India's pandemic: spectacle, social murder and authoritarian politics in a lockdown nation

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Abstract

This article maps and analyses the trajectory of India's Covid-19 pandemic from its onset in early 2020 until the outbreak of the country's devastating second wave a little over a year later. I begin with a critique of the lockdown policy of the right-wing Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which served as a political spectacle rather than a public health intervention. I then proceed to detail how India as a lockdown nation witnessed forms of social suffering and political repression that can only be truly understood in light of how the trajectory and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by two preexisting crises in India's economy and polity. In conclusion, I reflect on the likely political outcomes of the pandemic, considering both the impact of its second wave, and the emergence of oppositional sociopolitical forces in the country.

Keywords: India; Covid-19 pandemic; lockdown; spectacle; social murder; authoritarian populism

Introduction

On 31 December 2019, when China first alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) about several cases of unusual pneumonia in the port city of Wuhan, India was in the throes of one of the largest protest movements the country had witnessed since Narendra Modi and the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first took power in 2014. Hundreds of thousands of people were out on the streets, from Punjab in the north to Tamil Nadu in the south, protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that had been passed into law in the first week of December that year. As activists rightly pointed out, the CAA threatens to make Muslims second-class citizens in their own country, and at this point in time, the Indian nation – the world's largest democracy – looked set to face a 2020 that would be defined by a contest over the future of secular constitutionalism (see Nilsen, 2020a).

As we now know, things turned out very differently. India reported its first case of COVID-19 on 30 January 2020 – the patient was a student who had returned from Wuhan to the southern Indian state of Kerala. In the first week of February, three more cases were reported, and a month later, another 22 cases were confirmed. By the middle of the month, there were more than a hundred confirmed cases in the country (see Ray & Subramanian, 2020a). By that point in time, the WHO had declared that COVID-19 was a global pandemic, but the response from Indian authorities was, if anything timid: a COVID-19 awareness programme

was launched in early March, but the Modi government persisted in claiming that community transmission was not a problem, and testing and tracing was only implemented to a very limited extent (Krishnan, 2020a, 2020b). In fact, on 13 March, India's Health Ministry issued an official statement that Covid-19 was not a health emergency, and that the Indian public had no reason to panic (The Hindu, 2020).

Then, on 24 March, Narendra Modi and his government did an about-turn and introduced one of the world's strictest national lockdown policies (see Nilsen, 2020b; Ray & Subramanian, 2020a, 2020b). A 1.3 billion-strong population was given all of four hours to prepare for an unprecedented disruption of everyday life, involving, among other things, a sudden and comprehensive cessation of economic activities. 'The nation will have to certainly pay an economic cost because of this lockdown. However, to save the life of each and every Indian is our top most priority', Modi said in his address to the nation. 'Hence, it is my plea to you to continue staying wherever you are right now in the country' (cited in Nilsen, 2020b). India, in other words, had become a lockdown nation. And over the next eight months, this lockdown nation would witness forms of social suffering and political repression that can only be truly understood in light of how the trajectory and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by two preexisting crises in India's economy and polity (see Sundar & Nilsen, 2020).

These crises have different temporalities: one is a crisis of social reproduction and subsistence for the country's working poor, rooted in the long-term contradictions of India's neoliberal accumulation strategies; the other is a crisis of India's secular and constitutional democracy, which is brought about by the authoritarian populism of Narendra Modi's regime. In this essay, I offer an analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown intertwined with and amplified this dual crisis. I begin with a discussion of the fact that India's lockdown was not used to expand and bolster India's medical infrastructure. I argue that this has to be understood in terms of how the lockdown served as a form of spectacle, intended to project a public image of Modi as a strongman leader capable of swift action to defend Indian citizens against the pandemic, and argue that this has to be understood in terms of the political logic of Modi's authoritarian populism. I then move on to discuss the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, with a particular focus on how the working poor were affected. I argue that the acute collapse of subsistence and social reproduction witnessed among the working poor lays bare how India's economy functions as a machinery for what Friedrich Engels (1844/2009) once described as social murder. In the third part of the essay, I survey political repression in the lockdown nation. More specifically, I show how the Modi regime has engaged in a war on dissent targeting, in particular, anti-CAA activists, and discuss how this relates to the political logic of the BJP's hegemonic project. In the conclusion, I reflect on prospects for post-Covid transformations in India in light of both the devastating second wave of the pandemic, which ripped through the country from March 2021 with almost unfathomable ferocity, and the emergence of the farmers' protest movement as a significant oppositional social force in the country.

Lockdown as spectacle

There is little doubt that the national lockdown that was imposed in late March 2020 failed to avert a public health crisis during the first wave of India's pandemic. In September 2020, India overtook Brazil in terms of the number of total cases, ranking second only to the USA (Firstpost, 2020). We do well to bear in mind, of course, that India has one of the lowest testing rates in the world, which means that the numbers that were reported at this time very

likely to be underestimates (Naqvi & Kay, 2020; Saxena, 2020). In short, India became a pandemic epicentre. By early May, it was reported that India was doing far worse in responding to the pandemic and flattening the curve than its poorer South Asian neighbours. Compared to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, India had the highest cumulative and daily case count, and the highest death rate (Basu & Srivastava, 2020) (see Figure 1).
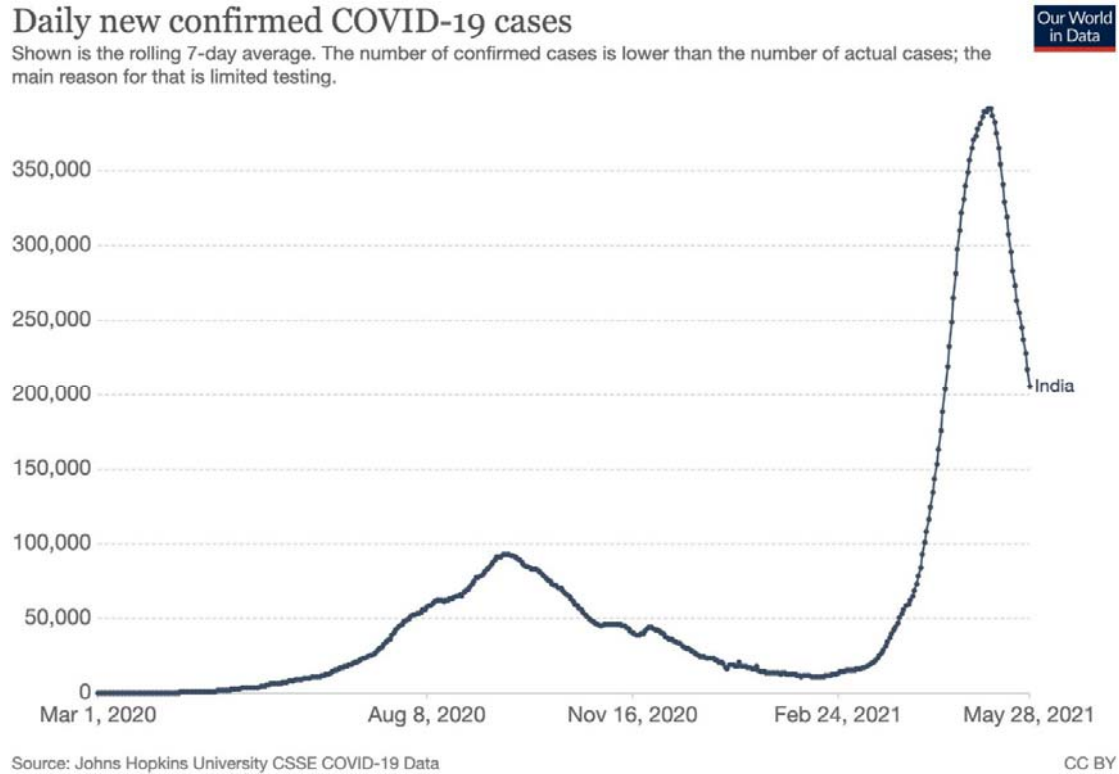
Figure 1. The trajectory of India's pandemic, March 2020 to May 2021 (source: Our World in Data).

If we want to understand this dismal scenario, it is necessary to first consider the fact that the Modi regime – much like other authoritarian populist regimes – have responded to the pandemic with thoroughgoing disregard for medical expertise. 'The COVID-19 pandemic', leading health journalist Vidya Krishnan (2020a) observed on the eve of the imposition of the national lockdown, 'hits India as it is led by ideologues who have urged the use of cow dung and urine to prevent the spread of the virus'. The fact that motives other than acting according to the best medical advice available shaped the BJP government's response to the pandemic was quite evident from the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in India. Modi first spoke to the Indian nation about the pandemic on 19 March 2020, and used the occasion to announce a 'People's Curfew' – a one-day lockdown – on 22 March. Rather than addressing pressing questions related to public health and relief measures for those whose livelihoods would be most adversely affected by the pandemic, Modi exhorted citizens to do their patriotic duty by following government guidelines (Krishnan, 2020c).

Two days later, Modi declared a three-week national lockdown with only four hours' notice. The primary purpose of a lockdown is of course to flatten the curve of the pandemic – that is, to ensure a slower spread of the virus – in order to expand and strengthen the national medical infrastructure to cope with the increase in demand for treatment and care that will inevitably occur. At the time that the Indian lockdown was announced, health experts pointed

out that the country had three weeks to prepare hospitals, convert stadiums into isolation centres, and procure as many ventilators as possible. The Modi government, however, did none of this (Krishnan, 2020a; see also Ray & Subramanian, 2020a). Indeed, as Jayati Ghosh (2020, p. 6) has pointed out, less than 0.04% of India's GDP was made available for immediate health expenditure, and less than half of these miniscule resources were distributed to state governments. It is worth bearing in mind that this failure took place in a country which ranks as number 184 out of 191 countries in terms of spending on public healthcare – in fact, India's annual public spending on healthcare is just above 1% of GDP, far less than its poorer South Asian neighbours. As a result of such systematic underspending, the country, according to the Brookings Foundation, had only 0.5 government hospital beds per 1000 people in 2017, which is highly inadequate even in the best of circumstances. There is only one public sector doctor for every 10,189 people, while the WHO recommends one doctor per 1000 people (see Nilsen, 2020b).

The lockdown was extended multiple times – from 15 April to 3 May, from 4 May to 17 May, and from 18 to 31 May – before a phased easing of restrictions began in June. It is revealing that the COVID-19 Task Force appointed by the Indian Council of Medical Research to advise the government was completely sidelined in the decisions to extend the lockdown (Krishnan, 2020d). In fact, just a few days after the third extension of the national lockdown, members of the COVID-19 task force openly stated to the media that the lockdown had been a failure because the government had failed to strengthen the country's medical infrastructure, and also had not expanded testing and tracing capacity (Krishnan & Konikkara, 2020; see also Krishnan, 2020e, 2020f).

So what purpose did the lockdown actually serve then? If we want to answer this question, we need to understand the centrality of spectacle in the political modus operandi of Narendra Modi and the BJP (see Nilsen, 2021c). The Modi regime, of course, is one of many avatars of the authoritarian populism that has become a political force across the North–South axis of the world-system during the past decade (see Hart, 2020; Heller, 2020). And, as is typical of authoritarian populism, the hegemonic project of the BJP hinges, to a considerable degree, on the figure of Narendra Modi as a strongman, linked directly to the people, opposed to both corrupt elites and threatening Others, and, crucially, capable of decisive action and leadership in the national interest. This image has been carefully crafted over a long period of time – arguably since Modi was chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat (2001–14) – and cultivated through multiple channels, including radio broadcasts, television, and social media (see Bobbio, 2013; Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Rai, 2019). As Ravinder Kaur (2020a, p. 249) has argued, Modi's strongman 'brand' has been built, in no small part, through a series of 'attention-grabbing spectacles' that have become a core feature of the BJP's style of governance. Modi's 'signature quality', she proposes, 'is the capacity to make swift decisions – unilateral and almost entirely conducted in secrecy but released in the public domain as a thrill-inducing series of spectacles' (Kaur, 2020a, p. 249).

These spectacular policy decisions demonstrate to the public that Modi is indeed an undaunted man of action – someone who will intervene resolutely in the best interest of the people. The act of demonetization – the sudden withdrawal, in November 2016, of 86% of the cash circulating in India, supposedly to combat corruption – is one example of such spectacles and how they work. While demonetization did nothing to combat corruption and caused immense hardship to ordinary Indians, it nevertheless succeeded in building up Modi's image as a valiant warrior who would wield every weapon in the battle against corruption (see Ghosh et al., 2017). Similarly, the sudden imposition of a national lockdown

was intended to project an image of Modi as a bold protector of the Indian nation in the face of the coming onslaught of COVID-19. These spectacles seem to defy the laws of political gravity – for example, as I show below, in another parallel to demonetization, Modi's lockdown policy did substantial damage to the country's working poor, who make up the majority of the electorate in India, but his approval ratings actually improved during the lockdown months (see Gettleman & Yasir, 2020; Kumar, 2020; Roy & Bellman, 2020). Ultimately, this reveals one of the most important strengths of Modi's authoritarian populism – namely that it is animated by what political scientist Neelanjan Sircar (2020) calls the politics of trust and belief. This is a form of personal politics, in which the people are asked to trust in the ability of a strong leader to make sound decisions for the nation. The politics of trust and belief contrasts, of course, with a more conventional politics of democratic accountability, in which citizens judge political leaders based on what they actually deliver. But it fits hand in glove with the designs of Modi's authoritarian populism, which peddles empty neoliberal promises of prosperity to India's citizens – some 60% of whom live on less than $3.10 a day – at the same time as it seeks to rally those citizens behind majoritarian designs for the making of a Hindu nation. In my concluding remarks, I ask whether this politics is still likely to be intact after the second wave of India's pandemic, which has revealed the inadequacies of Modi's policy response more starkly than ever. Now, however, I turn to an analysis of how and why the national lockdown did such damage to India's working poor.

A machinery for social murder

'Work just disappeared'. This is how 17-year-old plumber Vishal Kumar Maurya explained his decision to leave the metropolis of Mumbai for his native state Uttar Pradesh when the pandemic began to tighten its hold in late March 2020. Having spent most of his days since he arrived in the city six months earlier looking for casual work that would fetch him between 500 and 600 rupees as a daily wage, Vishal could no longer find anyone to hire him at the local labour junction. His only option was to return home: 'A virus we can fight but hunger we can't' (Daniyal et al., 2020).

Vishal was only one of many among India's 120 million migrant workers who did not abide by Narendra Modi's exhortation to stay put when the national lockdown set in. Instead, in a mass exodus of the working poor from India's cities, some 10 million people took to the national highways to walk home as their livelihoods disappeared without warning (see Ghosh, 2020; Singh, 2020). As I detail below, many embarked on their journey without sufficient food, and found themselves at the receiving end of harsh and humiliating treatment by state authorities. In Bareilly district in Uttar Pradesh, for example, a group of returning migrant workers were rounded up in a bus stand and hosed down with a disinfectant based on sodium hypochlorite, which is the main ingredient in bleach. Others were sent back to where they came from, as Modi's government ordered state borders to be sealed (Nilsen, 2020b). Some 972 migrant workers are reported to have died during their trek home, in road accidents and from causes such as exhaustion, malnutrition, and suicide (Mohanty, 2020).

The mass exodus was caused by the very structure of India's economy, where approximately 95% of India's workforce eke out a living in the informal sector, with low wages, poor working conditions, long working hours, limited access to social protection, and, crucially, insecure employment (see Agarwala, 2013; Barnes, 2014; Bhattacharya & Kesar, 2020; Breman, 1996; Ghosh, 2012; Shah et al., 2017; Shah & Lerche, 2020). When the Modi government imposed its draconian lockdown policy, economic activity ground to a halt, and

informal sector jobs – particularly in manufacturing, construction, trade, and hotels and restaurants – were decimated (Anand & Thampi, 2020; Kapoor, 2020). According to media reports, unemployment in urban areas went up by more than 22 percentage points – that is, from 8.66% to 30.93% – between late March and the first week of April (Chishti, 2020; see also Menon, 2020). The result was 'severe economic distress' – and this distress was compounded 'by the fact that there was very little public assistance to prevent growing destitution and hunger' (Ghosh, 2020, p. 4).

There is no shortage of evidence of this destitution. For example, according to a survey of 11,159 migrant workers carried out three weeks into the lockdown, some 50% of those who had left the cities they worked in had rations left for less than a day; 96% had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food; 70% of those walking home had less than 300 rupees left with them; 89% of those surveyed had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). Two weeks into April, Indian media reported of growing hunger among migrant workers, who, due to the fact that they work outside their home states, were not able to access food grains from India's Public Distribution System (PDS).[1] This was despite the fact that, in March, the Food Corporation of India held 77 million tons of wheat and rice, which is three times the required buffer, and a bumper harvest was set to further swell public food stocks (Agarwal, 2020). A subsequent report from ActionAid India, published in August 2020, painted a similar picture of sustained distress: 81% of migrant workers and 71% of non-migrant workers in the informal sector reported losing their livelihoods; those who did not lose their work altogether frequently reported reduced working hours and less earnings, with many not receiving their cumulative wages in late March; many workers reported declining levels of food consumption, rapidly depleting savings, and, consequently, deepening indebtedness; many also reported having lost their housing as they were no longer able to pay rent (ActionAid, 2020). A recent comprehensive study from researchers at Azim Premji University further confirms this scenario: two-thirds of their respondents lost work, with casual and self-employed workers in the informal sector being hit hardest; those who did not lose their jobs outright reported huge losses in income – sometimes as much as 50%. Overall, earnings fell by between 40% and 50%, and 91% of poor households reported a loss of livelihood. As the report points out, this happened in a context where earnings were already very low, which means that the shock of the pandemic and the lockdown exacerbated food and consumption insecurity and deepened indebtedness. In fact, the vast majority of households surveyed reported reduced levels of food consumption during the lockdown (Kesar et al., 2020).

This reveals the extent to which India's economy is, most fundamentally, a machinery for what Friedrich Engels, in his study of the working poor in nineteenth-century England, called 'social murder' (Engels, 1844/2009). Engels coined the term to refer how the industrial working class confronted premature death as a result of how capitalist exploitation subjected workers to 'conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long' (Engels, 1844/2009, p. 106). The workings of asymmetrical relations of power between capital and labour, he argued, 'undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time' (Engels, 1844/2009, p. 106; see also Chernomas & Hudson, 2009; Grover, 2019). This becomes obvious if we consider in some detail the nature of what Stuart Corbridge and Alpa Shah (2013) have rightly referred to as the 'underbelly' of India's economic boom – a boom which began in the early 2000s on the basis of steadily rising growth rates since the early 1980s, and which averaged annual GDP growth rates between 7% and 9% throughout the 2000s, with only a minor and temporary dip

after the financial crash of 2008 (see Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2015; Ghosh, 2012, 2015). What is striking about this growth trajectory, much of which has taken place after neoliberalization began in earnest in the early 1990s, is that it has failed to bring about a structural shift in the economy: India's economic growth, which has been driven primarily by finance, IT services and real estate, has failed to translate into employment growth, and labour's share of national income has fallen sharply (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2015, pp. 5–11). And, closely associated with these trends, informal work continues to be the predominant source of employment in India (Bhattacharya & Kesar, 2020). As Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2015, p. 18) point out, India's informal sector and its workers actually service the formal sector, and 'the low wages in the informal economy help sustain the formal sector profits' (see also Ghosh, 2015). Moreover, informal working relations are an integral part of India's growth process due to the fact that private employers in the formal sector are expanding their use of contract labourers with only the most minimal of legal rights (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2015, pp. 18–21). In other words, India's informal economy is 'a major site of precarity' (Bhattacharya & Kesar, 2020, p. 2) that has been reproduced and regenerated under neoliberalization, and which fails to adequately undergird subsistence and social reproduction for India's working poor (see Breman, 2016, 2019; Gooptu & Parry, 2015; Kannan, 2014) (Figure 2).
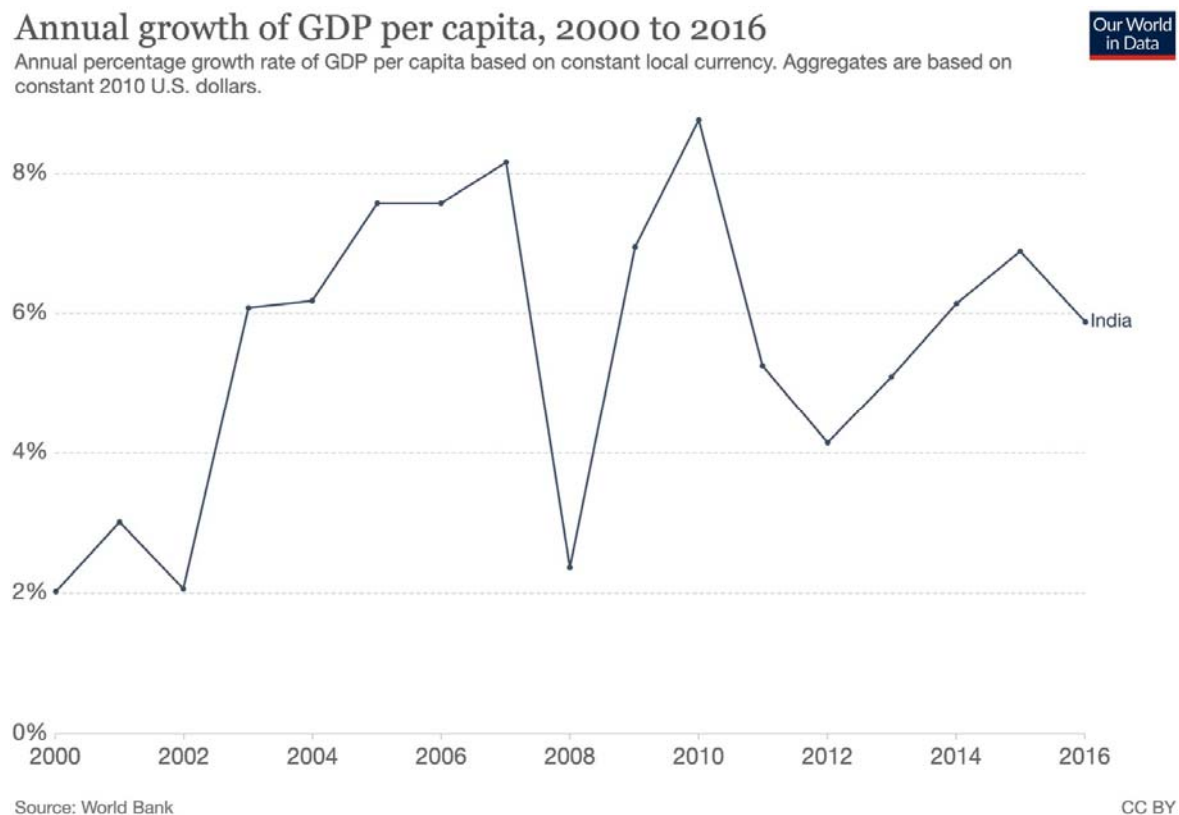
Figure 2. India's boom years: Annual aggregate GDP growth, 2000–2016 (Source: data.worldbank.org).

The workings of India's machinery for social murder becomes even more evident when we consider how the suffering of the working poor was aggravated by poor access to emergency relief and social protection under lockdown. ActionAid's (2020) survey of informal workers during the lockdown showed that 44% had not received any assistance with food, 75%

received no cash assistance, and 85% of those who needed shelter did not receive it. In addition, many could neither access healthcare nor avail of state welfare schemes. This reflects, first of all, the fact that India has consistently failed to extend social rights to its poorest and most vulnerable citizens – a failure which has resulted in the country having far weaker social development indicators than those of poorer neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Drèze & Sen, 2013). These consequences were worsened as a result of the 'extreme parsimony' (Ghosh, 2020, p. 7) of the relief measures that were announced during the pandemic and the lockdown (see also Nair, 2020). The first relief package that was introduced consisted mostly of budget items already committed to public spending prior to the outbreak of the pandemic and the imposition of the lockdown, and additional spending amounted only to 0.5% of GDP. An additional relief package was announced six weeks into the lockdown that supposedly amounted to 10% of GDP. However, close inspection reveals that the package mostly provided credit guarantees and other liquidity measures that did not necessitate fresh fiscal outlays. Total additional public spending therefore amounted to approximately 1% of GDP, much of which failed to reach those who needed it (Ghosh, 2020, p. 7). Above all, it was the 'inexplicable delay' (Ghosh, 2020, p. 7) in distributing food from the PDS that caused the most harm to the working poor (Indian Express, 2020; Varma, 2020). As with so many other facets of India's pandemic, the coexistence of plentiful food stocks and desperately hungry people was not a novelty: despite being a food surplus country, India ranks as number 94 out of 107 assessed countries on the 2020 Global Hunger Index, and is home to the greatest number of wasted children (low weight relative to height) out of all the countries assessed in the index (Upadhyay, 2020).

Interestingly, a similarly parsimonious approach characterized the Modi government's economic stimulus package, which in turn has long-term impacts on the Indian economy, far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Seemingly bound by strict neoliberal edicts, the government has been very reluctant 'to increase public spending beyond trivial amounts that are unlikely to do much to prevent capital declines in economic activity' (Ghosh, 2020, p. 8). A close reading of the stimulus package announced in the first half of May 2020, which the government claimed amounted to 20 lakh crore rupees, shows that direct fiscal stimulus would amount to less than 2.5 lakh crore rupees, or just a little over 1% of GDP (The Wire Analysis, 2020a). The majority of the measures were focused on credit and the easing of liquidity constraints for sectors of the economy badly affected by the national lockdown. However, in a context of declining demand, access to credit is likely to do little to improve investment, and banks and other firms are likely to use the available funds to balance their sheets (Ghosh, 2020, pp. 8–9). It is important to bear in mind that this failure to stimulate the economy through increased public spending happens against a longer-term backdrop of stagnation in the Indian economy. As Roshan Kishore (2020, p. 2) has shown in great detail, the Indian economy was 'caught in a prolonged deceleration even before the COVID-19 shock' (see also Nagaraj, 2020). In the quarter ending March 2019, the GDP growth rate stood at 2.5% less than the previous year, and by the end of March 2020, it had plummeted from 5.7% to 3.1% (Kishore, 2020). 'In a span of three years', Kishore writes, 'India went from being the fastest *growing* economy to the fastest *slowing* economy' (Kishore, 2020, p. 3). The COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown worsened an already dismal economic decline, as India witnessed a 23.9% contraction in economic activity from April to June 2020 (Singh, 2020). In July 2020, Oxford Economics, a global forecasting firm, confirmed the deficiencies of the government's policy as a further loss of economic momentum was expected in the third quarter. Overall, India has fared worst in all of Asia in terms of economic recovery, and is likely to take longest among major economies to regain pre-COVID-19 levels of economic activity (The Wire, 2020).
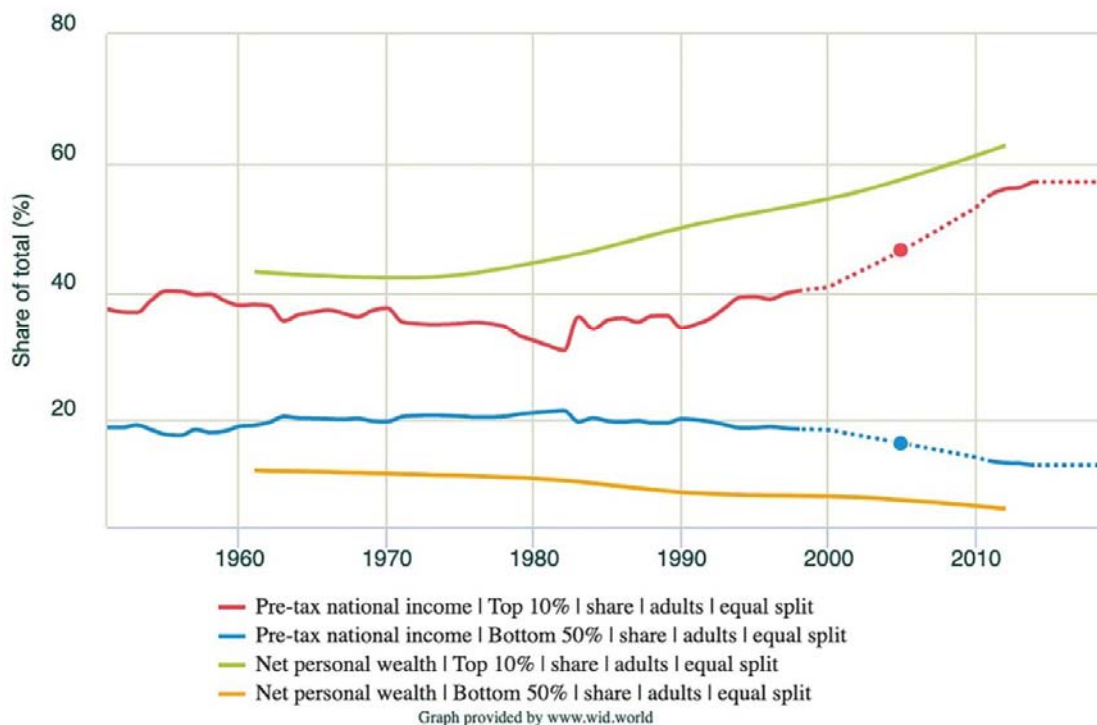
The Modi regime's unwillingness to invest in relief and stimulus contrasts sharply with its eagerness to push through further neoliberal reforms. In September 2020, the Indian parliament passed new legislation for the agricultural sector and introduced new labour laws. Both set of laws were passed in a great rush, and without much scope for discussion. In terms of agriculture, three new laws were passed – the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020; and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020. Tweeting after the bills had been passed into law, Narendra Modi claimed that the new legislation will 'ensure a complete transformation of the agriculture sector as well as empower crores of farmers' and bolster his government's efforts to double the income of India's farmers. 'We are here to serve our farmers', Modi proclaimed. The new laws, however, work, first and foremost, to further liberalize Indian agriculture, and threaten to leave small and marginal farmers, who make up 85% of India's farming sector, at the mercy of overwhelmingly strong corporate forces (see Jawandhiya & Dandekar, 2020; Narayan, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Sinha, 2020).

Aiming to put India among the top ten countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, the Modi government also rushed through substantial reforms of the country's labour laws: 44 central laws were subsumed into four broad codes of wages, industrial relations, occupational safety, health and working conditions, and social security. As critics have pointed out, these new labour codes will further expand India's informal sector workforce and leave many without the protection of formal contracts and benefits such as paid holidays and healthcare as labour laws will now apply to fewer firms, according to size and the number of workers they employ. For workers in India's formal sector, employment is likely to become more insecure while access to social protection remains very limited. Crucially, the new laws also severely curtail the capacity of trade unions for collective action (Sood, 2020; The Wire Staff, 2020b; The Working People's Charter, 2020).[2] Indeed, a crucial function the new laws is to signal to capital that the government is willing to confront labour (see Kaur, 2020b). Of course, as Varma et al. (2020) have shown, the laws fail entirely to address the needs of migrant workers, which became so evident during the national lockdown. Instead, the legislation deepens the informalization of Indian labour markets just as lockdown regulations are easing and desperate migrant workers have begun to return to the cities, willing, as Radhika Kapoor (2020, p. 6) puts it, to take up any work that comes their way 'even if the remuneration offered is lowered or the terms of employment are more precarious than before the shock of the pandemic' (see also Kumar, 2020).

In other words, instead of addressing the humanitarian crisis among the working poor, the Modi regime has instead pump-primed the machinery for social murder, and in doing so, the regime has also looked after the interests of Indian big business, which, as a class, has stood more or less uniformly behind Modi since 2014.[3] Indian capital, in turn, has done well during the crisis wrought by the pandemic and the lockdown. As Figure 3 below demonstrates, India was already a 'billionaire Raj' (Crabtree, 2018) before the pandemic. In 2019, the top 10% of the population earned 55% of all income and held 74.3% of all wealth (BQ Desk, 2019; Thakur, 2020; see also Chancel & Piketty, 2019; Himanshu, 2019). And between April and July, the combined net worth of Indian billionaires increased by more than a third – that is, their net worth increased by 35% to 423 billion US dollars (Kamdar, 2020; The Wire Staff, 2020c). India's capitalist class is also well-placed to further enrich itself as the Modi government, in addition to pushing through the new agricultural and labour laws, also liberalized investment regimes across multiple sectors of the economy, and dismantled

environmental regulations that were widely viewed as impediments to industrial, mining and infrastructural projects (Haq, 2020; Zargar, 2020b).

Income and wealth inequality, India, 1951-2019

Pre-tax national income | Top 10% | share | adults | equal split
Pre-tax national income | Bottom 50% | share | adults | equal split
Net personal wealth | Top 10% | share | adults | equal split
Net personal wealth | Bottom 50% | share | adults | equal split

Graph provided by www.wid.world

Figure 3. Wealth and income inequality in India: 1951–2019 (source: World Inequality Database).

In sum, then, what we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown in India is not only the amplification of the perverse workings of an economic structure that preys on the working poor through social murder but also a further consolidation of the power relations that produce these workings. As I show in the next section, these dynamics intersect, in the current perilous conjuncture, with a crisis in India's secular and constitutional democracy, which is brought about by the authoritarian populism that is at the core of the BJP's hegemonic project.

Authoritarian politics and the war on dissent

India is often hailed as an exceptional polity in the global South: since the coming of independence in 1947, the country's secular and constitutional democracy has remained remarkably stable and struck deep popular roots (see Jakobsen et al., 2019). This compares favourably, of course, to other regions and countries in the global South where democratic rule has tended to rest on feeble foundations and often has given way to outright authoritarianism (see Nilsen & Nielsen, 2016).[4] However, as India enters the third decade of the twenty-first century, Narendra Modi's BJP government has brought this democratic order to an unprecedented crossroads, and this has never been more evident than during the months that India has been a lockdown nation.

When the BJP came to power as the nation's governing party in the 2014 general election, it was, as already noted above, at the helm of a hegemonic project of authoritarian populism – that is, a form of conservative politics that constructs a contradiction between common people and elites, and then uses this contradiction to justify the imposition of repressive measures by the state (Hall, 1988). Initially, this project was constructed around a narrative of development that sought to address frustrated subaltern aspirations in the context of jobless growth while opposing dynastic elitism and promulgating individual entrepreneurialism. However, since the initial electoral victory in 2014, the politics of the BJP under Modi has increasingly come to gravitate around a majoritarian cultural nationalism that draws a line between true Indians and their enemies, and seeks to rally popular support for a crackdown on those enemies. Crucially, this line is defined in large part by religion – the ominous Other that authoritarian populism depends on in order to frame a unitary conception of the nation and national culture is, in Modi's India, the Muslim. Hate speech and vigilante violence against Muslims have escalated dramatically under the current government, and more recently, the precepts of Hindu nationalism have also come to be increasingly enshrined in law (see Jaffrelot, 2019; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020; Nilsen, 2021a, 2021b).[5] This hegemonic project has enjoyed considerable success – the 2019 elections saw Modi return to power with an even greater majority than in 2014, and 44% of all Hindu voters cast their ballots in support of Modi (see Nilsen, 2021a).[6]

However, it is not only India's vulnerable Muslim citizens who constitute the ominous Other in Narendra Modi's authoritarian populism. The enemy within also encompasses the political dissident who dares to question and challenge a government that claims to be acting in the interest of the people. This is evident in how the BJP government has waged a steadily escalating war on dissent in India. The first shots in this war were fired in early 2016, when student activists at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi were arrested on trumped-up charges of sedition (JNU Teachers' Association, 2017). The arrests helped spawn the idea that India confronts a threat in the form of 'anti-national' forces that are undermining the country from within. This idea has been used to justify a range of coercive attacks on dissenters – be they activists, public intellectuals, academics and students, lawyers, or journalists. Legal harassment and public vilification were the chief modus operandi of the state in the early stages of the war on dissent – for example, news channels that reported critically on the Modi regime have found themselves at the receiving end of police raids and investigations – but Hindu nationalist activists have also engaged in murderous violence against dissenting voices in the public sphere, as evidenced, for instance, by the assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017 (Nilsen et al., 2019).

Modi's government began scaling up its war on dissent in late August 2018, when the homes of several human rights activists were raided in a nationwide police sweep. Five activists were arrested: Arun Ferreira, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, Gautam Navlakha, and Vernon Gonsalves. The arrests were linked to what is known as the Bhima Koregaon case. This case refers to the police investigation of violence that erupted in the western Indian state of Maharashtra in early January the same year. Dalit groups who had gathered to commemorate the bicentennial of the defeat of the upper caste ruler Peshwa Bajirao II by the armed forces of the British East India Company – a force that also counted a substantial number of Mahars (a Dalit community) in its ranks – were attacked by a Hindu nationalist mob. However, rather than scrutinizing the involvement of Hindu nationalist leaders in the attack, the police investigation targeted prominent activists who were arrested on charges of instigating the violence and planning a terrorist attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi (see Nilsen, 2018; Shantha, 2020). And the crackdown did not stop there. Since 2018, altogether

16 arrests have been carried out in connection with the case – most recently, in April this year, of Dalit scholar and activist Anand Teltumbde, and, five months later, of Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest who has dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of Adivasi (tribal/indigenous) groups in the state of Jharkhand in eastern India. The gravity of the charges has ensured that the accused have been refused bail and remain in police custody (see Jaffrelot, 2020; Mandhani, 2020; Nilsen, 2020c).

This strategy of imprisoning dissenters linked to draconian sections of the Indian Penal Code picked up momentum as the national lockdown began to quell India's public sphere. To fully understand the war on dissent in the lockdown nation, it is necessary to return to the scenario that this essay began with, namely the mass protests against anti-Muslim citizenship laws that shook India in late 2019 and early 2020. Often spearheaded by Muslims, this groundswell constituted the first substantial nationwide opposition to the policies of the Modi regime since it took power in 2014. Protesters faced brutal police actions and arrests, and Hindu nationalist mobs attacked student activists at JNU and groups of demonstrators elsewhere in Delhi. By late February this year, BJP leaders in Delhi incited mobs to attack Muslim neighbourhoods in northeastern parts of the city as part of their campaign against anti-CAA protesters. In the riots that ensued, 53 people – 39 of whom were Muslims – were killed, and hundreds of families were displaced from their homes. Despite the repression and violence, the protests continued until late March, when the national lockdown made it impossible to organize and mobilize on the country's streets and public spaces (see Nilsen, 2020c).

As protesters retreated, the Delhi Police, which reports directly to the central government and the Home Ministry under BJP supremo Amit Shah, swung into action, weaponizing the North East Delhi Riots, and operating under cover of the national lockdown to persecute leading anti-CAA activists. At the heart of this persecution lies the claim, by the Delhi Police, that the violence in North-East Delhi was the result of a conspiracy carefully planned and executed by anti-CAA activists. The conspiracy, the police narrative goes, revolved around spreading misinformation about the CAA and the NRC, and then encouraging young Muslims to join in street protests. These subversive efforts allegedly reached their climax with the violent riots in late February, which the police claim were intended to cast India in a negative light in international media as erstwhile US president Donald Trump visited the country (The Polis Project, 2020).

The legal crackdown on anti-CAA activists began soon after the street protests had been cleared. For example, Meeran Haider, an activist and research scholar at Jamia Millia Islamia University and president of the youth wing of the political party Rashtriya Janata Dal, was arrested on 2 April on charges of instigating violent riots. Safoora Zargar, a media coordinator for the student activist committee at Jamia Millia Islamia University, was arrested a week later, also accused of instigating protests that escalated into violence in late March (Daniyal, 2020; Yamunan & Daniyal, 2020). Similarly, Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, founding members of the feminist student collective Pinjra Tod, were arrested later the same month on charges related to their participation in the anti-CAA protests. After the two were granted bail, they were immediately rearrested on new charges that encompassed serious offences such as murder and attempted murder. Furthermore, the charges against the two were later expanded to include offences under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) – a particularly draconian anti-terrorism law (Maniktala, 2020).

As the independent research organization The Polis Project (2020) points out in a detailed report, the strategy of the Delhi Police – which, according to Amnesty International, was complicit in the riots in North East Delhi – has been to begin by detaining and arresting junior activists from the anti-CAA protests young Muslim men from the communities affected by rioting. More than a month after the national lockdown had first been declared, residents of North East Delhi reported that police forces would sweep through their neighbourhoods to make arrests. 'If they could not find the person they were looking for', Divya Trivedi (2020a) writes, 'they picked up his family members and detained them until the person they were after appeared before them'. Their interrogations were then used to build evidence that was used to arrest and bring charges against more senior activists:

During the interrogations, the young men are put under severe pressure to act as "witnesses" and produce statements corroborating the police narrative that the violence was caused by the anti-CAA/NRC protesters. In particular, the police coerce the youth to testify against senior activists in order to falsely implicate the latter in the violence. (The Polis Project, 2020, p. 22)

As the examples referred to above illustrate, the chargesheets that have accompanied the arrests of more senior activists tend to make very grave allegations without much substantial evidence. Indeed, there is much to suggest that what passes for evidence in these cases has been fabricated by the police to prop up the claim that anti-CAA activists were involved in a conspiracy to provoke violent riots. At the same time, evidence related to violence and incitement to violence by Hindu nationalists has either been suppressed or disregarded (Trivedi, 2020b).

The climax, so far, in this process – a witch-hunt by any standard – came in mid-September 2020, in the form of a 17,000-page chargesheet filed by the Delhi Police under the UAPA and various serious provisions of the Indian Penal Code against 15 prominent anti-CAA activists – among them Safoora Zargar and Meeran Haider, Natasha Narwal, and Devangana Kalita, all of whom had originally been arrested in April, and student leader Umar Khalid, who was one of the JNU students arrested on charges of sedition in 2016 (The Telegraph, 2020). The chargesheet, which also implicated renowned academics and leaders of national political parties as mentors of the arrested activists, was underpinned by two disclosure statements – effectively confessions – attributed to Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal. Interestingly, these statements were identical, despite supposedly having been made independently of each other, and on several pages, Kalita and Narwal had both clearly written 'I refuse to sign' in the margins (Mahaprashasta, 2020).

The purpose of these arrests is evident. It is, as The Polis Project (2020, p. 11) puts it, to produce 'a climate of fear that silences citizens by criminalizing dissent' (see also Nilsen, 2020c). And importantly, this war on dissent is joined at the hip with the majoritarian cultural politics of the Modi regime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Muslims have been scapegoated as super-spreaders of the coronavirus. This scapegoating seized on the conference of the Tablighi Jamaat – a Muslim revivalist organization – in Delhi in the second week of March 2020. Several attendees tested positive for COVID-19, and by the end of March, six conference attendees were reported to have died of the illness (Sebastian, 2020; Salam, 2020). At this point, Ziya Us Salam (2020) writes, 'the political establishment went into overdrive to paint the Tabligh, and by extension, the Muslim community, as responsible for the spread of COVID-19'. The political establishment was aided by a Modi-friendly media which wasted no time in peddling this narrative, and by the circulation of fake news on social media – a staple of Hindu nationalist politics in recent years (Trivedi, 2020c; see also

Sinha, 2017). Such scapegoating aligns with the efforts of the Modi regime to produce a Hindu nation out of a secular constitutional democracy (Krishnan, 2020g). Most immediately, the stigmatization of Muslims as super-spreaders resulted in Islamophobic violence and harassment. There have been numerous media reports, for example, of Muslims being accused of engaging in 'Corona jihad' and being beaten up, while middle class neighbourhoods have implemented boycotts of Muslim street vendors (Ellis-Petersen & Rahman, 2020). As TIME journalist Billy Perrigo (2020a) puts it, it is quite obvious that all of this is 'exacerbating an already dangerous atmosphere for Muslims' in India.

Concluding remarks

If the trajectory and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with a clear view of how India's economy is constructed as a machinery for social murder and how its polity is besieged by authoritarian political forces, it is only natural to ask where all of this leaves the Modi regime in relation to oppositional social forces. Does the BJP's hegemonic position in Indian politics remain intact after the pandemic has ripped through India, or are we likely to see a turning of the tide propelled by popular opposition to social suffering and political repression?

The initial lockdown months in 2020 witnessed some scattered protests by stranded migrant workers, and civil society groups played an important role in providing care and relief to those who made the trek from urban metropoles to rural homes. Trade unions opposed the new labour laws, and doctors and health workers objected to their working conditions (Sundar & Nilsen, 2020). Nevertheless, the politics of belief seemed to work its magic for the Modi regime: in late February 2021, the US firm Morning Consult reported that Modi's approval rating stood at 75% – higher than that of any other world leader tracked by the firm (Nilsen, 2021c). The question, of course, is whether the politics of belief will continue to ward off an hour of reckoning for Modi even as a second wave of the pandemic wreaks havoc on the country.

As I finalize this essay, India has been setting a new world record in terms of new Covid-19 cases every day for more than two weeks straight – that is, as of early May 2021, the 7-day average of new cases stood at 378,092, the cumulative case rate at 20,665,148, and the number of deaths at 226,188. These numbers doubtlessly underestimate the actual scale of the second wave of the pandemic. In fact, medical experts assume that the actual numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths to be anything from five to thirty times higher than the official figures. This desperate situation reflected the fact, detailed above, that the Modi government failed entirely to address the Covid-19 pandemic as a public health imperative, despite the fact that it was warned by both parliamentary committees and its own medical experts that the country would be hit by a second surge in infections and that there were severe deficiencies in terms of supplies of oxygen and other medical necessities. In addition, the Modi regime's much trumpeted vaccination drive turned out to be a dismal failure due to inadequate manufacturing and procurement: only 2% of the population had been fully vaccinated at the time that this was written. Instead, Modi had declared to both national and international publics that India had succeeded in the battle against Covid-19 and directly enabled and pursued super-spreader events by giving the go-ahead to a massive Hindu festival and campaigning intensively for the state elections in West Bengal (see Nilsen, 2021d).

There is evident discontent and anger with the Modi regime as a result of this humanitarian crisis, and there have been numerous reports of dissent within the ranks of the BJP and the wider Hindu nationalist movement of which it is a part. However, this discontent will only be able to drive a progressive post-Covid transformation in India if it congeals with wider currents of protest in Indian society. This refers, above all, to the movement against the new farm laws that began to crystallize in October last year. Camped on the outskirts of Delhi since late 2020 in large numbers, the farmers' movement is widely considered to be a key node of opposition to both neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism (see Vanaik, 2021).

Now, protests by farmers are of course not new in India, and earlier generations of farmers' movements – especially the farmers' movements of the 1980s and 1990s – have been criticized for representing the interests of rich farmers, while marginalizing small and marginal farmers and agricultural workers (Banaji, 1994; Bentall & Corbridge, 1996; Dhanagare, 1994). In contrast, the current anti-farm law protests seem to be animated by a different configuration of social forces. As Shreya Sinha (2020) has shown in the context of Punjab, there has been active participation by farm workers' unions in these protests, and this is a result of activist efforts to build bridges between agricultural workers, most of whom are Dalits, and small and marginal farmers, who tend to be from dominant caste communities. Similarly, Sudhir Kumar Suthar (2018) has pointed out that the agrarian movements that are currently emerging in India are more diverse than what they used to be, and there is significant representation of small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, Adivasis, and notably, urban youth from rural backgrounds (see also Krishnamurthy & Aiyar, 2018).

This is not to say that caste and class differentiation are no longer issues in India's agrarian politics – as Sinha (2020) notes, the changing dynamics of organizing and mobilizing that she calls attention to have occurred within relatively clear limits. Moreover, a progressive political project would also have to extend solidarities to encompass the working poor in India's cities. The potential strength of doing so was amply demonstrated in late November 2020, when a nationwide strike brought together 250,000,000 workers and farmers in opposition to both the new farm laws and the new labour laws introduced by the Modi regime (Perrigo, 2020b). But again, building such solidarities would necessitate breaking with the binary political imaginary, central to much agrarian protest, that opposes an exploited rural India to an exploiting urban India (see Dhanagare, 2014). In sum, much hinges, therefore, on the ability of activists to extend and consolidate solidarities – not only between agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers, and the urban working poor, but also between these groups, those subaltern citizens – especially Muslims and Dalits – who find themselves at the receiving end of an aggressive Hindu nationalism, and those voices who are in the line of fire in Modi's war on dissent. It was encouraging, in this regard, to see protesting farmers at the Delhi border demand the release of what they rightly refer to as political prisoners wrongfully charged under the UAPA. If there is to be a road ahead towards a progressive post-Covid future in India, it has to be built by fusing discontent with Modi's neoliberal Hindu nationalism with struggles against capitalist exploitation and with struggles for recognition, secularism, and democratic rights.

Disclosure statement

Additional information

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Notes

1 As both scholars and activists in India has noted, there were substantial problems with coverage in the PDS before the onset of the pandemic, with as many as 108 million people being excluded from its remit despite being eligible for subsidized grains (see Agarwal, 2020).

2 The new national labour laws were preceded by initiatives at state level to liberalize employment regulations (see Zargar, 2020a).

3 Indian capital shifted its allegiance to Modi and the BJP in a major way in the early 2010s, in part as a reaction to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance passing legislation on land acquisition that was perceived to be a barrier to business, and in the context of declining growth rates and several high-profile corruption scandals. Corporate support has been crucial in funding the BJP's election campaigns in both 2014 and 2019 (see Nilsen, 2021a).

4 The only interruption in India's democratic trajectory was the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977, which was presided over by Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (see Prakash, 2019).

5 This process of enshrining Hindu nationalism into law - a process which is best understood as Hindu nationalist statecraft - began with the abrogation of Kashmiri statehood in August 2019, continued with the Supreme Court verdict in the Babri Masjid three months later, and advanced further with the introduction of the CAA, the National Population Register and the National Register of Citizens in December the same year (Nilsen, 2020a). At state level, legislation against so-called 'love jihad' and cow slaughter is evidence of the same process (Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021).

6 The key factor that has enabled the BJP to win two consecutive general elections is the fact that the party has expanded its support base beyond its traditional urban middle class and upper caste constituency. Support for the BJP has increased strongly among the poor and among Dalits - India's formerly untouchable castes - and lower caste groups. This trend was already clearly evident in the 2014 general election, and was further reinforced in 2019, when the party increased its vote share from 34% to 44% among lower caste groups, from 24% to

34% among Dalits, and from 37% to 44% among Adivasis. Whereas the party increased its vote share across all classes, the largest increase happened among poor Indians – from 24% in 2014 to 36% in 2019 (Sardesai & Attri, 2019; Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Venkataramakrishnan, 2019).

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