# The Pandemic in the Periphery of Delhi: Covid-19 and Boundary (Re)Making in Peri-Urban India

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Sonipat is a satellite city (with an eponymous district) to India's capital city of Delhi.[1] It has so far been largely overlooked as a preferred suburb for those working in Delhi and looking for affordable housing outside the city. Sonipat district has a population of 1,450,000 people, of which close to 300,000 reside in the city. Despite officially being a part of the National Capital Region (NCR), Sonipat has not become as urbanized as Gurugram and Noida, the two key satellite cities that adjoin Delhi. By contrast, it is very much a peri-urban space that is still on the cusp of a new urban dawn. As the district and city you first encounter when you cross Delhi's northern border into the neighboring state of Haryana, Sonipat is gradually becoming home to new residential complexes, educational institutions, and factories. Newly constructed villas and apartments are sold by real estate companies on the unconfirmed promise of Delhi's underground metro rail extending to Sonipat, and a new fast expressway connecting Sonipat and Delhi is under construction. Being attached to Delhi, therefore, is seen as a big advantage for Sonipat's future as an urban center.
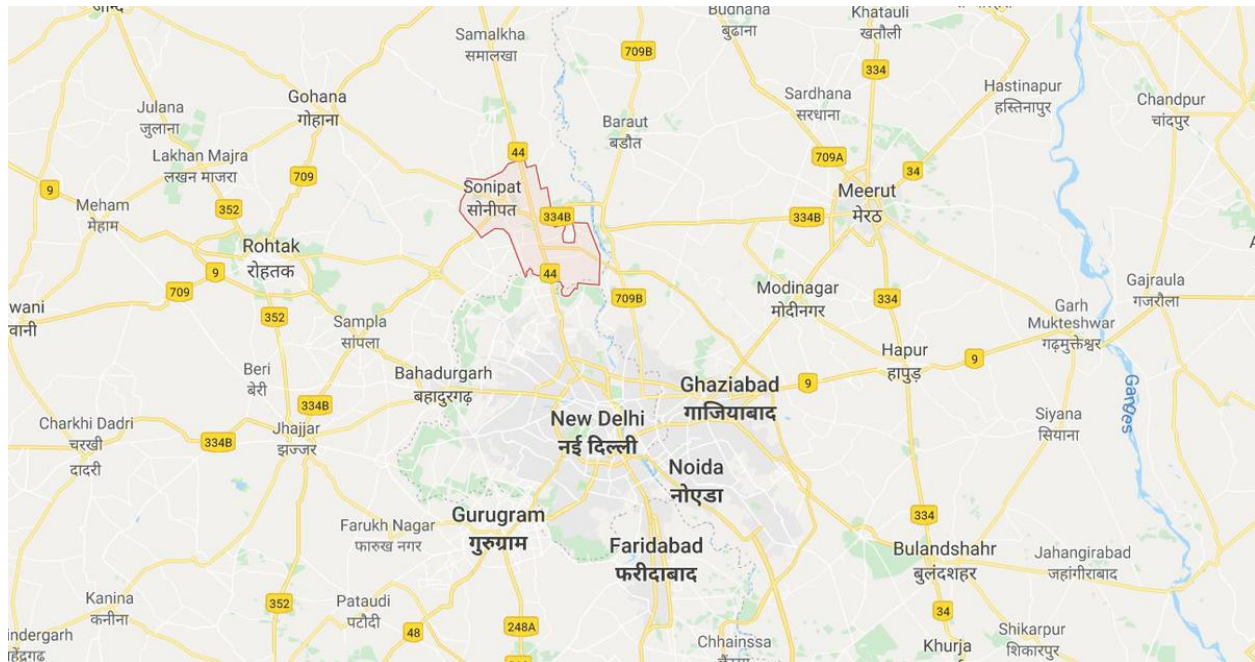
1.1 Map of Delhi and Sonipat, Source: Google Maps

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, exposed the problem with being too close to Delhi. At first, Delhi sealed its borders with neighboring states, including the Delhi-Sonipat border. Later, as Delhi started seeing a massive rise in the number of corona positive cases, there were two measures that the Sonipat administration and the Haryana government took to reinforce the same border. First, in April 2020, the Sonipat administration forbade vendors of fruits, vegetables, and milk to supply their goods to wholesale markets in Delhi. This was done with a view to ensure that Sonipat does not run out of essential supplies and to prevent these vendors from getting infected during their trips to and from Delhi. Delhi is dependent on its neighboring states, including Haryana, for such supplies. Second, the administrative authorities in Sonipat sealed off the border with Delhi and prevented non-essential movement of people who worked in Delhi hospitals and in the Delhi police, thus putting into motion a new process of boundary-making. In fact, there were also reports

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of the authorities digging up roads and paths in villages that connected Sonipat to Delhi. Whereas earlier, sharing the border with Delhi opened up economic opportunities, the same border was now seen as bringing in the coronavirus. The proximity to Delhi shifted very quickly from being a boon to being a bane. We thus argue that the pandemic exposed the tenuous relationship between the urban metropolitan city and its peri-urban periphery.

Present day Sonipat is a patchwork of agricultural land, industrial zones and mushrooming elite private institutions of higher education. The different spaces co-exist and are often contiguous, although this co-existence is not without conflict. Agriculture is still the major economic activity in the region, with paddy, wheat, and vegetable farming being dominant. Sonipat also has two industrial zones, Rai and Kundli, which were set up by the Haryana state government. More recently, agricultural land was acquired to set up new private universities. The changing patterns of land use in the peri-urban district of Sonipat have made the population here quite diverse too. There are local peasant communities belonging to traditional peasant castes; mercantile groups; migrant workers from other parts of India who work on farms, factories, and in households; faculty and staff of the private universities who moved here from across the globe. The "urbanizing" of Sonipat has primarily occurred in the city area and in recent years, around the new universities.[2] In this piece, we primarily focus on these spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic and the experiences of those residing here.

Sonipat registered its first case on 20 March 2020, just before a very stringent national lockdown was announced on 23 March. As in the rest of India, the police were deployed to ensure people do not step out of their homes. When someone tested positive, the authorities pasted stickers outside their house to inform the neighbors. This practice was carried out all over India and was reminiscent of the practice of marking homes with plague-infected people in medieval times. In Sonipat, the authorities seemed to be already prepared to deal with the cases. The chief civil surgeon had run an advisory in January to keep an eye on Chinese visitors (Sonipat gets a fair number in the industrial areas) and created separate wards for them. This was done before any cases in India were registered. Officials in Sonipat did not want their preparation and vigilance to go to waste due to the virus coming in with those who lived and/or worked in Delhi and that was a major reason why the border was sealed off. Due to the lockdown and border sealing, cases in Sonipat did not see a big rise. However, once the lockdown was lifted and borders opened, the cases have been steadily increasing. By 12 July 2020, Sonipat district had seen 1989 corona positive cases, of which 702 were active. In everyday conversations, Sonipat residents spoke about Covid-19 as a "threat from Delhi".

1.2 An image depicting the empty streets of Sonipat city and police barricades during the lockdown (Source: Circulated on WhatsApp, last accessed 12 July 2020)

The lockdown period from March-May affected the livelihoods of migrant workers in Sonipat. A large number of these were men and women who had migrated from other parts of India to work on factories, farms, construction sites, and as domestic help in upper-class and middle-class homes. Suddenly thrown out of work and with no public transport, many decided, like the masses of migrants all across India, to return to their home villages on foot, facing exhaustion and hunger. Others relied on the generosity of their employers who continued to pay them their wages. As Shivi Chawla, owner of a factory in the Rai Industrial Area told us, "About 75% of the workers here have gone back home. In my factory, many stayed back. We paid them salaries during the lockdown and provided them with accommodation in the factory premises." Those workers who stayed back in Sonipat without receiving wages looked for alternate employment which too was hard to find. They also relied on civil society interventions to help them out. For example, the

faculty and staff of a private university pooled in money to help the migrants who worked as construction workers, domestic help, plumbers, and gardeners for the apartment block where a large number of these faculty reside. Some faculty members also collected money to buy groceries for poor migrants in other parts of Sonipat and contributed to state and NGO-led relief efforts.

Information sharing about essential services during lockdown, guidelines and the coronavirus itself took place through the internet. The Sonipat district administration set up a [dedicated page](#) on its website to relay information on the virus in the district: which areas were hotspots, which grocery stores remained open, helpline numbers, and advisories to citizens. District officials also connected with citizens via WhatsApp seek help in organizing relief efforts, asking business groups like the 'Real Estate Association', composed of those in the property buying-selling business, to coordinate and collect funds for relief packages. Social media provided an additional channel of communication for the officials.

But social media was a source of dis/mis-information too. When the state authorities created containment zones (micro-level demarcations with restricted access having a high number of cases), videos with incorrect labelling of these zones started doing rounds on social media. For instance, a video showing the police sealing a neighborhood in Chandigarh (another city in Haryana) was wrongly circulated as having been shot in Sonipat. This created panic amongst the local residents. Due to the lack of a timestamp or location of the original content, the context was easily diluted. Misinformation also took the form of unconfirmed medical theories such as drinking

hot water allows the virus to move out of your system, sitting in the sun, drinking lemon water

with baking soda, consuming vitamins were prescribed by "people who have been discharged" as

lifesavers. These people who had come out safely after battling the virus were given the status of

experts and their word given the same value as that of a doctor. One message (image 1.3) even

dubbed Covid-19 as a bacterial disease rather than a viral one, and attributed WHO as the source.

To counter this, the administration decided to place a ban all social media-based news channels.
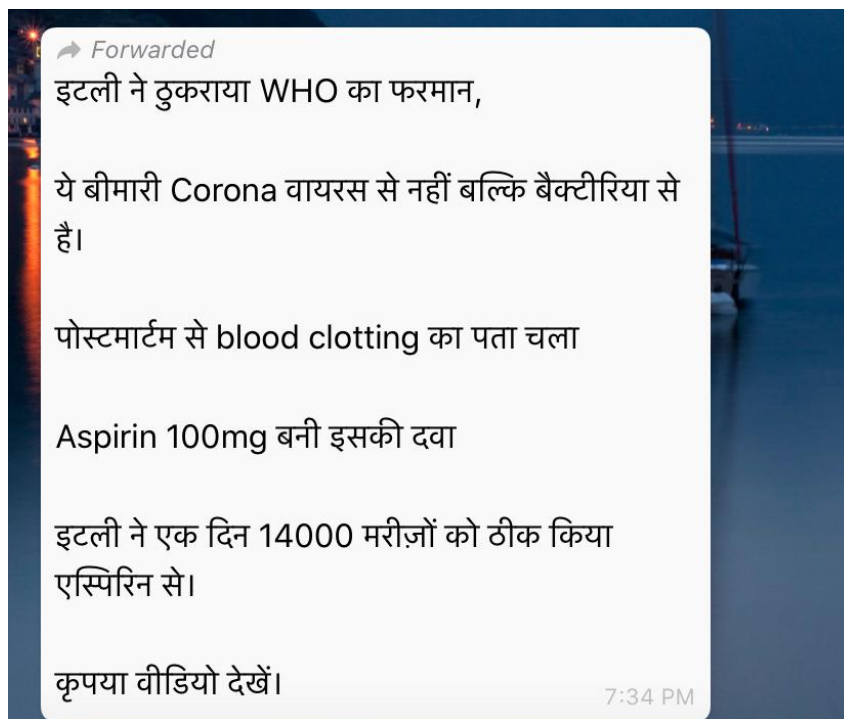
1.3 Translation from Hindi: Italy has rejected WHO's directive. This disease is not caused by coronavirus but by bacteria. This has been found by post-mortem. Blood-clotting can be addressed through Aspirin 100mg. Italy has cured 14000 patients with Aspirin. Please watch the video (Screenshot by Sneha Khatri, WhatsApp, message received on 11 June, last accessed on 12 July 2020)

Apart from spreading false information about the virus and its antidotes, disinformation on some television channels and on social media played a role in further marginalizing religious minorities, particularly in the initial days of the pandemic. A congregation by the Tablighi Jamaat (a Muslim preaching movement) in Delhi in mid-March brought together participants from across the world as well as from other states in India for an event. After many attendees tested positive for coronavirus, media was abuzz with content centered around the 'Muslim virus' and how Muslims were carrying out 'Corona Jihad' by spreading the virus across the country. These narratives, which were built on the already growing hatred for Muslims in India, also led to discrimination with Muslims during lockdown. For example, in parts of northern India, middle-class neighborhoods banned Muslim vegetable vendors from entering. In Sonipat, the othering of Muslims was similarly reflected in how poor Muslims were perceived. Zeenat, who lives in rural Sonipat but works as a domestic help in Sonipat city mentioned that her family faced discrimination on the grounds of being Muslim. The village elders visited their home to inspect if they have "hidden" any members from the Tablighi Jamaat. There were also messages on WhatsApp which were wrongly attributed to the Sonipat city administration asking people to not park their cars outside because some Muslims who have "escaped" Delhi would go to any extent to spread the virus. The perception of Muslims as spreaders of the corona virus also forced the district administration to organize separate relief shelters for Hindus and Muslims. Media narratives clearly had implications for how people perceived Muslims and further erected borders between communities.

Digital media platforms such as WhatsApp simultaneously became tools of community building and tools of surveillance in the middle-class housing complexes of Sonipat. New WhatsApp groups

were formed as soon as the lockdown started. The housing complexes where the faculty and staff of the private universities lived are spaces with mixed populations from across the country and across the globe. The campus was closed off, students went back to their homes, and the faculty conducted online classes. WhatsApp groups became a way for them to interact with colleagues when everyone was within the confines of their homes, and even coordinate food and grocery deliveries.[3] While WhatsApp was definitely a medium for neighbors to support each other, it also acted as a medium to keep a check on others. In one housing complex, for instance, the residents' WhatsApp group often had people posting photos of anyone who would be seen walking outside their house and indicating that they are not following the lockdown properly. These people, however, were only strolling in the housing complex where they lived. More broadly, lockdowns across the world made the digital space the preferred space to connect with friends, neighbors and families, but digital tools were also more readily used for surveillance by states and citizens alike. It brought down some walls but erected others.

The peri-urban experience of the pandemic draws attention to the (re)making of borders, both physical and those between people. While state-corporate interests earlier looked to dissolve the border with Delhi to fasten the pace of urbanization in Sonipat, the high number of coronavirus cases in Delhi now prompted the official authorities to reinforce the existing boundaries between Delhi and Sonipat. The pandemic also highlighted and further entrenched cleavages of class, caste, and religion, contributing to the solidification of borders of a different kind, even as members of civil society came together to help those in need. The borders between Delhi and Sonipat are now open after the national lockdown was lifted. However, the pandemic exposed the shaky

relationship between the urban metropolitan city and the peri-urban. The Covid-19 pandemic has solidified all existing borders, from international borders of nation-states to splits between ethnic and religious communities. The reinforcing of borders between metropolitan cities like Delhi and their peri-urban periphery provides us with yet another example of the boundaries being made and remade in contemporary times.

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[1] Sonipat is both the name of a district and its central city. A common practice in India is to name a district after its town/city. Districts are administrative divisions within states. Bureaucrats holding the position of District Magistrates head the official state administration in districts.

[2] In the urbanization of Sonipat, acquisition of farmland is a contentious process. To understand the changing land use and contentions around it in Sonipat, see https://scroll.in/article/890592/jobs-for-some-land-lost-for-others-how-new-universities-have-changed-lives-of-sonipats-villagers

[3] The sealing of the border with Delhi meant that many of the residents could neither travel to Delhi to buy supplies unavailable in Sonipat nor get deliveries of the food they preferred. Take the case of those who are originally from West Bengal (a state in Eastern India) had an arrangement in place for a fortnightly supply of fish commonly eaten in Bengal from a vendor in Delhi's Chittaranjan Park, a colony of with a large number of Bengali residents. This supply was disrupted for the first month of the lockdown. During this time, faculty WhatsApp groups became very active in discussing alternate sources of fish supply. Even non-Bengali faculty members joined them in trying to arrange for fish and ordering fish. Similarly, new WhatsApp groups to order organic vegetables, meat, and sea fish from the western Malabar coast were formed.