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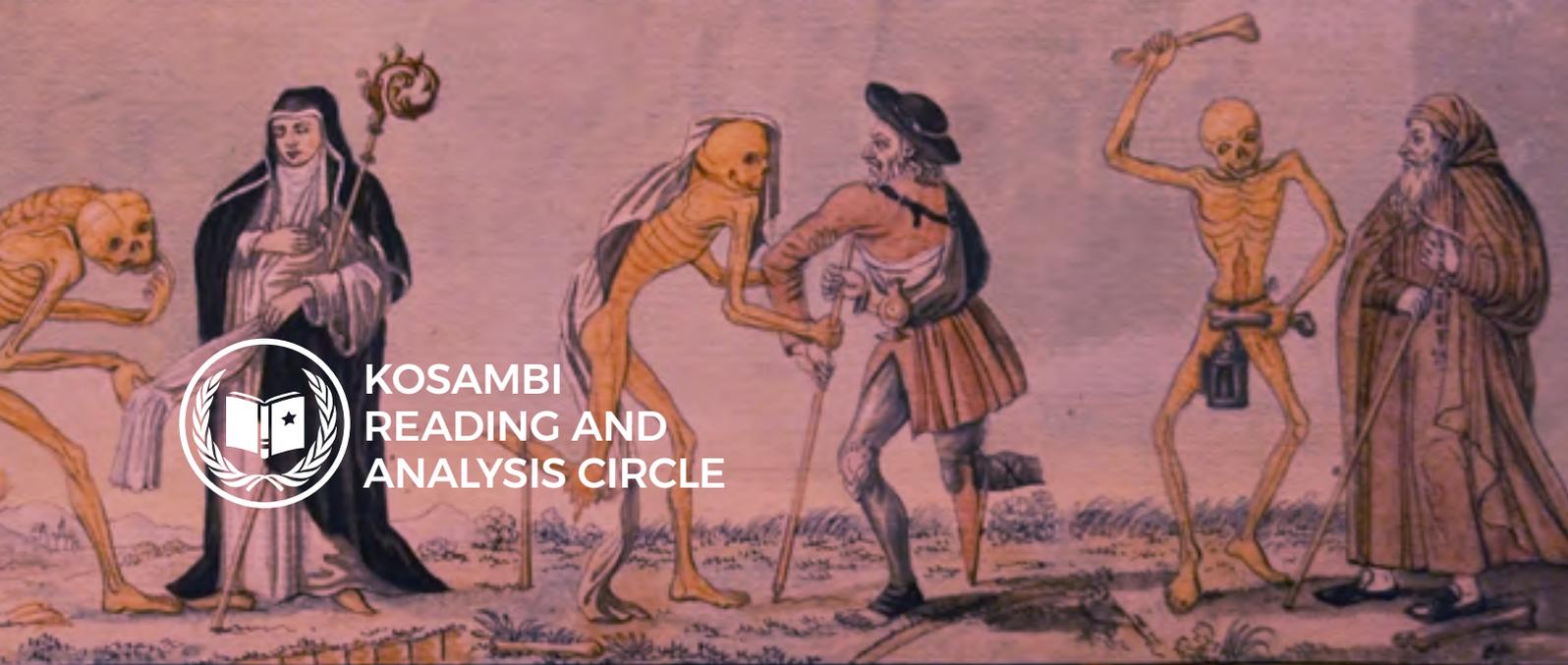
# #RASA

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Da Tod zum Kaiser. Da Tod zum Kaiserin. Da Tod zum König.



Da Tod zum Abt. Da Tod zum Ritter. Da Tod zum Jurist.



KOSAMBI  
READING AND  
ANALYSIS CIRCLE



"Without a free and untrammelled press,  
without the unlimited right of association  
and assemblage, the rule of the broad  
masses of the people is entirely unthinkable."

— *Rosa Luxemburg*

CHAPTER V, THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

# Introducing The Rosa

OUR CIRCLE WAS FORMED A YEAR AND A HALF BACK **with the premise that socialism was the only answer to the problems of exploitation, iniquity, and unfreedom that characterise our world.** We collectively decided our mandate was a pedagogic one, to present the socialist case with all the richness of its theory, to as many people as possible, and with as much clarity as possible. This is not an easy task because to teach what socialism is, let alone the case for it, requires one to grapple with its continuous vilification by a dominant and exploitative capitalist ideology. At the same time one must not fall into the usual traps that have plagued socialist debate since its inception — ahistorical vulgarism, economic determinism, uncritical nostalgia and the whitewashing of leftist projects, and deliberate obfuscation.

In order to fulfil this task, we decided last January that, among other things, we will create a platform to host critical commentary of socialists for an audience outside of our circle, while trying to make socialist theory and commentary accessible. We believe an intelligent audience of people exists which wishes to know in depth what socialist ideas are and what relevance they hold for our modern world. We have decided that this platform will take the form of a regular publication.

The Rosa makes no grand claim of resurrecting socialist discourse beyond what organically needs to be talked about — all good ideas do exist in some form already in the never-ending struggle of the exploited against exploitation. We will try to bring out these conversations, and we will neither be uselessly esoteric, nor will we engage in vulgar surface-level discourse. Our editorial line will be broad and encouraging of critical engagement with all, as long as the contributions respect our core priors of critical thinking, socialist liberty, and honest engagement. Beyond this, there is no 'editorial line'. Writers can speak for themselves.

Quarterly, there will be a theme for which pitches will be invited. Aside from thematic pieces— ranging from essays of analysis and opinion, picture essays, art, poetry, etc.— there will also be components like arts reviews, news of the South Asian working class, and the international Left.

We call our magazine The Rosa, named after one admired socialist revolutionary and thinker, Rosa Luxemburg, who embodies our common values. Rosa, in one critical analysis, wrote: “Without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable”. She was an uncompromising advocate of socialism and democracy, the former as the end of waged exploitation, and the latter in its true form as the sovereignty of the wide working masses, and repeatedly encouraged socialists to write and write well for this goal of liberty from exploitation for all. Our magazine aspires to advance this modest cause.

*Anupam Guha*

CONVENER

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**KOSAMBI  
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SPOT ON

# From Right to Privilege

A TOOLKIT FOR CORPORATISATION, MANUVADIKARAN,  
CENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION

*by Sourya*

## On November 2, 2020, **Aishwarya Reddy**, an undergraduate student of mathematics at Delhi University **died by suicide**.

by her parents, daily wage workers in rural Telangana, who had mortgaged their home and will continue to pay off an education loan till 2026, with 24.54% interest. Last year, India recorded<sup>1</sup> a 25-year-high in student suicides — 10,335 deaths — an ongoing spike since the 2000's.

In July, last year, the BJP-led union government adopted the National Education Policy 2020. The NEP promises to inject a dose of optimism for those affected by such headlines. It imagines<sup>2</sup> a citizenry preparing itself for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a coinage that has floated down from the Alpine resort town of Davos, Switzerland where the *World Economic Forum* congregates every year. So, now, Indians must become 'lifelong learners', proficient in 'multidisciplinary' courses offered by 'world class universities', prepared for the creative, flexible 'knowledge-based economy', which will emerge any day. For those who are still hesitant, they can choose among 'multiple exit options' instead of dropping out.

So gripping was this fable of national regeneration spun up by the corporate media amidst the pandemic that even liberal critics of the ruling regime appreciated its

'boldness'. Many expressed<sup>3</sup> confidence in its intent, reserving judgment on implementation. However, reading any policy document for the beauty of its phraseology, ignoring its precedents and context, would be an error for progressives.



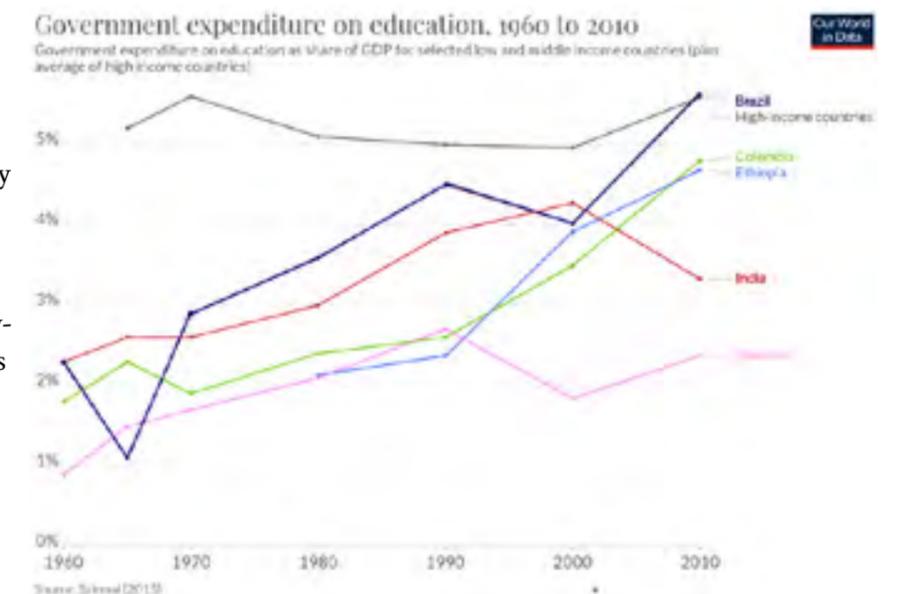
1. Kumar, Chethan, "One every hour: At 10,335, last year saw most student suicides in 25 years", *The Times of India*, September 7, 2020 url: <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/WhtKKWxXJDVDMkljgghrRnLftKGzLQQTsvHl-bKsQFpGNGLwptvnpnBLjdDSBDzTHQdvQPL> Last accessed: July 22, 2021
2. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, "National Education Policy 2020", url: [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf) Last accessed: July 22, 2021
3. Collective, "A Dictionary of National Educational Policy 2020", *Groundxero*, August 6, 2020 url: <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/08/06/national-education-policy-2020-notes-on-how-to-read-a-policy-document/> Last accessed: July 22, 2021

Her funds from the union government's *INSPIRE* Scholarship had been stalled since March, when India went under lockdown. The cost of online education and the suspension of hostel facilities were the immediate triggers for Aishwarya's death. She is survived

### PRIVATISATION PAPER TRAIL

Some of the core ideas of NEP 2020 originate in the NITI Aayog's Three year Action Agenda (2017) and the UGC's Graded Autonomy Regulations (2018). In the name of 'autonomy' — financial, not intellectual — they suggested that highly-ranked educational institutes could be shifted to a 'self-financing' basis, given their track-record of competence. On the other hand, those performing poorly deserved to be audited, and sold off as real estate, if necessary, by the same metric.

None of this is entirely new. In 1994, with the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) being inked, education and healthcare were made tradable commodities that the darker nations would have to buy from the world market. In line with WTO-GATS commitments, the NDA government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee set up a committee to suggest 'reforms' in higher education in 2000. Instead of being chaired by educationists or academics, Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani was made its convenor, and the industrialist Kumar Mangalam Birla was a member. The 'Report on a Policy Framework for Reforms in Education', or the Birla-Ambani Report, as it came to be called, flagged off much of what we are seeing today. The move towards integrating the demands of private industry more closely with



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curriculum design, the modularization of courses under the Choice-based Credit System, as well as the entry of multinational educational conglomerates for profit-making from education itself were, unsurprisingly, recommended by this committee. In line with this vision, the Lyngdoh Committee recommended curbs on campus democracy among students, teachers and non-teaching staff in 2006.

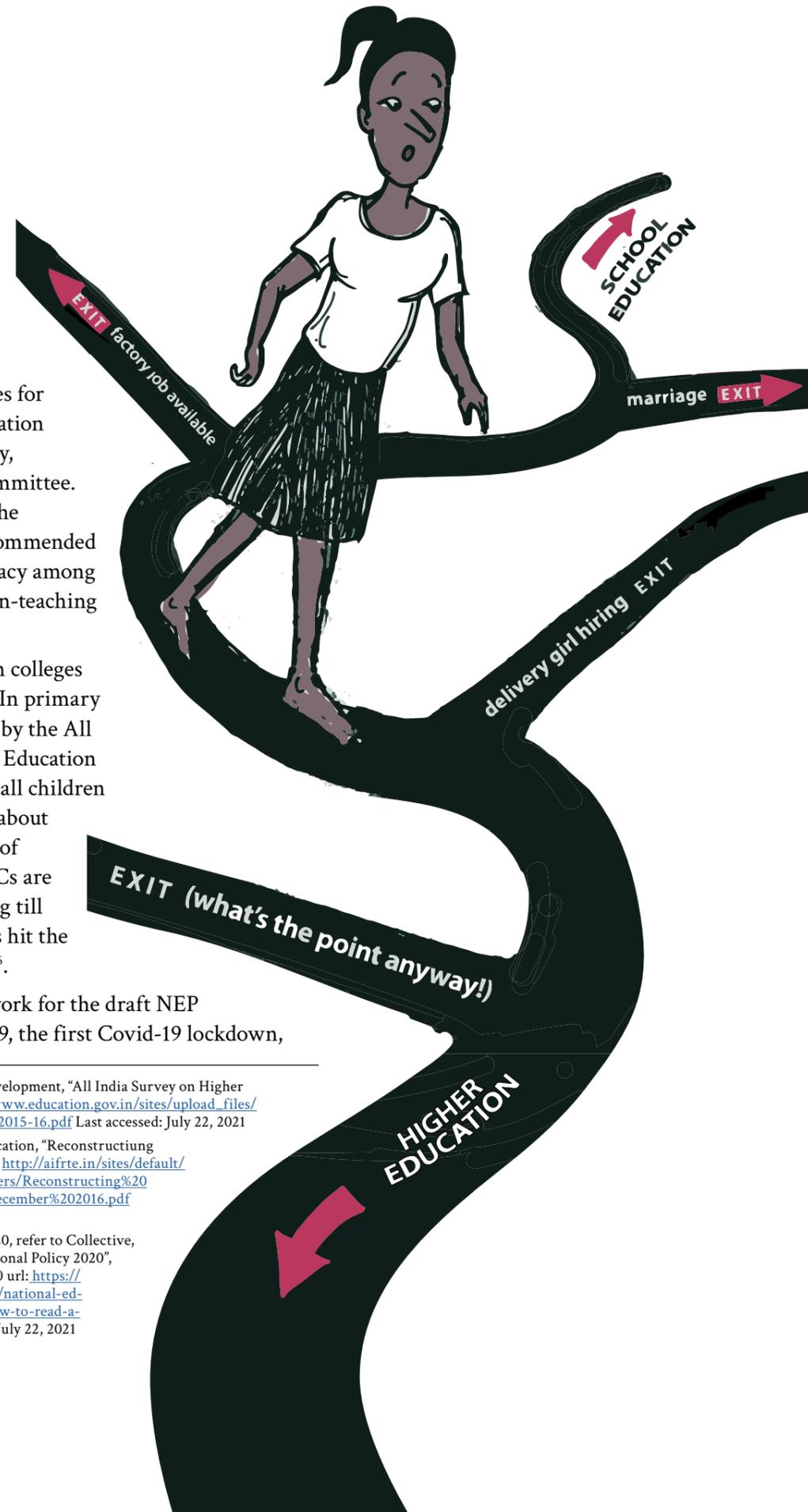
By 2015-16, 78% of Indian colleges were already privatised<sup>4</sup>. In primary education, data compiled by the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) shows<sup>5</sup> that of all children enrolling in class 1, only about 6% of STs, 8% of SCs, 9% of Muslims, and 10% of OBCs are able to complete schooling till class 12. Privatisation has hit the marginalised the hardest<sup>6</sup>.

Despite much of the legwork for the draft NEP already completed by 2019, the first Covid-19 lockdown,

4. Ministry of Human Resource Development, "All India Survey on Higher Education 2015-16", url: [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/AISHE2015-16.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/AISHE2015-16.pdf) Last accessed: July 22, 2021

5. All India Forum for Right to Education, "Reconstructing Education for Emancipation", url: [http://aifрте.in/sites/default/files/AIFRTE%20docs/Newsletters/Reconstructing%20Education/REE\\_July-October-December%202016.pdf](http://aifрте.in/sites/default/files/AIFRTE%20docs/Newsletters/Reconstructing%20Education/REE_July-October-December%202016.pdf) Last accessed: July 28, 2021

6. For a detailed analysis of NEP 2020, refer to Collective, "A Dictionary of National Educational Policy 2020", Groundxero, August 6 Aug 6, 2020 url: <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/08/06/national-education-policy-2020-notes-on-how-to-read-a-policy-document/> Last accessed: July 22, 2021



which made protest a violation of the Disaster Management Act, provided a window for its rollout. Much was retained in the document from earlier drafts but the section on online learning, or 'digital-distance education', as it has been renamed, was expanded. While a clause-by-clause evaluation of the document is beyond the scope of this review, let us examine what this phrase means more closely.

#### DIGITAL DROP-OUTS

As per the NSSO, roughly 8% of Indian students have computers and home-based internet. The shift to online learning during the pandemic, as in Aishwarya's case, exposed this 'digital divide'. But beyond the question of access, it also exposed the inequities within our society which ensure that video calls cannot substitute the more egalitarian possibilities offered by physical university campuses.

However, an influential section of big business is behind today's digital push. In May 2017, a report by Google and KPMG pegged the online education 'market' in India at \$11 billion. Within two months, the Education Ministry floated the SWAYAM portal for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). On May 1, 2020, PM Modi announced that online learning would be a major component of the proposed NEP.

In line with NEP 2020, the UGC's latest notification on 'blended learning', issued during the second wave, mandates that 40% to 70% of all coursework must be shifted online even during non-pandemic times. Reading between the lines, this foreshadows a future where quality education in private universities becomes even more exclusive, restricted to an elite minority, while more and more Indians are pushed into diploma-like online certification courses in the name of increasing gross enrolment in higher education.

#### EDUCATION: NOT FOR SALE

This brings us to the question of where education in India, under NEP 2020, fits within the larger political-economic context. While revolutionaries like Savitribai, Jyotirao Phule and Fatima Sheikh showed us that education can emancipate, Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh reminded us<sup>7</sup> that it can also prop up a deeply hierarchical and undemocratic order, fit for producing clerks.

7. Singh, Bhagat, "Vidyarthi aur Rajneeti" (Students and Politics), Kirti, July 1928 url: <https://www.marxists.org/hindi/bhagat-singh/1928/vidyarthi-aur-rajneeti.htm> Last accessed: July 22, 2021

But beyond the question of access, it also exposed the inequities within our society which ensure that **video calls cannot substitute the more egalitarian possibilities offered by physical university campuses.**

While NEP 2020 emphasises that it will formalise the ‘choice’ to opt for vocational learning and integrate education with the job market, the question remains: where are the jobs? Today, we have the highest unemployment in the last 45 years. We know that the problem is not just of inadequate skilling but of a lack of aggregate demand in the labour market. NEP 2020 wishes away this missing link between education and employment. Moreover, at a time when contractualization, NEEM trainees and apprentices have become the norm, ‘flexibility’ in education gels well with increasingly precarious employment. ‘Lifelong learning’ glorifies an economy which cannot provide secure livelihoods.

**‘Lifelong learning’ glorifies an economy which cannot provide secure livelihoods.**

A report by the AIFRTE<sup>8</sup> summarises it in this manner: corporatization, *manuvadikaran* (saffronization) and centralization are the key tenets of the NEP. Unfortunately, today, these political tendencies extend beyond education. Any

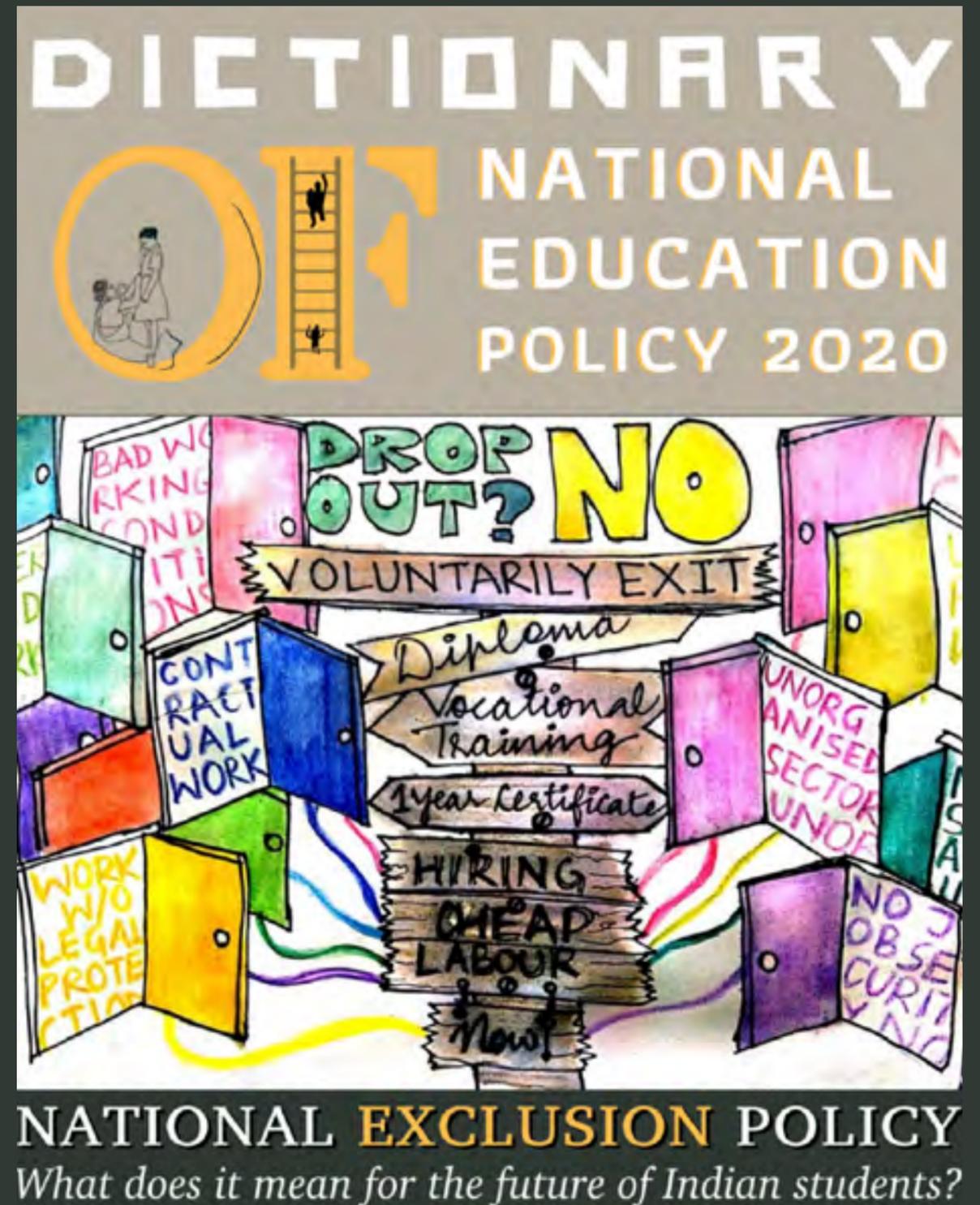
progressive response to NEP 2020 must link the struggle for equal, scientific and free education for all, from KG to PG, with the struggles of all toiling and oppressed Indians. Otherwise, as the immortal lines from the Internationale remind us, ‘Freedom is merely privilege extended, unless enjoyed by one and all.’

In 1966, the Kothari Commission on education had advocated for a state-funded Common School System, where an industrialist’s child would sit next to a daily wagger’s. This was tabled in a Parliament where the liberals were in majority. It was not considered a radical proposition, rather, a need of the times, for a newly independent India to forge its sovereignty. Yet, today, one can imagine being tagged an ‘urban Naxal’ for raising such ‘unrealistic’ demands. This indicates how far to the right our ‘common sense’, as a society, has shifted during the decades since. As India heads towards its 75<sup>th</sup> year of Independence, we fight to win back this common sense.

8. All India Forum for Right to Education, “National Education Policy 2020: An Agenda of Exclusion and Enslavement”, April 2021 url: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CPbQU2EJ2luVOxNLtj7TVLgYChaffmRS/view> Last accessed: July 22, 2021

**ALL IMAGES ATTRIBUTED TO**

‘A Dictionary of NEP 2020’ by COLLECTIVE url: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZZ83xYIOz0LzRtiG32-bdZWzm-MuevqzV/view>



# Attack on Workers Rights

EVEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, THE DISMANTLING OF  
LABOUR LAWS HAD BEGUN

*by Ritisha*

# In April and May of 2020, several states in India promulgated ordinances to suspend labour laws, to provide flexibility to businesses.

Of these states, Uttar Pradesh was arguably the worst offender, with manufacturers being exempted from nearly all

labour laws.<sup>1 2</sup> The pandemic period has seen some of the strongest attempts at diluting workers' rights in India, which have been hard-won over centuries of struggle.

The state-level ordinances followed closely on the heels of a set of four new Labour Codes introduced into the Lok Sabha (and subsequently passed with little discussion) by the central government, which proposed to replace the vast majority of existing labour legislation. Thus, within little more than a year and a half, the entire structure of labour legislation built up over decades has been systematically dismantled and replaced.

This destruction of workers rights has taken place in parallel to a massive deterioration in the actual conditions of employment during the Covid crisis. According to one estimate, around 120 million workers lost work with the imposition of lockdown in April last year.<sup>3</sup> Further, the effects were highly disproportionate by gender and caste – while the majority of men had recovered employment by August last year, only around 3 million of the 19 million women who lost their jobs had recovered them by August. Younger workers and workers from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

were also less likely to have recovered their jobs as compared to older and upper caste workers. Significantly, even among those who had recovered their jobs, the nature of employment had taken a turn for the worse – forms of informal employment (such as self-employment and daily wage casual work) saw an increase.

The pandemic period has seen some of the strongest attempts at diluting workers' rights in India, which have been hard-won over centuries of struggle.

1. The states are Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. For information on the legal changes, see Obhan & Associates. 2021. Suspension of Labour Laws amidst Covid – 19 - Obhan & Associates. [online] Available at: <https://www.obhanandassociates.com/blog/suspension-of-labour-laws-amidst-covid-19> [Accessed 27 July 2021].

2. Exceptions: 1) Safety provisions of Factories Act & BOCW Act 2) Equal Remuneration Act 3) Child Labour Act 4) Bonded Labour Act 5) Maternity Benefit Act 6) Section 5 of the Payment of Wages Act.

3. Abraham, Rosa, Amit Basole, and Surbhi Kesar, "Tracking Employment Trajectories In the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Indian Panel Data", CSE Working Paper #35, Azim Premji University, January 2021, pp. 24-25 [online]: Available at: [https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Abraham\\_Basole\\_Kesar\\_Covid\\_Trajectories\\_Jan\\_2021.pdf](https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Abraham_Basole_Kesar_Covid_Trajectories_Jan_2021.pdf). For a critical review of the Consumer Pyramids Household Survey dataset, on which the working paper is based, see the discussion by Dreze, Jean and Anmol Somanchi, "View: New barometer of India's economy fails to reflect deprivations of poor households", The Economic Times, June 21, 2021, url: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/view-the-new-barometer-of-indias-economy-fails-to-reflect-the-deprivations-of-poor-households/articleshow/83696115.cms>, Accessed on 27th July, 2021.

## LABOUR LAWS IN INDIA: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Labour is part of the concurrent list, which means that both the Union Government and State Governments can make laws pertaining to establishments under their respective jurisdictions. Most estimates put the total number of labour laws in the country at around 150, with such laws being broadly divided into three categories (Table 1).

<b>Laws regulating worker-management relations / industrial relations</b>	These govern labour unions, worker-management relations, and employer-employee relations. Notable laws include the Trade Unions Act, the Industrial Disputes Act, and the Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act. The broad purpose of these laws is to regulate the power relationships between labour and capital, particularly in the organized sectors.
<b>Laws regulating conditions of work</b>	These laws regulate working conditions, particularly in the manufacturing sector, and require employers to adhere to minimum standards of occupational health and safety. The main central laws under this umbrella are the Factories Act, Building and Other Construction Workers Act, the Contract Labour Act, the Mines Act, state Shops and Establishments Acts, among others.
<b>Social security laws</b>	These laws pertain to wages and social security, with laws such as the Payment of Wages Act, the Minimum Wages Act, Payment of Bonus Act, Employee State Insurance Act, Employee Compensation Act, etc.

Table 1

These laws along with associated case law precedent evolved from various movements and judgements all over the country at different points in time, and hence contain certain complexities and inconsistencies. However, by and large, the fundamental purpose of these laws has been to redistribute legal power in a way that increases the bargaining power of workers and provide them with certain bare-minimum protections against exploitative workplace practices.<sup>4</sup>

4. Much of the economics literature on labour law in India has focused on how such 'restrictive' laws inhibit growth and perversely, the expansion of employment. However, see Bhattacharjea, Aditya, 'Labour Market Flexibility in Indian Industry: A Critical Survey of the Literature', Working Paper No 296, March 2019', available at <http://www.cdeds.org/pdf/work296.pdf> for a review of such literature.

### THE LABOUR CODES

Four new labour legislations were introduced in the Lok Sabha in July 2019, which proposed to subsume over 40 central laws and over 100 state laws. These were: The Code on Wages (the 'Wage Code'), the Code on Social Security ('SS Code'), the Code on Industrial Relations ('IR Code') and the Code on Occupational Health, Safety and Working Conditions ('OHSWC Code').

The labour codes have been introduced (and subsequently passed) under the dubious pretext of simplification and rationalization, at the expense of workers' rights protected by existing legislation. The labour codes were passed without any consultation with stakeholders and without any meaningful debate in parliament or with labour unions.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT CHANGED

Perhaps the change that has received the most media attention and even the attention of the salaried classes is in the Wage Code, which concerns wages, bonuses, social security and welfare measures. This code has implications for nearly all types of employees for whom take-home pay is expected to reduce as a result of this Code.<sup>6</sup>

**The labour codes were passed without any consultation with stakeholders and without any meaningful debate in parliament or with labour unions.**

The erstwhile Industrial Disputes Act required that establishments with over 100 workers had to seek permission before retrenching (firing) anyone; under the IR Code, this threshold has now been increased to 300. The threshold headcount for having Standing Orders has also been increased to 300.<sup>7</sup> This Code also makes it harder for workers to strike.

The Social Security Code brings about ambiguity and subjectivity in the calculation of minimum wages, with no clear methodology being prescribed and state governments having the freedom to determine the minimum wage for different categories of workers. Subjective factors such as 'skills', 'arduousness' and 'geographical location' have been recommended to be the basis of such calculations. With the central government

5. All the four codes, except the Code on Wages, were introduced into Parliament and passed by the two houses, between September 19, 2020 and September 23, 2020. The Code on Wages was introduced and passed between July 23, 2019 and August 2, 2019. See <https://prsindia.org/billtrack>. Also see The Hindu. 2021. Labour codes passed are anti-worker, say trade unions. [online] Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/labour-codes-anti-worker-say-trade-unions/article32680053.ece> [Accessed 27 July 2021].

6. India Today. 2021. Explained: How new wage code will impact your take-home salary. [online] Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/explained-how-new-wage-codes-will-impact-your-take-home-salary-1782324-2021-03-22> [Accessed 27 July 2021].

7. Standing Orders are a set of rules for industrial establishments which define the specific conditions of employment such as classification of workers, working hours, attendance, shifts, types of misconduct, disciplinary action, and much more. See model standing orders <http://www.lawsindia.com/labourlaw/STANDING%20ORDERS/MAIN.htm>



Cast adrift by the sudden lockdowns | wikicommons

setting the floor wage and no clarity on the minimum wage calculation, a race to the bottom, to the national floor wage, is expected with all states vying to attract more investments.

The OSHWC Code explicitly defines certain non-core industrial activities where employment of contract labour would not be prohibited, and changes the criteria for abolition as well. While abolition of contract labour is already a rare occurrence even under the existing regime, the new set of criteria will reduce the scope for litigation in these matters. While this Code makes certain provisions for migrant workers, these provisions are paltry at best and hinge on the use of UIDAI-Aadhar for availing benefits. This Code also entirely fails to provide any standards or welfare facilities for the informal sector, which constitutes over 90% of the country's labour force and arguably faces the harshest working conditions.<sup>8</sup>

### CONTRACT LABOUR FACE EVEN MORE PRECARITY

The use of contract labour in lieu of permanent employment has increased considerably over the years. It has become a way to reduce the bargaining power of workers and circumvent many statutory compliance requirements by eliminating the all-important 'employer-employee relationship'. However, under the existing Contract Labour Act, the principal employer was still held responsible in case the contractor failed to pay wages or other benefits to the workers. This 'vicarious liability' of the

8. India Today. 2021. Explained: How new wage code will impact your take-home salary. [online] Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/explained-how-new-wage-codes-will-impact-your-take-home-salary-1782324-2021-03-22> [Accessed 27 July 2021].

principal employer acted as a check to ensure that already-impooverished workers do not get cheated out of their wages as a result of multiple layers of sub-contracting. This requirement has been done away with under the new Wage Code, which broadens the definition of principal employer to include contractors or anyone in charge of the worksite. Such a wide definition will allow the principal employers – in whose establishment the work is actually being done – to shirk all responsibility and will increase exploitation of a class of workers that by definition faces a lot of precarity.

#### HOW DO THE CODES AFFECT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS?

The Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act is being repealed. The erstwhile BOCW Act provides for social security benefits for construction workers, such as pension, scholarships, loans, etc. and also constitutes a welfare fund using 1-2% of the total construction cost. To avail these benefits, construction workers have to be registered with BOCW Boards. The repealing of this Act will result in the cancellation of close to 4 crore such registrations and require workers to register themselves afresh with the new welfare boards.<sup>9</sup>

Workers already face a tremendous amount of red tape and rent-seeking in navigating the labour bureaucracy, with labour officials charging thousands of rupees from daily wage earners for the simplest transactions. The complexities in these systems have increased manifold since the introduction of Jan Dhan-Aadhar-Mobile regime, as workers find it nearly impossible to complete KYC formalities unless the details on their Aadhar Card, Bank Account and PF Account are identical and linked to the same mobile number. In such a context, it is expected that workers will face a lot of difficulties in getting registered again, let alone receive the benefits.

Roughly Rs. 40,000 crores of cess with the welfare boards will now be transferred into a common social assistance fund.<sup>10</sup> This fund will also require contributions from construction workers themselves. This is a preposterous provision as construction workers hardly get 15 days' worth of wages in a month and mandating a fixed percentage of contribution from these workers will only impoverish them further. The delivery of benefits to construction workers is also expected to be privatized as the Code provides for implementation through various 'agencies'.<sup>11</sup>



9. Advisory from Union Government to States on relief to Building and other Construction Workers <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/DO.pdf>

10. The Wire. 2021. Repealing the Construction Workers Act Under New Labour Codes Will Prove Disastrous. [online] Available at: <<https://thewire.in/labour/repealing-the-construction-workers-act-under-new-labour-codes-will-prove-disastrous>> [Accessed 27 July 2021].

11. The SS Code envisions licensing of intermediate agencies for fund management, record keeping and benefit disbursement under various social security provisions. See <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/DRAFTCOSSRULES2020NOV.pdf>

#### THE CODES LEAVE WORKERS WITH LESS LEGAL RECOURSE THAN BEFORE

Earlier employers had criminal liability in case of violation of Payment of Wages Act, Factories Act, etc., under the new codes they will only have a civil liability. The Wage Code also constitutes quasi-judicial bodies for hearing matters relating to it, thereby cutting off workers' access to labour courts. Wage matters are also closely linked with matters of working conditions and employment relations and hence these Codes significantly limit and to some extent reverse the redistribution of legal power that the erstwhile laws had attempted to do.

While the Wage Code does provide for minimum wages to be applicable to all workers, not just workers in Scheduled Employments, it is unclear how the enforcement of such provisions will happen.<sup>12</sup> Seeing as these quasi-judicial bodies can be approached by only appropriate authorities or trade unions, unorganized workers and those in informal sectors will find it hard to make any claims.

#### LABOUR LAW COMPLIANCE: ANECDOTES FROM THE REAL WORLD

Labour law compliance is not easy. As someone who works in industrial relations and labour law compliance for a large manufacturing organization, there are requirements for dozens of licenses, forms and returns that have to be fulfilled round the year, and the transaction costs involved are quite high. Add to this, the complexities of contracting and sub-contracting, and ensuring labour law compliance essentially requires an entire department of personnel. And even then, some of it slips through the cracks and doesn't get done (largely unintentionally).

However, even with the corporate mandate of 100% compliance and an entire department dedicated to this goal, I have seen what happens when we fail to enforce labour laws: contract workers don't receive minimum wages for months on end, working hours are long and brutal, and sometimes workers are even disabled temporarily or permanently with little or no compensation. This is exactly why a robust labour law regime with a strong enforcement mechanism is required.

I have seen what happens when we fail to enforce labour laws: **contract workers don't receive minimum wages for months on end, working hours are long and brutal, and sometimes workers are even disabled temporarily or permanently with little or no compensation.**

12. According to the Minimum Wages Act, governments are empowered to fix rates of minimum wages for types of employment specified in Schedule of the Act. See <https://labour.delhi.gov.in/content/schedule-employment-covered-under-minimum-wages-act-1948>. These are known as 'Scheduled Employments'.

In reality, non-compliance does not arise because of popularly quoted reasons such as complexity or lack of clarity: there are enough and more legal professionals who can assist with these things. Non-compliance arises because local labour officials are lax, do not conduct frequent inspections, and are often quite clueless about what to enforce in the first place. (Real example: Recently, we were trying to get a contractor to register his workers under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (ISMW) Act and the local labour enforcement officer had never even heard of this law, let alone the registration mechanism.)

Another important reason for non-compliance is corruption: quid-pro-quo understandings with local MLAs and councillors, and labour department officials themselves extorting massive bribes. (A frustrating case in point was the aforementioned labour enforcement officer who upon learning about the ISMW Act demanded six thousand rupees to register eight workmen under the same.)

#### THESE CODES ARE NOT A STEP FORWARD

The Labour Codes have been accompanied by the rhetoric that they will simplify a complex web of archaic legislations and be in the interest of both employers and workers. While the second claim is by definition oxymoronic, the first is worth examining.

Labour laws should act as a **check against unregulated capital**, however, what these Codes essentially do is **accept the exploitation of capitalism as a given** and simply construct a toothless edifice of bureaucracy around them.

The erstwhile labour laws were not without their flaws and certainly required clarity in definitions and better implementation. These laws also largely catered to workers in the formal sectors and hence required their scope to be expanded. However, an important reason that existing labour laws fell short of achieving their stated goals is because labour departments across the country are understaffed and underfunded, resulting in lack of skilled labour officials and a very low level of inspections. It is said that existing labour laws needed to be

repealed because they only catered to the formal sectors — however, the labour code provisions are such that ambiguities even for the formal sectors will increase and result in a kind of informalization even in formal sectors.

Labour laws exist fundamentally to empower workers against exploitation; however the new Labour Codes fail to do so. Rather, they increase the scope of exploitation by reducing oversight, privatizing delivery and increasing thresholds for compliance.

Photo by Joko Narimo on Pixabay



COVID-19

# Data Obfuscation as Modi Operandi

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE TALE OF  
COVID-19 NUMBERS IN INDIA

*by Rang*

Photo by Dmitry Suponnikov on Unsplash

It was the middle of April 2021; the **second wave of the pandemic** had just about begun to rear its ugly head in India.

I was looking forward to spending a quiet time with my new-born and celebrating a decade of living and loving my partner. Then everyone got COVID-19 (by everyone I mean everyone, including my then two-

month-old) and all hell broke loose. I remember the horror it became, the frantic search for medicines, the desperation for a hospital bed, leaving the city in disgust and then the three months of deaths, deaths, and more deaths.

On July 20, in a mass insult to folks like me and indeed the average Indian, the Central government informed the Rajya Sabha that no deaths due to lack of oxygen<sup>1</sup> were specifically reported by States and Union Territories (UT) during the second COVID-19 wave. On Aug 7, 2021, it also went on record stating that no panel had ever been formed to review oxygen availability<sup>2</sup>. This same government runs a 'CORONA HELPDESK' broadcast channel on Telegram. Telegram is my messenger platform of choice, but the government – as you know – has a presence everywhere. Now I'm a loyal follower of the Corona Helpdesk on telegram because it is such a steady source of incorrect information, it provides me oodles of content for the short data literacy course I teach online.

In this article, I am going to examine public claims of success at beating back the pandemic, as made by the current Modi government, with a view to expose the systematic data obfuscation undertaken to create these claims. However, before I get into that, I want to expend a few words on why this trend – of over-information and, largely, wrong information – is not just the result of the “communication age” we live in or accidental but, instead, a rather old, tried and tested, and wildly successful tactic used by fascist governments the world over.

Data obfuscation is now a quietly and powerfully wielded weapon in information warfare and makes real and rapid contributions to the state of disinformation we all now live in.

1. India Today, “States join Centre in saying no one died due to oxygen shortage: Who said what” July 21, 2021, URL: <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/states-join-centre-in-saying-no-one-died-due-to-oxygen-shortage-who-said-what-1830965-2021-07-21> Last accessed August 12, 2021

2. Jebaraj, Priscilla, “In U-Turn, Centre denies existence of panel to oversee supply of medical oxygen”, The Hindu, August 7, 2021 URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-u-turn-centre-denies-existence-of-panel-to-oversee-supply-of-medical-oxygen/article35781739.ece> Last accessed August 12, 2021

## INFORMATION WARFARE

To begin with, the term ‘data obfuscation’ is not a term I made up and that am glibly attributing to this government or fascist governments in general. Those of us who work in data science know, for instance, that data obfuscation – otherwise known as data masking procedures – serves a real purpose in data-led work and that purpose is ‘testing’. Data obfuscation is the process of replacing sensitive information with data that looks like real production information, making it useless to malicious actors. It is primarily used in development environments – developers and testers need realistic data to build and test software, but they do not need to see the real data. The same principle applies to making a dataset with missing information more complete. Ironically, the purpose of data obfuscation is to protect from ‘malicious intent’.

However, in practice, data obfuscation is not just this legitimate purpose or replacement of data. It is, instead, the systematic use and reporting of data and cherry-picked numbers used to wilfully spread incorrect information as well as distract from the real message that a chart or a number intends to communicate.

Data obfuscation is now a quietly and powerfully wielded weapon in information warfare and makes real and rapid contributions to the state of disinformation we all now live in. In the book, *Visualising Fascism* (Thomas, 2020), the author recounts many examples through history of propaganda that increasingly relied on covert obfuscation – one such prominent example is of Japan in the 1940s:

*‘In 1940, the year leading up to the government’s consolidation of domestic photography magazines, a dispute (ronsō) broke out among the ranks of Japanese photographers concerning their duty to the state. At issue was the relation between art as a craft and politics as an imperative. Was it possible to serve both? On the one hand, Ina Nobuo (1898–1978), long a leading critic in the Japanese photography world, argued quite subtly that a photographer could be true both to his craft and to the nation. Serving the regime was not, he said, a matter of merely “communicating” (iu) the right subject matter but a matter of “leading” (michibiku) intellectually, emotionally, and sensually. To lead in this way required a self-aware practice that was cognizant of both method and message, technique and topic. Personal talent and patriotism were not at odds. In making this point, Ina insisted that “the difference between journalism (hōdōsei) and art (geijutsu) is a non-issue.” A honed aesthetic was a necessary component of good reportage (hōdōshashin) elevating the nation required a purposive art (mokuteki geijutsu).’<sup>3</sup>*

Data obfuscation is a kind of propaganda, similar to what Adolf Hitler felt in 1924: data ‘is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert’. During the two decades that followed the terrible Twenties, Nazi leaders showed the world bold, new ways to

3. Thomas, Julia Adeney, and Geoff Eley, eds. 2020. *Visualizing Fascism: The Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right*. Duke University Press.



Japanese wartime poster celebrating the friendship of the three Axis countries, 'Naka yoshi sangoku', 1938 | [wikicommons](#)

use propaganda, thus laying the old and now solid foundations of data obfuscation. Through a variety of sophisticated techniques, the Nazi Party successfully swayed millions of Germans and other Europeans with appealing ideas of a utopian world and perpetuated genocide.

Indeed, several fascist states, such as Salazarist Portugal and Fascist Italy, shared characteristics in their approach to propaganda and data obfuscation. Like Modi's India, all three were civilian and not military dictatorships, headed by charismatic leaders who drew on a revolutionary rhetoric and placed ideology at the core of the construction of their idea of a new state. This is the New State we are all going to become occupants of if we do not rise to defeat it; this state is not intended to be 'neutral' and actively works to extend control over all forms of organised social activity. The aim of these regimes — characterized by an undisputed leadership, a single ideology, and a conflict-avoiding institutional structure — is the totalitarian occupancy of the state.

Even if one examines history in very broad strokes (of over centuries), one can see that fascist forces in the nineteenth century experienced social upheaval characterised by liberal revolutions and the secularisation of the state and urbanisation/modernisation. Alongside came what can only be called the 'massification' of society, including the development of education and the mass media, which both enabled the construction of a single new narrative and the emergence of parties, and institutions of mass socialisation, such as trade unions, factories, and war trenches. Throughout the post-Second World War period, authoritarian regimes tried to subvert public opinion and regimes with totalitarian tendencies saw the distinction between education and propaganda slowly disappear. History makes it clear that goal of propaganda was (and is today, too) to create a reality in which all the pieces fit together seamlessly, with no contradictions or any possibility of testing the veracity of the official ideology.

Massification works to reinforce capitalism. Repression and propaganda constitute the two most important instruments of this effort and they work together to ensure the functioning of a dictatorship and industrial cartels. Violence has not always been the principal means for regime consolidation in this context. Indeed, propaganda and its emphasis on ideology is the new 'war' of the post-Second World War world that seeks to change the hearts and minds of citizens through the deployment of

Throughout the post-Second World War period, **authoritarian regimes tried to subvert public opinion** and regimes with totalitarian tendencies saw **the distinction between education and propaganda slowly disappear.**

simple and powerful ideological messages. In the India of Modi's dreams, 'data-driven technologies' — as he himself has stated on many an occasion — is at the centre of ideological messaging. Patriotism and nationalism must also be evidence-backed, no matter that these are as manufactured as consent is.

Data obfuscation is useful for a regime, no matter what type of propaganda goal it has, viz. active consensus, passive consensus or dissensus. Active consensus refers to the active participation of the citizenry rather than simple acceptance, thus we have massive troll armies in Modi's India. It is not a goal but a means to achieve concrete objectives that would otherwise not be achievable. Passive consensus, by contrast, or the mere management of dissensus is often enough to ensure regime survival.

**Central to this narrative and all the fancy graphics on the Covid Helpdesk Telegram channel, for instance, is data obfuscation — using data incorrectly to build support for a misleading conclusion.**

One really easy way to do this is by persuading people that there is no alternative to the regime, so it is best not to oppose it — the claim that the opposition leader is an idiot is not, in fact, a fact at all but, instead, a carefully constructed narrative.

Propaganda aims to fully engage a population with regime structures, to mobilise it to obtain active consensus. This is a qualitatively different idea from the concept of public opinion and that

of the public arena. Rather than a meeting-place between state and civil society, in a society such as ours now, this arena is entirely occupied by the state or, in this case, a party. The central aim is to contain the masses within the life of the state. To fulfil this goal, propaganda has to simplify concepts to make them readily digestible and easily memorised and one of the easiest ways to do this is through data that appears non-political or factual and indisputable. This kind of propaganda also has to be repetitive, partial, and seemingly beyond question; in other words, it has to convey only 'absolute truths'. Such propaganda can only exist in contexts of low or non-existent competition and contestability.

So, what does this have to do with COVID-19?

It is now widely acknowledged that the Modi government has been incompetent in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first lockdown (in March 2020) was implemented badly with no prior notice and caused mass migration and loss of lives. In the year that followed, the Modi government failed to ramp-up medical facilities

despite this being placed on record in parliament<sup>4</sup>. Then, catastrophically it failed to arrange enough oxygen, regulate super spreader events, and even prioritised vaccine diplomacy over vaccination atma-nirbharta when it mattered!

Despite this, criticism of the Modi government's handling of the pandemic within India is low because of the narrative of success in battling the pandemic that the Modi government has successfully built. The narrative is a careful attempt to manufacture consent around the idea that this government has done all it could to deal with COVID-19, which is, of course, untrue. Central to this narrative and all the fancy graphics on the Covid Helpdesk Telegram channel, for instance, is data obfuscation — using data incorrectly to build support for a misleading conclusion. The remainder of this article is dedicated to debunking some of these untruths.

#### WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE

Poor policy design and implementation has been the hallmark of this government; most policies have had far-reaching consequences for the poor. India's economy has always been skewed. It has been primarily agrarian and then it leapfrogged to the services sector (at least in urban and peri-urban areas) which has been hit badly by India's worst economic decisions of all times — demonetisation and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The infrastructure to support a services sector boom, such as a robust education system at foundational level or basic healthcare, is non-existent. The pandemic has taken a toll on tourism and low-level IT jobs, too. Construction is in the doldrums. Years of underinvestment in agriculture, social-security, healthcare, and education has set up the economy for failure; demonetisation, GST and COVID-19 killed it further.

Could the pandemic have been managed better? Yes, if some of the decisions made by the Modi government is analysed. India's top virologist<sup>5</sup> recently quit a scientific advisory panel after criticising the government's 'stubborn resistance to evidence-based policymaking'. The Modi government's mismanagement includes its complicity in allowing huge political

**According to the World Health Organization, a death should be recorded as Covid-19-related if the disease is assumed to have caused or contributed to it, even if the person had a pre-existing medical condition, such as cancer.**

4. PTI, "Parliamentary panel had asked govt in March to ramp up vaccine production capacity", The Economic Times, May 12, 2021 URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/parliamentary-panel-had-asked-govt-in-march-to-ramp-up-vaccine-production-capacity/articleshow/82574740.cms?from=mdr> Last accessed August 12, 2021

5. Reuters, "Top Indian Virologist Shahid Jameel quits government panel after airing differences", The Indian Express, May 18, 2021 URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/top-indian-virologist-quits-government-panel-after-airing-differences-7317836/> Last accessed August 12, 2021

rallies for election campaigns and mass religious gatherings, including the Kumbh Mela, where millions of people shunned the all-important mask while they jostled for space. The second wave arrived because in the intervening year, the government did next to nothing to prepare for it. Indeed, so bad was the policy planning that oxygen supplies were not ramped up and field hospitals that were hastily assembled after the first wave were actually dismantled<sup>6</sup>.

#### RECORDING AND REPORTING COVID-19 DEATHS

At the centre of understanding COVID-19 deaths in India is the issue of how the deaths are recorded and reported. Story after story in the press records that India has vastly underreported deaths from COVID-19, especially in the second wave, as also in the first wave, largely because of instructions and pressure from the very top to officially record cause of death as a co-morbidity and not COVID-19 per se. The last time a public health crisis of a somewhat similar magnitude happened was when AIDS was discovered in India. The two stories have much in common. Like HIV, the coronavirus causes fatalities in bodies with weakened immunity — this places vulnerable people such as the aged with other diseases as the most likely targets. Someone with cancer, for instance, or hypertension, is much more likely to die of cancer or a heart attack if they had COVID-19.

Part of the trouble is that there is far too much variation in how States count deaths. To begin with, in India, every State and Union Territory does it differently. Then there is the issue of matters of birth, marriage and death being religious and, therefore, unrecorded — in India only one in every five deaths is medically certified. There is no law that requires medical certification of cause of death. According to the World Health Organization, a death should be recorded<sup>7</sup> as Covid-19-related if the disease is assumed to have caused or contributed to it, even if the person had a pre-existing medical condition, such as cancer.

It is now widely known that private and public hospitals have been under tremendous pressure to misreport and fraudulently classify COVID-19 deaths as something else, easily done when there has been a complicated medical history. This is one kind of data obfuscation and this is not the first time the Modi government has tried to obfuscate data – in a very public scandal in 2019, for instance, Modi's government tried

to suppress data showing a rise in the unemployment rate<sup>8</sup>.

Undercounting of COVID-19 deaths is something of a global phenomenon too; in India, it has certainly been a concern for a long while<sup>9</sup>. There are several reasons why undercounting could be an issue, but what separates unintentional undercounting resulting from data complications from data fabrication as done by the Modi government is intent. Undercounting can happen because testing capacity varies markedly across countries and within countries over time, which means that the reported COVID-19 deaths as a proportion of all deaths due to COVID-19 can also vary markedly across countries and within countries over time.

Demography also complicates this issue. For instance, countries with an aging population (as a proportion of the total population) will likely see deaths from COVID-19 in older individuals, especially in long-term care facilities, and these go unrecorded because many such people are already sick anyway. This is exactly what happened with Ecuador, Peru, and the Russian Federation, for instance. It is worthwhile asking why do excess deaths matter anyway. Estimating an accurate COVID-19 death rate is important both for modelling transmission dynamics of COVID-19 and to make better forecasts.

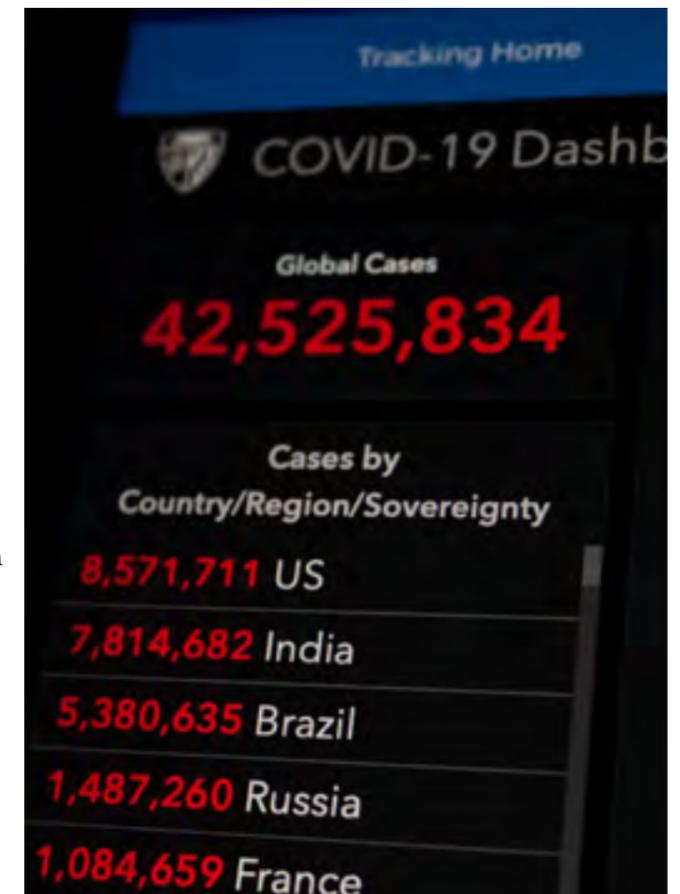


Photo by James Yarema on Unsplash

The agreed method is to **estimate State-wise how many excess deaths** have occurred **when compared to average deaths** in the civil births and deaths register.

6. Slater, Joanna and Masih, Niha, "A frantic search for scarce hospital beds as pandemic rages in India", The Washington Post, June 13, 2020 URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/india-coronavirus-hospital-beds/2020/06/12/7b538a8a-ab4d-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-coronavirus-hospital-beds/2020/06/12/7b538a8a-ab4d-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html) Last accessed August 12, 2021

7. WHO, International Guidelines for Certification and Classification (Coding) of COVID-19 as cause of death, April 16, 2020 URL: [https://www.who.int/classifications/icd/Guidelines\\_Cause\\_of\\_Death\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://www.who.int/classifications/icd/Guidelines_Cause_of_Death_COVID-19.pdf) Last accessed August 12, 2021

8. Jha, Somesh, "Unemployment rate at four-decade high of 6.1% in 2017-18: NSSO Survey", Business Standard, February 6, 2019 URL: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/unemployment-rate-at-five-decade-high-of-6-1-in-2017-18-nssso-survey-119013100053\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/unemployment-rate-at-five-decade-high-of-6-1-in-2017-18-nssso-survey-119013100053_1.html) Last accessed August 12, 2021

9. Radhakrishnan, Vignesh et al, "Data: Is India undercounting its COVID-19 deaths?", May 20, 2020, The Hindu, URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-is-india-undercounting-its-covid-19-deaths/article31628155.ece> Last accessed August 12, 2021

So, how does one tell how many people actually died as a result of the Modi government's failure? The agreed method is to estimate State-wise how many excess deaths have occurred when compared to average deaths in the civil births and deaths register. Excess deaths are typically defined as the difference between the observed numbers of deaths in specific time periods and expected numbers of deaths in the same time periods. But this is hardly a straightforward exercise. If you think about it there are at least six aspects that influence how excess deaths can be measured:

1. *The proportionality of COVID-19 deaths when related to COVID-19 infections*
2. *An increase in deaths caused due to needed health care being delayed or deferred during the pandemic*
3. *An increase in deaths due to increases in mental health disorders, including depression, increased alcohol use and increased opioid use*
4. *A reduction in overall deaths due to decreases in injuries because of general reductions in mobility associated with social distancing mandates*
5. *Reductions in deaths due to reduced transmission of other viruses*
6. *Reductions in mortality due to chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease and chronic respiratory disease that occur when frail individuals who would have died from these conditions died earlier from COVID-19 instead*

To correctly estimate excess COVID-19 mortality<sup>10</sup>, one would need to consider at least these six determinants of change in death numbers since the onset of the pandemic. Now, this is a data-issue. A logical question to ask, therefore, is where does India stand? Unsurprisingly, India's excess deaths data is not even in the public domain – therefore, one cannot even try to make better or more accurate estimates. For example, I was able to obtain detailed excess deaths estimates for a variety of countries on a public tracker with zero information and data from India:

**Making data unavailable is the first way to obfuscate data, because then, researchers have to rely on all sorts of estimates.**

Making data unavailable is the first way to obfuscate data, because then, researchers have to rely on all sorts of estimates.

On July 31, 2021, for instance, the website IndiaSpend reported<sup>11</sup> that health data from

the National Health Mission website run by the Government of India pertaining to the pandemic year – which demonstrated a sudden spike in deaths, particularly in rural India – suddenly went offline due to 'server problems'. The disappearance was timed to stave off the sudden and welcome mushrooming of papers estimating India's excess deaths accurately using this data<sup>12</sup>. Devastatingly, the data recorded that an estimated 1.5 million children also missed essential vaccines (such as the BCG) during the same period. Curiously, data pertaining to health issues other than COVID-19 during the same period and much older periods remained online.

#### WHAT IS A COVID-19 RECOVERY

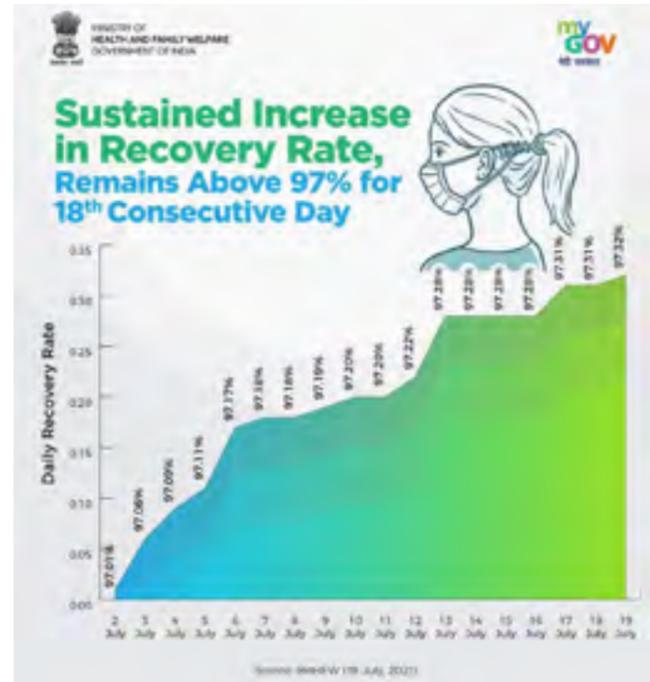
India has made a big deal of COVID-19 recoveries and recovery percentages in all official communication regarding COVID-19. Unfortunately, recovery rates and the number of recovered cases is a lousy indicator of how a country has dealt with any epidemic or pandemic. Consider this: while the pandemic has been devastating, it is still less than fatal and even mild for several million people in India. All these people who do not die ultimately recover making high recovery rates kind of pointless. Diagnosis usually has only two outcomes – either a person recovers or dies. So, when there is a rise in the pandemic there is also a rise in the number of cases recovered i.e. there is no new information being reported by this piece of statistic. Over 50% of the population in India is in the age group of 18-35 years. We are a young country and young folk typically have better immunity, i.e., the odds of recovery and healing are naturally high. That someone is a bright learner says nothing really about the teaching ability of an instructor. Nearly all prior pandemics show that recovery rates remain high and vary in tandem with a pandemic's own timeline. It is possible entirely that India might reach a 99% recovery rate but that does nothing to signal an end to the pandemic. Despite the uselessness of this statistic, the Modi government has circulated posters and fashioned media campaigns with pointless heat maps of recoveries by region in green – a colour known to psychologically signal 'all-is-well(ness)' to the mind.

On July 31, 2021, for instance, the website IndiaSpend reported that **health data from the National Health Mission website run by the Government of India pertaining to the pandemic year – which demonstrated a sudden spike in deaths, particularly in rural India – suddenly went offline due to 'server problems'.**

10. See; <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-excess-mortality?country=> for an excellent primer on this issue. Last accessed August 12, 2021

11. Rukmini, S, "Govt Data That Showed Excess Mortality During Pandemic Go Offline", India Spend, July 31, 2021 URL: <https://www.indiaspend.com/covid-19/government-data-that-showed-excess-mortality-during-pandemic-go-offline-764637> Last accessed August 12, 2021

12. Deshmukh, Yashwant et al, "Excess Mortality in India from June 2020 to June 2021 during the COVID pandemic: death registration, health facility deaths, and survey data", medRxiv, July 23, 2021 URL: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.07.20.21260872v1> Last accessed August 12, 2021



mygov.in

A similarly useless statistic is the positivity percentage which is also being used widely by the Modi government, particularly against States with a non-BJP government, as we see in the case of Kerala continuously under attack for a high number of COVID-19 cases.

What is a positivity rate? A high percentage of positive cases means that more testing should probably be done — and it suggests that it is not a good time to relax restrictions aimed at reducing coronavirus transmission. A high percentage of positive tests suggests high coronavirus infection rates (due to high transmission in the community), indicating that it may be a good time to add restrictions to slow the spread of disease. The high positivity rate is a

proportion i.e., the numerator, while the denominator is the all-important context. In this case, a positivity rate is a function of the total number of tests conducted. Therefore, a low positivity rate also reflects low testing and high positivity reflects a higher proportion of population being tested.

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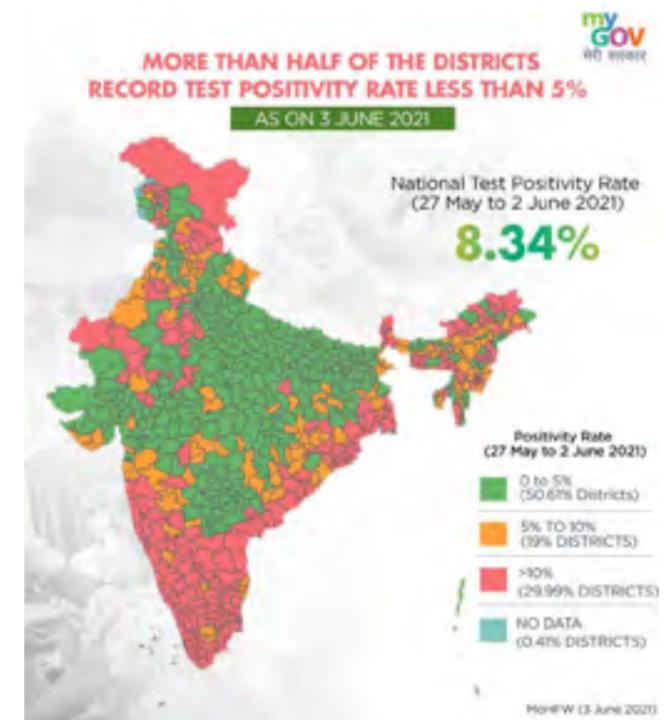
One can recall in the case of HIV this same fallacy played out. While it continues to be true that the southern states of India have high HIV numbers, the naming and shaming of AP and TN for high AIDS rates in the country has been unfair. It has only been recently acknowledged in public health discourse, that the southern states of India have also tested much more efficiently than other states ever did — with mandatory

testing of women from high risk groups and community testing<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, suggesting that States like UP or MP are doing better than Kerala on positivity rates or caseload without using testing percentages as context is an incomplete story.

13. Avert, January 28, 2020 URL: <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/asia-pacific/india> Last accessed August 12, 2021

**EXAMPLES OF DUBIOUS INFOGRAPHICS**

Despite this, the Modi government’s propaganda includes heat maps on positivity percentage as a vital part of its strategy. Yet another statistic used almost always without context is ‘doubling time’. Doubling time is a term conveniently borrowed from the world of finance. It refers to the time it takes to double the number of active cases and, as such, has to be calculated based on the emergence of new cases. It changes every day and, as such, doesn’t mean anything when monitored every day. A much better method is to simply calculate moving averages. It is also an unreliable measure because it is impacted by a variety of external factors such as wide differences at the State — and district-levels, given population characteristics, low or high testing or contact tracing, or because of human migrations that could be seasonally driven or driven by labour markets or those imposed by bad policy.



**WHERE FROM VACCINE AND WHERE TO?**

In another startling piece of data obfuscation, the Modi government continues to report India’s vaccination drive as one of the most successful anywhere in the world. Vaccination experiences have been terrible for even those of us who can afford to pay — for many of the poor the irony of being illiterate and requiring a CoWin registration, even if done on the spot, is too visible to ignore. State-wise vaccine availability has also been questionable with Bengal having a projected a 66% shortfall of vaccine availability<sup>14</sup>; the best States have approximately a quarter of their populations projected to suffer from vaccine shortfall.

Between January and May 2021, India bought roughly 350 million doses of the two approved vaccines — the Oxford-AstraZeneca, manufactured as Covishield by the Serum Institute of India (SII), and Covaxin by Indian firm Bharat Biotech. The vaccines were cheap at procurement (but pricy for those who needed to take them) and sufficient for barely 20% of the population. During the same time, PM Modi took

14. NDTV, “Vaccination Shortfall: India’s 5 Best and Worst States”, July 10, 2021 URL: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-vaccination-shortfall-indias-5-best-and-worst-states-2483092> Last accessed August 12, 2021

Vaccination experiences have been terrible for even those of us who can afford to pay – for many of the poor **the irony of being illiterate and requiring a CoWin registration, even if done on the spot, is too visible to ignore.**

to the television no less than three times to declare that India had defeated Covid. Then came ‘vaccine diplomacy’<sup>15</sup>, with India exporting more vaccines than were administered within the country by March. Soon after, the images of mass pyres pricked the conscience of the nation, but the corridors of power maintained a deathly silence.

While India continues to celebrate vaccination success with absolute numbers (India has surpassed the number of vaccines administered by the US, for instance), in reality, it has vaccinated only 4% of its population (in the US, India’s favourite country for comparisons, the figure is nearly 50%). While PM Modi likes to emphasise that it is currently vaccinating around four million people every day, what he chooses not to say is that it should be administering double that number if we want to beat the pandemic this year. The government data that mysteriously vanished earlier included data that shows that 14% less women are getting vaccinated<sup>16</sup> than men, especially in rural areas.

The day India rolled out free (not really free; it costs money in private hospitals while government hospitals have long queues and a shortage) vaccinations to everyone aged 18+ years on June 21, 2021, PM Modi’s heart was gladdened<sup>17</sup> given the record administration of 8.5 million doses, but that feat was immediately followed by a sharp decline with average daily inoculation falling below 3 million. Madhya Pradesh, which recorded 1.7 million vaccinations on Monday[SB3] , saw only 68,370



- 15. Pant, Harsh and Aarshi Tirkey, “India’s Vaccine Diplomacy”, ORF online, January 23, 2021 URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-vaccine-diplomacy/> Last accessed August 12, 2021
- 16. Ramesh, Mythreyee, “More Men Than Women in India are Getting COVID Vaccine, But Why?”, The Quint, June 4, 2021 URL: <https://www.thequint.com/neon/gender/why-are-more-men-getting-coronavirus-vaccine-than-women> Last accessed August 12, 2021
- 17. Dwivedi, Sukriti, “India Vaccinates Record 88.09 lakh People on Day 1 of New Vaccine Regime”, NDTV, June 22, 2021 URL: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-vaccinates-record-52-lakh-people-in-one-day-2468935> Last accessed August 12, 2021

doses administered till 10 pm on Tuesday — a drop of 96% between the two days. In Haryana, there was a 75% drop in daily vaccination numbers on Tuesday (128,979 doses administered till 10 pm), compared to 511,882 Monday, data showed.

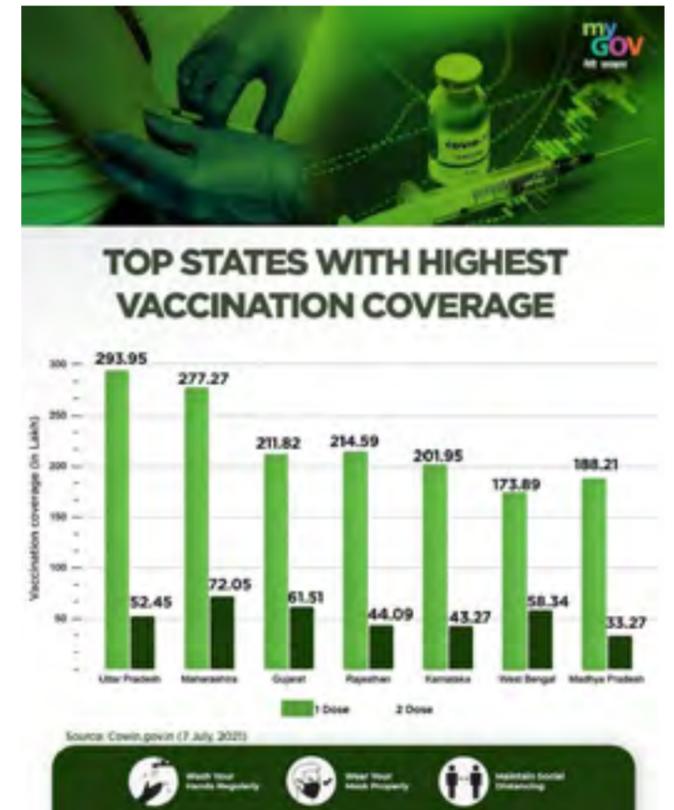
Guess which party runs these States?

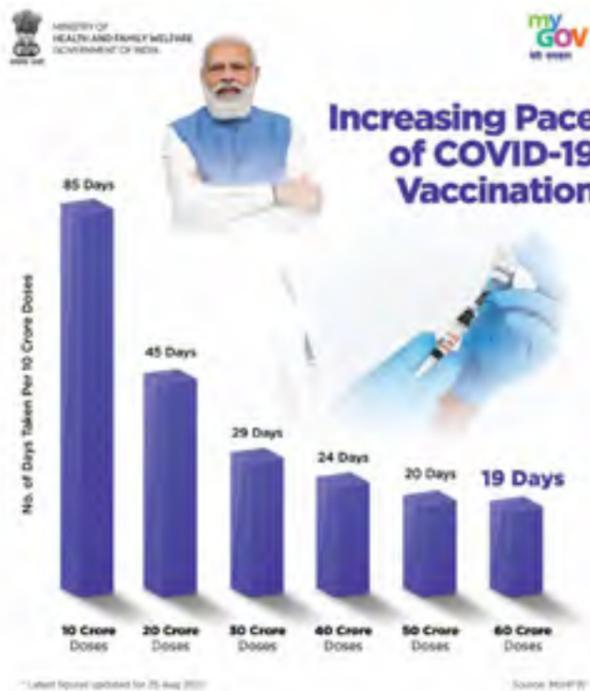
India’s COVID-19 vaccination programme is a colossal failure, and it is important to do a better job because there are real lives at stake. Do how much and how fast we vaccinate make a difference? Absolutely. All over the world, COVID-19’s base rate fallacy<sup>18</sup> is making headlines; in India the government reports this absolutely wrong statistic with impunity every day. Let us try and understand what the base rate fallacy is in how the government of India reports percentage of hospitalisations.

Let us assume that we have a good efficacious vaccine in supply – without this vaccine, nine out of 10 people get hospitalised (90%) and with it only one out of 10 (1%) get hospitalised. Now, suppose, 90 out of 100 people get vaccinated, what share of the hospitalised are vaccinated? What is the share if this is 50 out of 100 people?

When 90% are vaccinated, we find that nine vaccinated people and as many unvaccinated people are hospitalised, i.e., 50% of the hospitalised are vaccinated but there are only 18 hospitalisations in absolute numbers. Contrast this with what happens when there is a lower vaccinated proportion of population. When 50% people are vaccinated, we end up with five vaccinated people and 45 unvaccinated people being hospitalised. This means that barely 10% of those admitted to a hospital are vaccinated, but the absolute number of hospitalisations being 50. Thus, not only does vaccination save lives, but it also reduces the burden on a rapidly overwhelmed public health system. Therefore, the corollary is also true — a failed vaccination programme is a public health and policy disaster.

- 18. Long, Harry, “The base rate fallacy – what is it, and why does it matter”, Capgemini, October 9, 2020 URL: <https://www.capgemini.com/gb-en/2020/10/the-base-rate-fallacy-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter/> Last accessed August 12, 2021





#### DOES PREDICTION MAKE GOOD POLICY?

How did the Modi government make such a mess? Modi's decisions are the result of his fascination with poor policy advice received from the now widely publicised Menon model of Ashoka fame<sup>19</sup>. This is not the first time we know PM Modi to have been taken with bad ideas that have cost lives – demonetisation had similar story behind it.

We now know that compartmentalised models of COVID-19 spread are largely unreliable. Not only do we not have enough knowledge of potential factors that need to be factored into models, but we also lack procedure. While the now famous professor Menon has given many interviews and unarguably influenced government policy, his own interviews

state that they believe virus mutations are a random event (not conditioned by lock-down or social distancing methods) — a position which is scientifically incorrect. Menon's model was entirely untested (nobody ever checked if it reflected the accurate situation), used sparse input data and was never open to public scrutiny.

The model was not only poor science, the fact that it was taken seriously by the government was also poor policy. I venture that it was not accidental. Professor Menon has since gone on record to state that India's vaccinations aren't halting the pandemic in contrast to his earlier predictions.

The truth is that policy shouldn't be based on models; using evidence in policy-making is desirable but only in as much as it can help save lives.

Ultimately, the Modi government's COVID-19 strategy has centred on data obfuscation — making concentrated efforts to mask the failure of routine health services, attacking State federalism and using data sets as a political tool. These are all powerful weapons in the hands of an openly hostile, anti-people fascist government. For such governments, reliable data and truth in data collection and reporting is fundamentally

antithetical to capitalist interests. Modi's government has developed expertise in data obfuscation featuring techniques of dramatic storytelling, gaslighting and metric manipulation in tandem with amplification of false facts, the diffusion of post-truth, and the logic of numbers.

India's Covid numbers badly need public scrutiny and analysis. The data needs public ownership, for, policy is for the public and should also be determined by the public, no matter who is at the helm of affairs.

We now know that **compartmentalised models of COVID-19 spread are largely unreliable**. Not only do we **not have enough knowledge of potential factors** that need to be factored into models, but **we also lack procedure**.

19. Thapar, Karan, "Mid-May COVID Surge Could See 5-6 lakh Cases a Day, 7,000 Daily Deaths", The Wire, May 1, 2021  
URL: <https://science.thewire.in/health/watch-mid-may-covid-surge-could-see-5-6-lakh-cases-a-day-7000-daily-deaths/>  
Last accessed August 12, 2021



# Imperial vistas

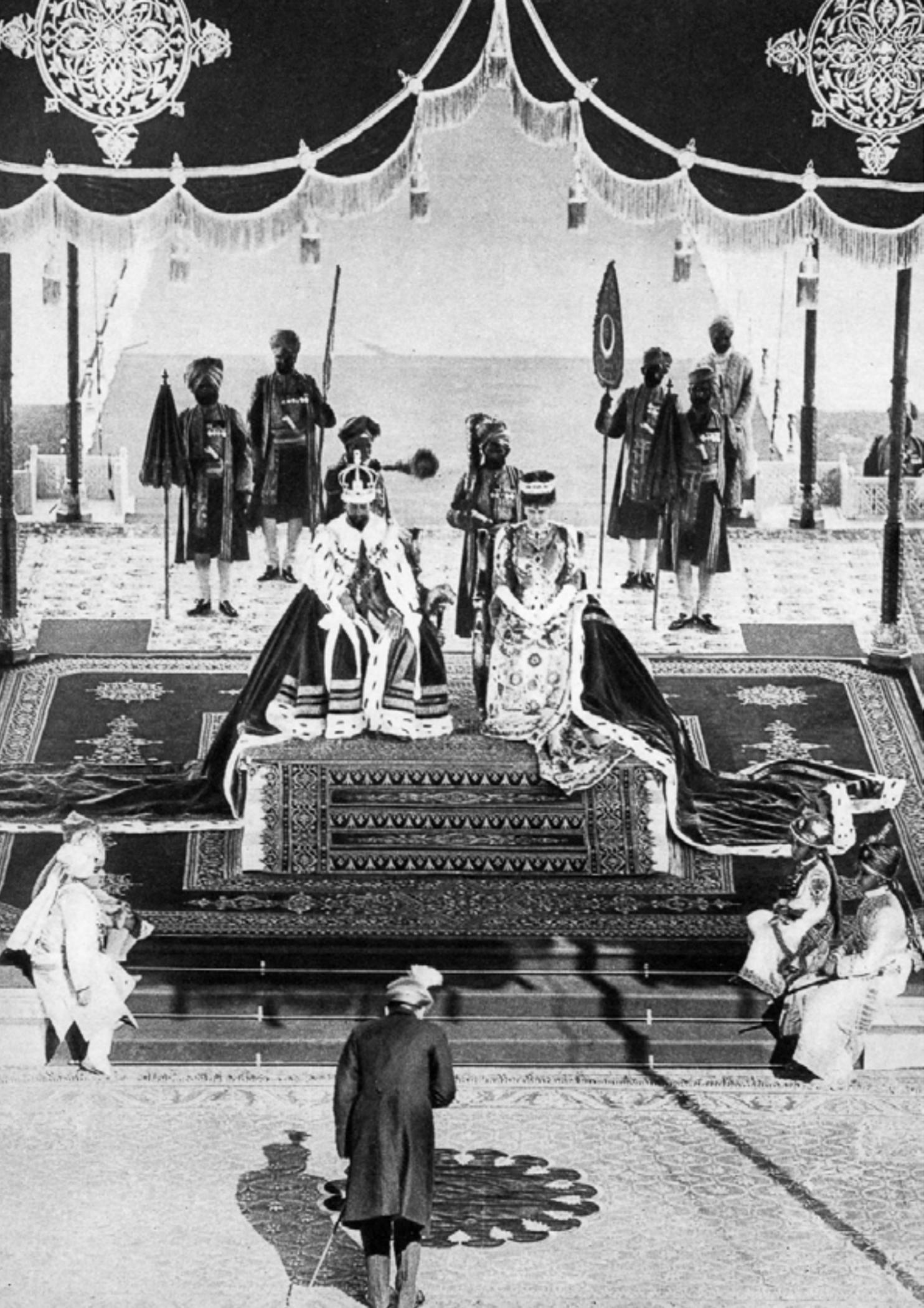
THE CENTRAL VISTA PROJECT RECALLS AN EARLIER, COLONIAL VISION FOR DELHI

by Vaishnavi

The City of Delhi Before the Siege - The Illustrated London News Jan 16, 1858 | [wikicommons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_1858.jpg)

- 1. The Jamma Masjid. 2. Office of the Jamma. 3. Postern Bridge. 4. Bellinghur, an ancient fort. 5. Palace and Gardens. 6. The Marble Hall, or Throne-room. 7. Main street of Delhi, Chandri Chawk. 8. Canal-street. 9. The Smoking-house. 10. The Jamma Masjid. 11. The Fakhra Khan. 12. The Masjid Fakhra. 13. Nigun Lod Gate. 14. Cashmere Gate.
- 15. Cabul Gate and Water Gate. 16. The Canal. 17. The Canal. 18. Lahore Gate. 19. Hindon College. 20. Ajmere Gate. 21. Turkoman Gate. 22. Delhi Gate. 23. Gaol. 24. Lunatic Asylum. 25. English Church. 26. Magazine and Store Houses. 27. Sakkar's House. 28. Custon's House. 29. Mariote Towers. 30. Kotah Minar. 31. Ruins of Ancient Delhi.





(left) The Nizam of Hyderabad pays homage to the Emperor and Empress at the Delhi Durbar, December 1911 | [wikicommons](#)

The new capital in all the grand structure of its conception, **betrayed a deep insecurity of the Indian nationalists** by the British.

#### THE POLITICS

On 12th December 1911, King George V announced the move of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. The move was undertaken for a variety of reasons.<sup>2</sup>

First, to enable the government to escape the uncomfortable political atmosphere of Calcutta triggered by the partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon. Second, the move was intended to create a new alliance with the Muslims of North India for whom Delhi had historic associations. To the Muslims, the British thought, it "...would be a source of unbounded gratification to see the ancient capital of Mughals restored to its proud position as the seat of the Empire."<sup>3</sup>

However, the main reason for the transfer was the first defeat of the British by the Indian nationalists in Bengal. This was more evident in the fact that from the stage of the Delhi Durbar, King George announced the revocation of the Partition of Bengal. The new capital in all the grand structure of its conception, betrayed a deep insecurity of the Indian nationalists by the British.

The Delhi of 1911, was in no way fit to house the entire imperial government. For the British this was an advantage, since this gave them a blank slate from which to start, and gave them an opportunity to elaborate a vision of imperial architecture. E.B. Havell, a retired principal of the Calcutta college of arts, first launched the campaign for an 'Indic' styled Delhi. He believed that the new capital would leave behind the atmosphere of Calcutta and find itself in the heartland of Hindustan, where the artistic traditions of Indian building were as alive as they were in the time of Akbar. He wanted to give the Saracenic architecture of India a new shape. He saw the British as the "trustee of India's intellectual and material possessions", which the rulers had an "imperial pledge to fulfil ...".<sup>4</sup>

Havell believed that the true India was not represented by the India of the Indian leaders who had been progressively captured by European nationalism but by Indian people abiding by Indian tradition. Britain's task was to secure "the goodwill of this India". He believed that a Delhi built by Indian craftsmen under British supervision would send out a message that Indian and British interests were not antagonistic to each other. A reconciliation of East and West, a new Renaissance. This new Delhi would stand as a lasting challenge to the European nationalism of the Indian elite.

2. Ibid

3. Ibid

4. Ibid, p. 213



E.B. Havell | [wikicommons](#)

Employing Indian peasants, Havell said, was a way to open up the British Empire to the common people. A way to cement British rule in India's history, so that it could ensure a place in the future.

This view found support with the then viceroy Lord Hardinge who was also against an outright expression of European architecture. He felt that the political importance of the new capital should not be ignored. Indians must not be made to feel that they have no say in the design of their new capital (though perhaps be asked to pay for it).

Havells' view of Indic style was agreed upon in early 1910. Gordon Sanderson of the Archaeological Survey of India was sent on a photographic tour of India to survey existing styles of traditional architecture. Sanderson concluded that despite a decline in British India, living art and master craftsmen could still be found in the princely state of the Rajputs. There was a petition filed to employ Indian craftsmen in the construction of New Delhi. The petitioners said that the government should take the advantage of traditional and genuine craftsmanship which has survived in India for the last 2000 years. In this way, a living craftsmanship could be saved from extinction and would tie the natives more closely to the mother country.

F.O. Oertel, a retired public work officer, argued that the new capital should use the example set by the Mughal emperor Akbar and create a 'true' Indian style, through a fusion of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' styles of architecture. He too was against simply replicating European Classicism as it would alienate the Indian peasants from British Raj.

However, the enthusiasm for Indian styles was a qualified one. Havell, for instance, was wary of the "archaeological pedantry" of the Indo-Saracenic builders. He acknowledged that the craftsmen would have to be directed by the Europeans to create an "Orientalised" design of British architecture with the help of the artists and craftsmen who were the descendants of the men who had built Fatehpur Sikri, Delhi and Agra.

Thus, there was a tension between the desire to promote native Indian styles of architecture, and the changing realities and priorities of British imperialism. The new capital was meant to signify the ending of an Empire based on conquest and its replacement by an empire driven by the consent and support of the people — which in this context meant Indian princes, peasants and artisans, while bypassing the Indian educated elite (and their 'European' nationalism).

### THE BAKER- LUTYENS IDEA OF DELHI

Edwin Lutyens was given the responsibility of the overall layout of the city and its centrepiece and Herbert Baker was given the responsibility of designing the Secretariat blocks which flanked the viceroy's house. Lutyens was opposed to the idea of mixing architecture and pandering to, what he called, "silly Hindu-Muslim stuff", planning the city far away from Mughal capital of Chandni Chowk. Meanwhile, Baker was concerned about the political implications of the new architecture of the capital. He said "Delhi must not be Indian, nor English, nor Roman, but it must be Imperial". The 'imperial' capital design according to him should be 'European' but suited to Indian settings.



Herbert Baker (1862–1946) | wikicommons

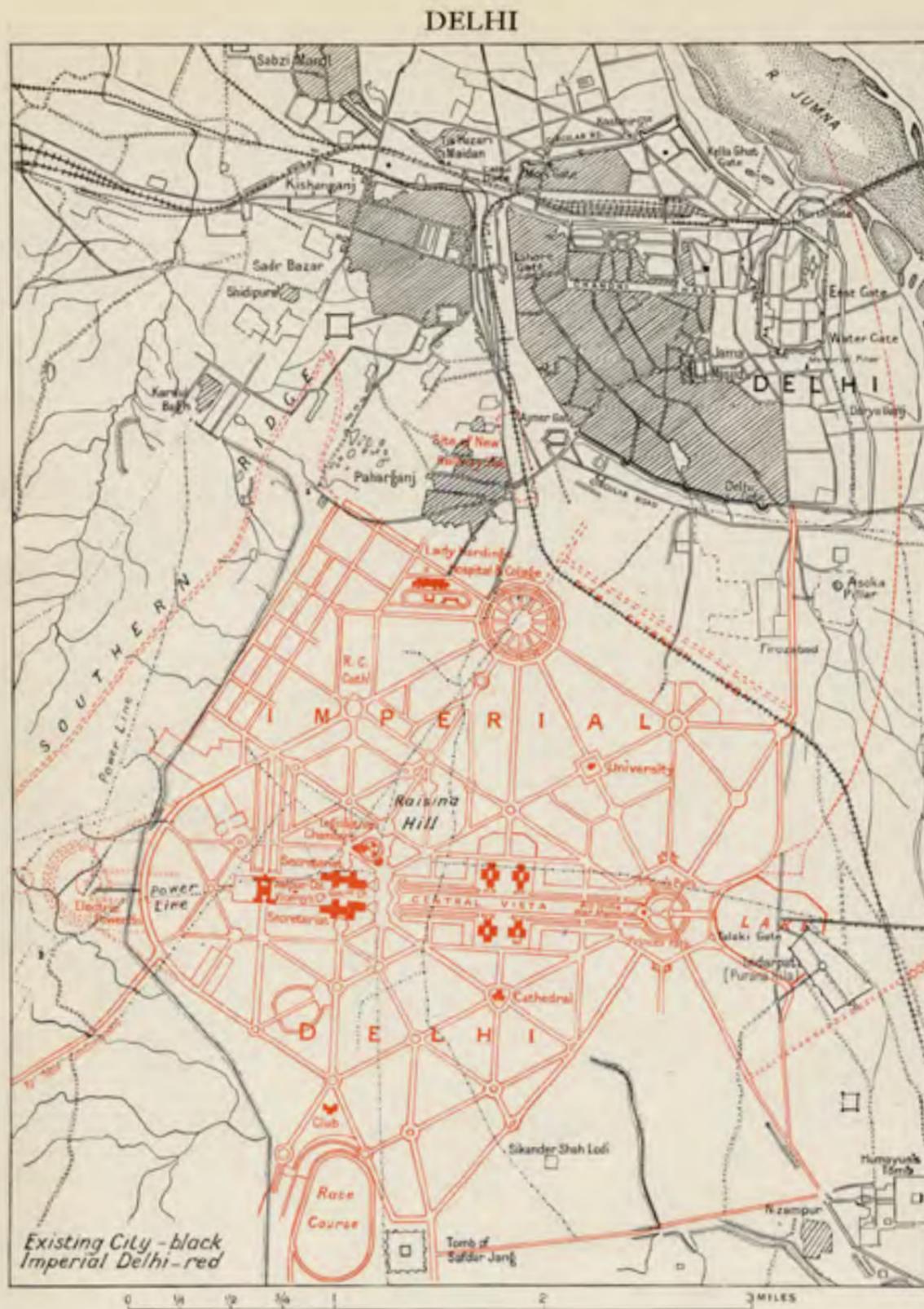
For Baker, the greatness of Indian architecture was not found in the shape of arches and vaults but in the "mass of walls and domes, the depth of the open hall and the raised platform on which the building stood." This was one of the reasons behind

The Secretariat Building reflects many of Baker's design preferences | pexels



building the Viceroy's Palace at an elevation, so that it could overlook all the previous capitals in the city.

Three features of Indian architecture appealed to Baker on a tour of cities of India: *chajja* or wide projecting cornice, *jaali* or the pierced stone lattice screen and *chattri* or the free-standing canopy turret. Baker adopted *chajja* and *jaali* because they could be used to make the architecture more climate friendly while the *chattri* was adopted for wholly aesthetic reasons, breaking the long, horizontal skyline of the flat roofed secretariat.



Map of Lutyens' projected Imperial Delhi, from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed., 1910-12 | wikicommons

Baker, Lutyens and Hardinge had conflicting views on the shape of the arch. Hardinge was in favour of the more Indian pointed Mughal arch and Baker and Lutyens preferred the round arch. Hardinge felt that the pointed arch would connect more to the east but Baker and Lutyens turned down his decision. Despite these differences, Baker and Hardinge were convinced of the political implications of architecture and saw the Oriental Classicism style as the foreshadowing of a happy marriage between the ideals of East and West.

Different architectural features had their distinct political meaning in the new Capital. The columns, porticoes and the domes of secretariats announced British sovereignty while the *chattris*, *jaalis* and *chajjas* proclaimed that the Raj was now Indian as well. However, Metcalf writes that the Oriental classicism style of architecture evaded as many problems as it solved. He argues that if Indo-Saracenic plans for New Delhi represented a world that was past, Baker's vision embodied an idealized vision of empire hardly less out of touch with twentieth century India.

**LUTYENS SARACENIC DESIGN AND VICEROY'S PALACE.**

Lutyens' favourite style was the beaux-arts classicism which he adopted as his own. Lutyens was against mixing Indian architecture with his western style and said that "You cannot play with the originality of classical order."<sup>5</sup> Lutyens saw it as his task to carry forward the baton of the classic architecture of Europe and "make it sane for India and Indian in its characters." Lutyens acknowledged that building Delhi would not be an easy task but he began his work not on ornaments but with a clearly defined "construction purpose." His architecture was more according to the demands of the material used, which brought him in conflict with Baker. He didn't pay any attention to the political importance of the architecture, of which Baker was hugely concerned. The disagreement started from Baker's initiative to place the secretariat buildings as well as the Viceroy's house over Raisina hill. Lutyens was convinced that only the Viceroy's house should be on top and it should be visible completely from the foot of Raisina Hill. Placed in back behind the secretariat, the Viceroy's house would be partially hidden from view as one approaches the hill. Lutyens fought unrelentingly to have his way and when he was refused, he broke angrily with Baker accusing him of deceiving him in drawing up the plans for the designing of the secretariat.



Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) | wikicommons

5. Ibid, p. 229



(above) construction around Raisina hill in 1920's and 1930's | [wikicommons](#)  
 (right) The erstwhile Viceroy's Palace which is now the Rashtrapati Bhavan | [wikicommons](#)

Lutyens' view of the new capital brought him in conflict with not only the supporters of Oriental classicism but also that of Havell who saw the design of the new capital as an opportunity for Indian peasants and craftsmen to showcase their talents.

**'..the construction of the Capital was the beginning of the end of the Empire.'**

The construction of the Viceroy's House successfully realized Lutyens' central objective, which was an assimilation of Indian forms, but rigorously controlled and subordinated, with a European idealism, to create architecture expressive of the ideals of the British Empire. The massive forms and colonnades had the authority derived from European Classicism, while the *chajja*, jutting forth eight feet from the

wall and the *chattris* marching along the roof line and clustering along the base of the dome represented Indic beauty. Unlike Baker's version on the secretariat buildings, Lutyens' *chattris* were reinterpretations of the basic forms.

For architectural inspiration, Lutyens looked to ancient Buddhist styles, rather than Mughal, thus bypassing, or evading, the communal issue. The inspiration for the dome of the Viceroy's house, for instance, is from the great *stupa* at Sanchi.

Though Lutyens rejected Indo-Saracenic architecture he didn't create an alternative. His despotism together with his knowledge of beaux arts, embodied the great idea of an imperial capital. Although through his talent he surpassed the limitations of 'orientalised classicism', the Viceroy's house didn't point toward an architecture that could define a new relationship between India and Britain. Confined within the classic tradition of European nationalism, it led nowhere. As Metcalf writes in his book, 'the construction of the Capital was the beginning of the end of the Empire.'





# Atmanirbharta

THE ACCELERATING DESCENT TO  
NEOLIBERAL ATOMISATION

*by Nagarjun Kandukuru*

## “There's no such thing as society, only individuals and families.”

Margaret Thatcher,  
UK Prime Minister.

In the '80s, Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, launched an assault on working people that would signal the start of what we call 'neoliberalism' today. Claiming that public expenditure was at the heart of Britain's contemporary economic crisis, she instituted a series of cuts to welfare programmes.<sup>1</sup> Childcare benefits were slashed,

and sturdy social programmes were replaced by band-aid measures like food banks. Her message was clear: to overcome the crisis, people had a moral responsibility to swallow a tough pill and get on with it. Funnily enough, this austerity didn't apply to big corporations, who were soon unburdened by several taxes and regulations.

Neoliberalism has become something of an umbrella term today but has an exact history. It was coined in 1938 by Mises and Hayek, two market fundamentalists working to destroy social democracy. Their ideological project would bear fruit in four decades. It wasn't as if the neoliberals were utopians opposed to state power, as is seen in the example of Chile. They were perfectly willing to use state brutality to preserve what they considered the sanctity of the market. Eventually, the 'postwar consensus' of Keynesianism in western Europe broke down in the face of economic crisis. There was a ready alternative to replace it. When Thatcher and Reagan took power, so followed the crushing of the trade unions, deregulation, and massive tax cuts for the wealthy.

Thatcherite policies have been taking hold in India since the '90s. It is not as if the pre '90's state-capitalist order cared much about services like public healthcare — but a sort of doubling down has happened, with a steady withdrawal of the state from all its welfare responsibilities. During the Covid-19 crisis, the Indian Government made clear its economic vision for society: atomised individuals battling for survival on their own, while the state aids and abets private Capital. Apathy towards the working class has marked the pandemic response.

They were perfectly willing to use state brutality to preserve what they considered the sanctity of the market.

### A NEW WORD IN THE INDIAN LEXICON

Just as the pandemic hit India, Prime Minister Modi launched the *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan*, or The Mission for a Self-reliant India, in May 2020. While talking about a putative economic programme, the PM reminded his vast TV audience that they bore

1. Dean, Malcolm. 2013. “Margaret Thatcher's Policies Hit the Poor Hardest – and It's Happening Again.” The Guardian. The Guardian. April 9, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/apr/09/margaret-thatcher-policies-poor-society>.

the responsibility of ensuring that the '21st century will belong to India'. Self-reliance was the only way for India, and indeed for the world, he declared, liberally sprinkling his televised speeches with Sanskrit quotes.

This declaration was entirely consistent with past speeches and policy. In a March 2020 address, the PM had discouraged people from check-ups, asked them to take help from family doctors, and essentially laid down the line clearly: you are on your own. Such calls to the public for 'sacrifice' have become standard since demonetisation, during which most of the sacrifice came from the poorest of the working class.

...calls to the public for 'sacrifice' have become standard since demonetisation.

While the PM was expounding on *atmanirbharta*, migrant workers were already practising it. State data show that 10 million migrants were internally displaced in complying with the 4-hr notice for a 21-day lockdown.<sup>2</sup> Absent the political will to open overflowing state granaries, they had to fend for themselves.<sup>3</sup> With no public transport made available, they walked thousands of kilometers home. The government claimed no information exists on an estimated death toll of migrant workers but there are estimates of at least 971 dead as of July 2020, with 200 of the deaths due to starvation. Instead of addressing this misery, the state was busy elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The Uttar Pradesh state government used the cover of Covid to deprecate already weak worker protections<sup>5</sup>, like minimum wage laws and the right to unionise.

### AUSTERITY FOR EVERYONE, EXCEPT CAPITAL

As the devastating second wave took hold in April 2021, the PM, usually not averse to speeches and grand pronouncements, went silent.

The urban middle-class, a core constituency of the Sangh, found to their surprise that even they had to be *atmanirbhar*. Can't find a hospital bed? Ask on Twitter. Private hospitals charging tens of lakhs for ICU? Well, that's what Milaap is for.<sup>6</sup> Running out of oxygen in a few hours? Try Twitter again. Can't find a slot on CoWin for a jab?

2. Sharma, Niharika. “India's Harsh Covid-19 Lockdown Displaced at Least 10 Million Migrants.” Quartz. Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://qz.com/india/1903018/indias-covid-19-lockdown-displaced-at-least-10-million-migrants/>.

3. “Coronavirus: Millions in India on the Brink of Starvation despite Overflowing Granaries.” The Straits Times. April 22, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/millions-in-india-on-the-brink-of-starvation-despite-overflowing-granaries>.

4. “While Centre Has 'No Such Data' on Deaths of Migrants & Job Losses, Here's What Reports Say.” 2020. News18. September 14, 2020. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/while-centre-has-no-such-data-on-deaths-of-migrant-labourers-job-losses-heres-what-reports-say-2876305.html>.

5. Doshi, Hetal. “Suspension of Labour Laws in Uttar Pradesh amidst COVID-19: A Fundamental Rights Emergency? | OHRH.” Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/suspension-of-labour-laws-in-uttar-pradesh-amidst-covid-19-a-fundamental-rights-emergency/>.

6. Url: <https://milaap.org/communities/covid-19>

Learn to write code<sup>7</sup>, or get on a Telegram group.

After 16 months of the pandemic, as many as 97% of Indians are poorer<sup>8</sup>. Low-income households lost two-thirds of their income by early June 2020, and as of October 2020, the average household was still 17% poorer than it was in January before the lockdown<sup>9</sup>. Women — particularly Muslim women, single women, and rural women — were the hardest-hit in terms of income loss, job loss<sup>10</sup>. A disproportionate figure (75%+) of Dalit and tribal families reduced food consumption during the lockdown<sup>11</sup>, as prices of diesel and cooking gas, two determinants of food security, continue to rise<sup>12</sup>. Doctors and nurses haven't been paid in three months<sup>13</sup>. 80% of Government schools have held no classes for lack of teacher training and functioning Internet connections<sup>14</sup>.

Yet, there is no meaningful action from the state; just empty noises<sup>15</sup> about healthcare budget increases — despite a 10% increase, health expenditure as a proportion of GDP remains ~0.34%, compared to the world average of 10%<sup>16</sup> — and old schemes packaged as relief measures<sup>17</sup>. Funnily, there is one set of people that do seem to receive help: Big Capitalists get Government contracts to the tune of INR 8.6 billion to rebuild Central Vista<sup>18</sup> — and achieve environmental clearances with unseemly haste<sup>19</sup>.

7. "Having Trouble Finding Slots on CoWIN? These COVID-19 Vaccine Appointment Tracker Sites Can Save You Some Time." 2021. The Financial Express. May 3, 2021. <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/technology/having-trouble-finding-slots-on-cowin-these-covid-19-vaccine-appointment-tracker-sites-can-save-you-some-time/2245189/>.
8. Ethiraj, Govindraj. 2021. "97% Indians Poorer Post-Covid; Steady Fall in Salaried Jobs: Mahesh Vyas." Business Standard India, May 29, 2021. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/cmie-ceo-says-97-indians-poorer-post-covid-steady-fall-in-salaried-jobs-121052900142\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/cmie-ceo-says-97-indians-poorer-post-covid-steady-fall-in-salaried-jobs-121052900142_1.html).
9. Azim Premji University. "STATE of WORKING INDIA 2021 One Year of Covid-19 Centre for Sustainable Employment."
10. Dalberg. "Impacts of Covid-19." Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://impactsocovid.in/impact-of-covid-19-on-women>.
11. "Hunger Index among Poor in 11 States Continues to Be Dire Post-Lockdown: Survey." The Wire, December 13, 2020. <https://thewire.in/rights/hunger-watch-survey-lockdown>.
12. "Domestic Cooking Gas Price Hiked by Rs 25.50." Livemint. July 1, 2021. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/domestic-cooking-gas-prices-raised-11625131691913.html>.
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14. Rozario, Anthony S. 2020. "No Education for 80% Govt School Students since Lockdown: Survey." TheQuint. September 15, 2020. <https://www.thequint.com/news/education/no-online-class-for-80-government-school-students-oxfam-india-survey>.
15. Bhuyan, Anoo. "Despite Pandemic, Health Budget Sees Little Real Increase." India Spend. February 2, 2021. <https://www.indiaspend.com/budget/despite-pandemic-health-budget-sees-little-real-increase-721259>.
16. Sinha, Dipa. 2021. "Explained: Despite Govt Claims, India's Health Budget Only Around 0.34% of GDP." The Wire Science. February 1, 2021. [https://science.thewire.in/health/union-health-budget-nirmala-sitharaman-covid-19-pmasby-allocation-gdp-expert-analysis/Current Health Expenditure \(% of GDP\), World Bank Open Data](https://science.thewire.in/health/union-health-budget-nirmala-sitharaman-covid-19-pmasby-allocation-gdp-expert-analysis/Current%20Health%20Expenditure%20(%20of%20GDP),%20World%20Bank%20Open%20Data). Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.GD.ZS>
17. "Nothing Really New: Stimulus Package for Health Sector so Far Has Been Unimpressive." The Wire. May 25, 2020. Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://thewire.in/economy/nirmala-sitharaman-health-sector-stimulus>.
18. "Tatas Win Contract Worth Rs 861.9 Crore to Build New Parliament Building." India News, September 16, 2020. <https://www.india.com/news/india/tatas-win-contract-worth-rs-861-9-crore-to-build-new-parliament-building-4143237/>.
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## NEOLIBERALISM IS ALSO A CULTURAL PROJECT

This Government isn't alone in having handled an emergency poorly, and it certainly won't be the last. But it does stand out for its aggressive refusal to be held accountable — people who question are, the PM said ominously, *andolanjeevis*<sup>20</sup>. This is in keeping with the ethos of Neoliberalism, in which the state isn't answerable to the people. If anything, the people are accountable to the state.

The Government may have organised the superspreader Kumbh Mela, but the police thrashes those who fall afoul of Covid protocol<sup>21</sup>. Even beggars and homeless people should provide labour for the privilege of using toilets, the Bombay High Court declared<sup>22</sup>.

A popular meme on WhatsApp read: "If you don't come out of this quarantine with either a new skill, your side hustle started, or more knowledge gained, then you never lacked the time. You lacked discipline."

Establishment figures have been keen to individualise success and failure. Mohan Bhagwat of the RSS pushed for a "new model of development" based on self-reliance.

The exhorted Mukesh Ambani said in a public speech<sup>23</sup>: "Positivity acts like a highly effective medicine. It works wonders for individuals, families, and for society." By implication, if your family is struggling to survive, you aren't being positive enough. If you're a farmer who doesn't think he can take a multinational corporation to court for reneging on a direct contract, you probably don't have 'unlimited self-belief'.

## PUSHING BACK WITH COLLECTIVE ACTION

Three decades on, the results of Thatcherite austerity, accelerated by her successors, have been dire in the UK. Poverty and inequality are through the roof, as are house

This Government isn't alone in having **handled an emergency poorly**, and it certainly won't be the last. But it does stand out for its **aggressive refusal to be held accountable...**

20. "Modi's Phrase 'Andolan Jivi' Ridicules Ambedkar's Slogan, 'Educate, Agitate, Organise.'" The Wire. Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://thewire.in/rights/narendra-modi-andolan-jivi-br-ambedkar>.
21. "Madhya Pradesh: Police Thrash Woman for Not Wearing Mask in Public." 2021. The Indian Express. May 20, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/madhya-pradesh-police-thrash-woman-for-not-wearing-mask-in-public-7322768/>.
22. "State Can't Provide Everything to Homeless, Beggars: Bombay HC." 2021. Hindustan Times. July 3, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/state-can-t-provide-everything-to-homeless-beggars-bombay-hc-101625327021749.html>.
23. "Reliance AGM 2021: Read the Full Text of Mukesh Ambani's Speech." Moneycontrol. June 24, 2021. Accessed September 7, 2021. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/reliance-agm-2021-read-the-full-text-of-mukesh-ambanis-speech-7082561.html>.



Photo by Pop & Zebra on Unsplash

prices<sup>24</sup>. The National Health Service has been decimated<sup>25</sup>, and a loneliness epidemic is raging across Britain<sup>26</sup>.

Even parts of the right-wing recognise the ruin of the Neoliberal path we're on. But their 'solutions' — such as those proposed by Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) and similar conservative small-business organisations — include scepticism of free trade<sup>27</sup> and advocating the ban of foreign players like Walmart<sup>28</sup>. These are reactionary responses to symptoms; a mix of protectionism, crony capitalism, and feudalism. Functionally, it is an impossible return to the past when the caste order reigned supreme, and the peasantry and working class was at the mercy of a *zamindar*. It is a belief in the family

24. "Precarity and Housing Politics in Austerity London, UK." 2012. Antipode Online. April 16, 2012. <https://antipodeonline.org/2012/04/16/precarity-and-housing-politics-in-austerity-london-uk/>.

25. "How a Decade of Austerity Brought the NHS to Its Knees." Tribune Magazine. July 1, 2020. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/07/how-a-decade-of-austerity-brought-the-nhs-to-its-knees>.

26. "The 'Despair' and 'Loneliness' of Austerity Britain." 2012. The Guardian. July 17, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jul/17/despair-loneliness-austerity-britain>.

27. "बाजार के भरोसे खेती को छोड़ने के जोखिम." Swadeshi Online. January 25, 2021. Accessed September 7, 2021. <https://swadeshionline.in/news/-risk-of-abandoning-farming-depending-on-the-market>.

28. "ई रिटेल में अनैतिक व्यापार: अमेज़न हुआ निरंकुश." Swadeshi Online. August 18, 2021. Accessed September 7, 2021. <https://swadeshionline.in/news/immoral-trade-in-e-retail-amazon-became-autocratic>.

structure to relieve the state of all its welfare commitments<sup>29</sup> without realising the injustices that it would lead to.

Those of us on the left know there is a better way. If the torrent of *atmanirbharta* has been accelerating the erosion of our collectivist ethos, we must come together and forge solidarities and consciousness to stop it. We must demand a fairer share of the pie, seek a re-evaluation of the state's relationship with its citizens. Recent political mobilisation in the wake of Covid-19 — spanning students and citizen groups, civil society organisations, worker associations and unions — must urgently make healthcare a demand and continue to hold the Government responsible for welfare. Healthcare, a fundamental condition for the running of any society, ought to be the basic right of all.

29. "Our Philosophy." Swadeshi Online. Accessed September 7, 2021. <https://swadeshionline.in/page/philosophy>.

# When Money is Meaningless

THE PANDEMIC HAS CAUSED AN ENTIRE CLASS  
TO QUESTION THE VALUE OF FINANCIAL SECURITY

*by T. Sriraman*

The horrors of what was termed by the establishment as **the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic** in India, in April and May 2021, **will likely never be forgotten.**

for structural change. They are status quoist, coming from continuing caste and class privileges. Their vocabulary combines a rhetoric of modernity and nationalism to decry the 'old ways' of both 'traditional violent times' and a 'pre-liberalised' economy. Instead, they claim to choose rather proudly the pursuit of a long-term course of wealth accumulation. Hence, they reside mainly in urban areas, own or dabble in 'business' and/or labour in all kinds of sectors with the aim to become a labour aristocracy, or even a petit bourgeois, by dint of 'hard work' and 'sound financial decisions'. Many of my friends, acquaintances, and family, have been, and are these people. They run inherited businesses or pursue 'permanent tenure' jobs in both public and private sectors, found start-ups or social enterprises, seek success in art and entertainment industries and as 'freelance consultants' (the entrepreneur, artiste, genius, idol and expert all rolled in one). And I am no different. Except in one key respect.

I never managed to accumulate wealth, neither have I sought to do so, especially because I seem to have missed the 'sound financial decisions' part of the memo. My natal family never seemed to have known enough to adequately plan, save or accumulate anything of financial worth, nor did they teach me to do so. My chosen education and then employment, is in a sector of high wage gaps, with perhaps the most inadequate resources to deal with inflation. I don't own land nor a depreciating asset because I always had too little income and too many liabilities to ever save, let alone invest. I have long been involved in repaying debts I never sought, resulting from personal relationships. Added to this, is an imposter syndrome and sheer belief that I

**I never managed to accumulate wealth, neither have I sought to do so, especially because I seem to have missed the 'sound financial decisions' part of the memo.**

Not even by the largely deliberately unconcerned section of people who form a self-professed 'middle class'.

These are people known for practicing a determinedly 'apolitical' lifestyle by choice, eschewing collective action

was meant to do this particularly underpaid 'good' work. So, I always felt incapable and scared of bank loans and schemes etc., let alone any asset building. While all around me, everyone had been practicing and preaching 'good personal finance habits'.

So, I often wondered whether I had been a fool. Is paying rent through one's nose on a peanuts salary for living in a shoebox size space in the most dilapidated building in the entire city really any better than the knowledge that an EMI of a similar amount or even more will at least result in 'my own house' or assured shelter, some day? Should I not have overcome my fear of committing to long term recurring payments because a credit card or a good medical insurance policy would really help when life tosses crises at me?

Eventually, however, I began to feel less of a fool. Slowly, I went from being labour to labour aristocracy (i.e., 'management') in my sector, moved into a shared household and to accumulating some balance in the bank. All this still isn't as much as I 'should' have accumulated; yet I found that I was more or at least as 'secure' in a precarious economy as the people who had been accumulating wealth all their lives. And it was my direst warnings to them coming true in our lived experience - about how late capitalism would manifest in our country. I, in any case, needed no further proof that capitalism is not meant to do anything good or lasting for anyone, except for the capitalists themselves— and it looks like they are also going to destroy each other and the world as we know it, soon enough.

**People had health insurance policies but there were no hospital beds; they had lakhs in savings but there wasn't oxygen to buy. Homes and vehicles had been bought on loan, but incomes were stalled and with that so were EMI payments.**

But, for said friends, family and acquaintances, **the months of April and May 2021 have proven** this in a singularly interesting manner. It was the time when **money did not mean anything, anymore.**

People who had saved and invested all their lives, were now frantically trying to switch from land and builder flats to financial assets, due to declining markets across all sectors.

People had health insurance policies but there were no hospital beds; they had lakhs in savings but there wasn't oxygen to buy. Homes and vehicles had been bought on loan, but incomes were stalled and with that so were EMI payments. Bank loan departments began to call families and turn up at their homes to harass them.

People I know— long-time critics of anything ‘public’ and ‘free/low-cost’— refused beds that many of us doing mutual aid work found for them in government hospitals and Covid-19 centres, in favour of private hospital beds only to find that private hospitals, being less regulated, were charging Rs 20 lakhs or more for long admission periods of even ten days, far beyond what insurance claims and savings could cover.

I heard someone suggest that there are cover restoration options now, but what does that mean for someone who can’t even afford to continue their existing policy beyond the current term because they have lost their job in this economy? Purchasing term cover to protect your family from debt or homelessness in the event of one’s death means nothing, again, when it is a single and limited income household.

Classist aesthetics acquired or cultivated with a full belief in the capitalist mode of success also began to falter. People who would have looked horrified at the very idea of standing in queues themselves, found that having the money for a home ICU set up and home collection for expensive tests meant nothing when these services became few and far between, mainly because the personnel doing this work began to fall prey to the disease themselves or fled to their hometowns.

Even doctors working in Covid-19 wards were denied term extensions on their insurance policies. These are all things that happened with and to people I know.

All this, amidst social media and non-mainstream news media reports of billionaire industry ‘giants’ growing obscenely richer by the second, and massive governmental concessions to them; of expenditure on grandiose buildings and events, by both entities, as well as of their concerted efforts to amend labour and farm laws towards further suppression of workers’ and farmers’ rights.

And for the first time, I began to hear these people say that **capitalism does not work.**

“It doesn’t work when the government is a crony to capitalists”, I heard a friend say, correctly defining what has been popularly misinterpreted as the reverse.

“It doesn't work when the best advice a personal finance expert can give is to spend more money, and even that won't guarantee safety and adequate treatment when a loved one is ill.”

“It doesn't work because not enough of the country’s resources have been spent on health and sci-tech that ensures healthcare and vaccines for all, as well as education, jobs/income and housing.”

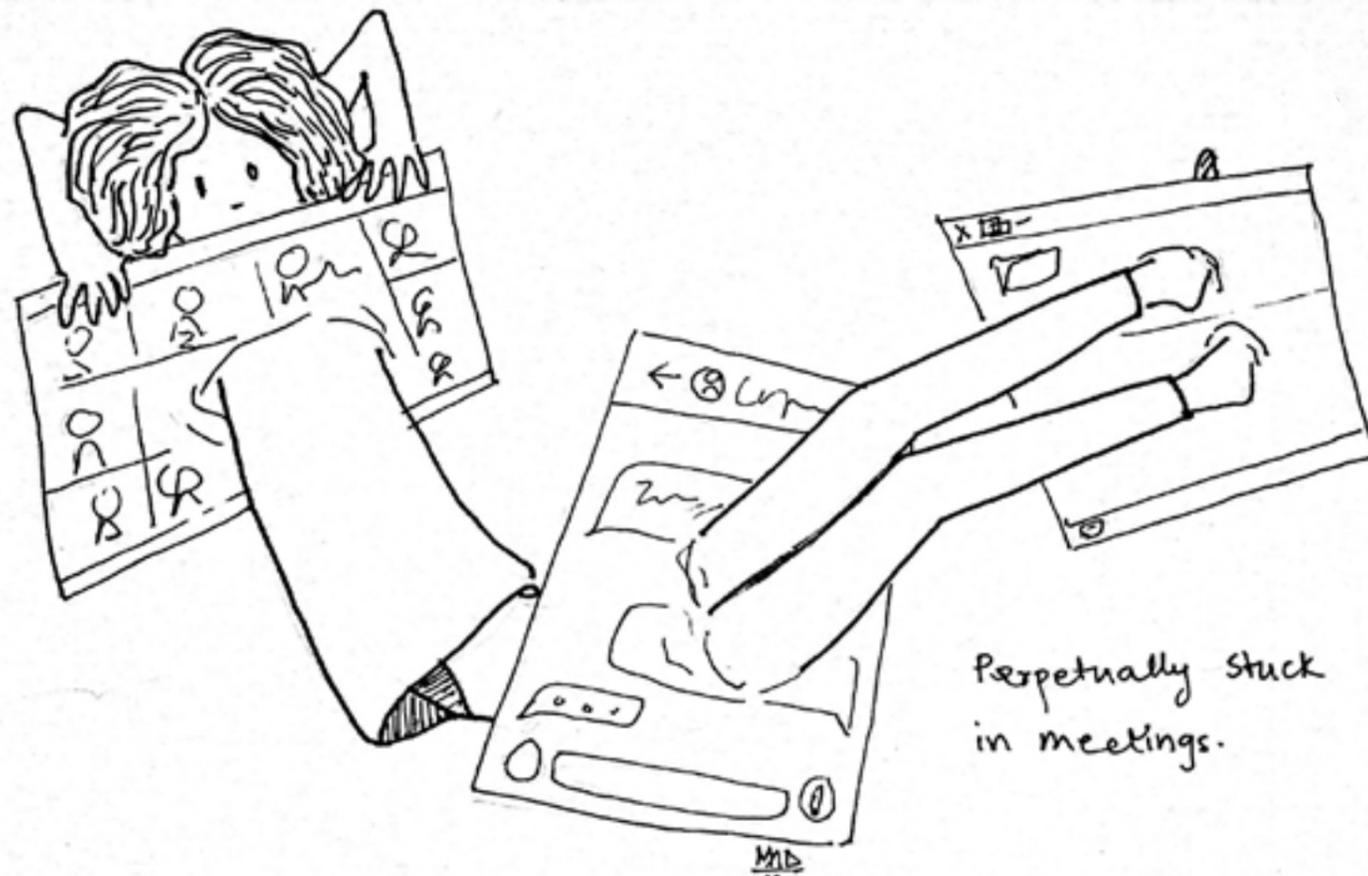
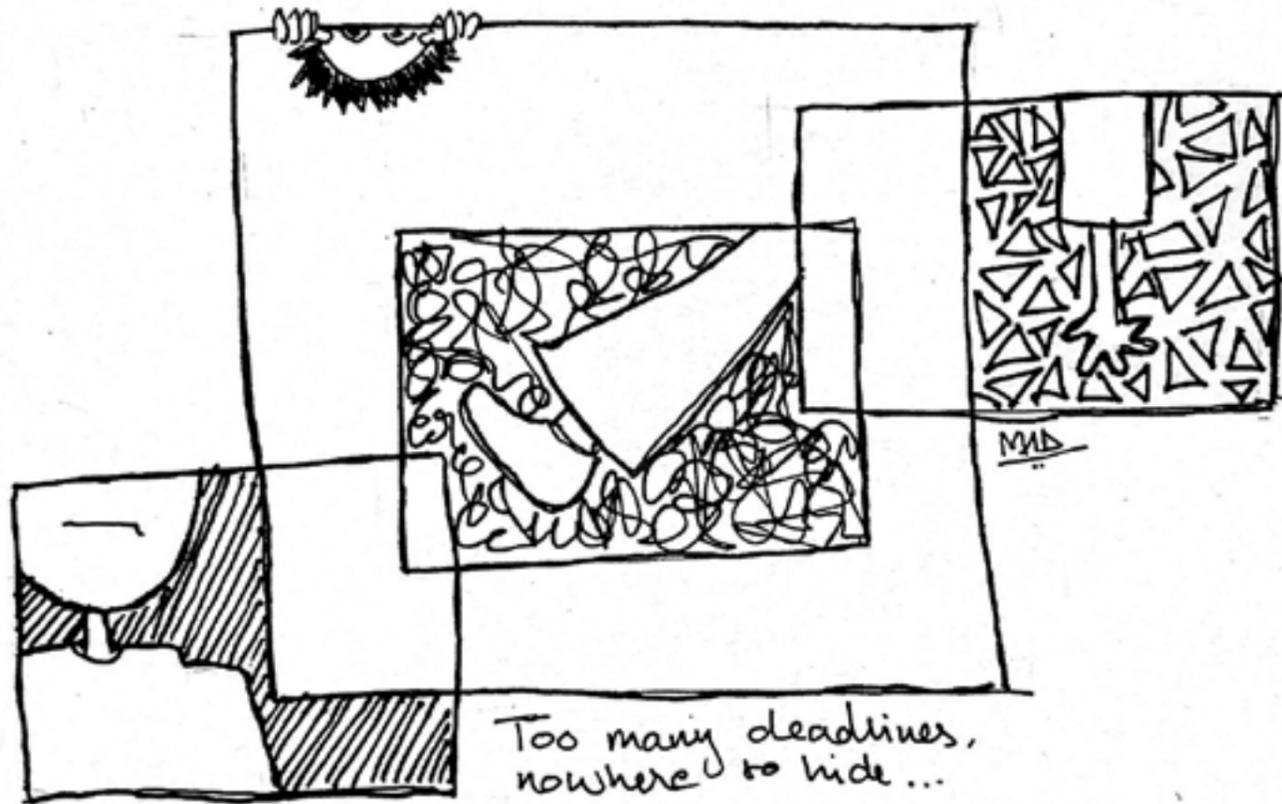
And in response I say: Here is socialism. In fact, it has been here all along.

The value form — the question of why essential services or goods, critical to the maintenance of life are expressed in terms of money or price — cannot work and will not work for any good, because it doesn’t mean anything for us really in capitalism, where we do not control all means of production collectively. All resources need to belong to and be controlled by all to ensure that everyone has equal access to healthcare, oxygen, food, housing and most importantly now, vaccines. Money (in itself) means or guarantees zilch in this regard, especially due to the particular nature of this pandemic. The limitations of securing yourself using money and accumulated wealth alone, is what has been revealed, especially, to a huge proportion of the urban, white-collared labour, labour aristocracy and even the petite bourgeois, in India.

This is what I have been saying to everyone I know. Often, I barely need to elaborate even this much. They all seem to know, and have begun to articulate it, in their own ways. On social media, in personal conversations, even in political and material transactions of daily life. They are feeling actively, deeply alienated by, and in, capitalism now, and I have never felt closer to many (if not most) of them.

My own relationship with money will continue to remain tenuous and fraught with alienation, at least while the value form and its expression as price lasts (I doubt I will outlive it). It is just extremely interesting to me — and dare I say hopeful — that an otherwise selfish status quoist section of society around me has woken up and realised that money doesn’t really mean anything, anymore. And that capitalism won’t save anyone, certainly not them, no matter how willingly and earnestly they participate in its project.

All resources need to **belong to and be controlled by all** — to ensure that **everyone has equal access** to healthcare, oxygen, food, housing and **most importantly now, vaccines.**



# Overwhelmed by work

by Madhushree

# Labour Crisis as Opportunity

HOW THE PANDEMIC WAS USED TO ACCELERATE  
LABOUR REFORM AND DEREGULATION

*by Sreyan C.*

## ‘Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change’

This quote, by Milton Friedman, is a clarion call for opportunistic neo-liberal reform in times of crisis and still continues to guide the hand of pandemic policymakers.<sup>1</sup> Indian governments especially, have taken

this call to heart, using for instance, the 1991 balance of payments crisis to institute wide-ranging neoliberal reform. Even before the current crisis, the Indian government had begun the process of diluting the existing structure of labour law, built up over decades, with a set of four labour codes. This process would accelerate dramatically as the full consequences of the pandemic started to play out.

Pandemic-induced acceleration of neoliberal reform came at a time when the unwinding of legal protections had been accepted as the consensus policy direction by the government.<sup>2</sup> This was done in spite of the concerns raised by various stakeholders. By the time the first wave of the pandemic hit, the labour reform process had gone through a series of public drafts and a long-drawn but largely ineffective consultation process — most stakeholders withdrew in stages due to the unilateral outcomes of the consultations.<sup>3</sup>

### PANDEMIC POLICY MAKING

The pandemic had two divergent effects on the status-quo political consensus. On the one hand, the crisis made clear the need for a much higher level of public provisioning of essential goods and services, increases in government spending as well as an upgradation of health infrastructure. The policy response however, was quite the opposite — the pandemic provided the much-needed cover of a Friedmanite ‘good

crisis’ for various governments to accelerate the policy of deregulation.

The mania for deregulation during the pandemic would express itself at both the state and central levels, through the process of bringing the labour codes into effect through central model rules as well as state level attempts to wipe large parts of the labour regime off the law books.

Even before the current crisis, the Indian government had begun the process of diluting the existing structure of labour law, built up over decades, with a set of four labour codes.

1. Friedman, Milton. 1962. *Capitalism And Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2. "India's Mismanagement Of Labour Law Reform Continues With The Modi Government". 2021. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/labour/labour-law-reform-narendra-modi-government>.

3. "Central Trade Unions Boycott Government Meeting Over Labour Rules, Call Consultation 'Farce' | Newsclick". 2021. *Newsclick*. <https://www.newsclick.in/central-trade-unions-boycott-government-meeting-labour-rules-call-consultation-farce>.

The retreat of the government in a climate of increasing precarity for both industrial workers and non-industrial workers has not been smooth. It sparked massive protests by trade unions supported by farmer unions, a boycott of Parliamentary processes by the electoral Opposition and a ground-swell of agnostic local support for the agitators. Even, the RSS-backed labour union, the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh- while maintaining its allegiance to the government, continued to agitate in refusing to accept the new labour codes or wholesale suspension of labour laws as notified by many states in May-June 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Within the present template of policy consultation, laws were not being analysed for content, effect on outcomes and constitutionality. Rather, a narrative of inevitable unpopular reform, superficial consultation and reductionist logic of market efficiency was employed to tackle some visible (but irrelevant) problems. A large part of the misinformation in the policy process was driven by the realisation that left unchallenged, people’s movements have the chance to radically change inequality outcomes in moments of great crises.

...rights are not repealed but are made slowly ineffective over time. Statutory rights thus die a slow death in the limbo of executive discretion.

### LABOUR POLICY

In the case of labour legislation, a trend can be observed in how systematic dilution of statutory rights has proceeded. The tactic employed was to use the consolidation process to repeal all existing laws, and provide an incomplete replication by leaving the most important details to delegated legislations - through rules, circulars, office memos and the like. This ensures that rights are not repealed but are made slowly ineffective over time. Statutory rights thus die a slow death in the limbo of executive discretion.

The narrative that accompanies this is that inflexible and rigid labour laws are a disincentive to new investments — removing them would bring new investments and consequent jobs.

As the pandemic caught a central government off-guard in its reaction, the policy reaction from the policy-makers was to clutch at straws. In a terse and later withdrawn order, the relevant authority reminded employers that their legal obligations were to not remove workers from payroll and pay due wages immediately.<sup>5</sup> This notification

4. "BMS To Oppose Suspension Of Labour Laws By Some States". 2021. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bms-to-oppose-suspension-of-labour-laws-by-some-states/article31559722.ece>.

5. Online, FE. 2021. "Home Ministry Withdraws Circular On Compulsory Wage Payment To Employees". *The Financial Express*. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/home-ministry-full-salary-payment-during-lockdown-circular-withdrawn/1963629/>.

would have little effect as barely 68% of workers would receive due wages, while only around 18% continued to receive wages during the first phases of lockdown.<sup>6</sup> Migrants attempting to return home suffered greatly in what has been described as the greatest forced exodus since the Partition.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the narrative of migrant workers as helpless victims of mis-information was used to justify policy paralysis which led to avoidable death and suffering.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, many state governments (like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) chose to suspend the labour framework in their states altogether. Labour protection norms and ideals were trotted out as narrative in the face of a man-made migrant crisis, but the real reason lay elsewhere. It was that after the crisis plateaued into a lull, and the need of continuous profitability started catching up to the capitalist class, a huge supply gap started emerging in the labour market.<sup>9</sup> Across sectors and geographies, the trauma of a policy-induced forced march showed its effect on the psyche of migrant workers.<sup>10</sup> To induce workers to return, business owners were being required to accept changes to extant working conditions. Further, employers were agreeing, piece-meal, to a number of legitimate demands — paid travel to hometowns or on employer-arranged transport, increased pay and better hours.

Thus, the proposed Uttar Pradesh Migrant Worker Commission (among other state level efforts) sought to reverse the changing dynamic. The commission did this by inserting itself into the labour market as a functional labour contractor - requiring approval for any movement of workers across state borders. However, this policy move backfired spectacularly. Within a matter of weeks, with mounting pressure from civil society and looming legal challenges, the proposal was withdrawn.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars like Sarkar and Deakin have demonstrated from Indian economic data that the narrative of loosening of labour protections to help deliver growth through increased investor confidence has no basis in empirical analysis.<sup>12</sup> Other research

shows that bottlenecks like reliable electricity, transport etc. affect investment choices more than labour laws.<sup>13</sup> Rationalisation based on the perceived needs of investors, from a firm's perspective, are regularly invoked as talking points but few attempts are made to accurately record and resolve such bottlenecks. Instead, the process of wholesale removal of labour law is touted as a cure all to India's productivity problems, an assertion that the analytical research finds baseless.

**Legal reform from above as displayed by the neoliberal policy imperative, is about denial of reality and by applying strait-jacketed solutions with dubious empirical backing.**

#### WHERE NOW?

Legal reform from above as displayed by the neoliberal policy imperative, is about denial of reality and by applying strait-jacketed solutions with dubious empirical backing. Scholars have argued that crises can accelerate policy movement to reduce inequality because of labour shortages and depopulation of cities after pandemics. To fight this asymmetrical battle of narratives, there needs to be clarity in ideological goals, plan of action, and the rationale for such action should be made clear to the general public.

13. "Labour Law Changes". 2021. Economic And Political Weekly. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/22/insight/labour-law-changes.html>.

6. "No Data, No Problem: Centre In Denial About Migrant Worker Deaths And Distress". 2021. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/rights/migrant-workers-no-data-centre-covid-19-lockdown-deaths-distress-swan>.

7. "Indian Migrant Deaths: 16 Sleeping Workers Run Over By Train". 2021. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52586898#>

8. "Bandra Migrant Crisis: Crowd Gathered From Nearby Slums, Unhappy Over Meals Provided". 2021. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bandra-migrant-crisis-crowd-gathered-from-nearby-slums-unhappy-over-meals-provided-1667509-2020-04-16>.

9. Oli Srivastava, Anuradha Nagaraj. 2021. "I Will Never Come Back': Many Indian Migrant Workers Refuse To Return To Cities Post Lockdown". Scroll.In. <https://scroll.in/article/963251/i-will-never-come-back-many-indian-migrant-workers-refuse-to-return-to-cities-post-lockdown>.

10. Ibid

11. "Why Adityanath's Simplistic Migration Commission Is A Non-Starter". 2021. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/labour/uttar-pradesh-migration-commission>.

12. Deakin, Simon, and Prabirjit Sarkar. 2008. "Assessing The Long-Run Economic Impact Of Labour Law Systems: A Theoretical Reappraisal And Analysis Of New Time Series Data". *Industrial Relations Journal* 39 (6): 453-487. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2338.2008.00501.x.

# The Round-Up

By Shreya Menon

## AMERICAS AND AUSTRALASIA

1. Warrior Walkers in Canada [made a stop](#) at Williams Lake, where the Williams Lake First Nation is searching a former residential school using the same technology used to uncover the mass grave of 215 Indigenous children in Kamloops; listen to Naomi Klein [speak with residential school survivor Doreen Manuel](#) and her niece Kanahus Manuel about the horrors of residential schools and the relationship between stolen children and stolen land
2. U.S. imposed [new sanctions](#) on Cuba; read Rene Gonzalez [discuss](#) the U.S.'s long history of interference with the island nation
3. Striking workers at Frito-Lays in Kansas, U.S., [ratified a contract](#) that will result in, among other things, an end to 'suicide shifts' or back-to-back 12 hour shifts

## AFRICA

1. As of 22 July, [337 people had died](#) in the recent protests in South Africa; Zuma's instigators are [moving from a weak position](#), writes Ryan Brunette
2. Sixteen African countries were [facing a COVID-19 resurgence](#) as of the first week of July, with the Delta variant detected in 10 of these countries; Senegal's Institut Pasteur of Dakar [reached a deal](#) with U.S. company MedInstill for the bottling of COVID-19 shots

## ASIA

1. The Taliban [captured Afghanistan's capital city](#), Kabul, on August 15, making short work of the U.S.'s twenty-year pacification effort in the region; read this [2019 investigation](#) by Craig Whitlock into U.S.'s abject failure in 'nation-building'. The Taliban continues its persecution of women and minorities such as Hazaras; read [RAWA's Aug 20 statement](#) on the Taliban takeover
2. Despite reports of 300+ verified Indian phone numbers on the list of potential targets for surveillance using Pegasus spyware, the Indian defence ministry [denied transactions](#) with the NSO group
3. Israel's Supreme Court is [deferring final verdict](#) in the Sheikh Jarrah eviction case,

while Israeli diplomats [asked the U.S. White House](#) to pressure the families into accepting a compromise where they would have to pay rent to continue living in their home of 70+ years

4. Japan faces a [record surge](#) in COVID-19 as the Olympics comes to an end; is it time to [abolish the Olympics forever?](#), asks Natalie Shure

## EUROPE

1. Southern Europe is facing severe heat waves; Greece [experienced wildfires](#) that burned through 100,000 hectares of forest and farmland. Read Stelios Foteinopoulos [write about the role of austerity](#) in this ecological disaster
2. An estimated 250,000 [protesters in France gather](#) for the fifth consecutive Saturday to oppose the country's pass sanitaire – health pass – required for everyday activities and meant to encourage vaccination, but which has had discriminatory effects



(left) Pedro Castillo, newly elected president of Peru | photo by *Presidencia Perú* via flickr

## WHAT'S GOING ON IN LATIN AMERICA

Socialists are fundamentally optimistic; we're always hungering after good news. Over the past year or so, a surprising amount has been coming out of Latin America. In Chile, the Left won elections to the convention that seeks to overhaul the country's anti-democratic constitution, rammed through by Pinochet's dictatorship and abetted by the Chicago Boys.<sup>1</sup> In Peru, Keiko Fujimori accepted defeat to trade unionist Pedro Castillo after six weeks and a resounding silence to her call to invalidate election results from the U.S. and U.S.-aligned OAS.<sup>2</sup> In Bolivia, the Luis Arce government is holding strong and the U.S.-backed challenger Jeanine Anez faces legal consequences for the interim coup government she ran, under which hundreds of indigenous and working-class Bolivians were detained and massacred.<sup>3,4</sup> The EU, breaking with the U.S. and U.K., politely un-recognised Juan Guaido as Venezuela's interim president.<sup>5</sup> Lula da Silva will run in the 2022 elections, after Brazil's Supreme Court overturned a corruption case advanced by right-wing judges and prosecutors and aided by the U.S. Justice Department.<sup>6</sup> And so on.

These developments challenge the idea that U.S. military intervention is a necessary condition to facilitate democracy, and that resisting intervention will bring upon some kind of Venezuela-like state of ruin and instability. One cannot exactly call the empire that made 600+ failed attempts on Fidel Castro's life 'effective', not without a lot of qualification; but it does seem like there was a time where the U.S. could identify an opportunity to expand its interest, and then convert it.<sup>7</sup>

The 'decline of American hegemony' has been a topic of interest in international relations since the '80s and particularly post-Iraq. In recent years, certain trends have become starker.

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1. "Communists Score Major Victory in Chilean Constitutional Convention Elections." 2021. Morning Star. May 17, 2021. <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/w/communists-score-major-victory-in-chilean-constitutional-convention-elections>.
  2. "Castillo Declared Peru's next President, Fujimori Backs Down." Buenos Aires Times. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://batimes.com.ar/news/latin-america/pedro-castillo-declared-perus-next-president-fujimori-backs-down.phtml>.
  3. "Bolivia Ex-President Jeanine Anez Arrested in 'Coup' Probe." 2021. Deccan Herald. March 13, 2021. <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/world-news-politics/bolivia-ex-president-jeanine-anez-arrested-in-coup-probe-961616.html>.
  4. "Bolivia's Post-Coup President Has Unleashed a Campaign of Terror." The Wire. June 1, 2020. <https://thewire.in/world/bolivias-post-coup-president-has-unleashed-a-campaign-of-terror>
  5. Spetalnick, Matt. 2021. "U.S. Reaffirms Support for Venezuela's Guaido, Sees No Talks with Maduro." Reuters, February 3, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-venezuela-idUSKBN2A33AU>.
  6. "The Secret History of U.S. Involvement in Brazil's Operation Car Wash." The Intercept. <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/12/united-states-justice-department-brazil-car-wash-lava-jato-international-treaty/>.
  7. Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Assassination Attempts on Fidel Castro." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. September 20, 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination\\_attempts\\_on\\_Fidel\\_Castro](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_attempts_on_Fidel_Castro).

1. **Fragmented decision-making.** Private military forces, which emerged in earnest after the Cold War, have decentralised decision-making.<sup>8</sup> The power to intervene now rests with paying clients, not just states. On the supply-side, the U.S. military industrial complex is no longer a monolith; it is composed of various business interests that may well disagree with one another.<sup>9</sup>
2. **Scattered ideological offensive.** The U.S. continues to fund cultural and educational measures as it has done historically, such as right-wing hip-hop groups in Cuba, or international exchange programs that ‘promote human rights’ outside of the U.S.<sup>10 11</sup> But some potency has been lost. Recruits from these programs seem less visible, collectivised, and goal-oriented in the way the Chicago Boys were. Similarly, Cold War institutions like OAS are less untouchable than they once were, with mainstream think-tanks and media organisations like CEPR and NYT reporting on their coding error in analysing the 2019 Bolivian election data.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, U.S. domestic discourse, perhaps as a result of social media and growing rifts in the Democratic Party, has accommodated anti-imperialist views in a way that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. We’ve seen this most recently with Israel and Cuba.<sup>13 14</sup>
3. **Weakened credibility.** As the U.S. has become domestically more polarised it has become more unpredictable and less attractive as a partner. This is best exemplified by Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, where Western European nations hoping to resume trade with Iran were left hanging.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. also has more competition; the Latin American region is just one of many that has seen dramatically increased investments from China.<sup>16</sup>

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8. Ballard, Kyle M. 2007. “The Privatization of Military Affairs: A Historical Look into the Evolution of the Private Military Industry.” *Private Military and Security Companies*, 37–53. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-90313-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-90313-2_3).

9. Turley, Jonathan. “Big Money behind War: The Military-Industrial Complex.” *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/1/11/big-money-behind-war-the-military-industrial-complex>.

10. Chandler, Adam. 2014. “Hip-Hop: America’s Latest Weapon against Castro.” *The Atlantic*. December 11, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/12/hip-hop-americas-latest-weapon-against-castro-cuba/383668/>.

11. “Apply for a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellowship.” NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for DEMOCRACY. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://www.ned.org/fellowships/reagan-fascell-democracy-fellows-program/applying-for-a-fellowship/>.

12. “New York Times and New Report Confirm CEPR Analysis Refuting OAS Claims of Flawed Bolivian Election Results.” Center for Economic and Policy Research. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://cepr.net/press-release/new-york-times-and-new-report-confirm-cepr-analysis-refuting-oas-claims-of-flawed-bolivian-election-results-2/>.

13. “Why the Overton Window Has Suddenly Shifted on Israel-Palestine” 2021. *Monthly Review*. May 26, 2021. <https://mronline.org/2021/05/26/why-the-overton-window-has-suddenly-shifted-on-israel-palestine/>.

14. “Progressives Denounce Biden’s Cuba Sanctions, Demanding End to US Embargo.” *Common Dreams*. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2021/07/22/progressives-denounce-bidens-cuba-sanctions-demanding-end-us-embargo>.

15. Norman, Laurence. 2018. “Merkel, Macron Try to Preserve Iran Deal without Provoking U.S.” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/merkel-macron-try-to-preserve-iran-deal-without-provoking-u-s-1526586874>.

16. “China’s Trade with Latin America Is Bound to Keep Growing. Here’s Why That Matters.” *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/china-trade-latin-america-caribbean/>.

As Latin American nations assert their sovereignty in opposition to the U.S., they become less isolated. We see Left leaders are naming each other in statements of solidarity.<sup>17</sup> Mexico’s Obrador government is sending aid to Cuba as the U.S. imposes new sanctions.<sup>18</sup> But it is unlikely that these Left parties, having capitulated to businesses in the past and witnessed crises such as Venezuela’s hyperinflation, will experiment with revolutionary policy.<sup>19</sup> Shortly before his ouster in 2019, Morales was pressured by citizen’s groups to drop out of a joint venture his government had inked with Germany to produce lithium compounds.<sup>20</sup> Just weeks ago, Castillo appointed a ‘moderate’ Finance Minister to allay the concerns of the investor class.<sup>21</sup>

All of this is to say that the situation demands careful, ongoing observation. If we see a successfully sustained U.S.-backed military coup, chances are it will take a lucky alignment of interests. This is not to underplay the considerable impact of U.S.’s non-military tools, but to observe that right-wing forces without popular mandate in Latin America are unlikely to vault into power as easily as they once did. Similarly, it would be best to moderate expectations of a red wave in Latin America that drastically break with the status quo. We should continue to support sovereign nations against the suggestion of intervention, military or otherwise, and our loyalty should ultimately lie with the people of these nations rather than their governments.

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17. “Lula Appreciates the ‘Solidarity’ of Alberto Fernandez, the Pope and Other Leaders.” 2021. *Amico Hoops*. March 11, 2021. <https://amicohoops.net/lula-appreciates-the-solidarity-of-alberto-fernandez-the-pope-and-other-leaders/>.

18. “3 Mexican Ships Taking Fuel, Medical Aid and Food to Cuba.” 2021. *AP NEWS*. July 27, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-sports-health-cuba-caribbean-ef152e53bb21cb483079875f75ecdb7f>.

19. BBC UK. 2002. “Brazil’s Lula Seeks to Reassure Markets,” October 28, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2368557.stm>.

20. “Bolivia Rethinks How to Industrialise Its Lithium amid Political Transition.” 2020. *Dialogo Chino*. May 19, 2020. <https://dialogochino.net/en/extractive-industries/35423-bolivia-rethinks-how-to-industrialize-its-lithium-amid-political-transition/>.

21. “Peru’s Castillo Names Moderate Leftist as Finance Minister in Olive Branch to Markets.” 2021. *Reuters*. July 31, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-mired-uncertainty-hopes-moderate-administration-dims-2021-07-30/>.



Illustration by K. Gopika Babu

# There is a World to Win

by Anupam Guha

In India today, the imagination of the technological future has been almost completely captured in the public sphere by a certain kind of capitalist, usually of the “technology” sector from Silicon Valley. It is a different matter that what is popularly imagined as technology these days is more in terms of consumer-facing communications stuff and not the actual technological developments of the last three decades which have been truly remarkable. The cultural output of all this is bemusing at times, from the fetishization of blockchain technologies, to Elon Musk fans trying to solve public transportation by reinventing tunnels, to technology vloggers who unbox smartphones on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> What do we make of this?

On the other side of this story, significant sections of the “left” in the country, whatever is left of it, have seemingly given up on science itself, on advanced technology in agriculture, on nuclear energy, and if one is to be critical, on any alternative concrete future vision of liberatory science and technology. The future technology worker is assumed to be a pawn of reactionaries and the sciences dedicated to investigating society are often not considered sciences by their own practitioners. A lot of this would have not made much sense to critics like Karl Marx in an age when capitalism was seen as an inversion of a rational society and critics of capitalism used the most advanced tools of reason to attempt to scientifically take it apart. The imagination of the future was once both desirable and socialist.

The imagination of the future was once **both desirable and socialist.**

The disenchantment of leftists with science can be understood if not condoned and much has been already written about it. Shocks in the 70s and the 80s, an overzealousness in trying to get ideology out of everything leading to a universal distaste of bourgeois institutions, a vulgar and utopian fascination with primitivism, and finally too many capitulations towards social conservatism have landed the

1. Hawkins, Andrew J. 2018. ‘The Boring Company’s Plan to Dig a Longer Tunnel under Los Angeles Is up in the Air - The Verge’. 23 January 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/23/16923220/boring-company-culver-city-council-tunnel-la>.

Indian left in a position where milquetoast versions of UBI (Universal Basic Income) are considered radical ideas in civil society. This is a grave issue, but the steady withdrawal of the left does not completely explain why in the public imagination we see a revival of the maverick capitalist as the pioneer, almost in the style of old science fiction novels. And to dismiss the attraction of these figures among the people as rich charismatic frauds fooling the gullible, misses something important.

The Italian communist philosopher Franco Berardi, who in 2011, coined the phrase 'the slow cancellation of the future', was on to something when he realised that the first generation which learned communication from the machine and not the human, came with a weakness in its ability to build solidarities.<sup>2</sup> Being a Marxist, he was not as concerned with the machine but rather the consequences to class consciousness the current historical moment had, and more importantly, the inability of labour for political action in the current climate. Connect this to the series of defeats the international working class has faced since the 70s and one understands something of the present. The unveiling of the brutal nature of capitalists, which the Situationists wanted, was not enough to spur on political action, but rather would enforce a climate of despondency.<sup>3</sup> Mark Fisher further articulated the position that according to him, the post 2008 crash of the leftist movements out of the financial crisis left no space for art and culture to provide any kind of revival — it had been reduced to nostalgia and hackery.<sup>4</sup> According to Fisher the sense of loss, at least in the capitalist west, was hard

to overcome. That there was no imagination of a better tomorrow aside from a slow dwindling capitalism towards an utterly hopeless future. In the mass culture at least, the worship of the future was over. Compounding the world historical situation is the climate crisis, a consequence of capitalism (this includes the ex command economy countries racing after accumulation) which for decades prompted little interest and effort by the countries most responsible for it to do anything systematic to resist it, and Fisher's thesis seems

**People will not stop wanting a better tomorrow just because there is a lack of a revolutionary movement. And here enters a different kind of capitalist who would be enthusiastically embraced by the broader cultural atmosphere.**

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2. Berardi, Franco Bifo. 2011. *After the Future*. Edited by Gary Genosko and Ph D. Nicholas Thoburn. Illustrated edition. Oakland, Calif. Edinburgh: AK Press.

3. Debord, Guy. 1957. 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action'. June 1957. <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>.

4. Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Alresford: Zero Books.



Elon Musk talks about his plans to build so-called tunnel systems for transport in Hawthorne, California | wikipedia

more or less correct.<sup>5</sup> The current generation is inundated with cultural depictions of hopelessness. However, this misses out the fact that historically humans have a tendency to be obstinate, that people will not simply walk into barbarism, and aside from the visions of apocalypse, there is a growing mass of people with a genuine desire for hope in the contemporary moment. What else can people do aside from making their own destiny? And this desire to somehow alter the course of admittedly terrible times is not getting much attention from progressive or even ordinary capitalist forces in terms of a vision. People will not stop wanting a better tomorrow just because there is a lack of a revolutionary movement. And here enters a different kind of capitalist who would be enthusiastically embraced by the broader cultural atmosphere.

Take Elon Musk for example. Neither he nor his company invented the electric vehicle, but he did something the earlier car manufacturers didn't, he insisted against the popular culture of his times that electric vehicles were not ugly and could be sold.<sup>6</sup> He also insisted that much of his manufacturing process could be eventually streamlined and automated. Regardless of the feasibility of the second (and automation usually being a smokescreen for more efficient exploitation); regardless of the fact that cars themselves are in no sense 'futuristic', being a most inefficient means of transport; regardless of the truths about all the other half-finished projects he started, Musk's

5. Arthur, Christopher J. 2002. 'Epitaph for the USSR: A Clock without a Spring'. *Critique* 30 (1): 91-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017600508413476>.

6. McFadden, Christopher. 2020. 'A Brief History and Evolution of Electric Cars'. 1 July 2020. <https://interestingengineering.com/a-brief-history-and-evolution-of-electric-cars>.



Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Italian modernist author of the Futurist Manifesto (1909) and later the co-author of the Fascist Manifesto (1919) | [wikicommons](#)

futuristic posturing had an allure.<sup>7</sup> That stemmed from the perception that he was ready to completely break away from the past, and his shameless peddling of dreams was perceived as different from the hopeless pragmatism we were used to consuming. This reminds one of the Futurists of the 1910s in Italy and Russia who were utterly repulsed by their present and wanted to ruthlessly stop the romantics with their useless veneration of a bygone era never to return and rather embraced speed, technology, even violence, if a better future could be imagined.<sup>8</sup> But as we have seen, the early futurists of Italy and Russia because of their utopian ignorance of the politics they lived in, would often prove to be dupes, even at times aid in fascism at a shallow aesthetic level.<sup>9</sup> But the idea that reactionaries and conservatives were doing something 'different' while transparently ridiculous to us, was attractive, with the Nazis going as far as calling themselves the European New Order. The world was fundamentally broken and a future was needed.

The capture of the future this time has happened in similar circumstances. For one, Fukuyamaism is dead and buried, and no one really thinks that liberal capitalism is victorious and permanent, and in this time of impermanence, precarity, and crisis,

7. Steinhoff, James. "A Dark Art: The Machine Learning Labour Process." In *Automation and Autonomy*, pp. 171-206. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021.

8. 'Manifesto del Futurismo'. 2021. In Wikipedia. [https://it.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Manifesto\\_del\\_Futurismo&oldid=121041193](https://it.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Manifesto_del_Futurismo&oldid=121041193).

9. Eveleth, Rose. n.d. 'When Futurism Led to Fascism—and Why It Could Happen Again'. *Wired*. Accessed 12 September 2021. <https://www.wired.com/story/italy-futurist-movement-techno-utopians/>.

while there is despondency and apocalypse, there is also fervent hope and a desire to march forward. The sudden social importance of the technological capitalists is only one symptom of this. The current crises impress upon all people that inoffensive managers of the present will not do, not in the long run. While the last year of the pandemic has led to growing despondency, it has also resulted in an increasing need for avenues to do something about it. Further, the almost religious censure of imaginations of technology, as we see in popular culture like *Black Mirror* etc, are mystifications of actual issues arising from contradictions of capitalism, and do not give people any useful hope. The answer to technological solutionism cannot become an uncritical phobia. People will take hope where they can get it. If nothing else remains from horror it is reasonable to find distractions from it.

Here, I think socialists have a duty which is connected to our essential mandate of overthrowing oppression, to understand the world using scientific methods and work out a way forward. To work out a vision is to give people courage. To continuously engage with the world and its future is fundamental to our politics, and so science and technology must not be objects of, dare I say, undialectical censure, nor just cynical means of producing value in some future ideal world. Rather, here and now, science and technology are vital means for the search of truth. Reason after all is a fundamental enemy of oppression. And yes, while science and technology have been perverted by class society, our critique must be an immanent engaged critique which constantly tries to alter these social relations, and tries to build a better vision. While this is a challenging task, despondency has never been an affordable luxury on the path to winning a world.

**While this is a challenging task, despondency has never been an affordable luxury on the path to winning a world.**



# Growl or Whimper?

THE MOVIE *SHERNI* TAKES THE ISSUE OF CONSERVATION BEYOND THE HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT

by Harshvardhan

*Sherni*, directed by Amit Masurkar of *Newton* fame and currently streaming on Amazon Prime, is probably the most reviewed and discussed cinematic venture from Bollywood in recent times. It has sparked off a healthy debate in the public sphere on wildlife conservation in India, which remains marginalised. Most of the reviews and commentaries on the film have analysed the storyline in the light of the 'Human-Wildlife Conflict' paradigm, which has become the dominant framework to understand the ever-growing ecosystem crisis.<sup>1</sup>

According to this paradigm, the biggest threat to nature and biodiversity comes from humans. In the latest Living Planet Report (2020) — in line with its previous reports — the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) presents a grim reality of 'humanity's increasing destruction of nature'.<sup>2</sup> According to the report, there has been 'an average 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish between 1970 and 2016'.<sup>3</sup> While noting this threat to biodiversity, the 83-pages report not for once mentioned the word capitalism, only twice used the phrase economic system critically, and criticised the current economic model only once, without naming it. The report squarely blames humanity and consumption (which appear 42 times) for this biodiversity crisis but does not explain who constitutes this humanity and what consumption denotes.

Similarly, when the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was passed in the year 2006, a lot of hard-core conservationists criticized the act as a threat to wildlife. One conservationist even went on to claim that the FRA will 'intensify the man-animal conflict by about

1. Jaiswal, Pooja Biraia, "Sherni review: Vidya Balan shines in a well-made film on human-wildlife conflict", *The Week*, June 18, 2021 URL: <https://www.theweek.in/review/movies/2021/06/18/sherani-review-vidya-balan-shines-film-human-wildlife-conflict.html> Last accessed August 17, 2021; Vanak, Abi T., "A Scientists' Review: Sherani is a Tale of Conservation in the Rough", *The Wire Science*, June 25, 2021 URL: <https://science.thewire.in/environment/sherani-review-conservation-avni-tigress-wildlife-science-forests-realistic-portrayal/> Last accessed August 17, 2021
2. Pigott, Anna, "Capitalism is killing the world's wildlife populations, not 'humanity'", *Science X*, November 2, 2018, URL: <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-capitalism-world-wildlife-populations-humanity.html> Last accessed August 17, 2021
3. WWF (2020) Living Planet Report 2020, "Bending the curve of biodiversity loss", WWF, URL: <https://f.hubspotusercontent20.net/hubfs/4783129/LPR/PDFs/ENGLISH-FULL.pdf> Last accessed August 17, 2021

10,000 %<sup>4</sup>. An NGO named Vanashakti campaigned against the FRA while another NGO, Wildlife First, approached the Supreme Court against the FRA demanding it be declared unconstitutional! They also argued before the court that everyone, whose FRA claim had been rejected, was an 'encroacher' who should be evicted<sup>5</sup>. In 2019, the SC ruled in favour of Wildlife First and ordered forced eviction of 10 million tribals declaring them encroachers on their own land. These NGOs and several hard-core wildlife conservationists argue that forests are home to animals and humans should stay away from them. They deliberately do not acknowledge that for millennia forest dwellers and wildlife lived in harmony with each other.

To cut the long story short, the Human-Wildlife Conflict paradigm blames not capitalism or economic policies of the Government, but humans (abstract humanity) for the destruction of biodiversity. This paradigm overlooks the fact that the human-wildlife conflict began only when capitalism reduced forests to resource reservoirs waiting to be exploited. This view was reiterated by South Asia branch of the World Bank<sup>6</sup> last year when they tweeted lamenting about the underutilisation of Bhutan's 71% forest cover with a GDP contribution of only 2%! The human-wildlife conflict paradigm plays an important ideological function of shielding capitalism from its responsibility of destroying biodiversity by blaming humanity.

*Sherni* questions this human-wildlife conflict paradigm and, also, attempts to answer an important question: who or what constitutes humanity? Instead of reducing the storyline to the human-wildlife binary and seeing the conflict as human vs. animals, *Sherni* presents the complexity of the biodiversity crisis.

In the movie, the conflict is between three parties — the tigress named T-12, the villagers living on the forest fringes, and the nexus of capitalism-opportunistic bureaucracy-cynical and corrupt politicians, joined in the hip by leftovers of feudal culture. Both the tigress and the villagers face the same problems — of food, livelihood, and survival. Both happen to be victims of corrupt and indifferent bureaucracy, both are manipulated by corrupt politicians for political gains, and both suffer from food and livelihood crises caused by mining operations and proliferation of capitalist farming.

The villagers are forced to take their cattle to the forest because their local grazing land was converted into capitalist plantation; what used to be communal property

4. Jhala, Geetanjali, "Conflict will go up by 10,000 per cent", DNA, December 23, 2007 URL: <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/special-conflict-will-go-up-by-10000-per-cent-1140969> Last accessed August 17, 2021

5. Kukreti, Ishan, "FRA in SC: 3 intervention applications from Wildlife First ahead", Down to Earth, September 9, 2019 URL: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/fra-in-sc-3-intervention-applications-from-wildlife-first-ahead-66598> Last accessed August 17, 2021

6. Tembon, Mercy. 2019. 'Investing in Bhutan's Forests for a Sustainable Future'. 31 October 2019. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpointvertyinsouthasia/investing-bhutans-forests-sustainable-future>.

became private property. As Jyoti, a vocal member of the village committee, says, "The grazing land where we used to take our cattle...Saiprasad has planted teak trees there... now we aren't allowed there...where are we supposed to take our cattle?" The same Saiprasad (Gopal Dutt), predecessor of Vidya Vincent (Vidya Balan), later says that "the forest department is a legacy of the British Raj...it works on the logic of generating revenue..." Similarly, when the T-12 starts to move towards the National Park, her home, she faces a roadblock in the form of a newly established copper mine. Masurkar, through an aerial camera, captures this destruction of forest captively. The real encroachers are not the animals or the forest dwellers, but the capitalists and the State.

One forest official [thinking in the human-wildlife conflict paradigm] comes up with a (not so) unique proposal to deal with the T-12 crisis. His idea is to 'move everyone out [from the forest hamlet] and convert the whole area into a National Park'. Now, this might come to the viewer as an idiosyncratic and cruel remark from an indifferent bureaucratic officer, but this single line is not only the summation of successive governments' forest policy with regard to Tiger conservation, but also the core ideology of the dominant model of wildlife conservation in the country. According to a report<sup>7</sup>, in the past 48 years since the inception of the union government's flagship tiger conservation scheme, Project Tiger, in 1972, a total of 18,493 families from 215 villages have been moved out of the protected areas, which is defined as a fortress. This fortress conservation model aims at 'creation of protected areas for terrestrial... wildlife by the coerced displacement or exclusion of the existing inhabitants. People may be evicted, their land may be seized, and customary rights to water, fishing, hunting, and resources may be curtailed...'<sup>8</sup>

It is true that Human-Wildlife Conflict is real, but it must be understood that this conflict is mediated by and is largely a product of Capitalism. Wildlife and humans come in conflict because of similar problems they face in regard to livelihood and home. The 'Humans' of the 'Human-Wildlife Conflict' paradigm are not all humans but a class of population who are forced to live in the porous zone between forest and civilization; it is they living at the physical margins of human habitation who fall prey to wildlife who too are forced to migrate from their natural habitat because of capitalist oriented forest policies. The 'Human-Wildlife Conflict' paradigm, but be broken down into its constituent parts, i.e. Humanity vs. Capitalism and Capitalism vs. Wildlife.

7. Kukreti, Ishan, "Tigers and tribals: Conservation project displaced 18,493 families in 48 years", Down to Earth, October 9, 2020 URL: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/tigers-and-tribals-conservation-project-displaced-18-493-families-in-48-yrs-73732> Last accessed August 17, 2021

8. Lasgorceix, Antoine and Kothari, Ashish, "Displacement and Relocation of Protected Areas: A Synthesis and Analysis of Case Studies", Economic and Political Weekly, December 5, 2009 URL: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/49/special-articles/displacement-and-relocation-protected-areas-synthesis-and-analysis> Last accessed August 17, 2021

There is a very interesting character called Ranjan Rajhans aka Pintu Bhaiyya (Sharat Saxena) who calls himself a conservationist but is, in fact, a trophy hunter. Pintu Bhaiyya is not a poacher or animal-part smuggler or even a professional hunter; for him hunting is a sport. In his own words, he is carrying forward the legacy of four generations of his family and, particularly, of his grandfather who was a famous hunter during the British Raj. Pintu Bhaiyya has connections in the upper echelons of power and works in full connivance with bureaucrats and politicians and holds a record of killing seven tigers and 32 leopards in six states. With T-12, he is looking to improve his kill-list. In this sense, Pintu Bhaiyya is a symbol of diminishing but deeply entrenched feudal culture in Indian society.

All in all, *Sherni* is a movie with excellent satirical commentary on the bureaucracy and the sensation-loving media. It aptly portrays the everyday life of forest officials engaged in conservation and protection of the country's forests and wildlife. Some officers happen to be proactive, some opportunistic and others just indifferent. *Sherni* also takes you through the everyday life of the forest dwelling communities; their trials, tribulations and aspirations as they navigate through the complexities of their environs — the unforgiving forests, the corrupt politicians, the indifferent bureaucracy and their threatened livelihood. Masurkar's deep research and observation of everyday life becomes clear in a particular scene: Jyoti (Sampa Mandal), a vocal village committee member, berates her daughter Sakshi (Sanjana Singh) and her friends for venturing into the prey-zone of the tigress. The children, realising their mistake, get nervous and start giggling while passing the blame on one another; one of the most common responses to disciplinary measures.

Man-eater is a powerful trope employed by humans for hunting wild animals. It brings with itself a sense of fear and hatred; of death and retribution. However, Amit Masurkar and his team were able to turn this negative trope, signifying the cardinal sin of killing a human being, upside-down. As the movie progresses, the audience begins to both sympathise and empathise with the tigress. The makers did this through some brilliant dialogues, background music and character development, but this cannot be just called a product of technical or cinematic brilliance. The movie also captured the complexity of the issue contextualizing the actions of the tigress and locating it in the broader social-economic and power play; she has to move towards the village in order to procure food for her newborns because the forest – her home – is shrinking every day; mean politicians arouse feelings against her to fulfill their agenda; she is blamed for killing a human who is actually killed by a bear and certain bureaucrats are indifferent and just want to get rid of her (and her two cubs)!

The movie also emphasises the unity of living beings when Hassan Noorani (Vijay

Raaz), a local Zoology professor and conservationist, says, "Animals and people are one," and when Vidya Vincent says, "No animal is a man-eater, it's just hungry", in response to Pintu Bhaiyya's suggestion to kill the two cubs because their mother, the T-12, is a man-eater.

The movie ends with this theme as local villagers, who suffered the most from the actions of the T-12, save her two cubs from the bureaucrats-politicians-trophy hunter combine.

Like literature, cinema reflects society and performs an important ideological function (overt or subtle); cinema can either strengthen the status quo or criticize it. *Sherni* is not an ideological film. It is, rather, an objective presentation of the conflict that seeks to demystify it through the paradigm of Human-Wildlife Conflict, not for once ignoring the everyday nuances. In an era of illusions and mystifications, perhaps merely showing reality is a revolutionary task, which Masurkar does very brilliantly.

By doing this, *Sherni* also opens up a space to question the highly eulogised, apolitical, moralistic ideology of mainstream environmental and wildlife activism. In this popular framework conserving environment and wildlife boils down to issues like saving forests, trees and non-human species at the local/national level and further to lifestyle choices like the use of plastic, recycled products or judicious use of electricity or consumption of organic food etc. at personal level. The issue of climate change or environmental destruction gets framed as 'moral' questions and saving it becomes the responsibility of an individual who is often bombarded with questions like what you are doing to save earth. Or how much carbon footprint are you leaving.

*Sherni* shows that even the innocent issue of 'planting trees in order to save the environment and forest' is enmeshed with the political economy of capitalism!

# The Band

*By Nishkala Sekhar*

## JUNE 2020

She was putting the pancake on the tawa when the bell rang. She turned the flame low and went to the door. It was her domestic worker.

"Oh, hello. Did you see the news?"

"Yes, madam," Rani said, removing her slippers and entering. "When will I get my band?"

"I don't think you will anytime soon. It is only for essential workers and those who have to go to work."

"So, you will get it?"

"I already have it. I designed it, Rani," she explained, leading Rani into the kitchen. Rani had never grasped the finer points of her work. "Some of the vessels are in the sink. Please make sure to take them to the balcony when you wash. I need to leave in half an hour, do you think you will be done by then?"

"Yes, madam," said Rani.

## 1 WEEK LATER

Rani and Atul got out of the auto rickshaw as Ajay went to park it. Rani stomped into the gate, fumbled with the lock. Atul put a tentative hand on hers. After a moment, she ceded the key to her son. Atul opened the door to their one room apartment.

"Five hundred! He charged us five hundred for going to the doctor," she raged, going inside. "Bloody khaki wala!"

Ajay came in behind them and switched on the fan. It started up sluggishly. "We left the prescription at the doctor. How would he know?"

"Our child fainted! How would I remember the bloody prescription? You should have taken care of it! And I showed him the medicines...did you see how he let those car people get by? But he had no trouble keeping us waiting!"

"Amma," said Atul. He'd flinched when Rani had raised her voice at his father. "Tell your madam. Maybe she can do something."

"No. She has done enough."

## MARCH 2020

Rani was a little frantic. They were running out of rations. The shop they usually bought goods from had jacked up prices. She was saving money for Atul's medical needs. He had developed a B-12 deficiency that required him to get regular shots. This had become a recent addition to her expenses. Meanwhile, Ajay was not making any auto fare because of the pandemic. He was sitting at home, but he did help around the house, and for that she was grateful.

"Madam, is it possible to have a raise?"

"Raise?"

"Yes madam. Everything has become expensive and I need some extra money. Grocery costs have gone up, so have costs of—"

"Okay, okay! Just tell me how much you need. I am late to work, and I have an important meeting today."

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The tagline of her pitch had been, 'One Band to Save Us All'. A remotely monitored geotagged band to track those who were at risk of Covid-19. A device that would enable the slow and safe reopening of the economy.

Her organisation had been one among many enlisted by the government to fight the pandemic. They specialised in data and tech. Their expertise, it was hoped, would reign in the pandemic.

"The recipient simply wears a band. There is nothing for her to do. She can't mess with the permissions. or game the system. There are some obvious benefits." She had smiled at the government officers arrayed in a U-shape around the conference table. "It'll make governance easy. We can track all movements. Monitoring curfew violations will become simpler. All they need is a QR scanner, which all smartphones have, and they will be led to the website confirming their details. We can do contact tracing easily, and isolate early on.

"We also plan to link their welfare and mobile information. We will be working with you and the health ministry. The data will also help us match population demand to health services by integrating financial status."

One of the officers had asked, "Shouldn't the whole population be given a band?"

"Sure, if you have the resources. Right now, applying for the band is free of cost. It is a simple form on the website. A few months from now, you could perhaps charge a percentage, depending on the size of business. For now, I would recommend that you focus on those who need to work. We can match requirements, no problem! However,

at the end of the day, it is upto your government to monitor those moving about without the bands. No band on hand, no man on public land.”

The officer who asked the question had nodded, looking thoughtful. She’d felt a surge of triumph.

#### APRIL 2021

The bell rang. She got up from the sofa where she had collapsed and went to the door.

Rani took one look at her distraught face and said, “I’ll make you breakfast.”

She went back to the sofa. The TV was running. Images flashed. Choked-up graveyards and burning pyres. Patients collapsing outside the hospital, breathless.

The band itched at her wrist. She dug a finger under its grip and scratched the skin there. They had rolled out eight million bands over the last year. The economy had opened cautiously, until it hadn’t. They had linked hospital admission to the band. Her father had followed all the protocols, stayed at home, never got a band. He didn’t need it. He got the disease, nonetheless, and he didn’t tell her. Not until it was too late. She hadn’t secured him a hospital bed in time. She had barely been able to cremate the body. He’d been gone for three days now.

#### MAY 2021

The pandemic had worsened. Ajay had received a band in December. In March, Rani had forbidden him from continuing work as an auto rickshaw driver. “Our child is vulnerable. It is not worth it.”

It was worse than when the pandemic had started. Madam had been irritable all month. She had broken down last week when her friend died.

“I failed her,” she had wept, “and they failed to surveil her, Rani. They didn’t do their job. They ignored the data. They did not stop the bandless from going out. They fudged our data. We got bad data and we sent out wrong models. We could have predicted this, had they done the one thing they needed to do. Keep people off the streets! They failed me Rani! They failed us...”

“They always stopped us, madam.”

Madam hadn’t seemed to quite understand that. So Rani had moved onto some sympathetic platitudes, which madam understood more readily. After some time, she had even recovered enough to show Rani a few tiles in the living room where the mopping had not been done very well. Rani needed to mop harder.

“Yes, madam,” Rani had said.

# Mr. Mehra has a Very Positive View of the World

*By Hardik Nagar*

On the 25th November 2021, Mr. Mehra will step out of his house to buy milk from his favourite shop Bhajanlal & Sons, which is renowned for its small black buffaloes and their pristine grey milk.

He will adjust the N-95 mask on his face, because just yesterday 15,888 new cases, which are really old-new-old cases, emerged in the Adishakti Red Containment Zone, which is where he lives now and which is where he will be living then. It is currently named The-Name-That-Shall-Not-Be-Named but it will soon be illegal to even type that name in a fictional story.

He doesn’t wear the N-95 mask when he steps out now, because he has a very positive view of the world, and he believes that any moment now this crisis—which is anyway a Chinese conspiracy—will end, and then he will be able to go to buy the pristine white milk of the big black buffaloes without worrying about whether the old fat man who runs the shop is infected or not.

He will not have this choice in the future, because he will have to upload a selfie every time he checks out of a containment zone on the Arogya Setu App, and he will have to smile in that selfie with his eyes, since his lips will not be visible under the mask. The selfie will be voluntarily mandatory, which doesn’t mean anyone has to do it: it just means that everyone has to do it.

Mr. Mehra will look on both sides of the empty road, because it will slip his mind that any vehicular movement, except ones authorized by the State, are banned. They are not banned now, of course, since a Very Positive Mr. Mehta is looking forward to taking Mrs. Mehta and Bunty on a road trip to Goa and having crab curry with tandoori roti once Lockdown 4.0 lifts. But he will not be able to until Lockdown 56, and then, one hour before Lockdown 57, a push notification from the official handle of Jio News will announce the ban on the movement of personal vehicles, because obviously if there’s

no one going from point A to point B, then the virus can't travel from point A to point B either. It will be called a masterstroke in the Jio Newspaper next day.

It will be a minor inconvenience for the citizens, yes; and the State and Jio will apologize, and the news will reiterate that the decision will help the State make significant progress, unlike the other countries which are still ravaged. It will not say which other countries, but Mr. Mehra will wish for one of them to be China.

Mr. Mehra will cross the empty roads and the empty sidewalks. He will walk past what is now a municipal park, but it will then be a makeshift morgue. He will cross what are now a line of shut restaurants, but it will then be a line of makeshift morgues. Mr. Mehra will count and realize there is a new one where his favourite *farsan* store once stood. He will scoff, and walk past it to reach Bhajanlal & Sons.

Mr. Mehra will not find the old frail man, but he will find a locked shutter and a notice explaining the closure. Jio Doodh has acquired the dairy farm, and along with it the small black buffaloes and their pristine grey milk. It will be delivered to all houses on alternate days. Jio Doodh, the notice will say, is happy to serve in these trying and difficult times.

Mr. Mehra will stomp his feet, but there will be no one around to notice his theatrics. Mr. Mehra will return to his containment zone. He will send a selfie as a check-in. It will be unsatisfactory. Mr. Mehra's phone will ring an hour later to notify him that the State found his eye-smile to be unsatisfactory. He will have to send the selfie again. Mr. Mehra will not do so. The notification will arrive again and again and again until Mr. Mehra, tired of the constant buzzing, will throw the phone at the wall, breaking it apart. Two State Officers will arrive precisely 7 minutes later to take Mr. Mehra away for violating what was voluntarily mandatory.

Mr. Mehra will think of simpler times. Like the one where he drank two glasses of milk and had a very positive view of the world.

Mr. Mehra will take a selfie with his new phone. His eyes will smile.

Jio News will send a notification that reads: *All is very positive and very fine.*

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# A ghazal

by *Shreya Ila Anasuya*

Show them your papers. It's not your home they'll storm anyway.  
It is someone else paying, for they are closing the gates to India.

Five months of silence from the Valley, but your phone still works.  
There's no one there to call – besides, they are closing the gates to India.

They stormed that university you despise. You nodded, convinced –  
These are the children you want out; they are closing the gates to India.

Peace in your heart, or so you say. I see the lotus on your sleeve.  
Will you draw that swastika, since they are closing the gates to India?

Boycott that film. Fire those workers. Food in your belly –  
But irritation at the strike. Glad they are closing the gates to India.

Smile when your terrified neighbour flees, and plead your innocence.  
Your midnight's tryst is fulfilled – for they are closing the gates to India.

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