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Affective Activism and Digital Archiving: Relief Work and Migrant Workers during the Covid-19 Lockdown in India

This article traces what I term the affective activism of volunteers, civil society organizations, and lorry drivers engaged in relief work to assist stranded migrant workers wanting to travel home during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic and national lockdown in India. I define affective activism as an archival practice that is driven by relief figures' affects of fear, anger, and aspirations—in this instance, toward their legal and administrative accountability to funders. Drawing on my ethnographic work in a relief network and using independent interviews I conducted, this article critically compares two modalities of digital archiving conducted by relief figures: collecting migrant workers' Aadhaar—unique biometric number identifiers issued to Indians—and digitally archiving their relief efforts through videos, voice-notes, and WhatsApp Messenger screenshots. I argue that relief figures expressed their anxieties in the form of talismanic beliefs that records of Aadhaar and their material infrastructure would keep safe the migrant workers they were trying to help. Alternately, and sometimes, concomitantly, they performatively deployed Whatsapp artifacts to support their accountability in the face of bureaucratic and political specters. Both forms highlight the desire of relief figures to exceed paper forms and state practices in their archival impulses. [affective activism, India relief work, Covid-19 lockdown, migrant workers, digital archiving, and visual politics]

Both Nagarjuna,¹ a lorry driver in an Andhra Pradesh (AP) district, and Vikky, an activist working on the AP-Tamil Nadu border in South India, facilitated the movement of migrant workers traveling home during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. In reconstructing their parts, they gave me a glimpse of the contextual affects underlying relief work and its digital archiving. Nagarjuna described how he filmed workers boarding and de-boarding his lorry that brought them closer to their home states, to reassure them that they were in safe hands in the face of a historical suspicion of lorry drivers. Vikky told me that he unfailingly photographed bills and train tickets and filmed migrant narratives of distress on his smartphone, but never of the workers accepting relief. He categorically stated that videography was ethical as an archiving practice compared to—common among other relief figures—collecting workers' *Aadhaar*, which are biometric number identifiers linked to multiple welfare services and payment interfaces via the cloud. *Aadhaar* had already been at the centre of tumultuous policy debate, litigation, and legislation.

I argue that relief figures' archiving impulse was driven by what I term an affective activism or an activism driven by anger against the mistreatment of migrant workers, fear of their own liabilities, a need to ward off suspicion of their work, and an aspiration toward

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accountability that simultaneously stalled and exceeded state forms. Here, relief figures include civil society organizations and their employees, activists, relief volunteers affiliated with networks, and lorry drivers. I demonstrate that relief work centering on migrant workers was shot through with affects borne by digital modalities of archiving events, carrying out audits, and creating a trail of their administrative actions (Strathern 2006).

This article delves into the hybrid politics of visual and material relief practices of the kind that Nagarjuna and Vikky undertook, and how they indexed the archiving impulses related to the Covid-19 lockdowns. Jacques Derrida traced the meaning of archive to two Greek terms, *arkhe* and *arkheion*, or to “where things commence” in “physical, historical and ontological terms” and where “authority, social order are exercised” and from where order is generated (1995, 1–3). My use of archiving is closer to the second meaning that Derrida denotes, but I specify archiving as the process of creating artifacts that aspire to administrative and legal accountability, if not authority.

This article critically compares two digital modalities of archiving by relief figures; namely, collecting migrant workers’ Aadhaar and generating artifacts through the WhatsApp Messenger (hereafter WhatsApp). If photography historically fulfilled the mandate of a filing system (Sekula 1986), I will show that digital and audio-visual archiving practices went far beyond to manifest what I term an “affective activism” within the field of relief work.

Ethnographies of Covid-19 Relief Work and Notes on Method

When the first Covid-19 wave and subsequent national and state lockdowns were announced in March 2020 in India, it disproportionately affected migrant workers in the unorganized sector, given the precarity of their employment, housing, savings, caste, class statuses, and the circular aspect of their migration (Centre for Sustainable Employment 2021). Consequently, primetime television, YouTube, and the mainstream press presented hard-to-ignore images in which workers had used up their wages, rations, and essentials, and were in imminent danger of eviction, starvation, and debt. Images showed migrants walking treacherously long distances to return to their home states. Relief networks echoed these images. A Stranded Workers Action Network (2020) report mentioned workers suffering the brunt of inadequate ration support, even after central government travel orders were issued allowing migrant workers’ movement. The workers were mired in confusing procedures and police registration mandates and faced expensive railway fares. Civil society responded in the hope of assisting workers and finding alternatives when they wanted to walk many miles, or hitch lorry rides, or take the bus to return to their homes. This article squarely addresses the activism surrounding this relief effort.

While this article is grounded in relief work during both waves of the lockdown, it centers on the first wave. In the words of Nelly, a relief figure, “The nation’s conscience was in crisis on account of the workers who walked and died while walking during the first wave” (interview, October 16, 2021). Among the intensely mediatized images was an NDTV report showing masons, painters, and construction workers, among others, traveling over 1,300 kilometers spread across several days, from their work locations back to their home states. They walked part of it and hitched rides on cycle rickshaws for some of it.² Workers said that they walked because they wanted to be home if all social safety nets and guarantees for work—contractor, landlord, and employer—crumbled. In the words of George, a relief figure, “They walked because they did not want to die surrounded by government apathy” (interview, November 1, 2021).

In this article, I draw on two sets of interactions, the first being my volunteer work in mid-2020 with the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), a loose network formed in India to respond to stranded migrant workers when, in 2020 and 2021, India's leaders placed the country under nationwide lockdowns. The second set of interactions are interviews I conducted from September through December 2021 with nongovernmental organization (NGO) figures, long-term activists, lorry drivers, and one-off relief volunteers active during both years of lockdowns. I discuss interactions with migrant workers and SWAN relief figures, but I also draw heavily on interviews with relief figures not connected with SWAN.

There were five SWAN zones—south, north, west, east, and Delhi—active during both lockdowns. During the first lockdown, I spoke to migrant workers stranded in the south zone, which covered the southern states of Kerala, AP, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Karnataka. These workers lived mostly in the eastern states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and Assam, and in West Bengal. In April, May, and June 2020, I and others called migrant workers using our phones and a helpline that SWAN set up (over Exotel, a cloud platform). During both lockdowns, my role involved offering assistance of cash transfers, rations, or travel to migrant workers and connected SWAN with donors.

In our interactions, civil society organizations (CSOs), activists, and relief figures were keen to showcase their accountability to donors and funders—church groups, civil servants, their wives' networks, NGOs, philanthropic foundations—and archive their enactments of organizational and self-assigned responsibilities to migrant workers. Because of legislative restrictions on foreign donors, which I discuss, contributing funds were usually from regional or national donors. However, a few foreign donors found ways to legitimately channel donations through local bank accounts of India-based friends.

My ethnographic method includes looking at the work processes and communication interfaces of migrant workers and relief figures. I have analyzed SWAN spreadsheets, voice-notes, videos, WhatsApp screenshots, podcasts, petitions, and my own work-call and conversational notes. I first briefly narrate the complicated nonlinear temporalities, or “dis-junctive flows of media” (Tiwary 2020), and the shifting discursive fields (Gitelman 2014, 2) of digital artifacts. These terms reflect how media frameworks, such as WhatsApp and YouTube, determine the temporalities and create the conditions for users to transmit their experiences and knowledge of disruptive events. For these authors, media forms circulate disparately and elicit variable intensities of affect-laden responses. I caution that instead of reading affect as media forms that impinge on relief figures unidirectionally, they should be read as acting on subjects who were weighed down by the lockdowns and its regional manifestations.

Affective Activism

I am attentive to scholarship behind the term “affect” and its conceptual meaning of “intensities” transmitted through bodies that affect each other when they are embedded in and “infol[d]ed” in a similar “context” (Massumi 2002, 30; Shouse 2005). Brian Massumi (2002) has underscored “abstract” and “non-conscious experience” and “prepersonal” sensations that distinguish affects. Patricia Clough (2007, 2) discusses affect in terms of its ‘nonlinear complexity’ and as determined not simply by bodies but also technologies that impinge on bodily capacities. Both authors distinguish affects from emotions, which are more immediately social.

I, however, draw on more recent work both in the fields of interstate and transnational migration, which describe affective labor and often blurs critical distinctions between

affects and emotions. In Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez's work, bodies—in this instance, of Latin American domestic workers—must be “historicized.” Hence, the affect of employers and employed accrue in intensity when they are driven by emotions implicated in spatial and temporal frames of global inequality (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2011, 22).

Anthropologists Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta read affect into socialities that unfold between call center agents and callers to arrive at a category of “affective labor” (Mankekar and Gupta 2016, 25). Such labor thrives on intimate relations between capital and the laboring force. In these authors' work, the laboring subject is produced through work that melds “emotional, intellectual and corporeal” (26) forms of inhabiting the call center.

Dolly Kikon and Bengt G. Karlsson (2019) also flesh out affective labor around “indigenous migrants” from the Northeastern states who resort to a toolkit of “soft skills” within the hospitality industry as a means of laboring and caring for their customers as well as for themselves. These visually ordered soft skills include facial treatments, haircuts, and make-up, which are part of an “affective regime.” Migrant workers' “aspirations and anxieties” are produced through violent images and effects of their mainland representation alongside the hospitality industry's idea of “cosmopolitan and appealing dispositions” (17–22).

I draw on this ethnography to explain affect as deriving its force from visual-sensory practices and socially awakened bodily intensities. However, I define affective activism separately from affective labor. By affective activism, I mean that relief figures' activism and social mobilizations were spurred by affective potencies and phantasmic forces unleashed by digital forms such as Aadhaar and audio-video artifacts. This activism is animated not by notions of cultural and economic value of labor but by context-borne and legally fraught anxieties around makeshift processes of archiving.

Relief figures complained of state harassment and of being pulled in different directions by funders and the contingencies of migrant workers, which underscored their archival practice. Affective activism was born out of intense anxieties related to establishing enhanced and unassailable legal-administrative accountability.

Relief figures knew that the Aadhaar infrastructure was built on intrinsically expansionist and violent “sociotechnical relationalities,” which Sandeep Mertia explains as social relations entangling humans and data in ways that defy any linear or neatly predictable understanding of time and space (Mertia 2020, 22). They were cognizant of Aadhaar as cannibalizing claims of privacy expressed in the form of informational dignity of marginalized classes (Narayanan and Dhorajiwala 2019; Ramanathan 2021).

Additionally, relief figures were simultaneously aware of how various legal challenges of Aadhaar were circumvented and how—increasingly across various private and state domains—an ironclad consensus was forming about Aadhaar as enabling authentication versus being mere identification. For Anirudh Raghavan, it was an infrastructure marked by “immediacy” (i.e., it was immediate and needed no mediation) (2020, 150). All this laid the groundwork for Aadhaar's scaled-up talismanic potencies.

Relief figures created digital trails to track the sweeping devastation in the familial and financial lives of migrant workers. They invested these trails with documentary, auditory, and performative evidence, such as bus and train tickets, Short Message Services, Aadhaar lists, online registration forms, petitions, voice-notes, and videos transmitted through WhatsApp. The videos and voice-notes narrated the distress of migrant workers immobilized in a time-warp, and captured them waiting at railway stations, in transit, trapped in a containment zone, or encountering police violence. But what I wish to flag is not the distress of the migrant worker but of the relief figures' activism via affectively driven, visually dynamic archival functions.

Relief figures found these digital artifacts amplified their outrage, flagged the emotions of mobile workers braving an angry mid-summer sun, and softened the impact on migrant workers during the regional implementation of the lockdowns. Rather than see videos and voice-notes as merely furnishing proof, I read them as facilitating two things. The first is that relief figures explained that this digital modality served as a legal alternative to consolidating lists of migrant workers' Aadhaar because they captured the stark affective environment of relief work. Second, these videos could not be abstracted from a visual NGO audit culture of archiving events and affordances of WhatsApp messages that enable journalistic reporting.

While relief figures were either strong advocates or bitter critics of using Aadhaar as a regime of proof of identification, they were all in agreement on one thing. They were all firmly convinced that carrying out relief required them to institute self-monitoring mechanisms that anticipated statist, neoliberal, informational, and technocratic mandates of "accountability" (Bear and Mathur 2015, 20). While this meant replicating "deservingness hierarchies" in a script similar to Dean Spade's (2020) theorization of the hazards of mutual aid efforts in America, this must be read with nuance. In the case of SWAN, the deployment of governmentalized habits, NGO audit practices, and some restrictive criteria occurred within an activist mold of mobilizing collective outrage against central, state, and regional administrations. This was marked by robust critiques of state negligence and expanding advocacy for improved ration delivery, better labor helplines, and restoring wage payment to migrant workers, as well as consistent interstate train schedules so they could travel home.

Archiving the Financial Aspect of Relief Work

In the last decade, the relief ecosystem, and especially CSOs, in India took a serious financial hit when government rules regarding foreign donations became more stringent. While some social enterprises and their investments thrived, most "organizations which work in the rights and welfare space" were devastated by these new rules (Sriram 2020).

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Amendment (FCRA), passed into an Act, includes debilitating policy norms that every organization receiving aid must limit its administrative expenses or all costs related to running the organization, including salaries, to 20 percent. Registered persons and entities could only receive foreign contributions in a government-specified branch of the State Bank of India (SBI) and not accept any other funds into this branch account. What is more, recipients could not allocate subgrants.³ As such, NGOs, activists, and other relief figures must either ask donors to send money through local channels or comply to set procedures. Only after the branch approves the request is the money transferred to the recipient.

Because donors did not always understand the SoPs⁴, they were often befuddled by the delay in their money reaching relief-dispensing organizations. I witnessed this when I acted as the SWAN liaison and connected a donor to an organization in Andhra Pradesh. Because of an inexplicably protracted delay by the SBI branch in Delhi, the donor could not, for a long time, send money to the organization, causing him to very nearly give up.

The tightening of these procedures must be viewed as part of a neoliberal framework that privileged investments and incurring debt from private foundations, philanthropists, companies, and networks over charities that provide foreign donations, loans, and grants to NGOs within the welfare space (Sriram 2020). I use the term neoliberal in the same sense as Philip Mirowski (2018) when he refers to the "repurposing" of the state to introduce market principles and strengthen them through law. Within this framework, foundations

and companies that provide aid through corporate social responsibility are treated as “legal persons”; meanwhile the charities and NGOs working within the welfare space are considered dispensable because they corrupt the ethics of self-care and efficient market systems (Mirowski 2018; Sriram 2020).

When welfare- and relief-dispensing figures were placed under such duress, they responded with a frenzy of documentary and auditory moves. Some responded by lowering their amount of FCRA funds, but this was not merely reacting to neoliberal thrusts within the relief ecosystem. After 2014, a vitiated political environment and agenda acted to frame NGOs and their donors working in welfare and social justice fields as “anti-development” and anti-national (Bornstein and Sharma 2016). Both international and national NGOs, such as Greenpeace International, Ford Foundation, and leading advocate Indira Jaising and her Lawyers’ Collective—all of whom had campaigned or contributed to campaigns against communal hatred and environmental effects of mining and nuclear power plants—had their FCRA registrations canceled (*Firstpost* 2016). This discriminatory political gaze and FCRA regime were only two variables of the relief ecosystem. Others included administrative and bureaucratic orders and police and municipal directives that regarded such interventions as undercutting local governmental efforts.

I mostly focus on two states, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, to describe how relief figures navigated their own archivally driven activism in the face of often-adversarial regional administrations that invoked stringent government orders.

The Lockdown Relief Ecosystem during the First Wave

During the first wave, the relief ecosystem during the Covid-19 lockdown in India was centered on cash, food, and travel assistance; during the second wave, efforts coalesced around cash, food, and medical assistance.

Because of a tidal wave of civil society mobilization and court orders during the first wave, local governments in states receiving migrant workers worked with those in sending states to finance *shramik*, or the special trains sending workers back home. Even though the Karnataka High Court ordered that workers did not have to buy tickets and despite the central Ministry of Railways’ order that the sending and receiving state governments share the bills, the state government of Karnataka defied these orders to collect fares from workers.⁵ For migrants, the process of traveling involved registering online and/or by going into local police stations, which filled a quota of seats for workers on scheduled *shramik* trains. In addition, e-passes, not paper tickets, were mandated to cross state borders.

Shramik trains took time to coordinate. CSOs and activists helped migrant workers get tickets and figure out train schedules, but they often preferred to send workers home through staggered lorry journeys. The reasons for this were multifold and contingent on hidebound administrative responses and state governments’ capitalist sympathies. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka, governments were averse to workers’ flight from regional rice mills, certain industries, and the construction sector. For instance, the Telangana government would cite procedural and narrow administrative reasons for preventing trains, such as needing to clear backlogs of workers’ online registrations (Mithun 2020; Philip 2020).

Given the delays in being able to book tickets home, spiraling debt, and mounting hunger, some migrant workers would brave leaving containment zones and *lathi-charge* (assault with police batons), or would cave in and pay bribes to police officers and brokers (Ganeshan 2020).

Here, I narrate the activism of Nelly, an indefatigable relief figure whose relief base was in a district in AP. She explained that even before she undertook Covid-19 relief efforts, she was engaged in community work to help ragpickers. Early on, she was stymied by the attitude of police officers. One officer harshly told her to cease her relief work of distributing food kits and arranging travel for workers on the grounds that only the district administration and the municipal commissioner's office were authorized to carry out this work. She routinely encountered difficulties in getting e-passes, which everyone in the relief field had to get. Other activists testified to similar police intimidation, such as threats of first information reports and video-filming.

Nelly also spoke of the labyrinthine Covid bureaucracy which mandated that workers or their sponsors secure a dizzying profusion of permissions to get on a bus or a lorry. For interstate travel, permissions were needed from local police stations, the *tehsil* (subdistrict) office, and the Regional Transport Office. Rather than navigate these Kafkaesque forms and procedures, Nelly crafted her own tactics to circumvent the Covid-19 bureaucracy in her district.

For example, she told lorry drivers to say they were traveling at the behest of municipal officials. She felt that such tactics were necessary to try to avoid lathi-charge and an administration inexorably biased against the working poor. Nelly spoke of how particularly the Guntur and Vijayawada districts passed a rash of orders restraining migrant movement. She told me that she could fit one hundred workers in lorries that typically haul cement, vegetables, or fruits. The lorries traveled from the Guntur district to the Krishna district, from where the workers took another vehicle to their home state of West Bengal.

Almost all relief figures mentioned link-ups with reliable lorry drivers and/or lorry union leaders. Relief figures expected the lorry drivers to film the migrant workers boarding the vehicles, stopping for breaks, and de-boarding at the destination.

Affects as Driving and Driven By Digital Archiving

George, a relief worker in AP, was intensely aware of the distances (sometimes as much as 400 kilometers) workers walked before they reached the Ramavarapadu ring in Vijayawada. This was the nodal point where migrant workers assembled in great numbers to find vehicles to take them home via NH 16 to Ichapuram, on the Andhra-Orissa border, approximately another 547 kilometers and taking 10 to 11 hours. George told me that he paid lorry drivers 600 rupees for every migrant worker who boarded, using funds he received from church groups and other donors. He described how he was devastated when lorry drivers dropped workers mid-way (say, just 15 kilometers from the Ramavarapadu ring), making it seem like they could not go any further because of Regional Transport Office or police directives. To shield workers from such brazen fraud, George started collecting personal data, including lorry drivers' and migrant workers phone numbers and the workers' Aadhaar numbers.

George distinguished between two gestures, both performative: collecting Aadhaar and making videos. The former was not only to curtail duplicity and fraud by the lorry drivers but also to lessen relief figures' liability toward the workers. What if something were to happen to them? Accidents involving lorries ferrying migrant workers were not unknown, with Maitri, a relief worker, citing an accident near the Uttar Pradesh border in which more than twenty workers died (interview, October 23, 2021). The second gesture created a visual record of relief workers' bona fide relief work and legitimate migrant movement, amplifying the affects of tending to workers.

Other relief figures too were swayed by both compassion and suspicion. Lorry drivers explained their filming process at length, marking their affective stakes in archiving their efforts in assisting workers' travel. Lorry driver Nagarjuna spoke of how he picked up migrant workers from the Ramavarapadu ring and brought them to the peripheries of a select district in Orissa. He made at least four to five rounds a day, estimating roughly one hundred round-trips transporting workers in his "16 tyre heavy lorry" (interviews with Nagarjuna, November 20 and December 9–10, 2021).

He would start the trip by loading his lorry with fifty-kilogram plastic bags of PPC or OPC—different grades of cement—on top of which he placed a platform. He covered that with a tarpaulin sheet or *dupatta* (a long scarf worn by women). This ensured that the cement did not release too much heat with the workers sitting on these bags. He reported several anxious moments braving police officers who alternately threatened him, chased him, or lathi-charged him for helping workers. He said that lorry drivers like himself who felt *jaali* (Telugu word for compassion) for workers took extra care to pick lorries transporting cement because they usually traveled late into the night or into the early hours of the morning, thus avoiding traffic and tollgates.

He diligently made video-calls to relief figures both when workers boarded and de-boarded the lorry, and he photographed his lorry and made videos during food breaks. He intuitively took these actions to gain workers' trust because so many had deep-seated suspicions of lorry drivers.

Nagarjuna explained that historically, with the emergence of government-run buses and "two-wheelers" (motorcycles), even the poor started viewing lorries traveling long distances into the night or early morning with suspicion. In the immediate Covid-19 context, he spoke with deep feeling about how there were predators on the road looking to make a quick buck, like police officers, other lorry drivers, and brokers. To engender workers' trust and to also appear accountable to relief figures, he made video-calls to the latter showing workers boarding and leaving the lorry.

Another relief worker in AP argued that he wanted to know if these workers were truly who they said they were. Were they migrant workers from Orissa, or from some other state? For these relief figures, Aadhaars should reflect state and local addresses. This is salient, because people made claims from the inception of Aadhaar as an identification (ID) infrastructure that it would trump analog documents that offered a narrow address function.

Aadhaar had talismanic powers in that it coalesced with the properties of older documents. It helped assuage the fears of some of those haunted by bureaucratic specters (Yashin 2012, 16); in this instance, accounting for potential harm to a worker's life and person.

Michael Taussig wrote about the talismanic powers of artifacts like passports, currency, and stamps within a modernity of the "Nation-State" kept afloat by a "Dead God" (Taussig 1997, 149–51). In that modernity, sustained through immanently powerful bureaucracies and self-legitimizing entities like immigration and visa, Taussig argued the presence of a God who moves with all the force of the dead, who alone can "possess the living" by wielding "talismans of the state" (114, 149–51).

Yael-Navaro Yashin puts a fine point on "phantasmatic" entities in the context of "the make-believe" documents and state of Northern Cyprus (Yashin 2012, 5, 116), whose legitimacy was unrecognized by Southern Cyprus and elsewhere. She adds that just because these entities had specter-like qualities, they were not lacking in materiality. It is the material, yet fictional, aspect of these documents that transmitted affects. Drawing on Yashin's work, I argue that the talismanic power of affect that Aadhaar wielded comes from a

material infrastructure driven by aspirational beliefs about what it can do. In this instance, it is reassurance of migrant workers' safety (as against their identity) and relief figures' own legal accountability.

Recasting the Legal Imagination of Aadhaar through Relief Work

In all these senses, Aadhaar has come far from being a biometric, cloud-based ID authenticator to being exactly what it was touted to not be: a "proxy" for the person, their local identification, and third-party aspirations. In relief figures' narratives, Aadhaar carried talismanic value as something that kept workers safe because its affective potency emanated from an opaque and ever-expanding material infrastructure.

Brian Larkin says, infrastructures carry a "peculiar ontology" in which they are "objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate" (Larkin 2013, 329). Underlying Aadhaar are self-fulfilling prophesies of the kind that infrastructures in Larkin's analysis carry: they set up "affectual relations" and "encode the dreams of individuals and societies" (330–34). Here, however, these statist dreams and fantasies are not of government functionaries but of relief figures who believe Aadhaar can carry out fortifying and ennobling functions. The data-gathering voids lorry drivers of malafide intent, keeps the migrant workers safer, and considerably lessens the liability of relief figures.

When stymied by the state, migrant workers were presented with violent choices. Relief figures on the ground told migrant workers that they might need to present their Aadhaar on a moment's notice in order to travel. In that fraught moment, workers could either cede their privacy, but if they did not, they could forfeit travel.

Interestingly, relief figures who diligently collected Aadhaar from workers also denounced the ID regime. Maitri told me that Aadhaar caused a paralysis in everyday life, sometimes literally. She explained that a migrant worker originally from Chattisgarh was about to give birth during the first lockdown. Maitri and her friends arranged supplies for the delivery where the mother was staying. However, the mother was prevented from admitting her daughter in a hospital in Hyderabad because she could not submit her Aadhaar. Maitri collected migrant workers' Aadhaar out of concern about ill-intentioned lorry drivers and because of a talismanic belief that this would make lorry drivers keep their promises to deliver migrant workers to the specified location (interview, October 23, 2021).

This talismanic aspect of Aadhaar is made clear, especially in the ruling of India's Supreme Court that no private entity, corporation, or person can ask for Aadhaar before providing a service. In so doing, they read down Section 57 of the Aadhaar Act that allowed "private players" like mobile service providers, fin-tech startups, and other service companies to demand Aadhaar before providing services. Srinivas Kodali, a security researcher, points out that even after this ruling, private and public players in India's financial and welfare ecosystems continued to ask for Aadhaar upfront. The dubious Aadhaar and Other Laws (Amendment) Ordinance of 2019 created fuzzy procedures that restored companies' access to Aadhaar (Kodali 2019). It became common for businesses to claim that using Aadhaar cut administrative costs, that it was superior to other forms of ID, and it had ubiquitous acceptance in Indian society. With the cascading uses of Aadhaar, its affective potencies grew unchecked, in that the expectation of showing it to access services became a given.

Given the informal nature of their work, relief figures' collecting of Aadhaar would likely fail even the test of the 2019 Ordinance. They played fast and loose with the legality of Aadhaar when they took it upon themselves to collect this data to monitor lorry drivers, anticipate state and corporate agencies, and watch over workers.

Their use of Aadhaar often took mimetic form, with relief figures saying it did not matter who collected them. George and his team worked alongside a state department, the Mission for the Eradication of Poverty in Municipal Areas, to help workers fill out railway ticket application forms. These forms required the declaration of Aadhaar for migrant workers. George furnished statist reasons above what Aadhaar could reasonably do: “We wanted to make sure that workers got down at the right station when they took the shramik train, and so we collected Aadhaar” (interview, November 1, 2021).

For these NGOs and activist figures, even where Aadhaar’s bureaucratic rationality was unclear, it became part of a “bureaucratic toolkit” to police informal fraud and surveil movement (Berda 2018, 78). Berda uses this term to characterize a hybrid ensemble of bureaucratic tools and techniques like laws, forms, classifications, “blacklists”, checkpoints, and permits that the Israeli state uses in a racialized bureaucracy to keep Palestinian workers from critical spaces in Israel and the Occupied Territories. What is remarkable here is that these genres are flexible to the extent that they can at times foster Palestinians workers’ mobility or confine them, and they always add uncertainty.

A toolkit consisting of enrollment forms, court orders, and ration cards all linked to Aadhaar thus suspended migrant workers in a state of uncertainty. Along with meeting the specifications of a bureaucratic toolkit-like material infrastructure, Aadhaar imbricates subjects in tech company-enabled sociotechnical practices such as end-to-end computational processes, database authentication, financial platforms, and cross-walking software. Aadhaar bolsters affective perceptions that they enhance bureaucratic performance, as Aakash Solanki demonstrates in his study of Aadhaar-enabled biometric attendance platforms (Solanki 2019, 590). It is the constellation of these dimensions that lends Aadhaar its spectral quality of outperforming all other IDs.

A few relief figures passionately condemned counterparts who collected Aadhaar. They were experienced activists who worked with *Dalitbahujan* (marginalized in terms of caste and tribe) and informal sector workers. Given their own social location (i.e., non-Brahmin, non-Hindu backgrounds) and their activist animus, they were determined to not replicate exclusionary government schemes. Joel, an activist in AP, was outraged at his government for collecting Aadhaar to implement housing schemes in the informal sector. He was upset with those who conveniently invoked the government, even when no directives to collect Aadhaar were forthcoming: “It is unfair when an NGO or someone like me asks a group of 100 workers to submit Aadhaar while distributing rations. A worker once asked me, ‘They are only giving rations to some of us, but they want all our Aadhaar. Why should we do what they ask?’” Joel spoke of how his NGO helped migrant workers secure Aadhaar, because without them they were denied benefits. He argued simultaneously that instead of collecting Aadhaar, the government should direct Covid-19 relief efforts to minimize pervasive caste hatred by focusing on communities, such as ragpickers, prevented from using municipal taps during the lockdown (interview, September 26, 2021).

Several migrant workers originally from Bangalore bitterly told me that governments always devised alternatives to ration cards such that, historically, those who did not possess them could show their Aadhaar to secure food or cash assistance. But governments *never* fashioned alternatives to those who did not possess Aadhaar, forcing them to turn to CSOs or NGOs for assistance.

Digital Archiving as “Repertoire” and “Visual Surplus”

Relief figures said they collected Aadhaar not only because they had to anticipate potential fraud by lorry drivers but also because organizational and individual donors demanded they

do so. Nelly mentioned one donor organization that had “excessive demands” in terms of what needed to be archived: each lorry driver’s phone number, photos of the lorries, workers’ Aadhaar numbers, and photos and videos of the workers. The organization also carried out midnight raids. It was suspicious how Nelly could claim that she was still assisting workers on her WhatsApp when the AP government had lifted interstate travel restrictions (interview, October 16, 2021). “State will pay to send migrant workers home, give them Rs. 500 for journey too”, *The New Indian Express*, May 7 2020. Nelly pointed out that, despite government orders allowing workers to travel, authorities were persuading workers to stay where they were to ensure companies did not “suffer” from the flight of migrant labor (interview, October 16, 2021; see also *New Indian Express*, 2020).

Faced with the prospect of having to share their Aadhaar and consent to being video-recorded, some migrant workers in Jharkhand, waiting to travel home to Vijayawada, said they preferred to walk home. Nelly said, “I furtively photographed these workers because I did not wish to distress them.” But she also did this because she did not want lose a substantial donation from an organization, 21 lakh at one point (interview, October 16, 2021).

To assuage this anxiety vis-à-vis unreasonable donor demands, Nelly filmed and archived every encounter with workers in transit: walking, traveling by lorry or bus, receiving food supplies. She did the same with lorry drivers in transit, including their vehicles’ license plates. She also did this with grocers and the supplies and bills she received from them. These photos, videos, and WhatsApp screenshots straddled both traditional functions of the “archive” and embodied memory manifest in what Abigail De Kosnik (2016) discusses as “repertoire.”

The photos of workers receiving food supplies and of bills of groceries were digitally transmitted, but they were what De Kosnik deemed traditional photos that create immutable “archival memory” critical to “print-analog culture.” “Repertoire,” on the other hand, captures “embodied memory” and “embodied acts of transfer” (De Kosnik 2016, 8-9). Diana Taylor (2003) called it “ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” in the form of performance gestures, movement, orality, dancing, singing (quoted in De Kosnik 2016, 8). Relief figures created traditional archival texts that were digitally transmitted, furnishing fixed evidentiary facts such as grocers’ bills. They also created videos of workers and lorry drivers in transit that functioned as “media texts” of repertoire (De Kosnik 2016, 6-7). Relief figures found the latter to be more accurate in terms of conveying workers’ desires, such as to walk home.

To make the videos, they used their smartphones (some with poor battery life), and they occasionally lost their phones in the field. One relief figure told me that her iPhone X would overheat in the unrelenting summer sun, so she would refrigerate it. When her phone overheated, she could not receive donors’ money or contact migrant workers or lorry drivers. This panic was sometimes evident in the short duration of the videos and the selected photographs.

Vicky, the activist in Tamil Nadu, sent me some videos that he made. In one video, Assamese workers are at the Chennai suburban railway station speaking over each other about being deeply frustrated with their wait. A woman is heard gently coaxing workers to not leave: *chath hai na?* (You have a roof over your head, right?). One worker replies that the roof in question was hardly ideal and that they want to walk home, even though they are exhausted. The woman again asks him to stay until either the police or a representative from the local Northeastern States Association can get the train schedule. The videos that Nelly and Vikky sent to me were grainy and reflective of the haste with which they were made. They feature workers complaining of lathi-charge at the

Andhra border; a police lineup outside a school; testimonies of workers shunted from one railway station to another. Photos feature workers holding water bottles as they board lorries, or sitting along the divider of a road with voices can be heard over honking buses and cars. These embodied archival texts narrate workers' angst and bodies in motion, choosing to walk home to escape the tyranny of arbitrary lockdowns, government orders, and starvation.

It must be stated here that relief figures were not self-reflexive in evaluating their own video and voice-notes. Some simply took it for granted that generating forms of evidentiary artifacts was necessary. Along with seeing videography as a better alternative, relief figures' choice of this digital modality was guided by an audit culture in NGOs of archiving the truth within both a mediatized affective mold and a paradigm of "technomoral politics" (Bornstein and Sharma 2016, 78).

Two points are critical to stress here. The first is that, as Erica Bornstein and Aradhana Sharma explain, the last decade saw activists and CSOs "translate moral projects into technical, implementable terms" and appropriate "languages of law" to manifest not a "depoliticized" but a transformed politics of collective action (Bornstein and Sharma 2016, 77). The second point is that these activists and entities relied on the enhanced "know-show" (Gitelman 2014, 1) politics of mediatized affect produced by digital artifacts. These include spreadsheets populated by locked and dynamic data sets, a mutable audio-visual archive (in SWAN's case), and personal collections of videos and thank-you notes. Drawing on Gitelman, I read these as variable mediatized meanings in excess of a printed memo, circular, or a scribbled note. Such affect- and context-rich interactions and journalistic/conversational forms rendered these narratives of grief less questionable.

I now describe another genre of videos that a few relief figures, especially Nelly, made that demonstrate a "visual surplus" (Browne 2012, 551). To appeal to older donors to contribute additional funds, Nelly created elaborate "thank-you" videos to visually amplify her reach. In these videos, workers pose as a grateful family or children in a cohort or regional cluster. They hold up notes with the names of donors emblazoned in hearts, and they thank donors after telling their intense life-stories.

These videos summon what Richard Iton and Simone Browne term 'visual surplus' foregrounding black subjectivities against a historical background of racialized surveillance and slavery in America. Black subjects in the 1970s resorted to creating visually performative forms of expressing themselves such as 'graffiti' and 'hip-hop laced videos' (Iton 2009: 105). Analyzing this production of what Richard Iton terms 'visual surplus', Simone Browne states that these artistic expressions carried out a 'performance of freedom' (Browne 2012, 551) and were framed as a way of recalling and denouncing visually stark eighteenth century modalities of surveillance, explicit in fugitive slave posters and lantern laws. The production of such visual surplus by black subjects in 1970s New York signaled their rejection of 'dispossession' and erasures through categories of 'commodity', 'fugitive' and 'slave'. (Browne 2012, 551-552).

One cannot argue a similar operation of visual surplus or even a similar subjectivity, and yet a comparison is warranted. Occasionally, Nelly's videos and photographs were disturbingly explicit, even featuring physical deformities or manifestations of disease that afflicted workers. She claimed that such subgenres of visual production were critical to mobilize funds and visually enact the markings of relief for particular types of workers. She found it less intrusive and more valuable to photograph and film workers as compared to collecting workers' Aadhaar. She found migrants workers' thank-you notes valuable because they preserved their biometric and demographic privacy, which she often had to give away when she ceded Aadhaar (interview, December 1, 2021).

The digital value of these videos and voice-notes had a direct affective reach in carrying tense and intense immediate appeals for help from those who were stranded, abruptly unemployed, disabled, or responsible for supporting a faraway family. Nelly relied on the affective charge of televised images on primetime news showing migrant workers walking to the point of collapse. In this sense, her affective activism relied on potencies of a double-mediatised image; namely, the viral televised image and the viral social media image. Both images in the digital medium worked together to create a middle-class, Indian, and Non-Resident Indian [NRI] audience that aspired to become donors, spurred by the affective urgency of what they visually encountered during the pandemic's first wave.

Nelly said that this steady supply of stark images kept funds coming in, such that organizations referred her to others, even if they did not always contribute. The visual surplus fulfilled the function not of marginal subjects performing their freedom from enslaving narratives but of relief figures adding a performative layer of migrant distress to propel the relief market forward.

Conclusion

While drawing on scholarship that frames the anthropology of bureaucracy, affect, and media studies, this article sought to provide fresh insights by drawing attention away from the fact of data collection and toward political meanings that accrue from two mediums of digital archiving and the contextual affects that they produce.

The appropriation of Aadhaar and its use by relief figures against liability opens up a new informal world of lateral governance by privileged subjects over migrant workers facing hybrid precarities. In this instance, the argument for Aadhaar is not underpinned by a burgeoning state expansionism that relies on neoliberal processes, though these are present. Instead, I define an affective activism very differently from affective labor and care work. The affect in affective activism is not found in the affectual relations that unfold between migrant workers and relief figures or in the cultural and economic values that emerge from the reproduction of relief work. The activism manifest in affective activism draws its energies from archiving practices, which at best, is ambivalent in its ethical values. The affect is located in relief figures' archival anxieties about the lockdown, which were amplified yet assuaged by two digital modalities: Aadhaar and WhatsApp.

Affective activism is driven by bureaucratic and political specters of the death of activism; or alternately, its diminished existence. These myriad specters were intensely and contextually borne, manifest as anxieties on how to evade police attention, and appear accountable to donors, auditors, and a travel-phobic regional administration. They were also manifest in how to prevent potential financial and physical harm to migrant workers.

It is by melding the potencies of bureaucratic toolkits and sociotechnical practices that Aadhaar gained spectral qualities of affective potency. Aadhaar presented itself as an infrastructure straddling several imperatives, with a history of being mandated as an authenticating mechanism as a proof of identity, eligibility, and address even when its original architects denied some functions. It surpassed judicial challenges and invited a spectrum of players (e.g., tech firms, municipal agencies and regional administrations) to repurpose its usages.

However, this article is less interested in showing Aadhaar's burgeoning uses and more in demonstrating how its bold, extra-legal, and unethical uses propelled a grassroots activism and uncorked an affective force of talismanic reassurance. Even when the use of Aadhaar by relief figures mimed state practices, they appropriated it within extended social and activist networks to pointedly fill a state void: assist migrant workers in their search for dignity and security. In the process, relief figures ended up compromising these same

valuable ideals. The critics of Aadhaar were themselves divided, some collected the ID unhappily as they regarded it as unavoidable, some others unreservedly refused to ask for it, because they associated it with exclusionary state-driven identification.

Digital artifacts of spreadsheets, videos, and photographs were “subgenres” (Gitelman 2014, 3) of an NGO audit culture and characterized by the dynamic force of “repertoire” (De Kosnik 2016). Relief figures found WhatsApp artifacts to be more dynamic than conventional paper forms in that the former conveyed embodied memories. Such artifacts were marked by tactile performativity instead of faithful indexical functions of conventional “archival memory” (De Kosnik 2016, 8).

It is critical to note that relief figures did not view this modality of archiving with the same intense self-reflexivity (Clough 2007, 3) as with Aadhaar collection, but presented it as an ethical alternative. Even when some relief figures put a context-specific point on when and how filming migrant distress was legitimate and ethical, they did not question their own premises of video as sanction of evidentiary truth. Occasionally, their performative investment in digital modalities of voice-notes, photographs, and videos produced a visual surplus that dehumanized the migrant workers.

Notwithstanding the (sub)genre used—Aadhaar or WhatsApp artifacts—this article shows a tense and intense impulse on the part of relief figures to go beyond paper forms in their archival records. Affective activism relies on visually stark and specific affordances and on talismanic beliefs around material infrastructures to articulate many-hued aspirations.

Notes

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1. All names have been changed.
2. “Migrants’ Long Walk Home: Not Out of Choice, But Desperation,” YouTube video, 2:12, May 16, 2020, posted by NDTV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7cyHqUcfkE>.
3. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2020, Ministry of Finance, <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-foreign-contribution-regulation-amendment-bill-2020>.
4. Standard operating procedures is a term very commonly used by government departments and agencies to indicate their internal guidelines.
5. Ministry of Railways order, May 2, 2020, Karnataka High Court Daily Order Case No. WP 6435/2020, May 12, 2020.

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