

Coronacapitalism and Hindu Rashtra in India

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This virus with the invincible will to survive has a way of mutating in the petri dishes of local cultures and politics to produce phenomena that seem bizarre, yet painfully familiar. In India, twin processes have driven the country in accelerated mode since the parliamentary elections of 2014, in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power - predatory capitalism and Hindu supremacist politics. Both have seamlessly melded with the virus to emerge as practically invincible, at least at this moment in time.

Consider one instance of each before we move into the longer story.

In April 2020, after the abrupt declaration of a national lockdown to 'flatten the curve' of Covid infections, as hundreds of thousands of migrant workers walked long distances to their home states in conditions of exhaustion and starvation, the Government took a decision that can make sense only within the surreal echo chamber of capitalism. It approved the conversion of surplus rice available with Food Corporation of India into ethanol for the manufacture of [alcohol-based hand sanitisers and also for blending with petrol](#). It was decided that some of the surplus grain, 5 kg per person, would be distributed free of cost during the lock-down period, but apparently after all the hungry across the land were fed, there would still be 'surplus' grain left to be sold in the market, so that private companies could profit from hand sanitizers.

Meanwhile, the discovery that the 'namaste' is the more hygienic greeting than the handshake in Coronatimes, has fed into the general celebration of 'Hindu' culture and civilization that has long accompanied the rise of Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation). (It may be of interest that Dalit politics often insists on the handshake to break the norms of untouchability that still structure Hindu society, of which the namaste is a hierarchical feature, for the 'upper' caste will not offer namaste to the 'lower' caste). At every level of Hindu supremacist discourse - members of the BJP, social media commentators, saffron clad 'sages', and sections of the educated middle classes - there exists a smug satisfaction, all facts to the contrary, that Hindu practices and beliefs protect India from the virus. A BJP leader said, when a Hindu religious gathering was called off by the local administration, that India cannot be affected by [the coronavirus as it is home to millions of gods and goddesses](#). When the PM asked Indians to clap at a particular time to thank frontline workers, there were many who gave this a Hindu spin, [claiming astrological features of that moment](#) would force Corona to "run away", and indeed, "go Corona go" was chanted nation-wide by educated people banging on steel plates in the belief that this would drive the virus away. This celebration of 'Hindu' beliefs is, of course, accompanied by venomous Islamophobia and casteism, as we shall see.

Part I below discusses how the current government in India has been producing Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation), both formally through law, as well as informally through the sabotaging of institutions.

Part II discusses the accelerated offensive by state-backed private capital, focusing only on two aspects that relate to the virus - the attempts at forced labour and, at the high end, the dazzling new avatar of data capitalism.

I

Hindu supremacism 'by stealth'

The term Hindutva is no longer sufficient to describe the ideology that drives the Indian state. Hindutva (Hinduness as political identity) is indeed the ideology of Hindu nationalism, but the emphasis used to be on *samrasta* or gradual assimilation of the non-Hindu other. What has emerged now is the naked face of *Hindu supremacism* in institutions of the state.

India has been explicitly and institutionally Hindu Rashtra since the [doubtful election victory](#) of the BJP in May 2019, through a process that Yvonne Tew has called 'stealth theocracy' in the context of Malaysia. 'Theocracy' is misleading for India, because there is no one clergy behind Hindutva, its fountainhead being a non-religious political organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Nevertheless, Tew's study of Malaysia's transformation is instructive - it suggests

"the fundamental alteration of a constitution's secular character through informal change by judicial and political actors, rather than through formal mechanisms [like constitutional amendment or replacement](#)."

Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh men in RSS uniform at a checkpoint during Covid 19 lock-down, near Hyderabad.

Formally, the role of Parliament in bringing about Hindu supremacy is starkly evident since what can only be termed as the RSS coup d'état of May 2019. Two key legislative measures were -

1. the abrogation of Article 370, which abolished the state of Kashmir, and placed the now Union Territory under military [clampdown that continues until today](#); and
2. the passing of the [Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 \(CAA\) that pointedly excludes Muslims](#) from the category of persecuted minorities which can seek Indian citizenship.

The Supreme Court has played its part - ending the long-standing dispute over the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 - by declaring the demolition of the mosque to have been a criminal act, but nevertheless handing over the site to the Hindu petitioners, and asking government to set [up a trust for the construction of the Ram temple](#). Thus, a pliant Supreme Court asked the still nominally secular state to ensure the construction of a Hindu temple, at the site of a mosque demolished by the very forces that run the current government.

There has been a series of similar accommodations of Hindutva by the courts at different levels - orders [that protected the BJP](#); stepped delicately back from addressing [Hindu patriarchy](#) while coming down hard on [Muslim patriarchy](#); and [penalized dissenters](#) to Hindutva and to crony capitalism.

The role of the Election Commission of India in the May 2019 election victory [is also highly dubious](#).

All of this has been accomplished while retaining the term 'secular' in the Preamble to the constitution. Revealingly, the priority for the RSS now [is the removal of the term 'socialist' from the Preamble](#), the term 'secular' having been rendered meaningless 'by stealth'. Both terms were introduced during the National Emergency (1975-1977) by a Constitutional amendment, but evidently between 2014 (when this government came to power for its first term) and today (especially from May 2019), the term 'secular' has been rendered toothless and can be permitted to remain. Its nominal presence in the Preamble to the Constitution may even be necessary to act as a fig leaf for Indian business interests before their global capitalist partners, [some of whom have reservations about blatant Hindu supremacism](#), although the right-wing in Europe, US and Israel is

in tune with it. But only when the powerful Arab countries [finally spoke out against blatant Islamophobia in India](#), did Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweet about 'humanist values' and 'the virus having no religion'.

Islamophobia and the virus

The Government systematically set off a spiral of Islamophobia early in the lock-down over Covid 19, by targeting a religious meeting of the Muslim organization, Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, with international participants, which led to a spike in infections. There were several other such large public meetings before and after, but [they were not similarly highlighted](#).

Until 29th March, Ritika Jain shows that the media were focused on reporting how millions, of migrant workers,

'jobless, homeless and unprepared because the government imposed a 21-day lockdown with four-hours notice — were streaming out of cities, attempting to make long journeys home by scooter, cycle or on foot.'

But by evening that day,

'news about the spike broke. The explicit connection by the government to Tablighi Jamat was made three days later.'

Jain demonstrates that the peddling of fake news and videos, and false claims about Muslims and Covid 19, emanated from every level of the RSS network – government, BJP MPs, Ministers, BJP members and BJP's infamous Information Technology Cell that runs [its virulent social media campaigns](#).

This inevitably signalled legitimacy for widespread violence against Muslims, and they were often denied admission to hospitals. A Gujarat hospital [separated Hindu and Muslim Covid 19 patients](#) into different wards. Muslim fruit and vegetable vendors were threatened, physically assaulted and boycotted in localities.

In Mumbai, the Municipal Commissioner issued a circular that the bodies of persons who died of Covid-19 would be cremated irrespective of their religion. There is no such health-based requirement either in the guidelines of the WHO or of the Government of India. After intervention at multiple levels, [the circular was withdrawn](#).

But the message is clear at every level - Muslims must be 'taught a lesson'. For not being Hindu.

***Sanghvat* in action - not just 'business as usual' for the Indian state**

Let us dwell for a moment on the massive, exclusively male organization, the RSS, founded in 1925 with the agenda of establishing a Hindu Rashtra. It terms itself a cultural, not political, organization, but it controls the BJP. The Prime Minister and the Home Minister are both hard-core members of the RSS as are practically all important functionaries of the party, including several Chief Ministers of states.

Hundreds of other organizations function under the umbrella of the RSS, and its ideology has been termed *Sanghvat*, which is the particular form that fascism is taking in India.

Since the 1990s, the RSS has steadily increased its reach over individuals in state institutions, police and bureaucracy. In states in which the BJP is in power, RSS has direct control over the state

governments. Gradually since 2014 and especially since May 2019, the RSS has established a violent hold over minorities, Muslims in particular, through a nexus between state governments, police and local criminals. [RSS members are appointed by the government as public prosecutors](#) in trials relating to anti-Muslim pogroms (termed 'communal riots'), to ensure that Hindu accused are acquitted.

Consider that only in the states in which the BJP is in power, did the nation-wide protests from the beginning of 2020 against the Constitutional Amendment Act supposedly 'turn violent'. This is because police are under the control of state governments, except in Delhi, where Delhi Police come under the central government. Fact-finding investigations by citizens' groups and journalists in these [states, Delhi](#) as well as Uttar Pradesh (UP) under a BJP Chief Minister, [suggest possible police complicity](#) with RSS activists and local criminals, in incidents of stone-throwing from within anti-CAA demonstrations, arson on public property during protests and so on. In Delhi too, the violence was exclusively in the 7 constituencies (out of 70) that BJP won in the State Assembly elections of February 2020, and [police complicity in pre planned violence is strongly indicated](#).

Such violence that 'breaks out' is followed by massive and violent state reprisals on Muslims: mass arrests, brutal beatings in police custody, denial of bail. In UP, the state government levied huge amounts as 'compensation' for destruction of state property, mainly from prominent Muslims (and also some very poor ones) - including from individuals who were under preventive house arrest [during the time the protests 'turned violent.'](#)

Journalists too, have reported on the reign of terror that police have [unleashed on Muslims in Uttar Pradesh](#).

However, there is a long history of police brutality and excesses in independent India, and not only against Muslims, [as this reading list testifies](#). Many therefore argue that this moment is simply business as usual, that most Indians have lived under an undeclared Emergency this whole time - Dalits, Adivasis, the poor, and of course, Muslims. But this would be a mistaken analysis, like an orthodox Marxist analysis that sees no difference between the liberal democratic state and the fascist state because both are capitalist. There is a specificity to this moment that we must recognize.

I suggest that three features constitute specific transformations to the Indian political system by Hindu Rashtra.

First, the *formal* dispossession and disowning of the Muslim.

The Sachar Committee Report of 2006 showed that Muslims were even lower in socio-economic indicators than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, historically marginalized communities. There have been pogroms against Muslims before, also mostly conducted by RSS-linked groups but formally, all communities were constitutionally equal.

What recent developments have achieved is the dropping of this formal equality for Muslims. The direct targeting of Muslim lives and livelihoods has been mainstreamed. Thus, existing laws against 'cow slaughter' have been activated and new laws passed, which provide cover for police and vigilante attacks on all cattle trading. However, the threat of lynching and arrests enables an extortion network by RSS linked groups like the Bajrang Dal, which permits the cattle business to continue, on payment of protection money, as Niranjana Takle found when he did an [undercover sting operation in Gujarat](#).

The Government's passing of the law criminalizing 'triple talaq' (unilateral divorce by husbands

under Muslim Personal Law) which had already been banned by the Supreme Court, is another signal to its supporters and to Muslims, that the latter are to be disenfranchised in multiple ways. Already Muslim men are imprisoned vastly disproportionately to [their share in the population \(as are Dalits and tribals\)](#), and this law will add to their number. Desertion of wives is not a religion-specific practice, after all.

The most important landmark in the formal disenfranchisement of Muslims is, of course, the Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019 which excludes Muslims alone from refugee status, a forerunner to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that will identify 'illegal immigrants'. The Home Minister [spelt out the 'chronology' from CAA to National Population Register \(NPR\) to NRC](#), making it clear that the CAA would protect all non-Muslims from being left with illegal status after the NPR and NRC are conducted. After nation-wide protests erupted, PM Modi claimed that people were being 'misled' by Opposition parties, [that NRC was not being contemplated](#). But within 3 months the government reiterated to the Supreme Court that 'preparation of NRC was a necessary exercise for any sovereign country for identification of citizens from [non-citizens, and to deport or expel illegal migrants.](#)'

After two key amendments in 1986 and 2003 to the Citizenship Act of 1955, there are 3 categories one could fall in, depending on date of birth.

1. If born between 1950 and 1987 in India, birth in India is sufficient for citizenship.
2. If born between 1987 and 2004 in India, additionally one parent needs to be an Indian citizen.
3. If born after 2004 in India, one parent should be an Indian citizen and additionally neither parent should be an 'illegal immigrant.'

'Illegal migrant' and 'doubtful citizen' are code words for Muslims, although others can fall into this net. These identities could be acquired on the basis of suspicion by anybody at all in the chain of command - the local official you know, perhaps instigated by someone with an eye on the land you live on; the bureaucrat; the judge in a remote court, speaking a language you don't understand. But effectively, every person has to prove birth in India, or that a parent was born in India or that one parent is NOT an illegal alien, depending on your date of birth. And the burden of proof is on the person whose citizenship is declared 'doubtful.' However, [what documents are acceptable to prove any of this is also unpredictable.](#)

What this will inaugurate is the large scale disenfranchisement of Muslims but also of the poor in general, Dalits, and other minorities - removed from electoral rolls, deprived of all status. The very possession of documents is a luxury the majority of Indians do not have - migrant labour; women who upon marriage move to their husbands' villages; the poor who have no means of protecting documents from rodents, floods, fires; trans and intersex children abandoned by their families; [queer people who run away from home to escape violence; sex workers.](#)

But not all doubtful citizens will be placed in detention centres. Nor will all of these be Muslims. There simply wouldn't be enough space to accommodate all Muslims and non-Muslims who fail the NRC test. In effect, the NRC will ensure that the entire country will become a detention centre, the vast mass of the population excluded from electoral rolls, living in terror and uncertainty, at the mercy of extortionists and blackmailers.

Many of these would simply be collateral damage, because the NRC's target is the Muslim.

Systematically, during the pandemic related lock-down, extensive arrests, mainly of Muslims, have taken place, of those involved in the peaceful anti CAA protests. While the protests were on-going, [the entire country was electrified](#), and it was not only Muslims who were protesting. Arrests or

removal of protest sites during that time would have been a huge embarrassment to Government. But once the 'public health' claim was made, [protest sites were dismantled violently](#) by police, and thousands of arrests carried out. In Delhi, arrests are on the allegation of responsibility for the violence of February 2020, which was in fact, as indicated above, a pogrom against Muslims, planned in advance by RSS linked organizations. [Muslims were the ones largely affected](#), in their lives and property, but [it is Muslims who are being arrested](#) in large numbers.

The lock-down served as a political emergency in which democratic rights have been suspended, and the effect is most devastating for Muslims. This repression continues unabated.

Second, Hindu Rashtra functions through controlled chaos.

Unlike the manufacture of organized 'communal riots' in the earlier phases, which had beginnings and endings, what has been unleashed since 2014 is a lynch mob culture, which produces a state of [continuous turbulence, threat and terror](#). Violence can now be sparked anywhere by even one or two activists linked to the RSS, drawing in a larger crowd which recognizes that with impunity it can participate actively, or enjoy the violence and record it. This new kind of violence targets not entire communities, but some Muslim individuals, some Dalit individuals, some individual women. Each time therefore, the authorities can say that this particular act was not a casteist or communal incident, not an instance of sexual violence, but simply an aberrant criminal act. Each one a law and order issue to be dealt with, or ignored, separately.

The impunity unleashed is such that it compensates young unemployed subaltern men for their utter lack of power in the system, and for the crashing economy. They don't need work or income, when they can have the heady rush of stopping a random middle-class man and forcing him to say Jai Shri Ram. In one case the man happened to be a Hindu doctor, and in another, it was a white tourist in Varanasi, but there have been innumerable incidents of Muslims being forced to chant Jai Shri Ram and being thrashed, tortured, killed. Acts of violence against Dalits too, [have gone up in number and intensity since 2014](#).

This lynch mob culture taps into deep reserves of justification of violence against Dalits and women in Hindu society, and Hindu supremacist politics has unleashed it from its secret places out into the open.

The pogrom against Muslims in Delhi in February 2020 and in Uttar Pradesh in early January was of the older, more established kind - organized targeting of Muslim homes, businesses, persons - [systematic, planned in advance](#). In one or two instances, this may have provoked some defensive push-back from the community, but it was by no means an equally matched 'religious riot'. And it is even possible that some of the violence on Hindu homes and shops [was pre-planned to give this impression](#). The Delhi Minorities Commission report on the violence is clear about [its 'planned and targeted' nature](#).

Paul Brass terms this ['institutionalized systems of riot production'](#). The term 'riot' is a deliberate misnomer, suggesting spontaneous and unpredictable mass action. In fact, 'communal riots' in India involve, Brass demonstrated through extensive studies, carefully calibrated activities by people with precisely designated roles and responsibilities - informants, propagandists, journalists who produce propaganda as news.

While the older model of sudden systematic pogroms continues, the maintenance of a constant state of controlled chaos and an atmosphere of terror especially for Muslims is the default condition now. An extreme indication of the social collapse is the generalized violence against doctors treating Covid patients, to the extent of obstruction of their funerals, which led the Indian Medical

Association to demand legal protection for medical personnel – and a [draconian Ordinance was almost immediately passed](#).

Though not directly connected with the RSS, this complete breakdown of societal norms is a feature made possible by the RSS takeover.

Third, we see the unprecedented crackdown on dissent, even by private individuals on social media, and the throttling of freedom of expression and critical thinking, in universities. In fact, the draft New Education Policy envisages bringing all [education directly under the Prime Minister](#).

Individuals are mostly targeted through police complaints and court cases by supposedly private individuals, but the fact that police and courts [take such complaints seriously](#) is an indication of RSS' indirect involvement. Recently, in an extraordinary move, the government banned two TV channels for 48 hours, for 'being critical of RSS' and for 'siding with one community' [in their coverage of the Delhi pogrom](#). That is, these channels did not present one of the two acceptable narratives – that 'both sides are to blame' or that Muslims were responsible for the violence. But more importantly, 'being critical of the RSS' was explicitly stated to be a reason for the ban. The order was withdrawn after strong protests from sections of the media, but the heavy hand of the RSS on the reins of India-as-Hindu-Rashtra is evident. The censorship of opinion is completed by the [debilitation of the media](#), largely intimidated or bought off, so that self-censorship often obviates the need for RSS or government action. A recent spate of vicious on-line attacks by Hindu right-wing trolls on anti-establishment stand-up comics, and threats of arrest, have led [to public apologies by many of them](#).

While suppression of dissent happened during the Emergency of 1975-77 too, that was a period of two declared years, and conducted by the state. Now we are over six years down – and counting – into an undeclared war on dissenters (including assassinations) by the state, by anybody whose 'sentiments are hurt', or by [armed Hindutva terrorist organizations](#). While the Emergency produced a polarization into state versus the people, Hindu Rashtra has created a situation of molecular, everyday violence against certain sections, which has now taken the form of an on-going, one-sided civil war against Muslims in particular, but also Dalits and other minorities, as well as those opposed to Hindu Rashtra. The other key difference between authoritarianism and fascism, as Egyptian scholar Mamdouh Habashi pointed out at a seminar, is that all authoritarianism is not propelled by a distinct ideology, as is fascism. As is Sanghavad.

These three features, each inextricably tied to nationalism, are what mark out Hindu Rashtra from business as usual. Each feature has ways of marking out the nationalist from the anti-national, inflected now through the pandemic, and each is about explicitly establishing Hindu supremacy.

II

Forced labour and data capitalism are the low end and high end of Coronacapitalism.

Forced labour

The gut-wrenching picture of migrant workers who managed to reach their home state of Uttar Pradesh, [being sprayed with disinfectant](#), provoked such widespread outrage in India and negative publicity in the foreign media, that the Health Ministry issued a [hasty statement that this should not be done](#).

But this brutality and callousness towards workers and the poor, emanates from the very top of this regime – the signal is sent from there, as to who matters and who doesn't. The difference in treatment is stark and unapologetic. For example, during the lock-down, even as thousands of

workers walked long distances home because no transport was arranged for them, precisely in order [to prevent them from leaving the states](#) in which they were stranded, [the Uttar Pradesh government organized buses to bring back students](#) from the state studying outside. Special flights and hospital beds were prepared by the [government to bring back Indians stranded abroad](#).

Meanwhile lakhs of migrant labour were [trapped in horrific conditions](#), prey to rumours and fake news of buses being arranged, special trains being run, to their home states; and when they arrived at bus terminuses and stations in thousands, with their meagre belongings, their little children, they ended up [baton-charged in Mumbai](#), teargassed in [Surat](#). Apart from some state governments (West Bengal, Kerala, Delhi), that have taken on the responsibility of feeding these hundreds of thousands, it is largely ordinary citizens who stepped up across the country, financially and physically, to set up networks, including those of NGOs, to prevent mass deaths by starvation – see [here](#) and [here](#), for example. The Central government's contribution to this has been negligible, according to its own reply to the Supreme Court.

The collateral damage of this tragic government-produced crisis was high – deaths due to exhaustion from the march itself, [due to police brutality, due to starvation](#). Visit this site to get a sense of [India's villages during the Covid 19 Pandemic](#).

The Bengal famine (1943), Partition (1947) – these are the historical memories of the subcontinent that have been evoked by the heart-breaking and enraging images that emerged from the catastrophic 'long march' of migrant labour. **More relevant however is another parallel, for it constitutes 21st century evidence of the indispensability of forced labour to capitalism.**

Let us return to the image of workers squatting on the ground, being sprayed with disinfectant, as if they themselves were the virus. The shock of the visual conjured up Nazi concentration camps, how as Jews and other prisoners entered these camps, they were first 'disinfected'. Dispossessed, stripped of German citizenship, these prisoners of the Nazi state were on their way to eventual death but first, to forced labour. Nazi concentration camps provided free labour to dozens of private companies. Apart from state-run camps, companies like IG Farben built private concentration camps for [Jews who performed forced labour in the plant grounds](#).

Germany of course, was only perfecting techniques used for decades in Africa by European colonial powers and settler colonialists – forced labour and labour camps were the engine that ran European capitalism, [as Aime Cesaire pointed out \(p. 36\)](#).

And the contemporary American [prison industrial complex is well known](#).

But India's migrant workers are not Jews in Nazi Germany or colonial subjects or prisoners – they are free citizens of India. By what powers are they being treated as criminals, facing the coercive power of the state as they seek to exercise the basic fundamental right to return home, a right that is being differentially accorded by the Indian government to different sections of its citizenry?

The answer is comical in its simplicity. By the power of capital, no less. Consider the following facts:

a) Throughout April, during the lock-down, news emerged that indicated rising anxiety about the economic crisis brewing for capital because of labour shortages due to migrant labour going home. To cite just a few of these – in [the agrarian sector \(Punjab\)](#); in Maharashtra [to unload cargo at ports, fill ATMs with cash](#) and staff neighbourhood stores; [in real estate and construction](#) across the country; and for [the steel industry](#).

b) In an order dated April 19th, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a [Standard Operating System for](#)

[the movement of stranded labour](#) which established:

(i) an outright prohibition on migrant labour, even those tested and found 'asymptomatic', from moving out of the state in which they were currently trapped, and on going back to their home states; and

(ii) the recruitment of 'asymptomatic' workers in 'industrial, manufacturing, construction, farming and MNREGA works' *only in the state in which they are currently located* (stranded), for which they must be 'registered with the local authority concerned...'

This would, quite simply, have been forced labour. After testing for Covid-19, the asymptomatic workers would have been forced to remain within the states they were located and be transported to where labour is needed.

It seems clear in retrospect that the lockdown with only 4 hours' notice was not inefficiency, but deliberately intended to stop labour from leaving cities.

There was an uproar, the order was not implemented, eventually we heard no more about it. However, attempts by industry in collaboration with government to force labour to stay where it was needed, continued and in some [cases were thwarted by public pressure](#).

According to a report published by the Stranded Workers Action Network, 89% of stranded migrants had not been paid any wages at all by their employers during the lockdown period. The report was based upon interviews [with over 11,000 stranded workers](#).. No steps were taken by the government to address this issue.

So at the 'low end' of the spectrum of Coronacapitalism is the attempt at forced labour.

Data capitalism and the Aarogya Setu app

At the 'high end', there is huge pressure from government to download Aarogya Setu, a contact-tracing mobile application launched by the Union Health ministry, which will supposedly help users identify if they are at risk of Covid-19 infection.

The Ministry has asked social media platforms to promote installation of the app among their users, giving these platforms a 'target' of 'minimum downloads' of millions. Additionally, companies have been asked to share progress on this front with the government on a daily basis. Government has told the companies that its target is 'all mobile users in India.'

Some [departments of government](#) have made it mandatory for employees while [some state governments](#) have asked all university and college teachers to download the app. Ordinary citizens receive daily mails or texts asking us to download it. Some food delivery companies have made it compulsory for their delivery partners to install the app. In short, Aarogya Setu is being aggressively promoted by government and private interests alike.

No less than Bill Gates wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, [congratulating him on the Aarogya Setu](#). Gates' delight in an app that will collect data from potentially the entire mobile phone-owning population of India is not so intriguing. One attempt at least, in the USA, by the Gates Foundation to [collect massive amounts of unspecified data via school test scores](#), was thwarted by parents and school administrations [over privacy and security issues](#).

The Aarogya Setu has been shown to be deeply problematic on a number of dimensions. As a thorough report prepared by Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) put it, the app is

“a privacy minefield and it does not adhere to principles of minimisation, strict purpose limitation, transparency and accountability.”

Globally, there are concerns expressed about contact tracing apps, a phenomenon *The Economist* termed ‘creating the [coronopticon](#).’ In Singapore and in Europe, the IFF report points out, only the health ministries can use these systems or have access to any limited data/interaction which is shared with them. They assure citizens that law enforcement personnel will not have access to these systems or the data they hold. But in India, there are no such guarantees offered. Moreover, unlike Singapore, where there is a legal limitation on the state, that data can be used only for disease control, the Aarogya Setu app says exactly the opposite, that the government can share your data with unspecified ‘other agencies’ for unspecified ‘other purposes’. The app could potentially allow government to peer into aspects of the user’s [private life that have nothing to do with Covid-19](#). There is also the risk that the personal information of users may be held not just for the duration of this public health crisis, but beyond, says the IFF report.

[See some user reviews of Aarogya Setu and privacy concerns they express, here.](#)

State surveillance is not necessarily a capitalist project. But what is relevant here is the emergence of *data capitalism* from the mid-1990s onwards, now a well-entrenched phenomenon.

Sarah Myers West defines data capitalism as:

‘a system which enables an asymmetric redistribution of power that is weighted toward the actors who have access and [the capability to make sense of information](#)’

Whenever we enter the internet (social media, on-line purchases, search engines) we leave behind traces, which are collected by companies for commercial purposes. Unlike *data leaks* and *state surveillance*, which can be seen as aberrations, data capitalism in its normal functioning, makes us all willing ‘prosumers’, a term combining production and consumption that has acquired the opposite connotation from the utopian way [Alvin Toffler conceived of it in 1980](#). Toffler envisaged a post-Industrial Third Wave in which production would not be split between use and exchange, and increasingly, because of the decreasing hours of work, people would produce what they consume. The term has been mutated by data capital to refer to the new resources at its command. As on-line users, we produce data for the use of data capitalism while we simultaneously *consume* social media and online goods and services. Data capitalists see prosumers as a “[new growth opportunity](#).” Data is seen by capitalists today in the same way that Nature was perceived under the Enlightenment project – as something which is freely available ‘out there’ to be acted upon, as something which [needs to be transformed from its rawness to be made useful](#).

The relentless push by the Indian government towards downloading the app, the data generated by which can be used, shared and stored in ways about which we know nothing, and over which we have no control, is Coronacapitalism at the high end, as it were.

The neoliberal agenda is not necessarily linked to Hindu Rashtra, but when it is, the impact is even more devastating. The mythology of the ‘Urban Maoist-Jihadi network’, a deranged script [concocted in RSS HQ](#), blends the twin enemies of Hindu supremacism (‘jihadi’) and predatory capital (‘urban Maoist’) to effectively silence opponents of these projects. Among thousands of politically motivated arrests in the last few years are those of journalists, academics and artistes for supposedly being urban Maoists. The 80 year old revolutionary poet Varavara Rao, arrested in 2018 on the farcical charge of a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister, supposedly linked to [a massive political congregation of Dalits](#), is one of them. He has been found Covid-positive in jail, and his condition, as I write this, is dire.

What lies ahead?

As India rapidly rises in the ranks of countries with the most Covid infections (currently, 3rd after the US and Brazil), resentment and anger run high on many other counts, but lockdown and distancing norms have prevented the kind of massive demonstrations that the country saw against the CAA before the pandemic. Meanwhile, discussions on climate change and alternatives to growth are gaining traction; university teachers contemplate a future outside physical classrooms, which will abandon large numbers of students with no access to the internet, but simultaneously force us to think of alternative forms of knowledge commons.

It is a strange interregnum for us here, filled with resistance and resignation, despair and hope, solidarities and internal fractures, rage and creativity. Like that oppressively sultry period that presages the monsoon, breathless and waiting, until suddenly the clouds burst - it feels like that moment of rupture is around the corner, both extraordinary and inevitable. And it could bring abundance or calamity.

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