March 2020 was held by Narendra Modi of the BJP. Within Delhi the Union government oversees policing, urban development and some aspects of higher education and health care.

At the municipal level, the city has a range of bodies. In 2020 these included the North, South and East Municipal Corporations of Delhi (MCD) responsible for the majority of the city,² the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), responsible for the central administrative area, and the Delhi Cantonment Board (DCB) responsible for military controlled areas. These municipal bodies cover public works and infrastructure maintenance; refuse collection and some aspects of school provision. In 2020 the BJP held the majority of councillor seats in the three MCD zones.

Sandwiched between these two BJP controlled organisations is the Government of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, a state-like entity³ represented by a Chief Minister and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The 'Delhi Government' is responsible for a range of functions regarding health, welfare, and social protection, including the provision of subsidised food rations *via* the Delhi Public Distribution System (PDS).

The largest party in the Delhi Legislative Assembly is the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Emerging from the nationwide India Against Corruption (IAC) movement of 2011–12 (Roy 2014; Pinney 2014; Webb 2014) the AAP, with a broom as its election symbol, had won successive elections

in Delhi in 2015 and 2020 under the leadership of the former bureaucrat turned civil society activist, anti-corruption campaigner, and now chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal. In 2020 the AAP was also the second largest party and main opposition to the BJP in the three MCD zones.

Standing on a platform promising state reform and improved service delivery the AAP has placed particular emphasis on the possibilities of technology as a solution to connecting the citizen and state more directly. These translated into policy promises in the 2015 and 2020 manifestos to provide ‘free Wi-Fi’ to Delhi’s residents (Khan and Ullah 2020) and to institute ‘governance by mobile phone’. In this plan a promise was made that all government services would be available online and *via* mobile phone, information about government projects, performance and personnel would be posted online, and transparency and accountability in governance delivered (AAP 2019). For the AAP ‘every citizen of Delhi is now an active part of the vast digital world’ and internet access is seen as a ‘crucial resource for connecting people to the information and skills they need’ including the most marginalised in the city (AAP 2019). The digitisation of services and citizen-state interfaces are a key part of the AAP’s techno-moral approach to electoral politics and governance. For Bornstein and Sharma techno-moral politics are

the complex strategic integration of technical and moral vocabularies as political tactics... It refers to how various social actors translate moral projects into technical, implementable terms as laws or policies, as well as justify technocratic acts- such as development and legislation... as moral imperatives (Bornstein and Sharma 2016, 11)

This strategy promotes the potential for digital governance initiatives to create connections between citizen and state, which are unmediated by the usual shady cast of brokers, agents and political operators (Mazzarella 2006; Bjorkman 2021). It is the structuring imaginary behind the Delhi government’s digital response to the crisis of hunger precipitated by the COVID-19 lockdown of March 2020.

The lockdown and ration crisis in Delhi

On 23 March 2020, in the face of growing COVID-19 case numbers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that from midnight the entire country would be put under lockdown to ‘save India and every Indian’. He went on to assert that while the lockdown would have economic consequences it had to be borne in the national interest. The closure of businesses immediately affected the large numbers of migrant workers who live, labour and put down roots in Delhi but whose registration as citizens only entitled them to welfare and social protection elsewhere, often in rural areas far from the city. The worst affected were the most vulnerable of these workers, without documents and dependent on daily wages. Across India a crisis developed as migrant workers attempted to return to their home districts, often by foot (Shroff 2020; Chaudhary 2022). However, in Delhi many who were not registered on the Delhi government’s public distribution and social protection schemes remained in the city and found themselves without access to sufficient food. Lacking basic amenities hundreds of thousands of people in the city fell back on locally organised emergency food supplied by neighbourhood civil society and faith-based groups. The Delhi government did launch local assistance programs, including cooked food distribution, which provided meals at around 2500 locations within Delhi. However, distribution centres were often chaotic with limited food supplies.

Delhi's PDS is one of the better functioning among India's states, including over 2500 'fair price shops' (FPS). It is estimated that there are over 7 million PDS beneficiaries in Delhi, affiliated with around 1.7 million ration card holders. The Union and Delhi governments introduced emergency measures that were managed under the PDS and affiliated with existing schemes serving those who possessed a ration card. At the national level, the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana* (PMGKAY) offered up to 5 kg of food grain. However, local demands and provisions varied drastically, and the Delhi government announced the *Mukhya Mantri Corona Sahayta Yojna* (MMCSY) schemes which targeted stranded migrants who did not possess the required documentation.

Against this backdrop of a rising crisis of hunger, we will explore the introduction of the 'temporary ration card scheme' introduced by the Delhi government in early April 2020. This was quickly dubbed the 'e-coupon' scheme since it required the claimant to apply online for an electronic coupon, which would be produced in exchange for rations at a designated distribution centre. Instructions for the application process required the head of the family to register online on the jansamvaad.gov portal *via* either smartphone or computer by providing a mobile phone number that could receive a One-Time-Password, popularly known as an 'OTP'. Having logged in with the OTP they would submit their family details, address, and contact number, upload an image of their Aadhaar card, including the image of the head of the family, and submit. Once approved notification would be sent by SMS to the mobile number including a link to download a printable version of the e-coupon. If approved each family would be provided with 5 Kilograms of dry rations, including wheat and rice. The combination of Aadhaar card and mobile number was a common requirement for accessing emergency social protection schemes across India during the pandemic. As Ganeshan and Chaudhuri (2022) found in their research into travelling migrant workers attempting to return home during lockdown this combination allowed migrants to register for a range of initiatives, including subsidised travel. As they note the significance of Aadhaar in this context was not linked to biometric authentication but rather to the possession of a physical card showing the 12-digit number and an image of the holder (2022, 4).

At its outset the e-coupon scheme hit difficulties. As the director of our partner CSO in Trilokpuri outlined, when the scheme was announced the CSO had decided to help as many eligible people as possible to apply online. They soon discovered that the portal was not accepting applications and that a combination of insufficient bandwidth and internet server provision by the Delhi government, and a lack of rations immediately available to satisfy demand, meant that the scheme had been quickly overwhelmed both digitally and physically. These issues took several days to resolve and even once the website was functioning again there were delays in processing applications. At the government level, the Food and Supplies department which handled the scheme, considered it only a stopgap measure to fill the additional demand for rations. As government responses to a public interest litigation (PIL) submitted to the Delhi High Court by the Delhi Rozi-Roti Adhikar Abhiyan campaign group showed, even though over 5.4 million e-coupons were issued, those seeking temporary rations far exceeded that number (Hima Kohli and Subramonium Prasad 2020, 2; Roy Barman 2020).

Before the pandemic in their community outreach work, the Jaankaars were encountering many people who struggled to complete online application processes or even to access the devices and networks required to engage with digitised social protection. In workshops held early in the research collaboration, the Jaankaars had complained that local 'cyber cafés'

were taking advantage of people who could not manage the new systems. They were charging significant amounts for making online applications on behalf of clients for services that are supposed to be provided either free or at a marginal cost by government-regulated Common Service Centres (CSCs). The term 'cyber café' used by the Jaankaars covers a wide range of operators, from well-established businesses with multiple computers offering internet access or computer training to shops in the market selling a range of goods but with a laptop, printer, and internet connection available for hire. Some players would only enter the market for 'online work' at times of higher demand and opportunity. For example, every year a month-long window for applications to the lottery for subsidised private school places for the 'Economically Weaker Sections' (known colloquially as the 'EWS') would open. For this month a shop in Trilokpuri market which refilled domestic cooking gas canisters would hang a printed vinyl banner outside carrying the words 'EWS: School Children's forms filled here'. As our research into the presence of internet access points in the neighbourhood developed, we came to call these *ad hoc* digital service providers 'mushrooms' for the way in which they seemed to sprout from the underlying digital network infrastructure in response to seasonal and other demands. Recognising the need to provide alternatives to these unregulated private players the Union government has implemented the roll out of a CSC scheme, through public-private partnership, to provide hubs for accessing e-services (Govt. of India 2021). Trilokpuri, however, does not have a CSC within the neighbourhood, the nearest being several kilometres away, and residents find it more straightforward to access services in the local market.

Pre-pandemic, in interviews with cyber café customers carried out by the Jaankaars, it was a common complaint that initial quotations for a single online application would increase as cyber café owners suggested that extra supporting documents were required, and that it would be easier for the client to apply for those at the same time. A quotation of fifty or a hundred rupees to complete a single application could turn into a bundle of work amounting to hundreds or even thousands of rupees. Processes could be left incomplete as an application encountered a problem and the digital mediator lost interest in following up. The dependence of those seeking access to government schemes on mediators with internet access and some, not always reliable, knowledge about how to navigate online bureaucratic systems meant that many people were unable to avoid these issues.

An example is the case of a woman, Amira,⁴ the mother of a disabled child. She was attempting to access a government stipend for her son and offered her story about her difficult experience of navigating a digitised application process when she visited one of the Jaankaar team, Rukshana, for assistance. Amira agreed to record a short video interview as part of the CSO's collection of casework evidence around this issue. The short film shows Amira unpacking documents from a neatly folded polythene bag and showing them to Rukshana. These include a voter ID card, her own Aadhaar card and another belonging to her child, and a bank passbook as proof of address.

Rukshana: *You had got your form filled up online?* (by a digital mediator in the market)

Amira: *Yes*

Rukshana: *How much did they charge you?*

Amira: *Two hundred rupees*

Rukshana: *Now what is happening when you are trying to submit your form?*

Amira (proffering the documents): *They are asking us to get this document, that document. I have every proof yet they are making me run from pillar to post.*

When she refers to 'they' Amira gives the sense that the demand for further supporting documents is being made by the government office who actually deals with the application. As she speaks Amira hands Rukshana the documents she has brought with her one by one and Rukshana inspects them. They begin to discuss the trouble that Amira has gone to concerning this case:

Rukshana: *So would you say it has been helpful or unhelpful for you in filling up the form online?*

Amira: *It has been absolutely unhelpful. I have had to go to Geeta colony at least 5-6 times!*

Geeta Colony is in East Delhi, around 9 kilometres distant from Trilokpuri. Amira has had to go there to follow up her case at the Delhi Government Department for Social Welfare – East – Office.

Rukshana: *And have you been going back to the person who filled your form online?*

Amira: *Yes, I have gone to him three to four times. Now he's saying, 'what can I do if things are not working out?'*

Rukshana: *He took two hundred rupees?*

Amira: *Yes*

Rukshana: *And there's no guarantee that your work will be done?*

Amira: *No. Initially he told me that it would be done, you will get a message (SMS confirmation from the Social Welfare department). But now nothing has happened since then.*

Rukshana: *And how much money was spent in travelling?*

Amira: *I had to take my child along (to Geeta Colony). I spent about seventy rupees per trip*

Rukshana: *Do you feel that if your form wasn't filled online, your work would have been done?*

Amira: *Yes, possibly.*

Rukshana: *Alright. I will come along with you on Tuesday (to the Department of Social Welfare office in Geeta Colony). Let's see what we can do.*

In this exchange we see a range of issues emerging. Amira's need to access the government scheme requires that she engage with a digitised application system that it is difficult for her to navigate because of issues of digital literacy and access to technology. The digital mediator loses interest once the application turns out not to be straightforward and Amira finds herself having to make multiple visits to that mediator *and* to the concerned government office. She then must seek out a new advocate and mediator in the person of Rukshana who will be able to help her navigate the interaction with the government office. Amira's experience reflects that of interlocutors in Carswell et al.'s research in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh (Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Carswell and De Neve 2022) in which the introduction of new technology into bureaucratic processes produces 'new obscurities, information gaps and forms of mediation' (2019, 607) even though the promise of the digitised service is that it manifests a relationship between citizen and state in which the need for human mediation and advocacy is reduced. In the context of a neighbourhood such as Trilokpuri, the experience of the Jaankaars working as community advocates and field researchers is that for those most in need the digitisation of services can lead to a multiplication of bureaucratic encounters and uncertainty.

The Jaankaars often expressed frustration at the relative lack of knowledgeable advocates that people encounter in these new sites of digital mediation in Trilokpuri, while acknowledging that they did not have the capacity to help enough people. This had been a key issue that the project had engaged with before the pandemic. In July of 2019 we had organised workshops and a public meeting attended by the local MLA and councillors, which presented preliminary research findings and brought together the Jaankaars and local cyber café owners. In these meetings, we discussed the question of how, as the digitisation of services gathered pace, the capacity provided by the marketplace in digital mediation in Trilokpuri could best be supported by the knowledge, gained through advocacy, of the Jaankaars to provide more reliable and reasonably priced mediation services to residents.

However, as the pandemic gripped Delhi in March 2020 the broader magnification of inequalities caused by the lockdown exacerbated the pre-existing issue of unreliable and expensive digital mediation. As restrictions were enforced and businesses closed, opportunities to access spaces where online applications could be made for those most in need of the e-coupon scheme became increasingly limited. In instances where cyber cafés did reopen temporarily, the police would move in to shut them down again. In this context, many cyber café owners resorted to both running their services clandestinely and where this was not possible using their smartphones to fill out applications. The advent of the e-coupon scheme also caused the emergence of a new crop of 'mushroom' internet access points. The Jaankaars and the network of volunteers working with them reported instances of younger people from better off families in the neighbourhood who had access to smartphones charging fees to fill out online applications and locating clients by waiting close to ration distribution centres. The implementation of the e-coupon scheme offered an opportunity for individuals with connections to the internet, and sufficient mobile data, to extract rents from their position as mediators and provide a means of mitigating the loss of income that many residents of Trilokpuri experienced during the lockdown.⁵ The Jaankaars fielded a number of cases in this period in which inexperienced form fillers lacking long-term experience of potential pitfalls in filling applications, or knowledge of how to maximise the amount of rations that could be claimed by a household, had made mistakes. Subsequently applicants had come to the Jaankaars for further assistance. They cited cases in which information such as addresses had been inputted incorrectly, or supporting documents not properly scanned causing applications to fail, in some cases preventing follow-up applications being made in relation to a particular Aadhaar number or address. E-coupon applicants surveyed by the Jaankaars at this time reported fees of Rs.100, or more, being charged for basic form filling, a considerable amount for those already made destitute by the imposition of the lockdown.⁶

Attempting to address the issue of unreliable mediators, the general lack of knowledge about application processes and their own lack of capacity to engage with the large number of cases the Jaankaars drew upon the cross-community network of volunteers they had built up through their work to develop school management committees (SMCs).⁷ Vidya,⁸ a Hindu woman from Trilokpuri who had been a volunteer for 7 years explained how she had started to take on the work of helping people who needed assistance in applying for the e-coupon scheme under the instruction of one of the Jaankaar *team*, Jyoti. Vidya describes herself as a housewife and her husband works as a 'stitcher' in the small-scale garment workshops that can be found across the working-class neighbourhoods of east Delhi. Although Vidya's family were badly affected by the loss of income caused by the lockdown they did have a Delhi Government-issued ration card and so were able to continue to access rations *via* the PDS.

Working with Jyoti and using the single smartphone that her family owns Vidya began to help fill in the applications of those that the NGO had identified as possessing Aadhaar cards, and who were thus eligible for the e-coupon scheme. Across the network of volunteers, the CSO set targets for outreach to people who the organisation knew possessed the requisite Aadhaar card but not the Delhi Government-issued ration card. Those without Aadhaar cards, and so not able to apply for the e-coupon scheme were placed on a list of those the CSO might assist with direct deliveries of emergency rations paid for through an appeal for donations.

Vidya describes how even though she was not particularly skilled in using the family smartphone she learned how to manage the process of e-coupon applications and helped to fill out 'twenty to thirty' applications for the scheme for people referred to her by the Jaankaars. If Vidya encountered problems with the process she could refer back to the Jaankaars and wider volunteer network for advice and support *via* dedicated WhatsApp groups.

In Vidya's story, and in the accounts of unreliable mediation above, we can note a significant issue emerging in relation to the process of digital mediation. It is the ownership of, and ability to use, smart devices that enables particular people to take on the role of digital mediator, whether paid or unpaid. These devices are the points at which the digitised welfare bureaucracy connects to the supporting human network of advocacy and mediation. The points at which the techno-moral imagination of the individual and digitally literate 'smart citizen' (Datta 2018) which lies behind the design and delivery of digitised m-governance services encounters the everyday reality in Trilokpuri of multiple applications being made through devices operated by relatively small numbers of digital mediators.

Earlier we outlined the application process for the e-coupon scheme as set out by the Delhi government. Now let us run through the same process mediated by the Jaankaars. Most of the people logged in the CSO's e-coupon application records could provide a mobile phone number, but relatively few had smartphones. Seeking assistance, they would visit a Jaankaar or encounter one doing street outreach work. The Jaankaar would open the e-coupon website on their smartphone and access the application portal by entering their own phone number and receiving an OTP with a link. After filling out the beneficiary's⁹ family details and Aadhaar number, adding the beneficiary's mobile number (if they had one) and then uploading an image of the beneficiary's Aadhaar card with photo they would submit the application. If the beneficiary did not have a mobile then the Jaankaar could use their own mobile number to receive notifications.

When the application had been approved, days or even weeks later, a notification SMS message containing a download link for the e-coupon would be sent to the number listed in the form. If this was the Jaankaar's own number, they would call the applicant to tell them that their e-coupon was ready. If the number belonged to the beneficiary, they could return to the Jaankaar for help with the next steps in accessing the e-coupon *via* the Jaankaar's smartphone or a computer attached to a printer. The process could require both. The e-coupon itself showed the family details, the collection site and time slot and a QR code and could be downloaded to print out. The Jaankaar and the applicant would meet and locate a cyber café or shop that was able to provide a printout of the e-coupon. During the lockdown, this may not be straightforward. The applicant could then take the printout to the distribution centre using their Aadhaar card as ID to collect.

Even in cases where an applicant did have a smartphone, they may still require help for reasons of literacy and gendered norms concerning mobility. In one of our interviews, a

Muslim woman called Shazia¹⁰ told us how her family applied for the e-coupon. Her husband drove an e-rickshaw and Shazia remained mostly at home looking after the children. The family did have a smartphone, but they only used it for making and receiving phone calls. She said that they had heard about the e-coupon scheme from a neighbour who told her that rations would be distributed at the school. She had known one of the Jaankaars, Rukshana, since coming to the neighbourhood and reached out to her for help. As Shazia was unable to leave home, she gave their smartphone and Aadhaar card to a male neighbour to pass on to Rukshana who completed the application and then returned the phone. Shazia said that they waited almost two months for the application to be approved. When the message came, they had to get a neighbour to read it and download the e-coupon to the phone on their behalf so that they could attend the distribution centre. Here then we see a process in which a scheme designed through the logic of m-governance does not just require methodical and time-consuming human intervention to make it work for the target citizen but also requires that the e-coupon be materialised as a paper document to render it usable. It is only when the paper e-coupon is created that the Jaankaar's mediation process is effectively complete, and the applicant can then visit the ration distribution centre on their own with the printout and their Aadhaar card as ID. Even when Shazia does have access to the necessary technology the process still involves a number of trusted intermediaries who can help her to manage the process. This should make us wonder about the promise of m-governance for the poor under any circumstances but in the context of the pandemic and the trauma of hunger insecurity induced by the harsh lockdown, it was particularly striking how these digital solutions produce the need for more human contact and connection rather than less.

Conclusion

As Rao and Nair (2019) observe in their introduction to a special issue on Aadhaar and biometrics the digitisation of the state in India requires that we take a fresh look at the routines and technologies of contemporary governmentality. As a biopolitical intervention to make the population more legible to the state Aadhaar, and the entitlements linked to it, seems to offer citizens new ways of encountering and 'seeing' the state (Chaudhuri 2021; q.v. Corbridge et al. 2005). Engaging with the everyday state continues to involve crossing the thresholds of government offices and negotiating encounters with officials (Fuller and Harriss 2000; Corbridge et al. 2005). Digitisation has not replaced this but now the digital thresholds of the state produce encounters with a multiplicity of locations, intermediaries and gatekeepers available *via* m-governance. Few of these gatekeepers are charged with a responsibility of being either transparent or accountable to the citizens seeking their assistance as might be required of government officials.

In the case of the 2020 e-coupon scheme, we might also ask what it is that the state itself is seeing (q.v. Scott 1998). The online application process for the scheme provides data on how many have applied. The link to physical Aadhaar cards, rather than biometrics, gives data about their identities. What the state does not fully apprehend in this data is the intense labour and complexity of the human infrastructure of mediation that produced the scheme on the ground. We would conclude that overlooking or downplaying the importance of mediation to the delivery of services, digitised or not, is a mistake. As our experience of working with community advocates in Trilokpuri shows, people do need assistance with

bureaucratic processes. Digitisation has complicated these processes for many and the value of having reliable advocates available who can offer well-organised and consistent support is clear. We do not intend to echo a weak sense of building 'social capital' here, promoted as part of neoliberal governance reform by development institutions such as the World Bank (Fine 2007) in which people are encouraged to rely on each other for support rather than the state. Instead, we wish to promote the active recognition and support of forms of organised advocacy that can build knowledge and resilience in communities.

Digital governance solutions are justified with appeals to virtuous techno-moral politics (Bornstein and Sharma 2016) that seeks to streamline governance, connect citizens to services and do away with the potentially corrupt mediation of those positioned to act as brokers (Rao and Nair 2019; Chaudhuri 2019). If these solutions do not actively recognise the need for advocacy in their design and implementation, they will fail to provide the services that those most in need actually require. As the case of providing emergency food to those made destitute by the Covid lockdown in Delhi shows, digital solutions must be designed for the convenience of those who will depend on them, not for the convenience of those who administrate them.

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Notes

1. The project detailed in this article received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics & Integrity Sub-Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London: Approval ref# 1474, and the Ethics IRB of the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology – Delhi: Approval ref IIITD/IRB/4/10/2020. The ethics committees recognised the value of verbal consent where interlocutors' literacy levels may be low. Verbal consent was given by interlocutors for parts of their accounts to be used in casework related to the operation of the civil society partner in the project and in the research collaboration with the project team. Names of interlocutors who are not part of the Jaankaar research team have been changed.
2. These were unified into one body in May 2022.
3. The National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi is a union territory within India, not a full state, meaning that some decision-making and revenue powers remain with the central government. We will not explore the distinction further as it bears little relevance to our argument.
4. Name changed.
5. During peer review one anonymous reviewer asked if we had heard reports of digital mediators making e-coupon claims on behalf of people and then keeping the rations for themselves. This may have been possible, but we did not hear any reports of this occurring.
6. Work by Raveendran and Vanek (2020) on pre-pandemic average hourly rates for informally employed workers in Delhi shows earnings in the following categories, aggregated across gender: Home based workers, Rs.73.08. Domestic workers, Rs.36.66. Street Vendors, Rs.45.58. Waste Pickers, Rs.57.84. Construction workers, Rs.49.13. Transport workers, Rs.59.39. (2020, 11). Hourly rates are given as length of working day may vary according to work availability. These categories correspond with self-reported employment data collected by the Jaankaars in records of people provided with ration assistance during the lockdown.
7. SMCs are mandated under section 21 of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009. SMCs are intended to foster accountability through participatory governance in school management by involving parents in the running of government schools.
8. Name changed.
9. The term beneficiary is used as it appears in the e-coupon application.
10. Name changed.

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