

Notes towards a Gramscian analysis of a pandemic year in India*

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In 2020 the authoritarian Hindu-supremacist BJP party was in its second term. With Modi leading it, the party won a landslide in 2019 and a majority in Parliament. Modi and the BJP were relatively restrained in their first term, however in their second term they vigorously implemented their coercive agenda and their ultra-neoliberal program of total deregulation and privatization. They were assisted by the Covid-19 pandemic which became their universal excuse for (1) shutting down political protests, (2) rushing through laws attacking workers, farmers and the rights of women, (they had passed laws attacking Muslims in 2019) and (3) arresting lawyers, trade unionists, journalists, university students, grassroots organizers, and organizers/leaders of subaltern groups, especially Dalits and Adivasis, on terrorism charges, denying them bail or trial. Modi and the BJP are using shock-doctrine-tactics to frighten the public and to blame Muslims for the virus. They have been successful because they control the media. Astonishingly, even though the government did shockingly little to help the starving millions who lost their jobs, the government has not lost its popularity. Its passive revolution strategies and its amazingly firm hegemonic power are examined within this conjuncture: a new neoliberal form of Hinduism is flourishing today.

Dissent; Labour; Authoritarianism; Shock-doctrine; Hegemony.

1. *The neoliberal conjuncture and an elitist political takeover*¹

1.1. Intensifying nationalisms, racisms, and populist politics in the neoliberal era

Great thinkers have special insights that make their reflections valuable to after-times. Gramsci was one such. Aijaz Ahmad and Himani Bannerji are both of his lineage: their observations throw a flood of light on what is happening here in India. Both Ahmad and Bannerji possess preternatural

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¹ «An elitist political takeover»: “The Guardian” columnist Aditya Chakraborty uses this phrase in an analysis of current British politics (CHAKRABORTY 2020). The phrase is an equally apt description of the Indian political context. This is not surprising since right-wing populist demagogues lead both countries.

presence: their classic articles from decades ago accurately predict many details of what is happening in India today (in 2020/2021).

In his prophetic 1993 essay, *Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva*, Aijaz Ahmad observes:

«Supposing the Congress variety of “liberalization” does not succeed, shall we then be ready for an authoritarian resolution? Shall then, “the mass of the urban and rural petty bourgeois” demand that *the machinery of terror and the machinery of “liberalization” be one and the same?*»².

This is exactly what has happened – big capital in India clearly felt that the «Congress variety of “liberalization”» had not gone far enough in giving it *unfettered* access to the productive resources of the economy. Consequently, under Modi from 2014 onwards the deregulation of the entire economy has gathered steam, reaching a definitive stage after the May 2019 national elections when the BJP won an absolute majority of seats in Parliament. From May 2019 onwards – and certainly throughout the pandemic year of 2020 – a sea-change in India’s polity has occurred, as «*the machinery of terror and the machinery of “liberalization”* have become one and the same».

The one difference from Ahmad’s 1993 conjecture is that it is not the petty bourgeois³ but big capital – led by India’s foremost billionaires like Ambani and Adani, all of whom are close cronies of the BJP, “of the RSS and the like” – that has demanded the immediate deregulation of the entire economy. But there are still many Left/progressive organizations in India’s civil society that are very ready to resist and to protest the further impoverishment of poor Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims that such economic deregulation would entail. For the Modi government’s profligate deregulation to progress smoothly and succeed, their resistance and dissent needs to be crushed. The Modi government has not hesitated to do so, taking an astonishingly heavy-handed and brutal approach to civil society opposition and resistance. This is why “*the machinery of terror*” is proving very useful to the government, which appears ready to throw into jail virtually anybody who has the temerity to publicly criticize its policies. The government, as we will see, is particularly cracking down wherever the green shoots of proletarian hegemonic resistance have sprung up, nurtured by subaltern “organic-intellectual” organizers and also by middle-class sympathizers and mentors. These activist leaders, whether

² AHMAD 1993, p. 60; emphasis added.

³ Though many of them are indeed “partisans of the RSS and the like”.

subaltern or higher-caste, are in the crosshairs of the Modi government: since 2018 the jails have steadily filled with their numbers as Adivasi community organizers, trade unionists from Chattisgarh, prison reform activists, young university students from Delhi, and lawyers, journalists and climate crisis activists from all over India have been arrested, chucked in jail and left to languish in incarceration for months and years, without bail or trial, on the fabricated charge of “sedition”.

In her important article on populist politics, *From Authoritarian to Left Populism?: Reframing Debates* (2019) Gillian Hart argues that «the political stakes of a Gramscian understanding are distinctively different from the standard Left dismissal of populist politics, as well as from the sort of left populism that Mouffe is promoting ... My purpose in this essay is to suggest reframing debates cast in terms of whether or not left populism can defeat right-wing forms of populism. The more salient and politically useful questions turn around *how to produce deeper critical understandings of the forces generating intensifying nationalisms, racisms, and populist politics in the neoliberal era*, in not only Europe but also many regions of the world beyond Euro-America» (2019, p. 310; emphasis added).

This is an insightful characterization of the present conjuncture in India. In its pandemic context in 2020 we are witnessing an intensifying “Hindu” nationalism, a sharply increasing racist-casteism, and a fundamentalist Hindu-majoritarian populist politics that is directed against Indian Muslims by a political leadership that is pursuing a highly aggressive neoliberal agenda. This ultra-neoliberal agenda is driven by the extremely close relationship between the BJP leadership and India’s millionaire corporate class.

Hart is right to emphasize the deep connections created by the neoliberal global economy between global elites. Pre-existing massive inequality in India is growing worse very rapidly. India’s richest 1% are intimately connected with other global elites. The daughter of Narayana Murty, India’s tech billionaire owner of Infosys, is married to Rishi Sunak, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer – and Akshata Murty is richer than the Queen! (THE GUARDIAN 2020a). *India’s richest 1% hold more than four times the wealth held by the bottom 70% of the country’s 1.4 billion population* (OXFAM 2020; SCROLL.IN 2020a).

The Modi government is not only intimately sutured to its homegrown billionaires but also to non-Indian global corporates, not least in the technology industries. Facebook is a shocking example of how ready the Western

billionaires owning FAANG⁴ are to kowtow to the demands of Modi's ugly Hindu-supremacist politics in order to profit from India's gigantic market. The "Wall Street Journal" reported that Facebook India had refused to take down a post placed on its Facebook page by the Bajrang Dal, a violent Hindu-supremacist organization closely linked to the BJP, despite this post being condemned by Facebook USA. It showed the Bajrang Dal attacking a Pentecostal church. The "Wall Street Journal" reported: «Facebook Inc. balked at removing the group following warnings in a report from its security team that cracking down on Bajrang Dal might *endanger both the company's business prospects and its staff in India*» (WALL STREET JOURNAL 2020; emphasis added). This *WSJ* report also noted that India is Facebook's largest market by users. Given the nexus between the Modi government and neoliberal global capital, corporate profits trump principles every time.

RAVINDER KAUR (2020) astutely points out that the Modi government is not just in a hurry, it is in a frantic rush to deregulate the entire Indian economy at speed, because, spurred on by Trump's political vendetta against China, a «great decoupling» is happening between China and the US (JOHNSON – GRAMER 2020), providing, as the BJP sees it, a massive opportunity for India to step into the breach and «become the workshop of the world» (KAUR, *ibid.*). Significantly, Kaur notes that Prime Minister Modi has explicitly stated that India needs to change the coronavirus crisis into an opportunity and a turning point for India's economy and she observes, «This *crisis-as-opportunity approach* is accelerating the speed of market reforms that big capital has long demanded» (*ibid.*; emphasis added)⁵.

But the Modi government's "pandemic crisis as opportunity" approach is not limited to economic restructuring and "market reforms", the BJP government also sees the Covid lockdown and the continuing restrictions on public gatherings as a welcome opportunity to legally stifle democratic processes/protests and to rush through Parliament a number of new laws, that would, in the normal course, meet very stiff resistance both within Parliament from the Opposition parties and outside it from the public. These measures include not only the deregulation of the economy, that big business, both domestic and global, has long demanded, but also laws aimed at radically weakening organized labour in India, as well as laws that go against the

⁴ FAANG refers to the five dominant American technology companies: Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google (now Alphabet).

⁵ Note the resonances here with KLEIN 2007 and GHOSH 2020a, discussed below.

Constitution and harass and illegally discriminate against India's Muslim population.

India has the third largest Muslim population in the world, at 183 million (or possibly, in 2021, even 200 million) people. This number is an insignificant percentage of India's total population of 1.4 billion people: Muslims are *hugely outnumbered* by Hindus. However, political ideology is a powerful amplifier, and playing on the «fear of small numbers» (APPADURAI 2006) the BJP-RSS⁶ combine and their cognate *Sangh Parivar* (“Association Family”) of closely related Hindu-supremacist/nationalist institutions – the Bajrang Dal, the ABVP “student wing” of the BJP, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), etc. – have for years played expertly on the fears of Hindus, both lower and upper class, in order to deliberately create the anxiety that they «will soon be outnumbered by Muslims» and to create suspicion and fear of Indian Muslims as «the enemies within» (JAFFRELOT 2020a, 2020b).

The Modi government's focus, during this pandemic year of 2020, has been multiple, using «the pandemic crisis as opportunity» (KAUR 2020): some of its key projects in 2020 have been (1) to “discipline and punish” and thus break the back of organized/unionized *Indian labour* so that it has virtually zero bargaining power (GHOSH 2020a), (2) to legislate major anti-Muslim laws, inspired by their Hindutva (Hinduness/‘Hindu-nation’) ideology, which aims to intimidate and harass *Indian Muslims* and demote them into second-class citizens (MALIK 2020), (3) to use anti-terrorist laws in an unconstitutional manner to criminalize non-violent political dissent and thus to persecute and cow criticism of the government, particularly by *Dalits, Adivasis and*

⁶ The RSS: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has grown exponentially over the years. It is a grassroots paramilitary political organization, devoted to Hindu nationalism, with masses of dedicated (very largely male, caste-Hindu) cadre who run village schools, night-classes for school children and medical clinics in many parts of rural India (largely north India). It has become *the largest voluntary organization in the world* and it has contributed hugely to the electoral successes of the BJP. In fact it is unlikely that the BJP could win elections without the RSS's “groundwork” at the grassroots. Thus the RSS is extremely closely intertwined with the BJP. Because it is credited with facilitating the BJP's political victories, the RSS has often been able to dictate BJP party policy, behind the scenes. As a far-right, Hindu-supremacist organization it is seen as even more extreme than the BJP. Significantly, today *no other political party in India* possesses any network of this size of grassroots cadre offering services to the rural poor. This indicates, of course, a huge lacuna for which India's other parties can be justly faulted – and the tremendous advantage possessed by the BJP in this respect (Jaffrelot 2020a, 2020b).

their activist supporters (SHANTHA 2018, 2019, 2020), (4) to deregulate the agricultural sector in order to open it up to big capital, thus destroying the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of medium/small *farmers*⁷ (KAUR 2020) and (5) to reinstate deeply oppressive patriarchal controls and thus turn the clock back on the partial emancipation of Indian *women*, by subordinating them, radically and definitively, to male control through legislative changes⁸ (SCROLL.IN 2020b; TheQuint.com 2020a). Patriarchy is central to right-wing nationalism everywhere, but nowhere more so than in India, which has been identified as the most dangerous country in the world for women (THE GUARDIAN 2018).

Due to the constraints of space this essay focuses only on the first and the third of these subjects: that is, (a) on the BJP's attack *on the working classes* and its rushed legislation of new anti-labour laws and (b) on the BJP's crushing of *political dissent*, particularly through the arrests of many eminent activists who have been charged, since 2018, with the (entirely fabricated) "Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy"⁹.

1.2. Modi's political use of the Covid pandemic disaster

India's big corporates are supporting Mr Modi's high-speed deregulation of virtually every sector of the economy. The Modi government has pushed through deregulation legislation in a number of areas ever since 2014, when it was elected to its first term in office. But it was after their landslide re-election to a second term in May 2019, that the BJP threw aside all restraint and started rushing through major legislation without any consultation with stakeholders (SINHA 2020). Since May 2019 they have done this so often, in such a sudden, peremptory and unexpected manner, that leading economists/political theorists have suggested (eg. GHOSH 2020a) that the

⁷ 80% of India's farmers have less than 5 acres of land; some 70% of India's population lives in rural areas.

⁸ This reinstatement of patriarchal controls has been aggressively pursued by the Modi government, under the guise of the reactionary new "anti-Love-Jihad" laws, passed in 2020, which transgress Indian women's fundamental rights in deeply shocking and unconstitutional ways (THEQUINT.COM 2020a).

⁹ Due to the limitations of space I have not discussed the many arrests following the CAA-NRC protests (2019-2020) at Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere. Many of those arrested are still in jail.

government is deliberately following a “shock doctrine” strategy similar to that identified by NAOMI KLEIN (2007).

One of India’s most distinguished economists, Jayati Ghosh, put this very clearly in an interview with the political columnist G. Sampath (GHOSH 2020a). Sampath asked: «Would you say that the Modi government has used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to follow through on a policy or policies of what Naomi Klein famously termed disaster capitalism?»:

«Yes, I think so. There has certainly been some element of disaster capitalism in terms of announcing a number of neoliberal policies. But perhaps the Indian version we’re facing is something more like disaster authoritarianism. I think the Modi government is using the pandemic to push through a set of policies that is not just centralizing power, but is suppressing dissent, and is enabling it to do a range of things which would not normally be allowed. So you see, I think Klein’s doctrine is a very simple one, as you said, which is that in periods of shock, whether it is a financial crisis, or in this case, a health shock, people are much more vulnerable and much less able to think through the implications of different policies. And they’re also looking for strong action and someone to say “we’re taking strong measures to protect you against all this and you have to listen to us because we know what we’re doing”.

And so they’re more willing to accept a whole range of things which otherwise would come under question and would be subject to a whole range of usual democratic processes. I think what has happened here is that the Indian government has used the pandemic, essentially to, first of all, bring about an extremely brutal, abrupt lockdown, which did not serve the purpose of controlling the pandemic but itself had several of its own other purposes. And then [secondly, the government] did not do anything really to control the health epidemic. It was raging [then] and is raging even more now» (GHOSH 2020a).

Jayati Ghosh’s comments set the scene for this essay on the politics of India’s pandemic year. Firstly, she points out that what India is contending with, under the Modi government, is not just neoliberalism, it is authoritarianism. Secondly, Ghosh notes that the government is «not just centralizing power, but is *suppressing dissent*, and [the crisis] is enabling it to do a range of things *which would not normally be allowed*» (ibid.; emphasis added). This is an extremely important point and it is the central argument of this essay, namely that in India in 2020 the Modi government has been engaged in crushing dissent – both dissent and resistance from the classes of labour¹⁰ and dissent from civil society.

¹⁰ On the concept of “the classes of labour” see BERNSTEIN 2007.

Ghosh then points out that the Covid disaster allowed Modi to play «the strong man» to the hilt, because in a crisis people feel anxious and are looking for someone to take «strong action» and «protect them». Ghosh emphasises that the pandemic crisis has allowed the government to brush aside democratic processes. And she notes that the «extremely brutal» lockdown did not stop the spread of the Covid virus but was intended for quite other political purposes (GHOSH 2020a). Among these “other” purposes were: (a) radical neoliberal reforms to deregulate the economy and crush labour’s bargaining power, (b) widespread arrests without bail of critics of the government and of intellectuals and activists working at the grass-roots to educate, organize and defend people’s movements of the proletarian poor and (c) anti-Muslim laws that go against India’s constitution. Due to constraints of space I have dealt with only the first two subjects.

The paper has four parts: (a) an introduction, followed by discussions of (b) the suppression of labour, (c) the crushing of civil dissent and, finally, (d) passive revolution and hegemonic constructions in India.

Prime Minister Modi enjoys the uncritical support of India’s corporates because his neoliberal government has spent taxpayers’ money in order to subsidize them. When he was Chief Minister of Gujarat (2001 to 2014), Mr Modi invited Ratan Tata to leave West Bengal and instead set up Tata’s new Nano car factory in Gujarat with a massive subsidy – which Tata did in 2013. This subsidy came at a phenomenal cost to Gujarat taxpayers, but they never knew of it at the time. Instead Chief Minister Modi received much personal credit for attracting a major industry to Gujarat, leading to the notion of a “Gujarat model of development” that was celebrated by sycophantic right-wing commentators. But the “Gujarat model” is a sham – social scientists/economists have shown that Gujarat lies far behind many Indian states on crucial indicators like child health and child survival-rates. This “model” is just as much a mirage as Modi’s current economic policy, which claims to be creating a «Self-Reliant» («*Atma-Nirbhar*») India¹¹ (KAUR 2020). What India’s greedy corporates are actually doing is using the jackboot of the Modi government to crush the working classes.

Crony-capitalism rules: a corporate oligarchy of plutocrats reigns from behind Mr Modi’s throne, comprised of Mukesh Ambani, Gautam Adani and the other billionaires who are close to Mr Modi and his hugely powerful deputy, Amit Shah, the Home Minister. Because Mr Modi does their bidding,

¹¹ See the government of India site: <https://aatmanirbharbharat.mygov.in/>.

Indian (and global) corporates fund his party lavishly and seem not to care at all about the many eminent activists, journalists, lawyers and academics who are being thrown into jail without bail or trial (arrested under iniquitous terrorist/sedition laws). Nor do they seem to care about the BJP's blatant celebration and protection of "high-caste" Hindu privilege. Kavita Krishnan is the secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association and a politburo member of the CPI-ML¹². She accused the (BJP) Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister "Yogi" Adityanath of very deliberately promoting injustice because of his protection of four "high caste" Thakur¹³ men involved in the gang rape and murder of a Dalit teenager recently in Hathras in UP (KRISHNAN 2020). She said: «We are up against a system that is bent on defending organised caste supremacy and Islamophobic terrorism while treating feminist, anti-caste and equal-citizenship activism as a crime equivalent to terrorism» (ibid.).

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is emphatically the party of high caste privilege. It has therefore started a deliberate campaign to destroy seventy years of affirmative action in favour of the lower castes, especially Dalits. Thus it was recently reported that a panel constituted by the Modi government to "improve reservations"/affirmative action in post-graduate education for Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs (non-Dalit lower castes) instead recommended that *there should be no reservations at all* in the appointment of faculty at the IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology), which attract the crème de la crème of upper class/caste students (THEWIRE.IN 2020a). Long-standing, major affirmative action legislation enacted over several decades by the Congress party for the benefit of Dalits and Adivasis, such as reservations in public sector jobs and in higher education, are being rolled back by the Modi government, which is also going against the Constitution by creating reservations/affirmative action for high-caste Hindus (ALJAZEERA 2019).

1.3. Casteism is India's racism

Paradoxically, despite its desire for Dalit votes, and its occasional campaigns to woo Dalits, the BJP – which is primarily the party of the north Indian, Hindu upper-castes – often publicly humiliates and insults Dalits, with casteist/racist taunts. *Casteism is India's racism*: this is absolutely clear from the

¹² CPI-ML: Communist Party of India – Marxist-Leninist.

¹³ Chief Minister "Yogi" Adityanath is of Thakur caste too.

contempt and loathing implicit in the way most high caste people¹⁴ and other non-Dalits treat Dalits (ex-‘untouchables’). The majority of Indians are still very far from recognizing that «ontologically *race and caste do not exist* ... the increase in derogation is a sign of civilisational pathology rather than a naturalised response» (SITAS 2016, p. 128; emphasis added).

Prominent BJP political leaders praise Ambedkar one moment and, in the very next breath, taunt and insult Dalits. Recently, the execrable female BJP leader Pragya Thakur made her contribution. She is one of the accused in the 2008 Malegaon bombings case of domestic terrorism against Muslims, where 10 people were killed and 82 more were injured. Arrested on terror charges, she was given bail by the BJP government in 2017. In 2019, while still a terror-accused, she was elected to Parliament as a BJP MP. Recently, at a meeting of the Thakur caste, which is a “high” Kshatriya caste, she roundly declared to the Thakur men around her (there was not a female in sight) that while members of the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya/Baniya “high” castes took pride in their caste names, sadly “Shudras” didn’t. “*Shudra*” is a derogatory omnibus term meaning the “*servant castes*” and today includes all the lower castes, both non-Dalit OBCs and Dalits. Thakur declared that if «Shudras» themselves «understood the principles of caste society» they, like the «high» castes, would take pride in their «caste name» (INDIAN EXPRESS 2020a). Her meaning was unmistakable – the “lower castes” (the vast majority of the population) should accept their servant-status and their unchanging place at the very bottom of society (THEWIRE.IN 2020b). Responding to this egregious statement, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, a well-known OBC intellectual and political theorist, noted that there had been no public reprimand to Thakur for her outrageous statement from either Mr Modi or his deputy, Amit Shah – or, for that matter, from *any* Opposition politician (ILAIHAH SHEPHERD 2020).

Thus the BJP are Janus-faced as far as Dalits are concerned. While BJP leaders are becoming increasingly insulting to Dalits, they are simultaneously trying to win Dalit votes. But the BJP-RSS¹⁵ mask often slips and their abiding contempt for Dalits is repeatedly revealed. This has important implications for how we should understand BJP-RSS ideology: while their Hindu nationalist¹⁶ ideology projects a vision of an egalitarian association of “all Hindus”, on closer inspection this reveals itself to be a project seeking an *upper-caste*

¹⁴ The terms “low/lower caste” and “high/upper caste” (and “middle caste”) should always be read as if in quote marks.

¹⁵ RSS: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

¹⁶ Hindu *rashtra*.

Hindu nation. So, though Dalits/“Shudras” are ostensibly invited to join this notional Hindu nation, they are actually elided from it because they are not “pure” enough. Their place in the eventual Hindu nation will be somewhere “down there”, exploited and confined in the very worst jobs. Thus the BJP’s Hindu universe has no room for Dalits – they are cast out into the outer darkness, once again made outcasts from society. But this time they will, the BJP fervently hopes, be joined by India’s Muslims in this outcaste, non-citizen status. Both Muslims and Dalits will be definitively shut out of this Hindu nation.

The important point here is that *class* is at the very heart of both the BJP’s Hindu-nationalism and its ideology of Hindu religious supremacy, because, in the BJP view, only an upper-caste Hindu is a true Hindu, and *to be upper-caste is to be upper-class*. Thus neoliberalism is revealed as the nation’s natural theology, for it is certainly the creed of India’s upper-classes.

This also highlights how India’s so-called “caste system”, where Dalits have been kept trapped for generations in the very worst, lowest-paid jobs, because these horrible jobs¹⁷ are viewed as “appropriate” for them, «is really about *the racialisation of economic issues, about how those who are racialised (and thus considered “naturally” other or radically alien) are considered worthless*» (FASSIN 2018, p. 92, quoted in HART 2019, p. 312; emphasis added). Fassin’s formulation is extremely important: hitherto, in the Indian context, it was primarily Dalits and Adivasis who were racialised and considered worthless, but today the BJP are trying to do the same with Muslims. Indian Muslims are being racialised by the Modi government, turning them from equal Indian citizens to “worthless” “radical aliens” who are non-citizens. Because now, in the era of the BJP, the Hindu-nation’s people are solely “pure”, *upper-caste Hindus* – Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis are automatically excluded from this “sacred” and “purified” national space.

Hart points out that «the evident dangers of racialization for nonwhites needs to be supplemented with an understanding that “it is also dangerous for whites, in particular for *working-class whites* who today are told, on all sides, that *they are not going to get anything—except whiteness*’» (FASSIN 2018, p. 92, quoted

¹⁷ Such as “manual scavenging”, a term used to cover both (a) the manual cleaning of, and carrying out of human shit from, the “dry latrines” of the wealthy in villages (a job done by *Dalit women*), as well as (b) the manual cleaning of urban sewers by *Dalit men*, who have to climb down into these underground sewers carrying buckets and spades – and who are very often killed instantaneously by the highly toxic gases that are generated in these sewers (DEUTSCHE WELLE [DW] 2020).

in HART 2019, p. 312; emphasis added). In the Indian context where Dalits are the racialized “non-whites”, the “working-class whites” correspond to working-class, lower-caste *non-Dalits*, such as OBCs¹⁸, who, in the context of the BJP’s Hindutva/Hindu-ness ideology *are not going to get anything from the BJP except “Hinduness”*. This, in the longer term, is likely to prove highly unsatisfactory to the non-Dalit/OBC working classes, as they come to realize that the Modi government is in fact their adversary and has no intention whatsoever of improving their lives, but fully intends to squeeze them further.

This, namely the Modi government’s neoliberal *exploitation of the Hindu non-Dalit working classes/classes of labour*, is the fundamental class contradiction that is likely to threaten the BJP’s Hindutva/Hindu unity project and, at some point, bring it crashing down. Thus the greatest challenge to Modi’s rule is likely to arise from the Hindu OBC working classes, rather than from Dalits, Adivasis or Muslims, because the OBCs are far stronger economically and politically than any of these marginalized sections of the population.

1.4. How do we initiate a broadly Gramscian analysis of Modi’s authoritarian populist politics during India’s pandemic year?

Drawing from BRAY (2015) Hart suggests that to understand populism we must begin by retrieving the class basis of populism. Hart notes that Bray, in turn, draws from POULANTZAS’s final book *State, Power, Socialism* (1978) which is «grounded in a refusal to separate the economic and the political which, he maintains, contains an unrecognized framework for an alternative theory of populism ... [which is] “Populism is, in other words, a symptom, within the representative structures of the capitalist state, of repressed class antagonisms” (BRAY 2015, pp. 40-41; emphasis added)» (HART 2019, p. 314). Thus, though the BJP’s “Hindu unity” ideology can fool working class OBC Hindus some of the time, the repressed class antagonisms between them and their greedy corporate employers cannot be camouflaged for long.

That is why Modi/the BJP are so anxious to distract the lower-caste working classes with the bogey of Indian Muslims as “enemies within” and to deflect the frustrations, resentments and anger of working class Hindus off the

¹⁸ OBCs: Other Backward Classes – this is the government term for *middle-caste* non-Dalits. Due to their large numbers they have been able to capture political power in some states – e.g. Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

neoliberal Modi government and onto innocent Muslims instead. As Hart observes,

«BRAY (2015, p. 46) maintains that “neoliberalism’s rise to hegemony has centrally involved the mobilisation of populist antagonisms”... A primary claim is that “neoliberal theory began with a distinctive populist appeal, laying the groundwork for a new legitimization strategy that turns, paradoxically, *on perpetually fostering, rather than resolving, popular legitimization deficits*” (p. 49). This reading is intentionally in opposition to accounts of neoliberal rationality that view the state as no longer encumbered by the danger of incurring legitimization deficits. Instead Bray is pointing us toward *the profound contradictions of neoliberal hegemony* and its deep entanglements with populist politics» (HART 2019, p. 315; emphasis added).

These profound contradictions derive from neoliberalism’s deliberate occlusion of class interests, representing them as secondary, and focusing on identities and cultural, ethnic, and religious issues as primary. Identity politics (cultural /religious /ethnic /racial /caste politics) is deliberately given centre stage, while economic issues are marginalized, “repressed” and made to appear less important.

Here we must note a difference between India and western Europe/the US, because this difference has implications for how class politics has developed in India. This difference, however, may be more one of degree rather than kind, given the recent revelation of the very strong racial identities of very many Americans¹⁹. It consists in the fact that even today the primary identity of most Indians is their caste[/race]²⁰ identity – not their class identity. This fact points to the success of the ruling upper-castes/classes in maintaining their hegemonic casteism project for so long. Until comparatively recent times there has been no widespread challenge to the notion that “caste identity” is inborn, biological/natural and inherited. According to this upper-class “caste ideology” caste identity can never be changed. It also marks the unchangeable economic status of every individual. *Caste[/race] is destiny*, according to caste ideology, and those born in “low” castes are “destined” to be poor and of low status for life. *Status cannot be achieved in this casteist[/racist] society because status is ascribed by birth*.

¹⁹ Trump’s election as President was clearly driven, in large part, by *white-supremacist* attitudes and beliefs.

²⁰ I argue that *we need to recognize “casteism” as the South Asian form of racism* – casteism is racism, though it is elaborated differently in India from its elaboration in the US (or South Africa).

This is a feudal ideology, of course, and its remarkable longevity and political success in India are due to its “divinization” – exactly as in medieval Europe, India’s high caste “aristocrats” have crushed subaltern dissent by claiming their “divine right” to rule, as enunciated in the Hindu scriptures²¹. If subalterns still demurred, their insurrections were met by overwhelming force. Consequently, the lower-caste classes of labour in India have gained little independence from their employers – trade unions are very few and are being driven into extinction (AMBEDKAR – PRAKASH 2020). Not more than 10% of Indian workers have ever belonged to a trade union, and even this figure has plummeted in recent years with aggressive neoliberalization (*ibid.*). Thus in 1992, when the economy was liberalized there was no need for the liberalizing elites to “defeat the trade unions”, unlike in the UK/the US, because the trade unions had already been brought to their knees.

Liberalization thus came to a political economy that was already highly fractured by the identity politics of caste. Indian politics did not become populist just recently, it has been populist since colonial times, because intra-Indian mainstream politics has almost never focused on class issues, it has focused on caste identities. Except for the Congress party, political parties have grown organically out of local caste associations. So class politics has been “repressed” in India for a very long time. Kerala and West Bengal have proved the rare exceptions to this rule. But even they, tragically, are today teetering on the brink of a BJP-induced madness of casteist identitarianism and Islamophobia. The BJP is hoping to win the West Bengal²² state elections in 2021, while it has gained a strong and growing foothold even in Kerala, the last bastion of Communist rule. (JISHNU 2016).

So in 1992 identity/caste politics was centre stage while class politics remained marginal. From 1992 onwards neoliberal economic ideas steadily gained ground under Congress rule. It was therefore very easy for the Modi government to encourage Hindus to identify with a politicized, cultural identity in 2014 because they had been doing this all their lives: caste identity had had the greatest political salience in their lives. Now they were encouraged by the BJP to see themselves first and foremost as “Hindus”. This was extremely easy for the upper-castes/classes to do because the BJP is an upper-caste party

²¹ Manu’s scriptures, which declare the eternal “impurity” and irremediable “low status” of both Dalits and women.

²² West Bengal was a Communist-ruled state for decades, but the Left has been totally marginalized there today. However the Left remains strong in Kerala, where the Communist party is currently ruling the state.

and *its version of Hinduism fetishizes upper-caste identity*. This politicized “Hindu” identity, however, has been far more difficult for the lower castes to achieve, precisely because it pre-supposes upper-caste identity. *The acceptance of caste-based hierarchy – in other words, the “traditional caste-system” – is implicitly central to the BJP’s ideology*. This possibly makes it even easier for upper-caste Hindu corporate leaders to applaud the BJP’s current “disciplining” of the working classes. After all, these are the same lower castes whom the upper-castes have been culturally conditioned to look down on and to exploit. Their upper-caste entitlement means that, in their view, they are *owed* the fealty of the working classes.

Following India’s independence in 1947 Hindus and Muslims generally lived in amity. To be a Hindu was an ordinary and insignificant fact. But today, “to be a Hindu” in the BJP’s highly politicized notion of Hindu identity means, specifically, “to be anti-Muslim”. That is what their ideology of “Hindu-ness” is really about: it is intended to attack Indian Muslims. All Hindutva propaganda is directed towards creating hatred of Indian Muslims (THAPAR 2020). This is neither surprising nor unusual – it is the strategy of “the politics of resentment” that has been successfully operationalized by authoritarian populist leaders the world over in 2020. Its principles are simple: (a) deflect class-based resentments from yourselves (the ruling elites) onto other groups, either other elite groups (as with Erdogan in Turkey) or minorities (as with Modi in India) or both other elite fractions and minorities (as with the Tories in Brexit UK). (b) Convert class-based resentments/dissatisfaction into identity-based hatreds. This move is fundamental to neoliberal strategies: right-wing leaders everywhere have encouraged identity politics – white supremacy (Trump in the US, Johnson in the UK), Hindu supremacy (Modi in India), Islamism (Erdogan in Turkey) – in order to distract attention from structural/class problems and to re-direct public anger from themselves to more vulnerable groups.

Identity politics has been very successfully used by the BJP to distract popular attention from bread-and-butter issues. India’s rich are getting richer, the poor poorer and the gap between them is steadily increasing. A comfortable middle class has developed, some 300 million strong, but this middle class constitutes less than a quarter of India’s population which remains largely poor (OXFAM 2020).

Jobless growth: India’s increasing GDP has been trumpeted by its BJP government, but it has remained very silent about the fact that this has almost all been *jobless growth*. Millions of educated young Indians are being left

unemployed. Their frustrations are growing, but big capital is not interested in creating jobs for them – nor is the government. Instead big capital is focused on increasing automation across all industries, with the full support of the government. Despite this, there was widespread shock and dismay when, in 2019, in Modi's second term, *unemployment figures were the highest in 40 years* (THEWIRE.IN 2019; The Hindu 2019). Prior to the 2014 elections Modi had made a much-publicised promise to generate millions of jobs but it remained an empty promise. When these shocking unemployment figures hit the headlines the government therefore just tried to shut down discussion on the subject. When the eminent economist Jayati Ghosh was asked in 2020, «Is the situation of decades-high joblessness more a result of the economy's trajectory or an outcome of government policies?» she replied, «It's clearly both. This is a process that's been ongoing for about 15 years, this separation of economic activity and job creation. So, I think it's a deeper structural problem and part of the difficulty that I am having with the current [Modi] government is that whenever you talk about joblessness, they seem to see this as a political attack, whereas this is really an issue of economic policy that has deeper roots» (GHOSH 2020b).

1.5. What are the contexts in which neoliberal identitarian ideologies are likely to prove most persuasive?

They are contexts where the working classes are vulnerable and on the backfoot, either because their jobs have been shipped abroad, as in the UK/US, or where the classes of labour have always been vulnerable, as in India. Erdogan has used Islamism to blame progressive elites and Modi has successfully used the BJP's Hindutva ideology to generate fear and hatred of Indian Muslims. Trump successfully blamed the Democrat "swamp" in D.C. for the ills of the working classes, and vilified the Black Lives Matter protests while encouraging racial hatred. The Tories successfully duped the UK's unemployed working class voters into directing their anger and resentments against European Union immigrants, instead of against the Tories – and persuaded these working classes to vote for Brexit (which harmed their interests).

It is when their jobs are being taken away from them, in a conjuncture when the classes of labour are feeling extremely vulnerable, insecure and anxious, that it becomes easier for their rulers to manipulate them into believing that others, *not* their rulers, are responsible for their troubles. This is what

happened in 2020 in pandemic India, when informal sector jobs were decimated through the brutal Covid lockdown. Unemployed migrant labourers and daily wage workers, helpless and fearful, fell easy prey to the BJP's propaganda that it was Muslims, not Mr Modi, who were to blame for the spread of the terrifying virus (THE GUARDIAN 2020b).

The BJP's propaganda, creating hatred against Indian Muslims, has proved so successful that it has largely safeguarded the government itself from popular censure since 2014. It has worked extremely well in 2020 during the pandemic, despite the Modi government's egregious acts of commission and omission during the long lockdown, which caused extreme hardship and suffering to millions of impoverished migrant and informal sector workers (see below).

1.6. Economics and politics cannot be separated

BRAY (2015, p. 53) warns the Left not to see «populism» as solely a rightwing label because left populism can indeed be a form of «emancipatory politics» (HART 2019, pp. 315-316). Hart applauds this «eminently Gramscian conclusion», highlighting Bray's insightful observation that «“the task is not to overcome populism but to render its forms of articulation and agency more coherent, more engaged with repressed struggles over social production and reproduction, while not underestimating the destructive potentials that lie in its ambiguous formations” (BRAY 2015, p. 59)» (HART 2019, pp. 315-316).

Hart notes that, like Bray, SOTIRIS (2018) too critiques Laclau's separation of class struggle and political antagonism. Sotiris notes that, «The specifically capitalist division between economics [material realities] and politics [ideology/culture] is reproduced in Laclau's conception in contrast to Marx's attempt to insist on the dialectical relation between class struggle and political antagonism» (SOTIRIS 2018, p. 4). Following HART (2019), I try, in this summary of the politics of India's pandemic year, to show how upper-caste “pan-Hindu”/anti-Muslim nationalism and the new economic realities of Modi's aggressive neoliberalism have worked in and through one another to generate the BJP's populist politics, which has focused on generating a Hindu-majoritarian chauvinism in order to repress the growing class antagonisms that Modi's zealous deregulation continues to exacerbate.

In this discussion of political events in 2020, I try to highlight the «projects and processes of hegemony» (HART 2019, p. 321) which, in India, have

manifested in (a) upper-caste Hindu nationalism, (b) a combative neoliberalism and (c) a racist/casteist upper-caste Hindu supremacism. These hegemonic projects «mediate between global forces and everyday life» (*ibid.*) in India. Throughout this essay I use Hart's concept of articulation, derived from Stuart Hall, «that focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, caste, and religion as *inseparably and actively constitutive of* both class processes and nationalisms» (*ibid.*; emphasis added). This concept of articulation helps to illuminate the ways in which the BJP's hegemonic notion of Hindu nationalism is being constructed, using caste loyalties and religious identity to obscure class divisions.

2. *Labour: the attack on labour. Modi's "neoliberal counterrevolution"*²³ in 2020

India shows how easy it is for someone who is a demagogic figure like Trump, namely Narendra Modi, «to ascend to power, given the long histories of racism [/casteism], right-wing nationalism, and populist politics [in India] ...; the ravages of neoliberal forms of capitalism; and the abandonment of the working class [by the Congress party] ... The conjunctural framework enables us to see [Modiism/] Trumpism not as an aberration, but as a ... latent possibility that required a particular conjuncture of forces in order to burst forth» (HART 2019, p. 321).

2.1. A Brief Background to India's Pandemic Year

This account of the politics of the pandemic year 2020 has been difficult to write because of the constantly shifting political-economic scene, with major news stories breaking almost every day. It focuses on the implications of the BJP government's actions – as well as the huge implications of *its deliberate inaction* – during the pandemic months (see Jayati Ghosh's incisive comments below). It also considers the economic impacts of the pandemic lockdown, particularly on the poorer classes of labour. The pandemic health crisis has worsened steadily, but has been difficult to assess due to the lack of reliable data. India had the highest number of daily infections in the world, every single day, for much of September 2020.

²³ HART 2019.

India's hugely inegalitarian economic structures and its deplorable and very deficient public health systems have been shaped by its socio-political history. The Congress party and its political allies must take much of the blame for continuing, after 1947, the gross economic inequalities and the religious and caste divisions which eventually created widespread disillusionment with the Congress and allowed the BJP to win the 2014 elections.

In the last years of the British Raj ordinary Indians had fought a largely non-violent struggle against their rulers, under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Gaining independence in 1947, India became a republic in 1950. Though the Mahatma's nobility was beyond dispute, and Prime Minister Nehru's intentions were admirable, many of the politicians around them remained deeply invested in their upper-caste/upper-class interests, as Dr Ambedkar, who framed India's constitution, clearly recognized. Under Nehru's leadership, the new democracy gained a secular and tolerant character and was also given the *appearance* of a socialist trajectory, through Five-Year plans for the economy and a celebrated closeness to the Soviet Union. But this "socialism" was entirely illusory: capitalism ruled, and capitalist elites at both central/federal and state levels ensured that their iron grip on entrenched caste-class power-structures remained unshaken. To ensure this, they harnessed not only intra-class loyalties but, even more, India's long-standing hegemonic ideology, *casteism*.

2.1.1. Casteism is a racist ideology that elevates "those born to rule" over "those born to be slaves"

Casteism is a toxic mythology that protects and preserves India's wealthy classes, just as the Divine Right of kings protected the aristocracies of medieval Europe. It has been India's hegemonic ideology for a long time. This highly venomous and racist ideology protects the powerful rich by creating a hereditary aristocracy (the "upper" castes) and a disenfranchised serf-class (the ex-"untouchables"/Dalits). Widely pervasive across Hindu India, and contaminating even Islam, Christianity and Sikhism²⁴, casteism has become a part of the everyday "common sense"²⁵ of most ordinary Indians, profoundly poisoning attitudes towards Dalits/the poorest/the lowest castes, who are represented as having been "born polluted" with the stigma of

²⁴ Islam, Christianity and Sikhism all have "untouchable/outcaste castes" in India despite their egalitarian creeds.

²⁵ I use this term in its Gramscian sense.

“untouchability” – namely the state of being “outcastes”. The parallel with the situation of African American slaves in the US pre-1863 is extremely close: both groups have been viewed as biologically inferior to other social groups and enslaved African Americans, like India’s “untouchables”, were seen as less than human by their masters. Most significantly, both were exploited by their masters for their labour. This was why they were enslaved: forced to perform the kinds of work that nobody else wanted to do. Casteism, like racism, is about enforced labour. This slave labour is then ideologically misrepresented as the “inherent impurity/inferiority” of the labourer who is “only fit to be a slave”. Or as Fassin put it: this «is really about the racialisation of economic issues, about how those who are racialised (and thus considered “naturally” other or radically alien) are considered worthless» (FASSIN 2018, p. 92, quoted in HART 2019, p. 312).

India’s ruling class-castes continue to glory in their high-caste identities. Caste identity and class identity continue to be closely correlated, especially at the top and bottom, because very few Dalits/lower castes get the opportunity to rise to upper-class/elite status and very few upper-castes sink into utter penury. This is because the social controls used to immobilize the lowest castes in the worst-paid, most unpleasant jobs, were so coercively enforced by the powerful higher castes for so long. Consequently, the lowest castes /”outcastes” /”untouchables”, who today often self-reference as “Dalits”²⁶, are, even today, India’s poorest and most discriminated-against citizens, mirroring the structural location of African-Americans in US society. The only castes who have risen very significantly in class are *the middle castes*, especially those termed the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). As noted, their large numbers have enabled them to form powerful vote-banks, allowing them to become the ruling classes in several states. Dalits still tend to be poverty-stricken, while the upper castes are even more affluent. However, it is important to recognize that *change is happening*: with increasing upward mobility for sections of every major caste – including the various Dalit castes and sub-castes – there has been a *very significant increase in class differentiation within castes*. Simultaneously, Parry argues, newly formed *economic-class-groups* constituted

²⁶ Note that though ideologically described as “*outside*” the caste system, and therefore viewed (and labelled) as “outcastes”, the so-called “untouchables” (who today self-identify as “Dalits”) are, on the contrary, very much *within* the caste system, because they have been totally integrated within highly oppressive labour systems, especially in agrarian labour, which were previously systems of agrarian slavery in much of India.

by people from different castes who usually, through being *in the same jobs*, begin to associate together regularly and closely, quickly tend to develop caste-like qualities as they become distinct *social* classes (PARRY 2020).

2.2. The BJP's attacks on India's classes of labour since 2014

During 2020, leading liberal and Left/Marxist economists, social scientists and journalists became very critical of the Modi government's acts of commission and omission with each passing month. Their consensus in December 2020 was that the government could and should have done very much more to alleviate the disastrous effects of the pandemic lockdown on India's labouring poor. Migrant labourers and informal wage workers both suffered terribly in their millions; both continue to suffer extreme hardship and deprivation.

Informal sector labour comprises around 92% of India's workers²⁷. These unorganized sector workers contribute around 45% of India's GDP (HARRISS-WHITE 2020b). And yet, instead of receiving their due from the government in terms of appreciation, protective legislation and financial assistance during the very harsh Covid lockdown, *around 35% of all workers in India's informal sector lost their jobs during the extended lockdown (ibid.)*. The poorer working classes have suffered enormously, losing their jobs, their assets and sometimes their lives in the pandemic. Many indigent labouring families in rural north India, having lost their jobs in the lockdown, were forced to send their school-going children out to work to earn a living, in order to keep their families from starvation. This marks a shocking reversal of decades of work by NGOs and state governments to end India's long-standing bane of child-labour.

2.2.1. *The BJP's war on informal sector workers*

HARRISS-WHITE reminds us that *every* neoliberal economic reform undertaken by the Modi government since it entered office in 2014 has been extraordinarily destructive to the jobs and lives of informal sector workers

²⁷ Harriss-White estimates that the organized sector has shrunk from 10% (about 20 years ago) to around 8% today. However, she adds that Ambedkar and Prashad (2020) have recently claimed that the organized sector has decreased *even further* and is slightly less than 4% of India's labour force today (HARRISS-WHITE, personal communication, 31 December 2020).

(2020a, 2020b). In this sphere of super-exploitation, workers' rights and protections are usually non-existent. As noted, today around 94% of all Indian workers are in unorganized/informal jobs. Thus only about 6% of them are in "formal sector"/organized jobs protected by labour laws and with rights and benefits. As already noted, the informal sector is immensely important to India's GDP, producing about 35% to 40% of India's total GDP²⁸. And yet, as HARRISS-WHITE reiterates (2020b), due to its neoliberal blinkers the BJP government consistently ignores the informal sector and pretends that it doesn't exist (*ibid.*)

In independent India's early decades the ruling Congress party was far more benign towards the working classes than the BJP is today. Successive Congress governments legislated labour rights and protections over time. But things are very different today. Leading economists, social scientists and activists who have studied the BJP's labour legislation and its economic impacts since 2014 have unanimously condemned the Modi government's brazenly anti-labour attitude. GHOSH (2020a, 2020b, 2020c), HARRISS-WHITE (2020a, 2020b), DREZE (2020), Sen (THEWIRE.IN 2020e), Mander²⁹ (MANDER – THAPAR 2020), and BREMAN (2020), among others, have documented how the major changes in labour legislation that Mr Modi has pushed through have had *a devastating impact* on informal sector workers.

Pronab Sen, India's former Chief Statistician, told Karan Thapar in their conversation on 6 September 2020 (THEWIRE.IN 2020e) that he, along with all the economists he knew, was utterly baffled by the Modi government's *unwillingness to take action* on the huge economic damage caused to poor people and to smaller enterprises by the extremely harsh lockdown. Like GHOSH (2020a) Pronab Sen advised that *the government should immediately provide a large fiscal stimulus to the economy* and, like her, he emphasized that the longer the Modi government delayed in doing this, the more difficult it would be to reverse the extensive damage to the economy and to workers, particularly in the informal sector. And yet, to his utter bewilderment, the central government was refusing to act, thereby causing even more hardship to impoverished people, especially those who relied on the PDS³⁰ (THEWIRE.IN 2020e).

²⁸ HARRISS-WHITE, personal communication, December 2020.

²⁹ In an interview with Karan Thapar in December 2020 Harsh Mander, one of the best known political activists in India, unequivocally described Modi's Covid lockdown as a crime (MANDER 2020).

³⁰ PDS: Public Distribution System, through which food staples are provided at lower prices through ration shops to those poor families who have ration cards. Shockingly,

2.2.2. *Demonetization, November 2016*

The first national political shock came on 8 November 2016 with the Modi government's totally unexpected announcement of "demonetization". As Jayati Ghosh has noted, this "shock tactic" was deliberate and typical of the Modi government's strategizing (GHOSH 2020a). Prime Minister Modi very suddenly, with no prior warning whatsoever, demonetized all 1000 Rs notes and 500 Rs notes. Demonetization was terribly mismanaged: banks were left without cash for weeks and ATMs remained closed everywhere for very long periods. The poor, of course, were the hardest hit and the working poor in the informal sector suffered the most: millions of them, though they continued to work, received no pay at all for months, because no cash was available from the banks. Consequently, millions of migrant workers and their families were forced to return home because they were close to starving³¹. The demonetization crisis of 2016 thus eerily foreshadowed the ghastly nation-wide trauma of migrant workers in the 2020 lockdown: significantly, both these monumental calamities suffered by India's working poor, in 2016 and in 2020, happened on Modi's watch and both were instigated by his deliberate "shock strategy".

2.2.3. *The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Debacle of 2017*

The second major shock to the informal sector, which occurred on 1 July 2017, was not just to workers, but also to the owners of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). This was a shock to the informal sector system, but it was not a surprise, because the public had been warned that the government planned to introduce a Goods and Services Tax (GST) law in 2017. Badly conceived and poorly executed, it had a devastating impact on small and medium enterprises in the informal sector, putting many of them out of business, and thereby causing gigantic job losses to workers across India. Harriss-White points out that the Modi government was very aware that this was likely to happen, but still went ahead because the bankruptcy of many medium-size informal enterprises actually profited the large formal sector

impoverished migrant labour families *are not given ration cards* in most migrant-receiving states.

³¹ This was, of course, exactly what happened again during the pandemic lockdown in 2020, but on a far larger scale and in a far more difficult situation, because, in 2020, the Modi government stopped trains and buses from running.

corporates who manufactured the same goods (HARRISS-WHITE 2020a; GHOSH 2020b, 2020c).

The BJP under Modi has undertaken an unrelenting campaign against the classes of labour – workers’ rights and protections have been steadily decimated in order to make workers as vulnerable, weak and defenceless as possible. Ghosh argues that this is very deliberate: the Modi government wants to destroy Indian labour’s ability *to bargain with capital*, so that the cost of labour becomes so low that it is irresistible to global corporates (GHOSH 2020a). The BJP publicly defends its remorseless destruction of existing labour laws as part of a necessary “flexibilization” of India’s labour force. But, as Ghosh (*ibid.*) emphasizes, the deliberate pauperization of India’s working classes is not going to make them more appealing to foreign investors, because their productivity remains low compared to that of better paid workers in China, Vietnam and Thailand (*ibid.*) It is important to understand how deeply unsympathetic, even antagonistic, the Modi government is towards the working classes: this helps us to understand the neoliberal strategy behind the horrors and heartlessness meted out by this government to workers during the Covid lockdown. Significantly, HARRISS-WHITE (2020b), GHOSH (2020a) and Mander (MANDER – THAPAR 2020) all insist that the government’s incomprehensible and inhuman lack of action to help starving workers was part of its hidden caste-class war on the classes of labour.

2.3. The BJP is using the pandemic to crush India’s working classes

The BJP is a high-caste, far-right, Hindu-supremacist party but its end-game is far more complex than appears, because it is equally an authoritarian populist party dedicated to protecting the interests of India’s upper-caste plutocratic oligarchs. That is why its ruthless assault on the classes of labour has proceeded at breakneck speed during 2020, not only under cover of the pandemic but actually *using* the pandemic instrumentally to crush and politically subjugate India’s working classes, as India’s leading development economists, JEAN DREZE (2020) and JAYATI GHOSH (2020a, 2020c) have both emphasized.

Jean Dreze has described the rigidity of Modi’s lockdown as: «*a death-sentence for the very poor*» (DREZE 2020). Interviewed by News18.com, he was asked:

«Q: What is the impact of the lockdown on the lives and livelihoods of those in the informal sector? How many people, do you think, are affected?

Dreze: Virtually everyone in the informal sector is affected, and that means the bulk of the population ... for most people, the lockdown is an economic disaster, the more so the poorer you are. For those who were living from hand to mouth to start with, *the lockdown is almost a death sentence*. That is the message of the long list of “lockdown deaths” compiled by Kanika Sharma and others.

Q: What do you see as the main flaws of the current lockdown and relief policies? What sort of changes are needed?

Dreze: It would be nice to see a better sharing of the hardships and risks of the crisis. Today, the poor are bearing most of the burden of India’s lockdown, one of the harshest in the world. The policies are made or influenced by a class of people who pay little attention to the consequences for the underprivileged. Just think, for instance, of how all sorts of basic services have been shut down without batting an eyelid: outpatient health services, child immunisation, school meals, MNRREGA worksites, the lot.

For good measure, the policies are often enforced in an authoritarian manner. Ideally, people should be empowered to face this crisis together, instead of being treated like sheep. Here in Jharkhand, I have been struck by so many people’s readiness to help in one way or another. But this good will is not being tapped. This mirrors India’s long-standing failure to foster and mobilise human resources for development. Kerala is one exception, and sure enough, it is handling this crisis in an inspiring manner» (DREZE 2020).

Dreze is an internationally respected economist who has worked on crucial issues including employment generation (MNRREGA), the Right to Food and the Right to Education. In this interview on 1 May 2020 he made a number of practical suggestions regarding how the Modi government could help the working poor immediately. *Not a single suggestion of his was heeded by the Modi government*. Dreze had been a key member of India’s Planning Commission during Congress rule, but he has been completely marginalized from policy-making by the BJP, which is simply not interested in improving the lot of the working poor.

2.3.1. Communist Kerala’s story: a light in India’s darkness

From a Gramscian perspective it is very significant that Jean Dreze emphasizes that: (1) lockdown policies that have a massive impact on the poor are formulated by the rich ruling class that has little knowledge about (and no concern for) the hardships suffered by the poor. (2) the impacts of India’s lockdown, which is «one of the harshest in the world», are being borne by the

poor, not by the rich who are sheltering in the comfort of their safe and spacious homes. (3) The top-down, elitist Modi government does not understand that it can involve and empower poor people to help themselves – it does not comprehend that human resources can be nurtured and mobilized for genuine development – i.e. the emancipation of the poor.

Kerala is perhaps the only state in India that really understood this and that therefore involved the public to a very large degree in its efforts to stop the spread of Covid (THE WASHINGTON POST 2020). It is no accident that this state government is also India's only Communist government. Kerala's publics, rich, poor, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, have all imbibed Communist ideas for decades and show a far higher degree of public co-operation than anywhere else in India. Further, Kerala's battle against Covid has been led by the state's remarkable and inspirational health minister, "Shailaja Teacher", who was previously a physics teacher.

She has been able to do precisely what Jean Dreze calls for: «With a fairly educated and politically agile population, so much depends on gaining citizen trust and cooperation, and she has been able to do that effectively» says a leading health activist (SCIENCEMAG.ORG 2020; also see THE GUARDIAN 2020b). Citizen participation, citizen trust and cooperation were not only *not sought* elsewhere in India, but, on the contrary, poor migrant workers were bullied, harassed and brutally beaten by the police when they tried to cross their home-state boundaries to reach their own homes. Dreze emphasizes that the working poor have been maligned and mistreated in extreme degree during India's phenomenally harsh lockdown (DREZE 2020).

A Guardian report on 22 December 2020 (THE GUARDIAN 2020c) spelt out the implications of Kerala's participatory approach even further. By this date Kerala, which had done spectacularly well during the first wave of the virus, was, unfortunately, experiencing a serious second wave:

«Nevertheless, Shailaja says now that "even after being the first Indian state to detect a Covid-19 case, as early as January, Kerala is the last state to peak". It had time to double the number of ventilators in government hospitals, and to train up an army of frontline workers it calls the 'Covid brigade'. These workers test and trace, monitor those in quarantine and isolation, and provide social and psychological support for the vulnerable. They have fed nearly 9 million people through 1,300 community kitchens, and they continue to deliver food parcels to over 8m households. These measures, in addition to a financial support package worth £2bn, have paid off. *Fewer Covid-19 patients have died in Kerala than anywhere else in India.* The CFR (case fatality rate) peaked in May at 0.8%, and since then it has fallen by about half – compared with a

national average of 1.5%. “Kerala is one of the very few places in the world where the CFR actually decreased while the epidemic was peaking”, Shailaja says» (THE GUARDIAN 2020c; emphasis added).

Nowhere else in India was «social and psychological support for the vulnerable» provided to the poor by the state government. Nowhere else were 9 million people fed through community kitchens. Nowhere else are food parcels continuing to be delivered to over 8 million households.

Communist Kerala stood alone in December 2020, a beacon in India’s Covid darkness and a paragon of participatory mobilization, showing that a government could inspire all its citizens, including the poor, to see themselves as equal participants in the fight to contain Covid.

2.3.2. The horrors of India’s lockdown: migrant workers had to walk hundreds of miles home

Prime Minister Modi announced India’s lockdown at 8pm on the night of 24 March 2020. This all-India lockdown was to start at midnight – so people were given *only four hours’ notice* of what was widely judged to be «one of the harshest [lockdowns] in the world» (DREZE 2020). All transport of every kind was stopped, all economic activities were halted and all institutions were closed down.

Harsh Mander, «one of India’s most highly regarded human rights activists, has said Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 60-day lockdown, announced with four hour’s notice, was: “A crime against the people of India. It is and must be recognised to be a crime against humanity”» (MANDER – THAPAR 2020). «Mander told *The Wire* the lockdown simply ignored the fact *the vast majority of the Indian people cannot isolate in their homes* and do not have running water to frequently wash their hands. More importantly, it ignored the fact *hundreds of millions would go hungry and starve if they cannot earn*. The financial or ration-based compensation given to such people was grossly inadequate. As a result, lakhs of people were left with no option but to depend on charity. They would stand for hours in queues that were two or three kilometres long waiting to be fed. The process stripped them of their self-respect and dignity» (MANDER – THAPAR 2020; emphasis added). Mander said, «The state drew clear lines between those who were to be saved and those who could be sacrificed; *those whose lives mattered and those who were expendable*» (MANDER – THAPAR 2020; emphasis added).

«Asked by *The Wire* if this language meant he was accusing the government of calculated murder, Mander replied: “I am accusing them of calculated murder by creating an environment where death was inevitable”» (MANDER – THAPAR 2020). «Mander said the lockdown “*laid bare our broken society, the near-complete estrangement of people of privilege from the working poor in India*”. He added that the middle class had “lost the trust of the poor”. He said, “The middle class let down India”. They only cared for themselves. They were selfish in their attitude and outlook. They didn’t bother about the poor» (MANDER – THAPAR 2020; emphasis added).

Evaluations of India’s Covid lockdown have concluded that its results were largely negative because it did little to stem the spread of infections and *because it caused the most enormous hardship to India’s poorer working classes*. They immediately lost their daily-wages because the vast majority of employers immediately stopped paying workers, who were soon close to starvation. The Modi government did virtually nothing to help these millions of daily-wage workers. Although the government claimed that it was trying to help them, no help was actually reaching unemployed workers (GHOSH 2020a). At best, after several weeks of lockdown, funds that had already been allocated by the government were moved into categories intended to help informal sector workers, but virtually no funds actually reached these desperate millions in the early months (GHOSH *ibid.*; THEWIRE.IN 2020e).

The Modi government’s treatment of poor migrant labour was shockingly different from its treatment of wealthy upper-caste Indians who had got stuck abroad and were evacuated home to India. These wealthy people were flown back to India, courtesy of the Modi government, for free! Not one rupee was asked of them in payment for their flights (NEWS18.COM 2020). In truly startling contrast, no transport of any kind was arranged for migrant workers who therefore, in sheer desperation, started walking home. When, months later, the various state governments did start arranging trains to take the migrants home, the Modi government could easily have offered to pay their fares. It did not do so and Indian Railways immediately demanded the fares from the state governments, who, excepting a couple of states, all demanded the fare payment from the greatly impoverished migrants, who – having no choice – had to pay. Where was justice and humanity? Where was the sense of the state’s responsibility to its most vulnerable citizens? Sadly, most state governments proved to be just as heartless as the Modi government.

In the cities the migrants faced starvation, increasing fear of the virus which was spreading very rapidly and extreme anxiety about their families

back home, who were, of course, no longer receiving any remittances. That was why, in a matter of days, millions of migrant workers tried to leave the cities and towns for their distant villages. But because the Modi government, in its great wisdom, had stopped all trains and buses, the horrifying, paradigmatic images of India's Partition in 1947 suddenly came to life again, as millions of desperate women, men and children, started walking back home hundreds of kilometres along India's highways (THE WASHINGTON POST 2020b).

At least a thousand people died while attempting this dangerous journey, primarily through dehydration, exhaustion and sunstroke: April and May are India's hottest months with temperatures well above 43 degrees Centigrade (110 degrees Fahrenheit). Normally nobody ventures out willingly in the mid-day sun during these months. The deaths of these thousand migrants were not noticed or tracked in any way by the government, which preferred to feign ignorance of all such unpleasant events, even when directly questioned by the Opposition in Parliament. All that the Minister in charge could say about these migrant-deaths was that the government of India had no information about them! (The Wire.In 2020c) Fortunately volunteer-researchers, several of them university academics, collated this data by painstakingly putting piecemeal evidence together, from information provided by NGOs and activists who were assisting the migrants en route (*ibid.*). The figure of a thousand deaths is likely to be an undercount, as many migrants probably died in unknown circumstances. Women and children died too, walking such long distances, hour upon hour, in the unbearable heat.

When, more than a month after the lockdown had started, trains at last restarted to allow the desperate migrant workers to leave, *many migrants died on the trains of dehydration and possible starvation*, especially women and children. Most of these train journeys took several days in the baking heat. Activists assisting the migrants found that the state governments, who had arranged the trains, had provided too little water and very little food. A returning migrant woman died on a four-day train journey from dehydration and hunger, and her dead body was left on a railway platform. Her corpse attracted attention only because her toddler, unaware that his mother was dead, repeatedly tried to wake her up. The video of this shocking and heartrending scene went viral, waking up some of its somnolent middle-class viewers to the appalling horrors being inflicted on India's migrant workers (INDIAN EXPRESS 2020b; FIRSTPOST.COM 2020).

Why did the Modi government refuse for several weeks to allow any form of transport to these desperate migrants? It emerged that the reason for this ban was that the government wanted migrant workers to “stay in place” because their labour would be needed again the moment the lockdown was lifted. But in that case why did the government not subsidise these starving workers? *Why were they left to starve?* The government was very aware of their desperate situation. And yet it repeatedly used police violence to physically prevent migrant labourers from leaving the cities.

Explicit instructions were issued by the central government to all state governments *to not allow migrant workers to leave*. These explicit instructions, kept confidential at the time, were later reported in the newspapers. But who was going to feed and shelter the millions of migrant workers in the intervening weeks of lockdown? To this the Modi government had no good answer – absconding from responsibility, it blithely declared that the starving labourers were the responsibility of the respective state governments. As Jayati Ghosh noted, the Modi government’s breathtakingly heartless attitude towards the migrant labourers was simply staggering to most observers, who could not fathom why India’s central government was doing so little to help them (SCROLL.IN 2020b).

But the government’s “incomprehensible” lack of action was actually all too comprehensible to those who had been closely studying this government’s functioning for some years: Jayati Ghosh summed it up when she said that the government’s inaction was *a deliberate attempt to break the back of the labouring classes and their ability to bargain*, and thus to subordinate them definitively. It was a demonstration of *the Modi government’s increasing authoritarianism* and was tacitly intended to hasten «a deep restructuring of domestic class relations in terms of a massive reduction in the bargaining power of workers» (GHOSH 2020a).

During the 2020 lockdown the BJP-supporting Tamil Nadu government (like the majority of other state governments) repeated its deplorable behaviour from demonetization in 2016. Once again migrant workers were given virtually no assistance. But this time it was worse, because, as noted, the state governments had been asked by the BJP government, as well as by local «industry heads», to prevent workers from going home (THE HINDU 2020b). While a few admirable non-BJP state governments ignored the Modi directive – Kerala, Goa and Rajasthan fell in this category – most state governments complied and did all they could to impede the travel of these desperate people.

This was inhuman and indefensible, but their defence was that «they were following orders»!

2.3.3. *The unending plight of migrant workers*

Jan Breman probably knows more about India's migrant workers than anybody else; he has studied their lives closely and sympathetically for over fifty years. In his recent account of the sufferings inflicted on migrant workers by the central government and by state governments during the pandemic, Breman emphasizes that this is nothing new (BREMAN 2020). The brutal treatment of migrant workers by state governments has been particularly evident in the way these workers have been consistently refused permission to settle down with their families in their receiving states. This has been both central government and state government policy for decades. Very few states have developed more humane policies towards migrant workers; once again Goa, Rajasthan and Kerala stand out as the more enlightened states (*ibid.*). In almost all other states migrant workers have been forced to remain peripatetic and to shuttle between their impoverished home villages in the sending states³² and their insecure places of work in the receiving states. Within receiving states migrant workers have not been allowed to benefit from the Public Distribution System (PDS) through which the poor are enabled to buy food staples at cheaper prices. Nor have their children been allowed to study in local schools. Nor have migrants been allowed to vote in local state elections. In short, *they have been systematically denied their rights as citizens* – and have therefore been forced to leave their children and wives behind in their villages (BREMAN 2020; THE HINDU 2020b).

Breman explains that the reason for this spectacularly unkind and inhumane treatment is startlingly simple: *it makes migrant workers cheaper for employers* and it makes them more docile as workers because they remain vulnerable, unable to speak the local language and lacking local support networks (BREMAN 2020). Deliberately kept in “perpetual motion”, they toil year after year until their health is destroyed – and then retire to their far-off villages, imposing no costs at all on the migrant-receiving states. Therefore, Breman concludes, they remain the most exploited of all workers – and the most attractive to employers! (*ibid.*).

Breman observes that the total number of migrant labourers in India is completely unknown, but he estimates that their number today is probably

³² Primarily Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal.

around 150 million people³³. Despite this astonishingly large number, all these migrant labourers have been rendered into non-citizens, with virtually no rights, benefits or protections in their receiving states.

The 2020 pandemic revealed the deeply shocking fact that both the central government and virtually all migrant-receiving states deliberately maintain no data whatsoever about migrant workers (THEWIRE.IN 2020c, 2020d). These workers therefore remain entirely invisible to the State (Karat 2020). This, of course, greatly facilitates their exploitation, because no attempt is made by officialdom to protect them or to ensure that they are decently paid, housed and fed.

2.3.4. The huge value of migrant workers' remittances

Unsurprisingly, most migrant workers come from India's most impecunious and backward states, which are also the states reputed to have the most corrupt governments: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Migrant worker remittances account for an astonishingly high percentage of state incomes – in Bihar, whose population is 99 million (and thus larger than that of any European country), a recent study found that the remittances of informal sector migrant workers account for around 30% of total state earnings³⁴.

2.4. The new anti-labour laws (September 2020)

Using the excuse of the pandemic, on 22 September 2020, the Modi government rushed very important labour legislation through Parliament at a time when the members of the Opposition parties were absent from both houses of Parliament, having staged a protest walkout. Using its absolute majority the BJP cunningly used the absence of the Opposition to very quickly pass three major labour bills in both the Lok Sabha³⁵ and the Rajya Sabha³⁶. The Opposition parties condemned this process as illegal, because the bills had not been

³³ Breman estimated that there are around 150 million migrant workers in India currently (personal communication, December 2020).

³⁴ This statistic was attributed to Christophe Jaffrelot by Pronab Sen in his interview with Karan Thapar on 6 September 2020 (TheWire.In 2020e).

³⁵ The equivalent of the UK's House of Commons.

³⁶ The equivalent of the UK's House of Lords.

sent, in the normal way, for consultation and discussion to any Parliamentary sub-committee. Even Yashwant Sinha, a highly respected senior member of the BJP party, who had previously been India's finance minister, condemned the lack of consultation regarding the three labour bills and also regarding the three anti-farmer bills that were passed by the BJP soon after: Sinha noted that the Modi government was no longer consulting with others on legislation and on major decisions of public interest, highlighting its increasingly authoritarian stance. However, Sinha is the sole senior BJP politician of stature, who has had the guts to criticize Prime Minister Modi's increasingly autocratic behaviour (THEWIRE.IN 2020f). To mark their anger the Opposition parties walked out of Parliament *en masse* and, very unusually, decided to register their protest by camping out on the lawn of Parliament that night, despite the cold temperatures.

There was, however, very good reason why the Modi government chose to rush the anti-labour bills through Parliament without any discussion: these three labour "codes" are highly controversial and emphatically anti-labour *because they radically deregulate the existing labour rights and protections of organized labour*. If they had been discussed or been open for consultation the trade unions and Opposition parties would have certainly tried to stop these bills.

2.4.1. *The three new labour codes: the institutionalisation of informality*

This is why both the trade unions and the Opposition parties protested against the three new labour laws that were illegally rushed through Parliament on 22 September 2020. These Bills, with 411 clauses and 13 schedules, comprising 350 pages, were given just three hours of discussion in Parliament. The new labour laws are *profoundly anti-labour*. They seek to make it very difficult: (1) for labour/trade unions to get recognised, (2) for formal/organized sector workers to go on strike and (3) for formal/organized workers to protect their jobs.

Outraged labour unions have protested that though the Modi government claims it is legislating in their favour to increase social security this is untrue: these laws are emphatically anti-worker because *they pave the way for instantaneous "hire and fire" within the formal sector and restrict the right to strike*. This is a shocking infringement of organized sector labour rights – and that is why the government rushed the laws through Parliament with virtually no discussion. They are an onslaught on organized workers who, until now, have enjoyed at least some protections and benefits.

In the absence of the Opposition, both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha passed the new “Labour Codes”, namely:

Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020;
Industrial Relations Code, 2020;
Code on Social Security, 2020.

These new laws are grotesquely cynical because they perpetrate a deliberate fraud on formal sector workers, who have been rendered very vulnerable by them. Legal experts and labour activists have pointed out that these laws supersede, and thus destroy, existing legal protections, effectively transforming India’s entire formal sector workforce into informal/unorganized workers. This is breathtaking deception on a gargantuan scale.

Significantly, the destruction of existing labour protections is ensured by greatly widening the scope of the central government’s rights to alter or cancel any labour law in relation to any industry/corporate: the government can therefore rewrite or cancel these new labour codes at any time to suit the wishes of corporates. The central government can cancel the application/validity of any labour law in relation to «any “controlled industry” that the government may specify» at any time (THEWIRE.IN 2020f).

A key feature of the new Acts is that they provide «size-based applicability of the laws to various organisations» (*ibid.*). Previously establishments employing over 100 workers had to seek government permission before any retrenchment; this threshold has now been raised to 300, with the government empowered to raise it further through notification (*ibid.*). This effectively means that the government has authorized itself to remake labour law on the hoof, at any time, to suit its corporate friends.

These laws deliberately seek to deceive: for instance, the new Industrial Relations Code prohibits the employment of contract workers in any core activity (in any formal sector enterprise) but this apparent protection of the employment of organized workers is entirely illusory because, as noted, the central government is empowered to ignore and set aside any labour law for the benefit of any corporate, at its discretion.

In another piece of trickery, the new Industrial Relations Code allows for the registration of trade unions but then – intentionally – provides no criteria for enterprises on how to recognise unions: such criteria are essential to enable trade unions to formally negotiate with employers. Thus unions have been purposely stymied.

Both the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 and the Code on Social Security, 2020, have, intentionally, been left vague – neither code specifies the norms pertaining to social security schemes or to health, safety standards and working conditions. Instead they largely delegate the specification of these norms to the local state governments, who are even more eager to please and attract corporates than the Modi government – the appalling results, in terms of working conditions and security schemes for workers, can just be imagined!

Workers' rights groups point out that these laws will promote a "hire and fire" regime, by allowing very easy retrenchment and exempting certain categories of formal sector companies – especially large/high-value corporates – from adherence to the laws safeguarding workers' rights.

NGOs that have studied the new laws carefully have concluded that the new Industrial Relations Code takes away the right to protest from formal sector workers. But the Code has been worded so ingeniously that this is not immediately apparent. It is a conclusion that has to be deduced. The new Industrial Relations Code states that it prohibits the right to (immediate) strike and demands that unions first give a 60-day notice regarding their intention to strike. On the face of it, this might seem an acceptable demand. But (and this is the hidden trap) any notice leads automatically to conciliation – and striking during conciliation is illegal. Thus, without spelling this out, the new Code effectively *destroys the right of organized sector workers to go on strike at any time* – even though this right is enshrined in the Constitution. Workers' rights groups have rejected this law, because it categorically «destroys the freedom of association guaranteed to Indian citizens under the Constitution» (*ibid.*) But to challenge it they will have to take the government to court – and there is little hope that they can prevail against the government in any court today. Thus the new labour laws, passed in Parliament in hugger-mugger, display cynicism and deception of the highest order. They deserve a prize for their unparalleled duplicity, and, as trade unions have emphatically asserted, they also deserve to be rejected in toto. Yet, given the enfeebled state of India's trade unions, this is unlikely to happen.

The Karnataka State IT/ITeS³⁷ Employees Union has stated that these new laws will lead to conditions of «virtual slavery» for organized workers and has estimated that the new «Labour Codes» will render more than 74%

³⁷ ITeS: Information Technology Enabled Services.

of all formal sector industrial workers and 70% of formal sector industrial establishments vulnerable to a «hire and fire regime» (*ibid.*). As the lawyer Rashmi Venkatesan notes, through these new labour laws «the state is effectively *dissolving the formal into the informal*. In other words, *it is institutionalising informality*» (VENKATESAN 2020; emphasis added).

2.4.2. *The Modi government's acts of omission regarding informal workers during the pandemic lockdown and after*

The three new “Labour Codes” therefore ought rather to be called the *Anti-Labour* Codes given the huge damage they have done to the rights and protections of organized labour. These anti-labour laws are a dangerous step in the further subjugation of the working classes, and confirm Barbara Harriss-White recent argument. Harriss-White is a distinguished economist and a leading authority on India’s informal sector: she has warned that the Modi government *is deliberately waging war on India’s working classes* (2020a). Harriss-White gave her warning on 20 May 2020, with particular reference to unorganized sector workers (who are 94% of all workers today). Speaking two months later, on 15 June 2020, in an interview with G. Sampath, Jayati Ghosh broadened Harriss-White’s warning, to include all workers, both unorganized and organized (GHOSH 2020a). Ghosh’s analysis is extremely important: she draws particular attention to Prime Minister Modi’s acts of omission during the Covid lockdown, emphasizing their catastrophic results for unorganized low-income workers. GHOSH (2020a) says:

«But I think that these [recent anti-labour laws passed by BJP-ruled states] are, if you like, the more symptomatic expressions of a deeper purpose. And that too I want to explicate in terms of the economic impact of so many of the government’s responses which have seemed completely inexplicable to many economists. And it’s not just me I think: across the board economists have been wondering, “What is the government thinking, why isn’t it responding?”

There are three critical areas where the [Modi government’s] response seems utterly illogical. [1] The first is the refusal to distribute more of the surplus foodgrain. We have currently more than 55 million tons of surplus, some of which is clearly actually being left out in the open, because the FCI³⁸ doesn’t have storage facilities that are way in excess of its maximum storage. And some of which will go bad, some of which will get eaten by rats, some of which is already very old and not fit for human

³⁸ Food Corporation of India.

consumption. *So why are they not distributing this food grain*, when we know that there are hundreds of millions of people facing hunger – extreme hunger and deprivation?

[2] The second is how they [the Modi government] have actually devastated the bargaining power of informal workers. They never had much power, as you know. But this lockdown, first of all it throws everybody out of jobs or livelihoods immediately. For two months you do not get any possibility of earning anything of your own. [3] And then you're even denied the possibility of going back [home] ...

So there was not just a deprivation in terms of denying people their own rights. But then there was denial of their right to have the ability to go back home, where they could at least be safe, and find some succour and some survival.

Why would you do that? I think that's part of a broader thing *which feeds into the whole authoritarianism, which is: it is a deep restructuring of domestic class relations in terms of a massive reduction in the bargaining power for workers*. We are going to be faced with massive open unemployment, massive destruction of livelihoods. And in those conditions, it is very hard for workers to demand anything. Whether or not state governments actually get rid of labour laws, you can pretty much be sure that those labour laws are not going to be implemented or recognized in most of the labour contracts that emerge in the post-Covid period. And then, because there are no jobs available, because there's no livelihood available, people will be desperate. And in that situation it is hard to know where the bottom will be in terms of wages» (GHOSH 2020a).

Ghosh is not only right in saying that we can be sure that labour laws are not going to be implemented or recognized in most of the labour contracts that emerge in the post-Covid period, she was also extraordinarily prescient in predicting this. Three months after she made her prediction (in June 2020), the Modi government passed the notorious new “Labour Codes”, discussed above, in September 2020, which explicitly stated that the central government would be *empowered to nullify any labour law*, if it felt this was necessary to protect the interests of a company/industry (VENKATESAN 2020).

The brutal “disciplining” of formal sector workers, dressed up in the BJP's neoliberal language of “making labour flexible”, has clearly indicated that the government is unabashedly and openly on the side of corporate employers. The government claims that the flexibilization of Indian labour makes it more attractive to foreign investors by making it cheaper but these arguments have been demolished by GHOSH (2020a), who says:

«[BJP-ruled] state governments have tried to bring in labour laws that are not just fundamentally anti-labour, I would argue that they are fundamentally counterproductive, because they don't actually end up encouraging more investment. When you deprive them [workers] of minimum wages, when you force them to work longer hours, you don't allow healthy and safe working conditions. That doesn't improve

labour productivity. And in fact, the stated objective, that this is to attract FDI – that has rarely worked, and it certainly will not work in this instance either. Because we know that FDI was much more attracted to China over all the decades when [Chinese] wages were higher and the [working] conditions of Chinese workers were better. FDI³⁹ had to meet far more conditions in China.

“We know that even today it is much more likely for FDI to be in countries like Vietnam and Thailand, which again, have better wages and working conditions than India» (GHOSH 2020a).

Initially even the rank and file of the RSS-supported trade unions protested against the BJP’s new Labour Codes. But because of their affiliation to the government⁴⁰ these unions soon capitulated and, unsurprisingly, supported the government. All the trade unions linked to the Opposition parties protested vehemently. But they are very weak today and have never had any influence in the unorganized sector. Previously 90% of the Indian workforce was beyond their reach in the informal sector. But, as noted earlier, recent research suggests that the percentage of workers who are unorganized may have grown even larger. AMBEDKAR – PRASHAD (2020) have recently claimed that the percentage of organized/formal sector workers *is in steady decline* and may already be under 4%, so that *India’s informal sector may now comprise as much as 96% of all Indian workers*⁴¹.

³⁹ Foreign Direct Investment.

⁴⁰ The RSS and the BJP are two sides of the same ideological coin, they are very closely connected because the BJP is the party political “wing” of the RSS, out of which the BJP developed. Further, the RSS’s grassroots activities have always preceded the BJP’s electoral gains: the RSS works at the grassroots, setting up schools and temple-festival committees, and running night-classes for children, to win over the poorer lower-castes and to create an ideological climate favourable to the BJP (see Jishnu 2016).

⁴¹ Also see Harriss-White’s estimate in footnote 27 above: she estimated that the informal sector has grown to *at least* 92% of all workers and that only 8% of workers *at most* are still in India’s formal/organized sector (HARRISS-WHITE, personal communication, December 2020.)

3. *Dissent: the crushing of political dissent*

3.1. Introduction: The Modi government is crushing political dissent

More and more of India's diverse subaltern classes are becoming aware that they do not need to suffer in silence from poverty, injustice, humiliation and oppressions of all kinds, as they have done for very long. Their TVs and their smartphones show them very different, affluent lifestyles, and clever advertising encourages them to desire these higher-status, more comfortable lives.

Dalits and other lower caste people are becoming increasingly indignant about the pervasive injustices that blight their lives and keep them and their children stuck in poverty, immobilizing them in jobs that are dirty, viewed as "polluting" and low status, even though these jobs are "essential jobs" and they are in fact "key workers", such as sanitary workers, municipal street-cleaners and sewage cleaners. The Covid pandemic highlighted the importance to society's health of these key workers, making them aware that they can bargain harder with their employers (often the local state governments or the central government) for more pay.

This growing assertiveness of Dalits and other lower-castes, as well as of Adivasis, is one of the reasons why the Modi government is moving so determinedly and so brutally to arrest and imprison without bail or trial, on the charge of "terrorism" and under a colonial "sedition" law, many key educators, journalists, lawyers, academics and activists – both those from the subaltern grass-roots and those from middle-class backgrounds – who have been engaged for decades with people's movements and with educating, mentoring and assisting low-income/low-caste/indigenous communities to assert their rights and demand justice.

Dalit leaders, like Chandrasekhar Azad of the Bhim Army in Uttar Pradesh, have been hounded and repeatedly arrested, while eminent Dalit academics/intellectuals, like Anand Teltumbde, have been silenced by summary imprisonment without bail or trial on entirely unbelievable charges (THEWIRE.IN 2020i, 2020j, 2020k, 2020l). Adivasi (indigenous) activists have been treated with contempt, and arrested as "[violent] Maoists", "[violent] Naxals" and "anti-nationals" simply for asserting their rights to their own lands (see below). Thousands of Adivasis have been arrested in the states of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh and summarily jailed without bail or trial. Their leaders and mentors have been jailed too: most recently, on

8 October 2020, 83 year old Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest who has worked with the poor for more than 50 years, and with poor Adivasis in Jharkhand for the last 30 years, was arrested by the National Investigation Agency in Ranchi on charges relating to the fabricated «Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy» (THEWIRE.IN 2020m; BBC 2020a).

The National Investigation Agency has no neutrality whatsoever – it merely does the bidding of the current government and is entirely political in its decisions regarding whom to prosecute for so-called “terrorism” or “sedition” under the UAPA law (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) *which allows indefinite detention in jail without bail or trial*. The UAPA is an anachronistic “sedition” law dating from the British Raj which should have been repealed long ago – and which has been repealed in Britain. But India’s neo-colonial rulers have kept this “sedition” law because it allows them to silence blameless political dissenters against whom no legal case can be made. That is why this colonial sedition law (UAPA) has been repeatedly and regularly invoked by the Modi government since 2018, first, from 2018 to 2020, against a large number of eminent activists, lawyers and academics jailed on charges relating to the fictitious “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” case, and then against an equally large number of university students, academics, activists and lawyers jailed in relation to the equally fake “Delhi riots conspiracy” case in 2020⁴². Due to the limitations of space I cannot discuss the important Shaheen Bagh protests which occurred in Delhi from late 2019 to early 2020 or the following arrests, through 2020, in relation to the fictitious “Delhi riots conspiracy” case.

This is a very difficult time and nobody knows this better than the intellectuals, academics, lawyers and activists who have been jailed under charges of “terrorism”, relating to the trumped-up “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy”. Sixteen very eminent activists have been arrested so far between 2018 and

⁴² This refers to the anti-Muslim pogroms organized by BJP leaders and BJP vigilantes at the end of February 2020. The great majority of those who died in these attacks were Muslim. “Riots” is therefore a complete misnomer for the lethal attacks on Muslim neighbourhoods (Malik 2020) that were orchestrated by the BJP. This happened very soon after the important Shaheen Bagh protests against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Bill/Act (CAB/CAA) law were shut down by the Modi government. As the historian Mukul Kesavan has explained the CAB is «couched in the language of refuge and seemingly directed at foreigners, *but its main purpose is the delegitimisation of [Indian] Muslims’ citizenship*» (BBC.COM 2019; emphasis added). Also see TheIntercept.com 2020.

2020 under the UAPA sedition law and detained without bail or trial in relation to the so-called “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” (which is also referred to as the “Elgaar-Parishad conspiracy”). Their arrests are paradigmatic of the Modi government’s ongoing destruction of democracy, which is proceeding apace.

3.2. The “Bhima-Koregaon Conspiracy” Arrests

In 2018 the Modi government started arresting prominent lawyers, trade union activists, NGO leaders, academics and activists, all of whom were closely associated with people’s movements of India’s two most deprived populations – Dalits and Adivasis. Through 2018, 2019 and 2020 these unjust and outrageous arrests on “terrorism” charges under the UAPA sedition law have continued. The arrests were “justified” by the police or the central government investigating agencies (the NIA – National Investigation Agency) by claiming that all those arrested were connected to a (totally fabricated) “conspiracy” that the police/investigating agencies had invented. This “conspiracy” goes by two names: the “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” and also the “Elgaar Parishad conspiracy”. The details of this fabricated “conspiracy” are presented in these two admirably clear accounts (THEWIRE.IN 2019b; JAF-FRELOT 2020).

For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is enough to try to understand what is really going on here and how it connects with the interests of the increasingly authoritarian, neoliberal and Hindu-supremacist Modi government – and the elite/big capital corporate interests it protects. One of the best analyses of the “Bhima-Koregaon” arrests has been provided by Apoorvanand, a highly respected academic and political commentator at Delhi University. Let us keep in mind that all the civil society leaders who have been jailed are still in prison in 2020 with no prospect of being freed. Apoorvanand wrote this in 2018, after the first arrests:

«It is not difficult to understand why it is important for this government to suppress people like Sudha Bharadwaj [an eminent activist-lawyer/trade unionist]. They work, mostly through the law, to defend the rights of the poorest of the poor, and the most dispossessed – the Tribals [indigenous peoples] and the Dalits. *It is crucial for the government to deprive the Tribals of this support. Thus Chattisgarh* [state]

*has now been emptied*⁴³ *of almost all journalists, activists and lawyers who wrote about the loot of the land and natural resources by big corporations, and defended the Tribals. Similarly, Jharkhand [state] is on the target list»* (THEQUINT.COM 2018; emphasis added).

Apoorvanand quite rightly focuses his analysis on the enormously valuable mineral deposits in the forested Adivasi lands in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand to which the Adivasis/indigenous peoples have legal rights. Indian and global corporates are extremely eager to appropriate and mine these lands – and have therefore invoked the Modi government’s help in throwing the Adivasis off their lands so that these corporates can mine these mineral-rich areas. Several of the arrested activists have been closely associated with Adivasi people’s movements for decades, educating and serving them, and supporting their land rights in various ways. Sudha Bhadravaj has worked as a trade-unionist and as a lawyer defending the rights of Adivasi contract-labour mine-workers (and other Adivasis) for over three decades. She has been accused of participating in the (fabricated) “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” and was jailed without bail in 2018. As Apoorvanand indicates, it is the neoliberal government’s protection of big corporate interests – particularly their mining interests – that is key to the jailing of these activists.

Apoorvanand then draws a very important distinction. He explains that the Modi government’s reason for jailing intellectuals and activists associated with the Dalit people’s movements is quite different from the government’s reason for jailing activists associated with Adivasi movements: it is because *educated Dalits have become a major threat to the BJP*:

«The Dalits are the new articulate political grouping which threatens the narrative of a seamless majoritarian project of the ruling party in the name of Hindutva. That is why it has become necessary to defame and criminalize it, by dubbing it “Maoist” and “anti-national”.

⁴³ It was “emptied” through blatant threats, physical intimidation and outright attacks. All these illegal activities were carried out on behalf of the Modi government by local BJP vigilantes or local BJP state officials in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand. Chattisgarh state continues to be under a BJP government, Jharkhand state too had a BJP government until very recently. This meant that the journalists, activists and lawyers who supported the local Adivasi (indigenous) populations were utterly unprotected – they were faced by a hostile BJP state government and an intimidating police force that supported the violence and threats of the BJP-linked vigilantes whose sole purpose was to terrify the activists and to chase them away from the two states.

*The present regime has been rattled by the opposition it is facing from the newly-educated Dalits. So, the design is to paint the Dalit anger as a Maoist fabrication. It has been said [by the Modi government/its supporters] that the likes of Rohith Vemula⁴⁴ are pseudo-Dalits and are agents of the Maoists. It is said [by Modi government supporters] that the mother of Vemula has been given money by the Maoists to campaign against the present nationalist government» (*ibid.*; emphasis added).*

In short, the arrests of Dalit intellectuals and activists working for Dalit rights/emancipation connect with the increasing and significant challenge that Dalits are presenting to *the Modi government's hegemonic project*, namely its claim that it represents an undifferentiated and united "Hindu"-nationalist political interest – which is, of course, "automatically" in opposition to the interests of Muslims. *But Modi's hegemonic project can be potentially shattered by the increasingly politicized Dalit people's movements and by increasingly anti-BJP Dalit political parties/organizations*, like Tamil Nadu's VCK, that utterly reject both the BJP's anti-Muslim ideology and its claim to speak for "all Hindus". On the contrary, these Dalit groups affirm their political solidarity with Indian Muslims and point out that the Modi government stands for Brahmin/upper-caste-supremacy and for the feudal caste-system which the BJP is seeking to revive, because, without the protection of this highly discriminatory system of caste-based privilege, Brahminism⁴⁵ is very vulnerable to challenge. The Indian political context is therefore becoming similar to that in the US where an increasingly powerful and urgent challenge to racism and white supremacy is being posed by politicized African-Americans. *Brahminism or casteism is India's white-supremacy. It is just as entitled, just as racist and just as violent.*

⁴⁴ Rohith Vemula was a PhD scholar at prestigious Hyderabad University. As a Dalit, he was a member of the politically active Ambedkar Students Association. He and his co-members were cruelly harassed by the upper caste university authorities who did not like their anti-caste campaigning and their monthly scholarships were stopped. They were also forced to vacate their university accommodation. They received no support in their continuing plight. Depressed by this continuing harassment young Vemula quietly committed suicide on 17 January 2016. He wrote an eloquent and heartbreaking suicide note: his death caused a furore across the nation and woke people up to the vicious discrimination that Dalit students face in India's top universities (THEWIRE.IN 2019c).

⁴⁵ By "Brahminism" I mean "upper-casteism" or more precisely "upper-caste *casteism-racism*".

The ideological rejection of upper-caste privilege and power by Dalits (India's "African-Americans" in this equation) is therefore hugely significant – it marks an epochal change. That is why the BJP has rightly recognized that *Dalit political movements embody the most significant challenge to upper-caste authority, and, therefore, to the BJP's upper-caste ideology*. The "(fabricated) Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy" arrests indicate that the Modi government is both perturbed and unsettled – and even this unsettling of the BJP marks a major ideological triumph for the various Dalit parties, because they are still very small and marginal in national politics. Apoorvanand concludes: «[McCarthyism] led to a four-year-long witch hunt, hounding and persecuting some of the best minds of America. *In India, the terror of the present regime has a similar tone*» (*ibid.*; emphasis added). Many of India's best-known and most admired activists have been jailed since 2018, with no prospect of bail or justice. Apoorvanand is right – this is indeed nothing less than a reign of terror.

Every one of the eminent activists incarcerated for the fake "Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy" is an outstanding and inspirational human being who has done enormous good for the most disadvantaged sections of society. Let us consider just one of these exemplary human beings: Father Stan Swamy.

3.2.1. Father Stan and the Adivasi People's Movements

Father Stan Swamy has been engaged for decades in encouraging and defending Adivasis who resist the illegal occupation of their lands by BJP-backed corporates (SWAMY 2018; DAYAL 2020). Indian and global big capital is very eager to appropriate and mine the Adivasi-controlled forest areas of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh because of their highly profitable deposits of coal and valuable minerals. The BJP governments of both states were therefore busy «taking over people's agricultural and cultivable land for the sake of handing over [the land] to mining lobbies and corporate business» (INDIAN CURRENTS 2020, p. 38).

Father Swamy had written in an article,

«Let it be noted most of these mines in all the above states are located in the predominantly Adivasi-inhabited areas, that is, in Adivasi land and forests. No need to remind anyone that, as it is, Adivasis are among the most marginalised communities. *They make up about 8 percent of India's population of 1.3 billion, but about 40 percent of the 60 million people displaced by development projects in past decades are Adivasis. Only 25% of*

them have been resettled, but none rehabilitated. They were given minimal compensation and then neatly forgotten» (*ibid.*; emphasis added).

A recent intervention by Father Stan on behalf of the Adivasis occurred:

«when the Central Government released a list of 41 coal blocks all over India on 18 June 2020 *to be auctioned to private companies.* Out of 41 coal blocks, 9 are in Jharkhand, 9 in Chattisgarh, 9 in Odisha and 11 in Madhya Pradesh. Swamy points out that “most of these mines in all the above States are located in the predominantly Adivasi-inhabited areas, that is in Adivasi lands and forests... Mining is important. But it has to cater to the community’s needs... [Father Swamy] points out that the 2013 Supreme Court verdict *recognised the ownership of major subsoil minerals by the owner of the land.* The 1997 verdict gives power *to the local cooperatives of Adivasis alone to do mining.* Combine these two verdicts and let the government facilitate the process of registration of such cooperatives, render technical help, marketing, etc. “The state can do it if it really wants the development and welfare of all. Where there is a will, there is a way”, states Swamy» (INDIAN CURRENTS 2020, pp. 39-40; emphasis added).

Hundreds of innocent Adivasis, protesting against the illegal expropriation of their lands, have been jailed on the charge of being “suspected supporters of Maoists”, that is, violent terrorists. Father Swamy and his research team had done a study to highlight their unjust arrest and following this, Father Swamy «organized legal help to get them out, at least on bail... According to Swamy, this could have been the main reason the government decided to silence him» (ivi, p. 40).

Although, for reasons of space, I have not discussed the *environmental activism* of Father Stan and the Adivasis, it is hugely important. Their efforts are, however, not appreciated by the Modi government, which has also been in denial mode towards the climate crisis. One small indication of this is the manner in which the BJP Environment Minister, Javadekar, declared that the Indian chapter of the school children’s “Fridays for Future” movement, that focuses on building awareness of the climate crisis among school children, would not be allowed to function in India – he banned the movement in 2020⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ This is the well-known international school children’s movement inspired by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. The Indian school children’s chapter of “Fridays for Future” *was initially charged by the Delhi police under the UAPA sedition law which can entail life imprisonment and allows no bail* – it is the very same law that the activists charged with the “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” have been jailed under (HINDUSTAN TIMES 2020).

3.2.2. *The cruel abuse of elderly “Bhima-Koregaon” prisoners by the jail authorities*

Because big capital has the total support of the government in its efforts to illegally appropriate and mine Adivasi-controlled lands, the Modi government did not hesitate to arrest and jail Father Stan Swamy – even though this inoffensive, soft-spoken 83 year old Catholic priest suffers from very severe Parkinson’s disease and cannot eat or drink or walk without assistance: he needs a sipper or a straw in order to drink anything, because the tremor in his hands is so severe. And yet, when put in jail, this kind and gentle old disabled priest, suffering from severe Parkinson’s, *was not allowed even a sipper or a straw!* (THE HINDU 2020c; THEQUINT.COM 2020). This is the malevolence the BJP has fostered – it arrests an extremely vulnerable 83 year old invalid, designates him a dangerous “terrorist” and then denies him *a straw!* (THEWIRE.IN 2020n). Because of his Parkinson’s disease, Father Stan needs support when he walks and it has been reported that he has fallen several times in the jail. Fortunately his fellow prisoners have come to his rescue and have taken care of him, helping to feed him and to bathe him. Referring to their unexpected kindness, Father Stan wrote to friends: «My two inmates help out during supper, in washing my clothes and give massage to my knee joints. They are from very poor families. Please remember my inmates and my colleagues in your prayers. Despite all odds, humanity is bubbling in Taloja prison» (SCROLL.IN 2020c).

Father Stan’s generosity of spirit shines through in his letter, as does the simple humanity and empathy in the hearts of his fellow prisoners – but not a spark of humanity appears to enliven the authorities who jailed him. Father Stan’s bail plea on health grounds has been turned down by them repeatedly. But when it became publicly known that India’s National Investigation

The reason for this draconian and terrifying charge was that the school children were blamed for creating awareness on their “Fridays for Future” website regarding the public consultation on the draft EIA (Environment Impact Assessment) notification 2020, and for encouraging concerned citizens to email the Minister. Apparently Javadekar’s official email had been inundated with messages of protest regarding the draft EIA 2020. He was so annoyed by this that the Delhi police charged the school children’s climate group with sedition! Though this charge was later withdrawn, their “Fridays for Future” website was shut down by the service provider, apparently on the orders of the Delhi police (HINDUSTAN TIMES 2020).

Agency had denied *even a straw* to this elderly activist, there was public outrage and a vigorous social media campaign immediately took off, «to flood the jail with straws and sippers». Taloja jail was deluged with sipper cups as a result (THEWIRE.IN 2020o). This social media furor finally shamed the NIA into providing Father Stan with a sipper and straw, which it reluctantly handed to him *almost two months* after his arrest.

Their cruel abuse of this venerable priest-activist was not unusual. The octogenarian poet-activist Varavara Rao had been similarly accused of being a “terrorist” and “Maoist” when he was arrested in 2019 in connection with the same fictitious “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy”. Varavara Rao has several debilitating illnesses, including dementia. While in jail he was infected with the Covid virus and became seriously ill. He was so cruelly neglected in the prison hospital that a court in Mumbai (where his relatives filed a case) *had to insist*, against the extremely stubborn and hard-hearted prison authorities, that he be sent to a reputed hospital to be enabled to recover from the Covid virus (THEWIRE.IN 2020p). His renowned advocate, Indira Jaisingh, stated that she was deeply worried that her client was going to die in jail. He was sent to a better hospital temporarily, but had to be returned to jail: bail was refused to him, despite his extremely serious condition.

The spectacles of the lawyer-activist Gautam Navlakha (another “Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy” accused) were recently stolen in jail. He is virtually blind without them, so his wife couriered a new pair of spectacles to the jail, after informing the jail authorities that she was doing so, so that they could accept the delivery immediately. Instead, they deliberately refused to take delivery and sent the replacement spectacles back to her! This, even though they knew that Navlakha is virtually blind without his spectacles (THEWIRE.IN 2020q).

«Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?»⁴⁷. The sheer malevolence of these repeated cruelties is absolutely startling. That India’s best and kindest have been locked up by the Modi government, just because it does not like their politics and their dissenting voices, and thereafter subjected to such malign and vicious treatment in jail, with no means of reparation or justice, is very deeply disturbing. It tells us a lot about the nature of the present government.

⁴⁷ *King Lear*: Act 3, Scene 6; Lear asks this question.

We are therefore, in this pandemic year of 2020⁴⁸, in the middle of the most serious and dangerous crisis in modern India's political history: Indian democracy is being dissolved before our very eyes.

3.3. Modi's second term marked the end of the BJP's "self-restraint"

The rest of the world, preoccupied by the 2020 Covid crisis and the melodrama of the US elections, has been largely unaware of the profound political transformations⁴⁹ that have convulsed India after the BJP party won India's national elections in May 2019, and thus its second term in office. Political scientists have suggested that in their first terms in office authoritarian rulers are usually more restrained, but if they are endorsed for a second term they throw aside their figleaves of restraint and indulge «their illiberal dreams» (MOUNK 2019). Mounk argues that because of his landslide victory in May 2019, which gave him an absolute majority in Parliament, Mr Modi gained unbounded confidence. Further, in the 2019 elections, which were the most expensive in India's history, the BJP's coffers were lavishly funded by the big corporates whose interests they were so zealously protecting. These corporates contributed far less to the Congress party: they could see which way the wind was blowing.

Mounk observes, «India is following a predictable pattern of what would-be authoritarians do when they win reelection» (*ibid.*). On winning his second term with an absolute majority, Mr Modi lost no time in implementing his long-standing anti-Muslim agenda: first came the sudden abrogation of the special status of Kashmir, on 5 August 2019, which broke legislation enshrined in India's Constitution. Next came the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)/ National Register of Citizens (NRC) legislation *which seeks to turn Indian Muslims into stateless citizens*: «Home minister Amit Shah had made it clear that implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) will be followed by the National Register of Citizens (NRC) throughout India that will be concluded by 2024» (AARON 2019). This was

⁴⁸ This section of this essay was written in December 2020.

⁴⁹ But the BJP government's hounding of Amnesty, forcing it to withdraw from India in October 2020, has at least drawn the condemnation of some EU officials. Amnesty's comments on the BJP government's trampling on the human rights of the Muslim population of Kashmir drew the ire of the BJP government (ALJAZEERA 2020).

followed by the anti-CAA-NRC protests, largely by Muslims but supported by many activists of all hues, at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, as well as across India, in late 2019 and early 2020, which were followed by the BJP-inspired attacks on Muslim neighbourhoods in Delhi at the end of February 2020 (MALIK 2020). Then, from March 2020 onwards, in the Orwellian reversal of reality that happens so frequently in India these days, *the victims of the Delhi attacks* and their associates/well wishers (university students, academics, lawyers, etc.) *were arrested* by the Delhi police and charged with the (fabricated) “Delhi riots conspiracy” case.

Not only were many innocent university students and activists arrested for “sedition” under the UAPA, but even the Communist Party⁵⁰ general secretary, Sitaram Yechury, was threatened with arrest by the Delhi police, along with Yogendra Yadav, an eminent activist, as well as Professor Jayati Ghosh. These three greatly admired civil society leaders and others were falsely accused in September 2020 by the Delhi police of wanting «to provoke and mobilise the [Muslim] crowd[s]” to turn Muslims against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens» (THEWIRE.IN 2020t, 2020u).

As TheWire.in reported, «Using identically worded “confessions” of students in custody, the police have named renowned economist Jayati Ghosh, DU⁵¹ professor Apoorvanand, CPI (M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, Swaraj Abhiyan leader Yogendra Yadav and documentary filmmaker Rahul Roy in a chargesheet» (THEWIRE.IN 2020u). Jayati Ghosh’s brilliantly insightful comments have guided this essay’s analysis – and Professor Apoorvanand’s perceptive comments have been quoted at length here too. In his video discussion with Karan Thapar Yechury emphasized that the term “the Delhi riots” was totally misleading – these attacks had been pogroms, inspired, aided and abetted by the BJP (THEWIRE.IN 2020t).

4. *Passive revolution, hegemony and India’s elites*

In January 1950 when India became a republic its Constitution enshrined the values of democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity between all citizens. But the continuing social legitimization given to discrimination against Dalits and particularly the exploitation of the enforced labour of

⁵⁰ CPI(M): Communist Party of India (Marxist).

⁵¹ DU: Delhi University.

Dalits/“untouchables” meant that in 1950 the democratic political system that was enshrined in law was radically at odds with India’s distinctly feudal social system. A profoundly hierarchized society had been joined to a democratic polity.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader, was appointed the nation's first Law Minister in August 1947. Appointed Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee thereafter, he framed India’s new Constitution. But though the chief architect of the new Constitution, Ambedkar had no illusions regarding the loyalties of India’s upper-caste ruling classes. When interviewed by the BBC in 1953, he was asked if he believed that India’s new-born democracy would survive. He answered in one syllable: «No!» He explained that his pessimism was due to the new nation’s political system being so completely at odds with its social system. He told the BBC that unless India’s people elected radical reformers, who could overthrow the existing casteist-classist political-economic structures, there was little chance for democracy to grow. But, he added, India’s existing leaders would not willingly do away with the caste system, because they cherished their upper-caste identities and the caste-class structures which protected their vote-banks and their coercive, semi-feudal power. That was why, even as early as 1953, Ambedkar had virtually no hope that genuine democracy would grow in India’s soil, unless there was radical political change to empower its subaltern majority.

4.1. Passive revolution: the deliberate neglect of public health and public education

Unfortunately, India’s trajectory seems to have proved Dr Ambedkar’s forebodings right. Seventy-three years after independence⁵², in September 2020, the Covid 19 pandemic was raging in rural India. The rates of infection were even higher than those in urban India because, though more than 65% of India’s population lives in rural areas, about 65% of all government hospital beds are in urban India. Only 20% of all doctors in India are serving in rural areas and only 37% of all government hospital beds are located in rural India (THE HINDU 2020d).

Public health is a local state government responsibility. But most state governments have invested very little in public health for decades, because the middle classes solely use private medical care and the rural poor have no

⁵² India became independent in 1947 and became a republic in 1950.

voice. So there has been a large gap between the investments state governments have made in public health in rural and urban India. Kerala and Tamil Nadu are among the very few exceptions here.

India is by far the richest and largest country of the South Asia region, and therefore sees itself as its unquestioned leader. Yet all four of the other South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan – spend more on public health as a percentage of government expenditure than India does. Chandrasekhar and Ghosh highlight India's «long history of low public spending on health, as indicated by the levels just before the pandemic ... India's health spending as a proportion of total government expenditures is the lowest of these five nations» (2020). This is shocking, given how much smaller the GDPs of these four countries are.

Chandrasekhar and Ghosh conclude: «The current difficulties India is facing with managing the Covid-19 pandemic therefore indicate more than the evident mismanagement of the Modi government. They also reflect *decades of inadequate government attention to public health under successive governments at the national level, which have resulted in health indicators that are poor even in comparison to other South Asian countries*. The Modi government tried to address this problem by a foray into an (underfunded) universal health insurance scheme, Ayushman Bharat, but the pandemic has very quickly exposed the limitations of that scheme too. The tragedy is that even a health crisis of such massive proportions has not yet made the government rethink its strategy and invest much more substantially in public health» (CHANDRASEKHAR – GHOSH 2020; emphasis added). Similarly, there has been very inadequate local state government investment in public education.

The reason for this severe underfunding of public health and public education is that the middle castes/classes and upper castes/classes solely use private education and private medical care. Since it is their bourgeoisie interests that count with politicians, government-run schools and government-run hospitals have been left poorly staffed and poorly equipped – and were therefore completely unprepared when the Covid pandemic burst upon them.

This consistent underspending on public health and public education over the decades could be read as mere neglect. From a Gramscian perspective, however, this underspending has obviously been *a political choice*, not “mere neglect”. India's upper-caste/class rulers and the plutocrats who back them, have been engaged in a passive revolution against India's poor/lower-caste majority population ever since independence in 1947. In the early decades it was Congress-led governments that ensured that the subaltern masses were

“kept in their place”, by keeping them uneducated and physically vulnerable, and thus unable to challenge their political masters. Even today, in 2020, Dalit women and men are often murdered if they challenge the authority of the rural upper castes, while Dalit men are routinely tortured to death if they fall in love with and try to marry “upper caste” women, *even* in “progressive” Tamil Nadu and Kerala. These murderous attacks on Dalits serve exactly the same ideological purpose as white supremacist shootings of African-Americans in the US – they are intended to “teach” the lower classes/castes not to challenge their subordination, but instead “to know their place” – and to stay in their subaltern place.

4.1.1. The BJP is pushing a neoliberal ethic that tells the poor they are responsible for their own welfare

In previous decades, then, the ruling class neglected public health and education but did not advertise this fact. However, this neglect has become blatant today: the BJP is pushing a highly individualistic neoliberal ethic where poor people are told that they must accept responsibility for their own welfare and that this is right, responsible and modern. The Modi government is thus using a neoliberal notion of individual responsibility – «self-reliance» or «*Atma Nirbhan*» in Modispeak (KAUR 2020) – to claim that this is both an admirable and a modern attitude.

According to this neoliberal creed, the swiftly narrowing possibilities of upward mobility that face India’s working poor are the result of their own inadequacies – they have only themselves to blame. It is not the result of growing structural inequities and increasing social injustices. The poor have been explicitly warned that they can no longer look to the government to assist with their education and health. Both the health and education sectors have already been privatized to a very large degree in previous decades and are rapidly being privatized further.

The BJP government has also slashed its investment in a gigantic and remarkably successful *national rural employment scheme*: the funding of the hugely successful NREGA⁵³ rural employment scheme has been radically cut, partly out of jealousy: the scheme was started under Congress. But it has also been slashed because the Modi government is determined to shake off any

⁵³ NREGA’s full acronym is MGNREGA: the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

responsibility it may have inherited towards India's poor. Their welfare is no longer the responsibility of the state: having shaken off the poor the government can give its undivided attention to fattening the already-flatulent rich.

4.2. Economic Liberalization and Mass Consumer Culture are Raising Aspirations

But instead of “knowing their place”, as their political masters desire, it is obvious that in 2020 the under-paid, lower-caste working classes strongly aspire for better lives for themselves and their children. They fiercely yearn to move up the social hierarchy and they share, though in far more modest measure, the hopes and dreams of India's increasingly wealthy middle classes.

A limited class mobility for the very poor lower castes opened up in the 1950s and 1960s through the “reservations” (affirmative action) policy mandated by the Constitution. *More than any other government policy* it is this affirmative action legislation, consisting of reserved seats in higher education and reserved, pensionable jobs in the government/public sector, that has given poor Dalits/Scheduled Castes (SCs) the opportunity to gain the economic basis on which their aspirations and hopes can be built. This affirmative action, enshrined as a constitutional right, assists Hindu Dalits/Scheduled Castes (SCs), Adivasis/Scheduled Tribes (STs)⁵⁴ and Hindu OBCs (Other Backward Classes)⁵⁵.

Over the decades, through promotions based on their seniority (years in service), these Dalit/Adivasi/OBC government employees climbed up to reach positions of responsibility and social status, with significant salaries. They educated their children in good private schools. Though only a very small percentage of Dalits/Adivasis/OBCs have actually been able to get these “reserved” jobs, their impact has been far-reaching. The previous humiliating deference that Dalits were required to show to all non-Dalits, has

⁵⁴ The Adivasis are the various indigenous peoples of India, who were earlier referred to as “Tribals”. Like Dalits, they have affirmative action “reserved” places in higher education and in the lowest levels of public sector jobs. Unlike Dalits, Adivasis have not been viewed as “polluted”, however they too have been marginalized and (like Dalits) are also discriminated against.

⁵⁵ OBCs: «Other Backward Classes» refers to the low-to-intermediate castes who are “above” Dalits in the caste status-system.

consequently weakened radically, particularly in the cities. There is far less caste-based deference today.

4.3. Both National Parties are Equally Neoliberal

Another reason, for the rising aspirations of the poor working classes is their *increasing consumerism*, fed by clever advertising in the liberalized Indian economy after 1992. Consumerism is morally ambiguous, because, unlike affirmative action, it does not provide the poor with any economic basis for their growing aspirations. But it can also stimulate the desire to *be more*, creating a thirst for socio-political change and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Neoliberal consumerism can thus impel subalterns towards seeking higher status and social respect. Both are powerful incentives for new political activity, such as participating in new communities and new group-identities.

In 1991 India's finance minister⁵⁶, Manmohan Singh, initiated the liberalisation of India's economy. Thus neoliberalism was first espoused by the Congress party. Both Congress and the BJP have supported neoliberal policies for the last 30 years. Both parties are controlled by wealthy elites representing upper-caste/upper-class interests, but today the corporates – the wealthiest elites – are almost wholly Modi-supporters.

But Congress and the BJP differ sharply in their relation to India's constitutional character as a multi-religious, multi-cultural country where religious tolerance and cultural inclusiveness have been guiding principles of public life. Congress has, largely, protected the right of all religious and ethnic groups to flourish in a plural India. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), developed out of the stridently anti-Muslim, Hindu-supremacist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and has therefore been fixated, from its earliest days, on the goal of unquestioned Hindu upper-caste supremacy and the creation of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) (JAFRELOT 2020a, 2020b).

That was why, as soon as it was elected for a second term, in 2019, the BJP threw aside its figleaf of restraint and started “othering” Indian Muslims, describing them as “terrorists” and “the enemies within”. It hoped, by this toxic strategy, to win “Hindu” votes – and, sadly, it has found great success.

This is despite the fact that there is actually no homogeneous “Hindu religion” across India. There are only numerous different Hindu sects, some

⁵⁶ Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister in the ruling Congress coalition in 1991.

large and others small. Despite this, the BJP has enjoyed enormous political success. Why has its fiction of a homogeneous, universal Hindu community/Hindu nation been so successful? Is this because subaltern Hindus are becoming more devout? Or are there other factors at play here, that have contributed to the BJP's mammoth electoral success? We consider this complex issue in the section below.

4.3.1. Upwardly mobile subalterns are using their new access to Brahminic ritual to raise their social status

In 1991, when Congress ended the “licence Raj” and India’s liberalized economy became part of the so-called “global market”, did the ruling classes realize that this change would embolden subaltern material aspirations and cultural dreams? Many upwardly-mobile, lower-caste Indians bought smartphones and TVs and their ambitions rose accordingly. With their rising economic status their political and social aspirations ascended. But this observation needs to be qualified: because of Indian patriarchy upwardly-mobile lower-caste Indian *men* accessed smartphones, but the *women* in their families generally lacked the financial means to do so, due to the sharp economic-political subordination of women. Due to patriarchy, women’s access to decent, safe, well-paid⁵⁷ jobs remains very restricted, thus severely handicapping their ability to become part of the new consumer society, as well as greatly limiting their exposure to political news and discussion, which has become increasingly available to lower-income/lower-caste men through social media⁵⁸ on their smartphones.

These rapidly rising expectations of the lower-classes (who constitute the majority of the population) partially explain, from a Gramscian perspective, why there is a palpable sense of urgency in the BJP’s increasingly divisive politics and, particularly, in its anti-Muslim rhetoric. A *key* aspiration of the poor working classes is their desire for decent jobs, especially for the millions of young male job-seekers. Here, despite its electoral promises, the Modi

⁵⁷ Jobs that are safer from sexual harassment are only available at higher levels, which require higher education – sexual threat to women, especially poorer women, is a huge and pervasive problem in India. It has a powerful negative impact on women’s willingness to participate in the labour force.

⁵⁸ Whatsapp has become enormously popular in India and much political news is disseminated through it: many low-income men increasingly receive their daily news through Whatsapp and YouTube.

government has utterly failed. National unemployment rates steadily increased, reaching an all-time high in 2019⁵⁹. Having utterly failed in their key election promise the BJP needed to divert attention from its failed promises *and* ensure that the diverse classes of labour did not join together. That is why *both* religious identities and caste identities play such a huge role in the BJP's regressive ideology: "blaming the Muslims" remains an absorbing pastime, providing a scapegoat for people's resentments and dissatisfactions; racist-casteist discrimination between the classes of labour helps to keep them divided.

The rising expectations of the lower-castes also help to explain why the BJP's "invitation" to Dalits/the lower castes to be included in high-status upper-caste Hinduism is being welcomed so enthusiastically by the lower castes. In the early 1990s as the lower castes (including a few Dalits) became upwardly mobile, they tried to hire the services of Brahmin priests for domestic/private rituals. These services from Brahmin priests had been forbidden to them earlier because of their "polluted" caste status. Previously Brahmin priests would not deign to enter their homes. But Dalits in reserved public sector jobs earned middle-class salaries – they not only started frequenting upper-caste public temples (which they had been prohibited from entering in earlier decades – because of their caste "pollution") but also began hiring Brahmin priests to perform life-cycle rites for them within their middle-class homes. Participation in these Brahminic rituals *signifies higher social status* and was therefore eagerly sought by upwardly mobile Dalits who could afford these new avenues of "status-production". But it was not just better-off Dalits, *all* those Hindus who could afford it started spending a lot more money on Brahminic/high status Hindu rituals after 1991. Sponsoring/attending Brahminic rituals, in both the public and private spheres, became a new means of status production for all upwardly mobile Hindus.

Thus the BJP's "invitation" to become part of an "egalitarian" wider Hindu "community", fictive though this is, is welcomed by upwardly-mobile Dalits and non-Dalits *because it responds to their rising cultural/political aspirations*. Even in Communist Kerala the BJP has succeeded in establishing a growing political foothold by riding on the back of the grass-roots achievements of its twin, the RSS⁶⁰. The RSS entered Kerala years ago and its numerous dedicated

⁵⁹ As already noted, by 2019 the percentage of the unemployed rose to the highest it had been in 40 years.

⁶⁰ As already noted, the RSS *is not a political party* but a paramilitary voluntary organization that is intimately connected to the BJP: the BJP party developed out of the

cadre have quietly engaged in grass-roots programs, building rural kindergartens and schools, all of them propagating its “Hindutva”/Hindu-nationalist ideology. It has also been busy facilitating popular participation in the performance of community Hindu rituals. Upwardly-mobile lower class/lower-caste Hindus – eg. the Ezhavas – have responded with particular enthusiasm. This has significantly raised the electoral chances of the BJP because Ezhavas constitute a large percentage of Kerala’s population (JISHNU 2016).

This is partly why “Hindutva” has been so successful with the upwardly-mobile lower classes/castes – not because they are becoming more religious, but rather because they are upwardly-mobile and desperately want the higher social status, which their participation in public and private⁶¹ Brahminic rituals confers. Orthodox rituals, performed by Brahmin priests, have therefore become “big business” in India’s liberalized economy. Prior to 1991, very many Brahmin priests were severely under-employed and therefore quite poor. With economic liberalization the demand for their services has grown astronomically, as Hindu ritualism became a major site for conspicuous consumption.

By the early 1990s ordinary Brahmin priests had become so impoverished that they were quite ready to relax earlier religious prohibitions, particularly because discretion was maintained on both sides: better-off Dalit families paid them their fees and discreetly did not reveal their caste identity. As they were well-dressed and urbane these Dalits could very easily “pass” as non-Dalits when they wished to, and the Brahmin priests were more than happy to receive their payments. Prior to 1991 no well-educated Brahmin men from middle-class families ever became priests, they all entered professional careers. Only the very poorest, least educated Brahmin men continued to work as priests, living in very straitened circumstances. They and their families were looked down on by better-off Brahmins because of their poverty, and it was well-known that they found it very difficult to find Brahmin brides – no young Brahmin woman wanted to marry an impecunious priest. This impelled

RSS, as its political wing. Thus RSS leaders wield enormous influence within the BJP party even today. The RSS does not hide its anti-Muslim, Hindu-supremacist ideology – but from time to time the BJP has to moderate its own identical ideology, because it is in the political limelight.

⁶¹ “Private” rituals are performed by a Brahmin priest who is paid by the client/customer to perform them, either within the home or within a public space like a temple. Payment by a client is what defines the ritual as “private”.

Brahmin priests to readily accept new customers – and they certainly did not wish to inquire into the caste antecedents of their clients.

Thus neoliberalization and the upward mobility of the lower classes have legitimated a radical widening of access to the services of Brahmin priests. Given that these subaltern groups primarily seek higher social status, *self-respect and a more equal place* in Indian society it is ironic that it is in the sphere of hierarchic Brahminic ritual that they have found the means to legitimize and confirm their new, higher social status.

Today huge numbers of women from these upwardly-mobile lower classes/castes travel across India together on jolly pilgrimages to major Brahminic temples. Women were never allowed to travel like this before – nor did Dalits have the financial means to go visiting India's Hindu cathedrals – the great temples. These cheerful women are inspired in equal measure by the new neoliberal consumerism and their new religiosity. Their support for the BJP's "Hindutva" is either tepid or non-existent, but their participation in Brahminic rituals and Brahminic temple-going is enthusiastic and intense, because these rituals and this temple-going confirm *their own new sense of self* and their new social status. Thus their new religious activities are just as much a performance of *social distinction* – these women are marking their entry into India's middle classes. In a society where religion has always had a strongly ritualist, materialist and this-worldly focus, it is no surprise that the new *social* distinctions and cleavages are expressing themselves in a *religious* idiom.

This neoliberal form of Hinduism preceded the recent political rise of the BJP. It helps to explain the widespread acceptance of neoliberal, consumerist values among subaltern Hindus, as well as the ready welcome given to the BJP's "Hindutva"/Hindu-ness ideology when it did appear. Further, the rapid efflorescence of this neoliberal Hinduism and the cheerful enthusiasms of its ebullient, upwardly-mobile lower-caste base are hardly surprising: they very closely mirror the huge global success of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism, of course, is a neoliberal form of Christianity and it too draws its membership from an ardent upwardly-mobile lower-class base.

4.4. The BJP's Free Market Theology

Modi and the BJP are faced by a strategic problem: they have two radically different constituencies to win over – and the interests of these two constituencies are diametrically opposed. Their Hindu-nationalism has to convince both the wealthy upper-castes and the impoverished lower castes/Dalits. The BJP have therefore tried to totally obscure class interests and solely focus on the identitarian dimension of Hindu nationalism. It has tried to beguile Dalit/lower-caste voters while also blandishing its existing upper-caste constituencies.

But the Modi government's deepest loyalty is to the protection of the interests of India's plutocratic oligarchs. Neoliberal globalization and the financialization of international capital have created unimaginable wealth for these oligarchs. Suddenly catapulted into millionairehood, and even billionairehood, they have no desire to share their windfalls with the rest of the population. India's richest 1% hold more than four times the wealth held by the bottom 70% of the country's 1.4 billion population (OXFAM 2020; SCROLL.IN 2020a).

That is why India's rising GDP – so loudly trumpeted by the Modi government – has been accompanied by steadily increasing inequality. But for India's fat cats to grow fatter in peace, it is essential that its classes of labour remain divided, deeply vulnerable and unable to bargain with their employers. Thus the BJP's call for "Hindu unity" to resist an unspecified Muslim threat, accomplishes (at least) two goals simultaneously: (i) it marginalizes and "others" Muslims and encourages Hindu chauvinism, and (ii) it tries to paper over the vast economic, cultural and political divide that exists between the poor lower castes and the rich upper castes, in order to distract attention from the very real economic distress experienced by the working poor⁶². The Modi government's deliberate scapegoating of Muslims as the imputed "source" of the Covid pandemic has been one such major "distraction" (see below).

4.5. The Extension of the Ruling Class Hegemonic Project: From Racist-Casteism To Racist-Casteist, Anti-Muslim Hindu Nationalism

⁶² As elsewhere in the world, the pandemic lockdowns *have hurt the incomes of the poorest far more* than they have hurt the middle-classes. The rich have either been unaffected or have profited very significantly from them.

The irresistible, though entirely mendacious, promise the BJP offers Dalits is that of being included as equals in Hindu society by the upper-castes. However, hegemonic racist-casteism has been increasingly challenged by educated, upwardly mobile Dalits over the last fifty years *and perhaps particularly in this last decade*. When challenged and investigated, racism-casteism reveals itself as “mere” political ideology, a political deception practised on vulnerable subalterns. It thereby loses its mystique and its power to command the acquiescence of Dalits/lower castes.

India’s upper-caste upper-classes are aware of the profound socio-political ferment and transformation that is going on among the lower-caste working classes. It is to rescue themselves and their upper-caste/upper-class wealth and interests, that they have been trying to institute Hindutva – a “unified, pan-Hindu” identity – as India’s new hegemonic ideology. *The notion of an egalitarian Brahminical Hinduism is an absurd oxymoron* and yet this BJP hegemonic project has enjoyed great success, winning them two national elections. Despite its patent absurdity, the notion of an egalitarian, and yet upper-caste led, Hindu national community has proved a winning formula. It is an idea that many Indians, particularly the upwardly-mobile lower-classes seem happy to identify with. Hindutva/Hindu-ness ideology is as much directed towards *winning over Dalits* as it is directed against Muslims, because Dalits and Muslims *are equally dangerous* to the RSS-BJP’s dream of an upper-caste-dominated Hindu nation.

4.6. The Modi Government’s Scapegoating of Tablighi Jama’at Muslims During the Pandemic

Very early in the Covid pandemic BJP-directed propaganda at many levels – in the mainstream media, which is now largely subservient to the BJP, as well as on social media – started identifying Muslims as the “source” of the virus in India and claiming that, having brought the virus into the country, Muslims were very deliberately trying to spread it, in order to infect as many Hindus as possible (THE GUARDIAN 2020b).

These wicked insinuations came about in the following manner: when Prime Minister Modi on 24 March 2020 suddenly declared the lockdown *with only four hours’ notice*, this took the nation completely by surprise. No time was given to people to prepare for the lockdown. It therefore caught many large organizations by surprise. Unaware of the extreme seriousness of the Covid

virus, Hindu and Muslim organizations were still conducting large-scale religious gatherings, in the latter half of March, involving thousands of their followers. One such international Muslim organization, headquartered in Delhi, was the Tablighi Jama'at, which is devoted to the revival of devotion and piety among Sunni Muslims. Their annual gathering of thousands included, as usual, many participants from abroad. The Tablighi Jama'at is quietist and inward-focused on internal "revival" and the renewal of personal religious fervour.

Caught unawares by the lockdown, the Jama'at was given no time to arrange for its Indian members and foreign visitors to return home. All flights into and out of India were stopped at midnight on 24 March 2020, four hours after the Prime Minister announced the lockdown. The foreign delegates therefore had to remain on the Jama'at's premises in Delhi's Nizamuddin area. Unfortunately a couple of them were infected with the virus and within days hundreds of Jama'at members, both Indian and foreign, being tightly packed together inside the Nizamuddin compound, were infected by the virus. These unfortunate people, instead of receiving care and sympathetic medical assistance, were seen by the BJP government as offering a massive propaganda opportunity: BJP acolytes and trolls immediately announced on social media that Muslims had "brought the virus" into India and were deliberately spreading it around (THE GUARDIAN 2020b).

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Covid virus had first entered India at Thrissur in Kerala at the end of January 2020, through infected medical students from Kerala who had been studying in Wuhan, the epicentre of the Covid virus, in China. When they were evacuated back to Kerala on special flights, they unwittingly brought the virus with them.

But the BJP propaganda machine was not interested in the truth. It spread its calumnies far and wide, so that when Jama'at members returned to their home states they were targeted and vilified by Hindus, particularly in north India, where the BJP's influence is stronger, but also in parts of south India.

The foreign Jama'at visitors, who included women and children, were hounded and many were imprisoned in temporary "detention centres" set up by some states, including (BJP-supporting) Tamil Nadu and also in Maharashtra. They were not allowed to return to their home-countries for many months. Eventually certain courts – especially in Aurangabad, and later in Mumbai – declared that they were shocked by the inhuman treatment of these entirely innocent foreign Muslim visitors, who had been unfortunately caught up in a situation not of their making, and ordered their immediate release

from the detention centres and that they be allowed to return to their home countries. By the end of December 2020 the long and hideous nightmare endured by the Jama'at's foreign delegates and their children appeared to be coming to an end at last.

4.7. The Remarkable Success of the BJP's Political Strategy

The Modi government seems to have been astonishingly successful in convincing subaltern groups, including impoverished Dalits and migrant workers, that they did a good job regarding the Covid virus, or rather, that they did the best job possible in very difficult circumstances. Evidence for this is widespread, not only from the opinion polls which interviewed small numbers of migrant workers soon after they returned home from the cities, but also from much larger surveys carried out by respected research groups, like Lokniti-CSDS (BUSINESS-STANDARD.COM 2020).

These poll and survey results are surely surprising, given the enormous hardships that these workers – especially migrant workers – endured during the lockdown. The BJP government not only gave them no warning of the lockdown but also stopped all modes of transport, though it knew that without any wages these workers would starve and be compelled to travel home.

It is therefore astonishing that both small and large-scale surveys found that: firstly, the BJP government, and especially Prime Minister Modi personally, were widely viewed as having done a great job in tackling the virus. Secondly, BJP fake news on social media, which claimed that the Tablighi Jama'at was responsible for spreading the virus in India, was apparently extremely successful in convincing many poor rural Hindus of its fabrications. Thirdly, respondents repeated the BJP propaganda that the government could not do more to help them, because it had already done its very best. These rural respondents asked how the BJP could be blamed for the spread of the virus, when “everyone knew” that it was Muslims who were behind this. BJP propaganda scored a very notable triumph here in this colossal indoctrination of north India's rural subalterns (LIVEMINT.COM 2020; THEWIRE.IN 2020r, 2020s).

4.8. Why is the BJP's propaganda so successful?

There are several reasons why the Modi government has been so successful in indoctrinating⁶³ the lower-income/lower caste working classes. Let us consider them.

4.8.1. The BJP dominates both social media and mainstream media today

A major reason for the BJP's success in persuading the public – especially the poor, less educated public – to believe its lies is its de facto control of India's social media. «Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth» is a claim attributed to Goebbels (BBC 2016). Trump's remarkable success in the recent US election showed the truth of this: his supporters willingly believed his lies. Similarly the lies told about Brexit in the UK were repeated *ad nauseam* and were believed by many less educated people to be the truth. Modi has recognized his close affinity with Donald Trump and Boris Johnson: he invited Trump to India in February 2020 and invited Johnson to be his chief guest at the Republic Day parade on 26 January 2021. Authoritarians of a feather flock together.

The BJP realized the huge importance of controlling the new medium of digital social media far earlier than any other political party. It invested seriously in expert IT teams and in connecting thousands of volunteer-trolls with digital social media. This has paid rich dividends: today the BJP totally dominates Indian social media through its extensive workforce of paid IT professionals as well as its unpaid acolytes and its armies of trolls. The BJP's commanding digital presence on Indian social media is quite literally a physical manifestation of its ideological hegemony. Further, the mainstream media very largely toes the BJP line today: this is considered expedient and politic, given the tremendous popularity of the Modi government, particularly in north India (BUSINESS-STANDARD.COM 2020).

4.8.2. The success of the BJP's propaganda of "blaming" the Muslims'

The Modi government has demonstrated an acute understanding of the power of a hegemonic ideology and great skill in using such ideology. Its hold on how ordinary Hindus think and express themselves on social media

⁶³ Indoctrination is "the process of inculcating a person with ideas and attitudes". It therefore has a very strong pedagogic element.

reinforces, multiplies and perpetuates its control of India's political narrative. Thus it is hardly surprising that many subaltern groups have been indoctrinated. This has been particularly true in north India, but sadly it is increasingly true in south India as well: the BJP already rules Karnataka state and is strengthening its foothold in Communist Kerala and even in Periyar's Dravidian-land (Tamil Nadu).

Further, as Ghosh points out, the Covid disaster allowed Modi to play "the strong man" to the hilt, because in a crisis people feel anxious and are looking for someone to take "strong action" and "protect them". This expressed itself in the uncritical and warm appreciation received by Mr Modi, despite his government's extremely ineffectual response to the plight of millions of unemployed workers during the pandemic lockdown and thereafter (GHOSH 2020a).

Of particular interest to this Gramscian analysis of the politics of this pandemic year is the hegemonic hold gained by the BJP's propaganda blaming Muslims for the spread of the Covid virus. This anti-Muslim propaganda convinced many poor migrant workers, including Dalits, who were therefore very ready to let the Modi government off the hook, displaying an unquestioning and ready willingness to trust and support Mr Modi (BUSINESS-STANDARD.COM 2020; LIVEMINT.COM 2020).

Yet this willingness on the part of many migrant workers to believe that the Modi government "was helpless" and "could not do more to help them" and "had done the very best it could" is remarkable – they were making excuses for the government, even though they themselves had received virtually no help at all during their traumatic journeys home⁶⁴ (THEWIRE.IN 2020r, 2020s).

From a Gramscian perspective these are fascinating examples of the power of a very successful hegemonic ideology and of Mr Modi's apparently irresistible demagogic powers in explaining away his government's mismanagement of the lockdown and its extraordinarily callous miserliness and inaction in relation to migrant workers. Further, the Modi government scored a notable triumph in shamelessly moving the blame for India's Covid misery from its own shoulders to those of the innocent Tablighi Jama'at Muslims, who were so cleverly scapegoated.

But for progressive Left observers, who hope for positive change in India in order to reverse the current neoliberal policies and provide better lives and

⁶⁴ In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa primarily.

genuine socio-political empowerment to the still-impoverished, still-vulnerable classes of labour, these polls and surveys are deeply disheartening. They appear to testify to the overwhelming success of BJP propaganda, to the Modi government's very strong control of the political narrative on social media and to its hegemonic hold over the minds of very many Indians, both poor and rich, both low-caste and high-caste. The outlook for change in Indian politics, towards a more tolerant, inclusive, socialist and secular political dispensation, is, at this time, gloomy indeed.

4.9. The Projects and Processes of BJP Hegemony⁶⁵

4.9.1. Politics and Religion in the Time of Hindutva

What is happening in India today connects not just with the massive and accelerated neoliberal deregulation of all parts of the economy, but with a fundamental tectonic shift in the plates that make up the ground that Indian society stands on: a deeply patriarchal and extremely coercive caste society that is many centuries old is slowly but steadily being shaken, and will be up-ended, through the arduous efforts of India's subalterns and their grass-roots leaders. Their struggle has gone on for at least two centuries, but it received very significant encouragement from local political leaders in the decades preceding independence and also through the (vulnerable) legal structures that underpinned the new state's democratic constitution in 1950.

Power in India has been caste-based for so long that the ruling classes, who are the aristocratic castes, cannot imagine a world without hierarchized caste identity. That is why the most powerfully ideological political movement of the last 30 years, the RSS-BJP Hindu-nationalist movement, has been an expression of the caste elites' «desperate effort to tighten their grip» (FROSINI 2013, p. 179) on the subaltern majority – the “lower castes” – who until only four or five decades ago still showed a public obedience and deference towards the “upper castes”. The mind-set of India's ruling elites is profoundly reactionary, and yet they have very profitably and successfully integrated themselves, their families and their wider caste/kin groups into the highest echelons of the globalized neoliberal order (THE GUARDIAN 2020a). At once reactionary and modern, their ethos has been summed up by BANNERJI as embodying a «reactionary modernity» (2006).

⁶⁵ The phrase is from HART 2019, p. 321.

But these spoilt and self-entitled elites are faced with the mass of India's subalterns who, like waking giants, have, in the last three to four decades, been vigorously seeking to free themselves from the gyves and chains that were set on them in earlier times. Structural changes in agriculture over the last half-century have transformed rural landscapes, throwing landless labourers into mass unemployment and impoverishing the poorest tenants. Their mass migrations to the cities in search of work have increased urban poverty but they have also brought the ex-rurals into more liberal social milieus: in the cities Dalits can much more easily pass as caste-Hindus: if they merely dress well they are assumed to be better-off and, therefore, *non-Dalit*. This connection between class and caste remains fundamental in India, even as both are changing: the very fact that those around them assume that they are not Dalits makes it easier for upwardly-mobile Dalits to "shed" a highly denigrated identity. *Caste is race* in India because *caste is felt as race*. Passing as non-Dalits was impossible in the village where everyone knew what castes others were from and treated them accordingly: respect for the higher castes and contempt for the Dalits. Thus seismic changes are under way in urbanized subaltern attitudes, but, like those very tectonic plates, these socio-psychological changes are usually hidden under the veneer of the conventional interactions of everyday life.

But if young Dalits, young Adivasis and young Muslims are throwing off their chains and publicly declaring that they want their fair share of life in India, come what may, this means that there will be less of the pie for the fat cats who have monopolized the country's resources hitherto. This the elites are ready to resist at all costs (and the costs are rarely to them) – which is why the very public marriage between India's ruling castes/classes and the RSS-BJP's reactionary politics is not just inevitable, but, in BANNERJI's estimate, has been over a century in the making (2006).

FROSINI's important discussion (2013, p. 178) of Gramsci on the politicization of religion and how this allows the State to *assimilate* civil society far more closely, is highly relevant to the present conjuncture in India:

«[A]lthough for Gramsci, like Marx, bourgeois society is a "permanent revolution", Gramsci does not think that the abolition of feudal castes is followed by the "profanation" of social relations, but rather by their *different ideological loading*. For this reason, Gramsci connects each disintegration of old social relationships to the formation of new ones and to the rearrangement of the relationship between religion, common sense and philosophy. The end of a society organized according to castes does not make society's functioning any simpler, but makes it dependent on a politics

that *constantly intervenes on common sense*. This is shown by the way Gramsci reads the “Jacobin initiative of instituting the cult of the ‘supreme Being’”. Namely: not as the (impossible) attempt of replacing the real unity of society with the delirium of an imaginary unity, but, on the contrary, as “an attempt to create an identity between state and civil society, to unify in a dictatorial manner the constitutive elements of the State organically and more broadly (the state, in the rigorous sense, and civil society) in a desperate effort to tighten their grip on the life of the people and the nation as a whole” (Q6§87; PN3, p. 74–5; SPN, p. 18)» (FROSINI 2013, p. 178).

The «rearrangement of the relationship between religion, common sense [= culture] and philosophy» is exactly what the BJP are, with considerable success, achieving in India today. And «a politics that *constantly intervenes on common sense* [culture]» is precisely what AHMAD (1993) and BANNERJI (2006) identify as the central BJP strategy. As they both point out, the BJP accomplishes this vital and ongoing cultural intervention through the multi-headed RSS-Sangh Parivar/“family” of organizations which seek to organize, influence and shape, at the intimate level of family and community, the very thinking and mores of ordinary Hindus. As Gramsci indicates, a state that seeks oligarchic/autocratic power, must «attempt to create an identity between state and civil society». This is essential because civil society is the particular terrain on which *resistance* to dominant class rule is built. By occupying most of the space of civil society the state puts the opposition/dissenters at a huge disadvantage. Gramsci uses the term «dictatorial» here, but JAFFRELOT (2021) prefers to use the Weberian term «sultanism» to describe Modi’s style of government. Gramsci uses a phrase that is very significant at this Indian moment; he says the ruling group need to unify the state and civil society because they are engaged «in a desperate effort *to tighten their grip* on the life of the people and the nation as a whole». «To tighten their grip» is a frighteningly apt phrase: the ruling class are tightening their grip on the throat of subaltern India. This strangulation of people’s democratic rights was very publicly performed in Kashmir in August 2019, but it had already been started, in a half-hidden manner, in Assam (when the state was under BJP rule) with the construction of “detention centres” for “illegal” Muslim residents. Now the BJP-RSS are extending their attempt to stifle and suppress democratic rights across the entire country, arresting activists on the slightest pretext, on the charge of “sedition” which allows them to be thrown into jail with no right to bail or trial. That is why «dictatorial» – Gramsci’s term – is so apposite to today’s government.

4.9.2. *The Making of Hindutva India*

Like Aijaz Ahmad, Himani Bannerji too, writing several years ago, accurately diagnosed the pathology and the reactionary ideology of the Hindutva party, which, she predicted in 2006, was likely to advance to hegemonic victory at the national level:

«The Sangh Parivar, the composite body or family of the Hindu right, started with the intention of becoming hegemonic by elaborating the cultural and then the political arms of their organization. *The centrality of religion for this right-wing political project is explained by Gramsci as the source for both ideology and legitimation found ready to hand as common sense.* But equally, as he would agree, it would be wrong to see this role of religion as only an “instrument”, because it is through the “reduction” of religion, in and through it, that Hindu ethnic cultural nationalism could find the ground or social and moral content for *a totalizing politics*»⁶⁶.

As a historian Bannerji is keenly aware of the political precedents that the BJP-RSS follow and draws our attention to the fact that they pursue a well-trodden route:

«But of course, it is not the first time in history that democratic discourse and practices have been employed to achieve anti-democracy. So let us begin by noting the way in which the BJP deploys democratic discourse and electoral apparatuses to this end. *The manipulations of classical democratic notions of “majority” and “minority” are worth scrutiny.* In this the BJP is not unique or innovative, but carries to a logical conclusion practices and meanings put in place by its colonial and postcolonial predecessors in state power, who *identified ethnicity with political agency* in both overt and covert fashion. However, *the thoroughness is what is new, as well as the shifting of the notions of political majority and minority to an ethnic definition and identifying the notion of community as a religious community*»⁶⁷.

From this Bannerji draws a conclusion that, like Ahmad’s insights, is both a prescient warning and nothing less than terrifying in its unmistakable echoes of the Third Reich:

«*Ethnicized/religious identities become the ground for political subjectivities and agencies.* As such, “majority” begins to mean Hindus (85%) and “minority” Muslims (12%), with

⁶⁶ BANNERJI 2006, p. 371; emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 375; emphasis added.

3% “Others” who are marginal minorities – and it needs to be noted that the 85% includes many groups who do not wish to be identified as Hindus (see Ilaiah, 1998). This ethnic categorization of the country’s population, when translated into a political equation, demonstrates *a gradation in citizenship by establishing religious/ethnic terms of claims on the resources of the nation*. In so far as “others”, or non-Hindus who are also non-Muslims, are numerically fewer, *the substantial minority, i.e. the Muslims, are the direct antithesis of the powerful Hindu majority. Hindus, therefore, would become the natural constituents and authentic citizens of the nation state*⁶⁸.

It is extraordinary that Bannerji wrote this in 2006, because, of course, this is exactly what came to pass in 2019. Through the clever ploy of the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and the NRC ([all-India] National Register of Citizens) laws that they passed in 2019, in a Parliament where, through their absolute majority, the BJP were able *to pass any law they wished*, they made it very clear that they intend to demote Indian Muslims – all 200 million⁶⁹ of them – to a miserable second-class citizenship in their own country.

BANNERJI warned of «the Indian media’s growing overall Hinduization and increasing religious identity politics» (2006, p. 385). And she described the BJP’s political strategy of universal «Hinduization» as «a *reactionary modernity* (Herf, 1986) *claiming “tradition” for self-affirmation [that] sought to hide from view the workings of a vicious neoliberal and fascist political economy*» (2006, p. 385; emphasis added). This neoliberal political economy became even more vicious and fascist in India’s pandemic year, as I hope I have made clear.

BANNERJI rightly emphasizes the enormous importance of the *religio-cultural* activities of the RSS and its “family” (*Sangh Parivar*) of organizations to the BJP’s continuing (and astonishing) electoral success. She therefore concludes her illuminating analysis of Hindutva politics with a very grave warning to Left progressives in India: «*Those who consider cultural politics as unimportant or secondary to what they deem “real” politics do not have the capacity to either understand or resist this fascist hegemony*. Nor do those liberals who separate the social from the cultural or the political ... *Its [the Sangh Parivar’s] victory over the last decades has been to ethnicize the Indian polity and to religiocize the conception of community and citizenship*» (2006, p. 386; emphasis added).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

⁶⁹ This is an estimated projection for 2021, based on the number of Muslims at the last Census: in 2011 they were 172 million of India’s total population of 1.2 billion: <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>.

Stuart Hall gave exactly the same warning to Left activists in the UK in 1988. His insightful comments on Thatcherism in Britain at that time are extraordinarily apposite to India's political-economic conjuncture today in 2020-2021:

«Thatcherism's search for "the enemies within"; its operations across the different lines of division and identification in social life; its construction of the respectable, patriarchal, entrepreneurial subject with "his" orthodox tastes, inclinations, preferences, opinions and prejudices as the stable subjective bedrock and guarantee of its purchase on our subjective worlds; its rooting of itself inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of "national identity"; and its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation – *these are as central to Thatcherism's hegemonic project as the privatization programme or the assault on local democracy*» (HALL 1988, p. 8; emphasis added)⁷⁰.

Virtually every item on Hall's inventory figures prominently in the Modi government's – or Modiism's – political project, which, following Hall, we can term *Modiism's hegemonic project*: (1) Modiism's *search for "the enemies within"*, which has identified the entire Indian Muslim population, as well as all those Dalits and Adivasis who are politically active at the grassroots, and the activists who work with them, as belonging to this category; (2) Modiism's *«particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of "national identity"»* which excludes and implicitly "outcastes" all Indian Muslims as well as all the lower Hindu castes and, implicitly, all Adivasis; (3) *«its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation»*: those expelled explicitly are, of course, Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis – but all Christians and other non-Hindus are also implicitly expelled, as well as the 96% of the nation's workers employed in the hugely exploitative unorganized sector. At the end of the day, membership of Modi's "nation" turns out to be very limited, highly privileged and does not extend much beyond the contours of the ruling class. All these political/ideological activities are indeed "as central" to Modi's hegemonic project as his deregulation and privatization program and his assault on India's constitutional democracy.

Hall ends by emphasizing, like BANNERJI (2006), the crucial importance of *identity politics and cultural ideology*:

⁷⁰ Quoted in SOTIRIS 2019, p. 159.

«The left cannot hope to contest the ground of Thatcherism without attending to these cultural questions, without conducting a “politics” of the subjective moment, of identity, and without a conception of the subjects of its project, those who it is making socialism *for* and *with*» (HALL 1988, p. 8)⁷¹.

Hall’s observations are urgently relevant to India – unless India’s Left activists and Opposition parties make the effort to *also* engage with *the subjectivities and cultural assumptions* of those whom they are trying to win over to a tolerant, humane and socialist hegemonic project, they are unlikely to succeed. This is why Latha Jishnu’s observations on Kerala politics (2016) are so valuable. In May 2016, Jishnu noted that though the BJP «is unlikely to make much political headway in the near future *[it] is finding comfort in the spread of Hindutva across the states*» (JISHNU 2016; emphasis added).

Significantly, Hindutva was spreading in Kerala not due to the BJP party, but due to the energetic efforts of its parent-organization, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), and its vast network of affiliated Hindu-nationalist organizations, namely the Sangh Parivar (“Association-Family”) and their dedicated grassroots cadre. Over the last decades they have set up schools and local committees across Kerala, to organize Hindu festivals, including «the Hindu Aikya Vedi or Hindu Unity Organisation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti (KSS or Temple Protection Committee), Balasadanams ([kindergartens] for very young children) and Ekal Vidyalayas [schools]» (JISHNU 2016). She adds, «*By embedding itself in the local community over the decades, the RSS has prepared the ground for taking the [Communist] state back to a time when religiosity was paramount. It is an alarming regression, with rituals and obscurantist views threatening to overwrite the history of its social reforms*» (*ibid.*; emphasis added). Kerala’s Adivasis and lower castes «have been persuaded [by the RSS cadre] that the new [religious] structures and regular paid puja conducted by Brahmin priests *are indicative of upward mobility*» (*ibid.*; emphasis added). This is an extremely important insight: the RSS-BJP are facilitating the *integration* of upwardly mobile lower-caste/OBC sections into the upper-caste-style religiosity of Hindutva/Hindu nationalism – this provides the upwardly mobile OBCs, lower caste Hindus and Adivasis with the new *social status* and the socio-religious *legitimation* that they so eagerly seek. But this apparently emancipatory process is *simultaneously* an “alarming regression” because it also re-asserts reactionary casteist values and the preeminence of Brahminical Hindu culture.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Structural economic changes resulting in the upward mobility of large numbers of OBCs (after the Mandal Commission⁷² affirmative action/reservation reforms) are key to the huge growth in the numbers of new OBC voters supporting the BJP, which gave Modi more than 30% of the national vote (and an absolute majority in Parliament) in the 2019 national elections (JAFFRELOT 2021)⁷³. Significantly, large sections of Dalits/lower castes in the north Indian states also voted for Modi in the 2019 elections contributing to his landslide victory (*ibid.*).

Subaltern upward mobility naturally stimulates an urgent desire for higher social status and for strong legitimation for this new status. This is why Stuart Hall's insights are so relevant to the Indian context. As he noted, any political party that wishes to win the allegiance of these large, upwardly mobile subaltern groups, both OBC and Dalit, has to understand *who* they are, *how* they perceive their changing identities and *what* their aspirations are – and this is what the BJP and RSS appear to be doing very successfully in Kerala today. The BJP has not won Kerala yet, but, according to JISHNU (2016), the RSS is clearly winning on the cultural-religious front in Kerala's civil society, and this is surely half the battle.

Currently, in February 2021, the BJP is using the same playbook in West Bengal, where it is hoping to win the April 2021 state elections and end the 10 years rule of Mamata Banerjee and her TMC (Trinamool Congress) party. Political analysts have noted that Mamata Banerjee will be faced by a hydra-headed behemoth: «The TMC's fight is not just against the BJP *but the entire Sangh Parivar with more than thirty organisations in its fold.... The Sangh Parivar [Association Family] has extended its multiple tentacles into every facet of socioeconomic activities in the districts*, just the way the Left Front had party members in all kinds of local groupings—from panchayats to local youth clubs to committees for public religious festivities, subordinating the social to the political» (THEWIRE.IN 2020v; emphasis added).

I would rephrase this last comment as “*infusing the social with the political*” or, in other words, *turning cultural politics into political capital*. Another political

⁷² The Mandal Commission submitted its report in December 1980. Its recommendations, which particularly benefited OBCs, were implemented by the V. P. Singh government only ten years later, in August 1990, amidst huge protests by the upper castes.

⁷³ See the interesting “The Wire” interview in February 2021 of Christophe Jaffrelot on why the BJP and Modi are so extraordinarily popular – and on the political problems that Modi's popularity may create for the BJP in the future (JAFFRELOT 2021).

observer comments «It is foolish and ignorant to miss out *the tremendous amount of work that the RSS has done* [on behalf of the BJP] *in mobilising the people in all these frontier districts* [of West Bengal]» (THEWIRE.IN 2019d; emphasis added). It is very clear that the vast army of RSS/Sangh Parivar cadre working at the grassroots is absolutely critical to eventual BJP political victories, because the BJP's battles are first won through the RSS/Sangh Parivar cadre attending to the “felt needs” of poor, lower-caste communities and politically “translating” and “guiding” their aspirations into a specifically Hindu-nationalist expression. Thus the RSS manages to infuse its Hindu chauvinism into all its cultural/religious evangelizing.

While it is important for any party building a hegemonic project to respond to the cultural-religious aspirations of its voters, subalterns also have urgent economic needs in terms of jobs and education. Responding to these economic demands, young Tejasvi Yadav⁷⁴ and his RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal) party did remarkably well against the BJP in the recent Bihar elections in November 2020. Tejasvi lost and the BJP-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) coalition won the election: predictably, the BJP “tried to raise [anti-Muslim] divisive issues, such as Kashmir, CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and the Ram Mandir [Temple] during its campaign” (THEWIRE.IN 2020v). But Tejasvi Yadav refused to take the BJP bait and instead remained solidly focused on a very different political agenda: «the twin issues of education and jobs» (*ibid.*).

Left political commentators were delighted and enthused by this, because it is so unusual for a political leader to *not* focus on religious/caste/identitarian issues and to focus on economic issues instead. THEWIRE.IN (2020v) very hopefully declared that Yadav might have «succeeded in setting the agenda *not only for this election but possibly also for post-pandemic politics in the country*. The fact that the BJP was forced to better Yadav's pledge of one million government jobs for the state's youth ... signifies the growing appeal of a Centre-Left political and economic discourse» (*ibid.*; emphasis added). But this was the sole spark of hope that gleamed in an otherwise unrelentingly bleak political landscape where Modi's domination seemed close to total. West Bengal looks likely to fall to the BJP in the forthcoming state elections in April 2021 – and thereafter the unthinkable might indeed happen in Tamil Nadu's state elections in May 2021 and later on even in Kerala.

⁷⁴ He is the son of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the popular long-time leader of the RJD, now held in jail and denied bail by the BJP.

At present the Opposition political parties (Congress, et al.) are at sea and floundering dangerously. Compared to these large political parties, it is obviously very much more difficult, if not impossible, for subalterns to build their subaltern hegemonic initiatives (SOTIRIS 2019). Subaltern hegemonic initiatives, where they do exist, are being very deliberately sabotaged and frustrated in a variety of ways by the Modi government, *particularly through the jailing of massive numbers of subaltern activists*, as in Jharkhand, where thousands of Adivasi land-rights activists have been jailed without bail for months and years (SWAMY 2018; INDIAN CURRENTS 2020), and as Bhima-Koregaon in January 2018, when many Dalit activists, who were the injured victims of upper-caste Maratha attacks, found themselves, in an Orwellian reversal of reality, charged with attacking the Marathas, and were jailed by the police on these false charges (THEWIRE.IN 2019b)⁷⁵.

In this discussion of political events in the pandemic year of 2020, I have tried to highlight the “projects and processes of hegemony” which have manifested themselves in the guise of an upper-caste-led Hindu nationalism, an aggressive neoliberalism and a racist/casteist Hindu supremacism. I have also tried to show, following Stuart Hall, Himani Bannerji and Gillian Hart, how casteism/racism and religion are inseparably and actively constitutive of both India’s class processes and Hindu nationalism.

Though Modiism’s hegemonic project of Hindu nationalism has been surprisingly successful in obscuring class divisions and economic problems, it will perhaps not be quite so successful in the future, as unemployment continues to rise and socio-economic inequalities increase. “Hindu unity” might begin to fray in the face of the ever-increasing exploitation of the Hindutva-friendly OBC working/labouring classes. For the present, however, Modi and his government seem unassailable. They are at the zenith of their triumph and look remarkably secure in their dominance of Indian politics.

I phoned a good friend yesterday. She has spent her entire life working for the benefit of the poor. She told me that she had met Father Stan some thirty years ago. His humility made an indelible impression on her. She said that she is so disturbed by what is happening in our country today that she often can’t

⁷⁵ I have argued throughout this essay that there are extremely close parallels between the experiences of Indian Dalits and those of African Americans in the U.S. This is another striking similarity – African American activists who are *the victims* of white supremacist attacks have often found themselves charged, by the (white) police, with being *the attackers* (THE GUARDIAN 2021).

sleep at night. 83-year-old Father Stan's tribulations in jail upset her profoundly: «The cruelty with which they are treating him! Such a kind, good man...».

They say the darkest hour is before the dawn. But it looks like it's going to be a long night. A very long night.

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