

## India: A Year of Pandemic, Deadlock, Disaster and Dissent

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*The lockdown that has been imposed almost a year back in the wake of COVID-19 has introduced several changes in almost every part of the world. The virus has not only resulted in damages resulting in high mortality and morbidity, but it has also made adverse qualitative changes in the lives of billions while its socio-political repercussions have devastated economies in the Global South. The pandemic has resulted in not only widening the wealth inequalities but it has also exposed the socio-economic vulnerabilities and the way the social protection system has crumbled depriving billions of their right to dignified life. The neoliberal policies being pushed by the governments over the decades has resulted in deepening of crisis that expands during the pandemic. Also, the lockdown imposed by the state led to chain of events that resulted in the loss of hard-gained rights and further marginalized those on margins. Moreover, the records of sufferings of those vulnerable are being erased from the public memory and are being stifled by the compulsory distortion of reality.*

However, those on the margins continued to resist against the authoritarian regimes. For instance, the ill-planned lockdown in India was imposed amidst the protests when the millions of citizens have been dissenting against the Citizenship Amendment Act. As soon as the lockdown is imposed with merely four hours of warning, millions of migrant workers in cities defied the plea of the Prime Minister and walked thousands of miles to reach their homes. A year later, the resistance took a different hue when thousands of farmers began protesting against the farm laws introduced by the government. Also, the unwarranted policies of intense privatization resulted in increasing unemployment pushed by the state compelled millions of workers and students to join the protest. Currently, the situation is that the state, instead of resolving the crisis caused due to the pandemic, seems to have initiated a war against its own citizens. Those in power are lamenting that ‘[too much democracy](#)’ is obstructing the tough reforms while ignoring the plight of the common citizens.

The year of the pandemic, therefore, is about the onslaught of repression by the state whereby the state enacted the anti-people laws and policies behind the garb of lockdown, that have deeply scarred the society, yet on the other side, it has also seen the outrage and

the resistance from those who have been marginalized by the autocratic regime. Though the vaccination may heal the impact in terms of morbidity and mortality caused due to the virus, however, achieving justice, political, economic and social, or the democratic ideals as enshrined in the Constitution, may take longer in the society ridden with the inequalities and oppressions at various levels and in different forms. Presently, the situation is that more the state is muzzling the dissent abusing its repressive power, more resolutely are dissenting the protestors. It may therefore be said that the struggle against oppressive policies and laws may continue in the post-COVID world for an idea to forge a better more just world.

### **The Pre-Lockdown Stage**

In December 2019, when the Chinese authorities identified the human case of coronavirus, its neighbor India was witnessing a huge protest against the citizenship laws where the protestors all over the country demanded to scrap the laws claiming that these are discriminatory. ([Nigam, 2020 a](#)) Started as a spontaneous gathering at Shaheen Bagh resisting against the police violence and against the citizenship laws, it emerged into a successful non-violent movement to protect the 'idea of India'. Gradually, many [Shaheen Baghs](#) emerged across the country where millions of men and women resisted against the repressive legal matrix. ([The Indian Express, 2020](#)) The goal of this movement was to protect the constitutional rights where the common people rebelled against the divisive ideology of hate. ([Nigam, 2020 b](#)) The government refused to initiate any dialogue with the protestors. Rather steps were taken by the ruling regime to malign the protestors and to question their integrity. The state portrayed the protestors as enemies of the imagined Hindu *rashtra*. The electricity at the protest site was cut off and the tents set up by the protestors were taken away in the freezing cold. The sites were cleared after 101 days when the lockdown was imposed whereby the protestors vowed to continue their fight for justice. ([Lama, 2021](#)) Later, during the lockdown, many students who participated have been arrested. The [Supreme Court](#) in October 2020 observed that the right to protest in public places should be balanced with the right of the general public to move without hindrance.

### **Accounting human losses during the strict lockdown**

India imposed a strict brutal lockdown on 24 March 2020, without any preparation or consultation from various departments and ministries, when India had less than 600 cases and nine people died of the coronavirus ([Purohit and Parmar, 2021](#)). 1.3 billion population was given only four hours to prepare for the heavy disruption in their lives including restriction on their mobility and complete cessation of economic activities. In order to explain as to why the government imposed the nationwide lockdown on merely four hours notice, it is being explained that this step was taken on the 'recommendation of experts' and after 'taking into account the global experience' to prevent the danger of spread of coronavirus. ([Azam, 2020](#)) The Oxford University tracker that calculated the governments' response to COVID-19 has identified India's response as one of the most stringent in the world. ([India Today, 2020](#)) Other scholars have termed it as a punitive and a draconian lockdown. ([Ray and Subramanian, 2020](#))

However, as soon as the lockdown was announced, millions of poor men, women and children started walking from the cities to their hometowns defying the appeal made by the Prime Minister on the national television. These workers took to roads while fleeing cities and cowering police batons, in brutal heat while battling hunger and fatigue. ([Nigam, 2020 c](#)). Some squeezed themselves in container trucks while others walked. These informal workers are backbone of economy as they construct buildings and flyovers, cook food, serve

in eateries, salons, automobiles, and do other odd jobs to earn meagerly to sustain themselves in the city. However, the state did little to help these desperate citizens. The arrangements for food and the transport was done after much delay and not all those moving could be reached out.

The lockdown, hence, reminded of fear, violence and mass exodus that took place during the Partition of India in 1947 ([Hajari, 2020](#)) During the Partition, sectarian and the communal violence forced millions to cross the political boundary, however, this time, the catastrophic ill-planned lockdown endangered the livelihood of those who are survive on hand-to-mouth existence with no social security provision being made available. The fear of survival and homelessness were the major concerns that compel millions to face hardship. ([Petersen and Chaurasia, 2020](#)) In one instance, disinfectant was sprayed on the migrant workers, others were beaten by the police, but that could not deter them to try all possible ways to return to their home.

The mass exodus also happened earlier in 1918 when the Spanish flu gripped the world. At that point of time, the British rulers were hardly concerned about the health or the economy of the colonial India, however, this time too, the state has hardly made any preparation to deal with the calamity. ([Sreevatsan, 2020](#)) Rather the state acted to deny the sufferings of the migrant workers as it declared the pandemic as an '[act of God](#)' (The Telegraph, 2020). Steps are taken to erase the pain and agony of those vulnerable from the public memory while distorting the reality. The human loss is being made invisible by those in power. In the Parliament it is claimed that no data is available on the death of migrant workers ([The Indian Express 2020](#)) though some organizations documented 971 non-COVID deaths of workers during the lockdown. ([SWAN, 2020](#)) Other database reported that 989 deaths occurred due to the financial distress, exhaustion, train and road accidents, suicides due to fear, absence of facilities, police brutality and so on. ([Article-14.com, 2021](#)) Many women and children were compelled to face adverse as the state failed to ensure basic minimum rights guaranteed under the Constitution. ([Nigam, 2020](#) c) The lived experience of [Berjom Bamda Pahadiya](#), a 54-year-old migrant labourer from Jharkhand who arrived home from Delhi after seven months with no money in his pocket and after being looted and cheated by the contractor resonates with that of millions of other families who have been devastated during the lockdown.

The Supreme Court, too ignored the 'crisis within crisis' of the migrant workers during the pandemic because of the omission of the government to prepare for the lockdown. It is being observed that in the darkest hour, the fundamental rights of the vulnerable citizens, that constitute more than 70 percent of the population, are denied and abdicated by those sitting in the 'ivory towers' of justice though some of the high courts played a stellar role while acting with 'rationality, courage and compassion' to uphold the rule of law ([Shah AP 2020](#); [Mihir D, 2020](#))

### **How COVID-19 Pushed the Marginals beyond Margins**

Economic disruptions due to lockdown also resulted not only in loss of livelihoods, wage loss, poverty, food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition, but also more children are orphaned, or are spending time in domestic work and a digital gender gap left many women and children unprepared for future. As per the UN Report, the health care disruptions caused due to the pandemic has killed [228,000 children in South Asia](#) under 5 years of age and resulted in estimated 239,000 maternal and child deaths. The halt in crucial services such as nutrition, immunization, health care services and range of other services has affected children and

increased child mortality by 15.4% in India, 13% in Bangladesh, 21.5% in Sri Lanka and 21.3% in Pakistan. The obstruction in health services with no access to contraception resulted in 3.5 million additional unwanted pregnancies including 400,000 among teenagers. The [data](#) indicates that 5,943 additional deaths occurred because of non-availability of treatment related to tuberculosis, malaria, typhoid and HIV/AIDs. The absence of basic public health and educational facilities has curtailed educational attainment of around 420 million school aged children. Only 2 out of every 3 are being reached by remote learning while denying access to children in rural areas in poor households. The report estimated that this disruption in education may cost India of US \$ 52.8 billion, Bangladesh US \$ 7.4 billion and Sri Lanka \$ 1.9 billion in long run. The high dropout rate of adolescent girls and economic hardships of the families is resulting in early marriage and increasing adolescent pregnancies. UN Women termed the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'most discriminatory crisis' that resulted in women losing more jobs as compared to men, also women faced domestic violence or 'shadow pandemic' while pushing 47 million more women into living less than \$1.90 per day. ([UN 2021](#))

### **COVID-19 and the Widening Inequalities**

The pandemic has resulted in weakening of economy affecting poorest of the poor while the wealth of the billionaires increased by 35 percent and by 90 percent since 2009 ([Oxfam, 2021](#)). The GDP fell down by 24 percent and the estimates suggest that it may take long to recover. The [COVID-19 Economic Response Task Force](#) was announced on 19 March 2020 to meet the economic challenges caused due to pandemic however the reports reveal that it never came into existence ([ANI, 2020](#)). The economic experts also criticized that the economic stimulus announced by the government during the lockdown remained inadequate to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. ([Dutta PK 2020](#)) The report [CMIE, 2021](#) depicts that the rate of unemployment increased by 8.7 percent in March 2020, 23.5 percent by April 2020 and by June 2020 it was 20 percent. It is in February 2021 that unemployment rate reached to 6.9 percent. However, the labour force participation rate and employment rate, both remained significantly low. Moreover, the jobs move away from high labor productive sectors such as manufacturing and services to low productivity sectors such as agriculture and construction ([The Economic Times, 2021](#)). Another research shows that the pandemic pushed 32 million Indians out of the middle class (those earning 10 to 20 \$ a day) leading to sharper rise in poverty while undoing years of economic gains ([NDTV, 2021](#)). It is estimated that the number of poor people with income of less than 2\$ or less each day has gone up by 75 million due to the recession induced by the pandemic. As a result, those on the brink, not only suffered due to government's inaction but are being pushed further beyond margins. The state has done little to mitigate the social and economic impact of the pandemic rather it pushed for tough reforms and attempts are made to crush and muzzle any resistance from the citizens.

### **The Weak Social Protection System**

During the pre-pandemic period too, the government has been pushing for tough economic reforms. The measures such demonetization and GST has already crumpled and weakened the economy. The imposition of stringent lockdown further made adverse impacts. ([Kumar A, 2020](#)) During the lockdown, hunger and unemployment rise rapidly. The Food Corporation of India had four times the buffer stock yet the state discontinued the supply of food grains through Public Distribution System in November 2020. ([Narayanan, 2021](#)) The post pandemic recovery approach ignored the plight of the citizens as evident by the [lesser allocations](#) towards social safety programs such as reducing the expenditure on the Rural



Employment Guarantee Act by 73,000 crores, leading to increasing stress for the bottom pyramid of population. Also, the government scrapped 3 crores ration cards for not linking it with Aadhaar card denying common people their basic right to food as ensured under the National Food Security Act of 2013 ([NDTV, 2021](#)) Instead of mitigating the impact of lockdown, the government initiated a series of reforms in the labour and the agriculture sector without consultation or debate from various stakeholders. These reforms aimed at increasing flexibility and supporting the employers and corporates rather than protecting the rights of the farmers or workers. Pushing such economic reforms is creating chaos. ([Jha 2021](#))

### The Farmer's Protest



Farmers' protest in India. Source: Green Left

It is during the lockdown that the farmers began their agitation against the three farm laws enacted by the state to liberalize the agricultural market by [flouting all democratic norms](#). ([Jain RK and V Suresh, 2021](#)) Instead of addressing the agrarian crisis or resolving the issues relating to farmers' debt or suicide, or providing safety nets to protect the rights of farmers, the state pushed the neoliberal agenda to empower the market. In [September, 2020](#) while laying siege to the malls, the farmers cordoned the godowns belonging to the corporates, occupied the railway tracks and burned the effigies of the Prime Minister and the corporate bigwigs. ([Ziya, 2021](#)) On [26 November, 2020](#), thousands of farmers rode on tractors, bikes, cars and trucks to start an indefinite sit-in in the capital. When prevented from reaching Delhi, they camped themselves at the borders of the capital. The state though engaged with the farmers and held several discussions with them, it also acted vengefully while using water cannons in freezing cold, digging up trenches on the road and putting fenced blocked, nails, barbed concertina wires. Iron lances and maces were mixed with cement were put up blocking the roads and with these resentful actions the state also obstructed the process of negotiations. Water connection, toilet facilities and internet were blocked at the protest sites, social media was censored while draconian laws were used against the protestors while demonizing them. The protestors were dubbed as separatists, secessionists, paid protestors or *Khalistanis*. The international celebrities who tweeted in support of the protest

were slammed whereas the international diplomats have been rebuked by the Indian government ([BBC, 2021b](#)). Multiple petitions have been filed in the courts to remove the protestors projecting the issue as right to protest versus the right to public convenience ([Chaturvedi, 2020](#)) rather than actually addressing the true causes for which the protestors raised their voice. As I write, the protest has completed almost four months, yet a breakthrough remained elusive. However, during this period, the protest that began with a group of farmers slowly is emerging as a [mass struggle](#) resonating across villages, *chaupals* and tea stalls ([Khan, 2021](#)). It is gaining momentum with many students and workers joining and extending their support. ([Kumar, 2021](#)) Some are terming these developments as a [satyagraha](#). ([The Conversation, 2021](#))

## **Dissenting Citizens versus the State**

The omissions and commissions by the government besides its dereliction of duties has caused much anguish among citizens – for some it entails loss of lives due to non-COVID reasons, others faced extreme starvation, debt, loss of livelihood, stress, atrocities of various kinds committed on them by police and administration in the garb of compliance of lockdown norms. The past year shows that government is at the war with its own citizens, be it women protestors at Shaheen Bagh protesting to scrap citizenship laws, the migrant workers who walked miles as soon as lockdown was imposed or the farmers who are continuing to protest against the farm laws. The state is adamant of not only dissecting the existing citizenship matrix denying the citizens their rights, but it is also pushing the neoliberal reforms guaranteeing the domination of the market. World over, the research shows that the economic liberalization has not guaranteed efficiency, rights or protection to the marginalized groups. Instead, economic approach that promotes massive deregulation has led to market volatility and has denied and deprived livelihood to many. However, the state is adamant and is muzzling dissent using various tactics. Several international organizations have intervened and called for the state authorities to protect the basic rights of the citizens to protest. ([The Amnesty International, 2021](#))

Yet, at the local and the national level, the dissent is growing stronger. The creative non-violent resistance at the ground level is paving the way for the independent journalism ([DW.com, 2021](#)) reviving the [brotherhood or 'bhaichara'](#) between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in western Uttar Pradesh where for decades the electoral politics has utilized the divide and disharmony to its vested interest, garnering international attention ([UN News, 2021](#), [The Hindustan Times, 2021](#)), initiating debates on issues relating to democracy and governance among the common citizens and more importantly giving voice to the women who are being excluded and made invisible for decades ([Bhowmick and Sonthalia, 2021](#)) In fact, hassled with the protests and different forms of resistance by the citizens, those in the ruling regime lamented that '[too much democracy](#)' is making the tough reforms difficult.

## **Marching Ahead in Post-COVID world**

A year of pandemic shows that more than a medical calamity, the crisis is humanitarian and arose because the fascist state is pushing the neoliberal agenda behind the garb of the lockdown. The lockdown has provided an opportunity to the authoritarian state to utilize its repressive apparatus to deny common people of their rights while consolidating power relationship with the rich corporates. The [V-Dem Institute](#) and the [Freedom House](#) both have downgraded the world's largest democracy to a flawed and partially free democracy. Despite the abuse of power by the state, the masses are not blindly following the traps laid

down by the corporate controlled media and are resisting to save the democratic ideals. The mass mobilization during the lockdown as evident by the farmers' protest against the ruling regime has re-kindled a heated debate on several issues such as survival with dignity, culture, corruption, identity, federalism, dissent, democracy and more importantly the 'idea of India'. The continuous resilience and resistance by the common citizens against the government's failure to uphold the constitutional values are igniting change, depicting the power of the people and is indicating towards the strength of democracy as imagined by the makers of the constitution. The citizens driven dissent against the citizenship laws, the social movement by the farmers, or the defiance by the workers who walked thousands of miles, all are the part of articulation of disagreement with the arbitrary laws and the policies of the government by the common citizens. Whether the demands being made by the protestors crystalize into action or not, what is significant is that these protests are initiating a debate and are heightening the political consciousness that is critical to functioning of democracy. The ruling regime may arbitrarily enact the anti-people laws in haste, however the citizens are mobilizing and challenging those in power. These acts of resistance against neoliberalism as well as against nationalist communalism depict solidarity among subalterns that is essential to build a cohesive society in the post-COVID world. Looking beyond the binaries of triumph or failure of social movements is vital to bring in social transformations to shape human destinies and to reaffirm the commitments towards inclusion, justice, equality and above all the human dignity.

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