

Covid-19 (India): Turning a Profit from Death - On Modi's Pandemic Response in Neoliberal India and pandemic

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Let us be clear from the outset: what is happening in India right now is mass murder. And it is organized by a man who has [practice](#) in such matters.

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Two images bookend the current crisis and contain in them a trajectory of the crisis. The first is the image of the Indian police hosing down migrant workers with bleach last spring, during the first wave of the pandemic, and the grimmer, more recent one of cremation fires burning all over the country. The road between the 2 markers was expected, but the violence lies in the fact that it could have been avoided.

When the infection rate fell after the first lockdown, the Modi regime declared victory over the virus. Lacing his propaganda with Hindu mythology, in March the prime minister told the nation that while the Mahabharat [mythic battle of Hindu epics] war had been won in 18 days, he would win the corona battle in 21.

Policy was shaped around these wild superstitions. The government's coronavirus task force stopped meeting and the Health Minister declared that India was "in the endgame of the pandemic." The government [boasted](#) that it had sold 55 million doses of vaccine to 62 different countries.

It was an example of a perfect marriage between Hindutva and capitalism. Hindutva assured the government that the virus was over, while capitalist greed monetized a global pandemic.

Vaccine Capitalism

The lifesaving vaccine is available for free in almost all countries of the global North, in India it is not. The Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine maker, is currently the chief manufacturer of the vaccine in the country. In January they sold the first 100 million doses of the vaccine to the Indian government at a "special price" of [200 rupees](#) (\$2.74) per dose, after which they raised the price. On the private market the vaccine is being sold for 1,000 rupees (\$13.68) per dose.

SII is a private company headed by one of the richest men on the planet, Cyrus Poonawala whose net worth is about \$13 billion. Poonawala made his fortune as a horse breeder and racer. These superior

gambling instincts guided his son, Adar Poonawala, to look at a devastating global pandemic last year and decide that it was his moment to make a killing. In his interview with [international media](#), Poonawala emphasized that he was going to “take the risk and become a front-runner.”

The usual suspects jumped on this bandwagon of turning public health emergencies into private profit. The Melinda and Bill Gates foundation invested \$150 million, while the vampiric firms of Goldman Sachs, Citi and Avendus Capital became SII’s [chief advisors](#). Like all elites from the global south trained well in neoliberal speak, Poonawalla [declared](#) his lofty anticolonial goal to be the supply of “A majority of the vaccine, at least initially... to our countrymen before it goes abroad.”

In reality, nearly [80 percent](#) of SII’s went abroad for a steep profit, till the Indian government finally forced a ban on exports as the death count began to rise.

The lineaments of this capitalist macabre soon revealed themselves. Cyrus Poonawalla’s wealth [rose](#) 85% in 5 months. And as the smoke from funeral pyres began to darken Indian skies, in late March, Adar Poonawalla [signed a deal](#) to rent a London mansion for a record \$70,000 a week.

Neoliberal Death-making

The Modi regime is directly responsible for the current bloodshed. But the road here was paved by all who came before them, those who, since the 1980s, eagerly complied with the IMF’s structural adjustment programs and destroyed India’s life-making institutions and infrastructure. We apparently needed more cars, more dams, at the expense of food and healthcare.

The Indian economy was formally liberalized in 1991 under a Congress government. The story that followed will be distressingly familiar.

Reducing the fiscal deficit, the holy grail of neoliberalism, in reality opened up “[a revenue deficit](#),” as the rich were relieved of taxation and the state, while increasing military expenditure, slashed public sector investment and social spending. I want to emphasize that not just the Congress or the BJP but every ruling coalition, at the state and federal level, followed this trajectory, including the Stalinists in power in my home state of West Bengal, whose most celebrated effort was to dispossess peasants from their land in order to build a car factory. More than 50 million Indians were dispossessed to make way for development projects like large dams in the first 50 years of independence to power capitalism’s productivist imperative. Research [shows](#) that over 50 percent of the dispossessed were adivasis or indigenous people living in hills and forested land where most of the dams and mines were built.

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The healthcare sector told a similar story of predation. According to the [BMJ](#), today, India has just

0.8 doctors and 0.7 hospital beds per 1000 population and is the [third largest military spender](#) in the world, after the US and China. But not everyone was left without healthcare. The private healthcare industry exploded under neoliberalism, with the country ranking among the [top 20](#) countries for its private healthcare spending, while being amongst the lowest for spending on public health.

Austerity, as Ruthie Gilmore teaches us, is the “organized abandonment” of life and life-making paired with “organized violence.” The closing of schools and hospitals and the expansion of prisons and defense budgets hold a mirror to each other.

Austerity, however, merely amplifies what is a key organizing principle of capitalism, the lowering of the value of human life. While capitalism strives to lower the value of labor power in order to increase surplus value, what this means concretely for the working class is, following Rosemary Hennessy’s concept of abjection, what we might call the manufacture of abjection. This mechanism goes beyond the economic effort of lowering wages. Indeed, wages are mostly effectively lowered when capital can successfully lower the parameters of social reproduction of life and labor power. Social oppressions such as race, gender, and caste are some of the key drivers for lowering social reproduction.



We should be reminded of a dark passage in *Capital* where Marx describes how, during his time in Britain, women were “still occasionally used instead of horses for hauling canal boats, because the labour required to produce horses and machines is an accurately known quantity, while that required to maintain the women of the surplus-population is below all calculation.” Michael Goldfield recently made a similar point about the role of slavery and racism in the US, showing how “both planters and northern industry benefitted from cheap labor whose lower limit was determined by racism” producing across time “a callous disregard for human dignity and the sanctity of human life.” To paraphrase [Gilmore](#), where life is not precious, life is not precious.

We are seeing this murderous logic - of capitalism devaluing life through austerity - playing out in India on such a scale that even the rich and powerful are not safe. A former ambassador died while waiting in the parking lot of a Delhi hospital. There are no hospital beds. There are no ambulances. In Surat, an industrial city in Gujarat, the grills used to burn bodies have been operating so relentlessly that the iron on some of them melted. Almost all the mortuary staff in crematoriums and burning ghats are from Dalit or Bahujan communities, whose average monthly pay is around \$134. They are working round the clock, without any PPE, providing last rites, grief counselling and consolation to families who in life would have probably advocated for their continued ritual segregation from elite society. Bezwada Wilson, an organizer for the rights and welfare of sanitation workers, told [VICE World News](#), “No one knows how many cremation workers have tested positive for this deadly disease and no one knows how many have died as a result. It is because government

officials don't see the cremation workers and sanitation workers as human."

But as the country gasps for oxygen, the stock of Linde India, a supplier of medical oxygen, has [doubled](#). Adar Poonawalla has honorably done a Ted Cruz, fled India and sought refuge in his modest London mansion, as have the [ultrarich](#) in their private jets.

Meanwhile the rest of India burns, as BJP leaders continue to peddle cow dung and cow urine as medical solutions to covid 19. As of Saturday, [only 1.9 percent of India's population has been fully vaccinated](#) and over 400,000 new daily infections are confirmed by tests, the actual figure is surely far higher.

Capitalist State against the People

Narendra Modi, more than any Prime Minister since the 1980s, has brutally wielded the might of the Indian state to shape a polity safe for capital, Hindutva has been the ideological battering ram for this project. While absent from any life-making work, such as healthcare or education, the state has been all too present in death-making, from the Gazafication of Kashmir to erecting detention camps for Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis. Indeed, it's not the state that is currently keeping the neoliberalism-ravaged health care system operational, but ordinary people. Teams of volunteers have set up mutual aid networks across the devastated landscape and are trying to reduce harm in ingenious and deeply loving ways. Gurudwaras and mosques are working tirelessly to provide food. The fascist Shiv Sena's chief Uddhav Thackeray was forced to [thank](#) the Muslims of Ichalkaranji town of Maharashtra for donating Zakat money to fund a 10-bed ICU at a local hospital. People have set up COVID helplines to reach the sick and the suffering and are setting up car pools to act as ambulances, while politicians in Maharashtra and Gujarat have been seen hoarding essential drugs and oxygen to sell at a hiked price on the market.

"The dead demand that mystical veils of inscrutability be ripped from history, for beneath them lie the banally obvious explanation for this carnage: capitalism."

This murderous division of labor between the state and the people needs to be reversed and the state forced to act on their behalf. A number of steps can be taken immediately to stem the tide.

- First, the government needs to invoke the Essential Commodities Act to stop the hoarding of essential drugs, oxygen, and so forth by predatory businesses.
- Second, the state should commandeer spaces to set up field hospitals and open up hotels for the unhoused.
- Third, the government needs to invest money in vaccine production immediately and take steps to make vaccines free and universal. The differential pricing of these drugs, instituted by corporations like SII, needs to be scrapped and vaccines made free for all, and with distribution according to vulnerability, and not wallet size or ability to push to the front.

- Fourth, while Anthony Fauci has recommended a hard lockdown, in a country like India this step is neither humane nor effective without a stimulus payment from the state to families allowing them to be off work. Where there can and should be a hard lockdown is on religious and social gatherings, one of which in recent past, hailed by the government as safe, was undoubtedly been a superspreader.

- Fifth, public funds raised to deal with Covid-19 should be made immediately available in an open and transparent way. During the first wave last year the Modi government set up a Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM-CARES) to deal with the crisis. More than 70% its funds have been donated by public sector units, but PM-CARES is set up to be unaccountable to government audits and hence the public. In reality no one knows how these funds are being spent.

- Finally, the international Left, especially in the global North, has a vital role to play: we need to pressure our own ruling classes to stop hoarding vaccines. Vaccine imperialism may work for the rich countries in the short term, but it allows the virus to mutate in the parts of the globe without the vaccine and eventually return to strike the hoarders. Internationalism in this case is not just a political principle, it is a public health necessity.

In Bhopal, Javed, an auto-rickshaw driver, has converted his auto into a makeshift ambulance, ferrying patients to hospitals for free. Courtesy: ScoopWhoop Media

My 13-year-old niece and nearly 80-year-old mother in Delhi are terrified to pick up the phone lest they hear of more losses.

I feel the need to marshal more than language to convey the scale of the crisis. How to convey the feel of air saturated with the ashes of cremated bodies? How to translate into words the sound of the wailing mother who just lost her child? But we must use our words, more loudly now than ever. The dead demand that mystical veils of inscrutability be ripped from history, for beneath them lie the banally obvious explanation for this carnage: *capitalism*.

As we strive towards stabilizing life in India, we need to constantly remind ourselves that we can no longer afford to stabilize the system.

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P.S.

• Spectre Journal. May 3, 2021:
<https://spectrejournal.com/turning-a-profit-from-death/>