

Authoritarianism and Resistance in India

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Editor's note: We are reposting this interview from our Summer 2020 issue because it provides background to the recent wave of mass farmer protests in India. We intend to post an article about these current protests soon.

New Politics board member Phil Gasper interviewed Samantha Agarwal in April 2020. The interview was subsequently transcribed and edited for length.

Phil Gasper for New Politics: You have recently returned from India. You were there during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and you left a few days before the recent lockdown was put in place. Can you tell us about some of these recent events that have defined Indian politics on a national scale for some time now?

Samantha Agarwal: I flew out from Bombay (Mumbai) on one of the last commercial flights before India's borders were sealed. I was surprised to see that in Bombay, the epicenter of the pandemic in India, the government was not taking any perceptible public safety or social distancing measures while I was there. In fact, right in the neighborhood where I was putting up, there were blowout wedding parties happening almost every night, with thousands of people attending.

Then at the end of March, after two months of almost no federally coordinated response to the pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi suddenly announced a 21-day lockdown, which entailed closing subnational state borders and suspending all public transportation. And all of this was with less than four-hours' notice!

More than anything, this move has exacerbated the gross inequalities that are characteristic of liberalized India. In India's 1.3 billion population, 800 million people live on less than \$2 a day, and at least 81 percent of the labor force is in the informal sector. Most of these workers are unorganized, and they have very few rights and legal protections.

At the other end, India has 134 billionaires, whose wealth equals the nation's annual operating budget. When the news of the lockdown reached this latter section, wealthy India went out in droves

and started hoarding wine and chocolate and other luxury commodities, to nurse their quarantine anxieties.

But, then, what happens to the common person? For example, what happens to the millions of internal migrants, who work for short periods of time, far away from home, while living in temporary settlements or tents that provide them little protection from the elements? How are you supposed to “shelter in place” if you don’t have shelter in the first place? Their first instinct, obviously, was to go home—it’s a human-enough instinct to want to be in the company of your family during a time of a crisis. But the government, shockingly, made no plan to get these people home.

So, in the absence of public transportation, there were hundreds of people who began walking home, sometimes up to 400 kilometers. Some of them were too late to reach the state border and were turned back. Many of these people are now being housed in dilapidated shelters in towns where they lack necessary social networks.

Simultaneously, in some cities there were reports of hundreds of people being stranded at train stations—at the Howrah Train Station in Calcutta (Kolkata), for example, migrants were forced to share a single outdoor latrine for multiple days on end. People were literally being crippled by hunger and defecating on themselves.¹ There were other reports of people being hit by cars or run over by trains in their perilous journeys home.²

The whole situation is devastating. Most likely Modi and his Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) will make it out of this moment without much loss to their popularity, because these migrants, who literally create the wealth of the nation, are invisible to the public imagination. One can only hope that this crisis, which has brought international attention to their plight, will be an impetus for some change.

NP: What about the recent protests against the CAA and the National Register of Citizens? What role have they played and how have they been affected by the lockdown?

SA: The BJP’s passage of the NRC and the CAA can be seen as one defining moment in the longer arc of Hindu majoritarian consolidation. The larger motivation behind these two laws is, of course, to deem India’s Muslims foreigners and to bring India a step closer to becoming a Hindu-only nation. The notion of India as a Hindu nation (or Hindutva) has been, since the 1950s, one of the main ideological planks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the paramilitary-cultural organization that is also the parent organization to the BJP.

In pursuit of this vision, the government plans to carry out a massive exercise on a national level to determine who is a legal resident and who is not, through a National Register of Citizens, the NRC. It would be similar to the NRC that has already been rolled out in the northeastern state of Assam, where nearly two million people were essentially left stateless. Now these people are being asked to appeal to so-called “Foreigner’s Tribunals.” But if you lose your appeal, you can be sent to a detention center—and these detention centers are now cropping up all over the country.

While the process of the NRC on the national level will look somewhat different than in Assam because Assam has a distinct set of regional and ethnic forces, the commonality will be the fact that the people who are most affected will be those who are poor and those who lack citizenship documentation for a variety of reasons. A recent study showed that only about 62 percent of India’s population even has a birth certificate, and among the older generations the numbers would be even lower. And, of course, the government knows that Muslims will be disproportionately affected in this situation because next to Dalits (members of the former “untouchable” caste), Muslims are the poorest and the most marginalized social group in Indian society.

The CAA, in contrast to the NRC, is aimed at giving citizenship “back” to people based on religion. It grants refuge to six religious communities, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis, from three different countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, while conspicuously excluding Muslims. According to the government’s claim, the act is meant to protect persecuted religious minorities in those three countries that I named. But if that’s the case, then why does the act not include the Ahmadiyyas or the Hazara Muslims, who are not even considered Muslims in their own countries and whose rights are continuously violated? Why doesn’t it include oppressed populations in other neighboring countries like the Tamils in Sri Lanka or the Rohingya Muslims of Burma (Myanmar)?

The rhetorical defense that I’ve heard from members of the BJP is that Muslims “have Pakistan and the Middle East,” and the non-Muslims in those countries should therefore be taken in by India. You can only buy this logic if you believe that Muslims are fundamentally oppressors, that there are no ethnic or class divisions in “Muslim society,” and that India is a Hindu state. It’s this last part that is in direct contravention of the Constitution, which says clearly that the Republic of India is a secular nation and will not discriminate against anyone on the basis of religion. It’s a kind of coup against the Constitution that’s happening under Modi.

The upshot of the CAA and the NRC is the unprecedented and sustained protests that they have generated. I think the intensity of the protests has surprised many of us because, while people are rightfully angry about the trashing of the Constitution, the NRC and the CAA are, as I said, part of a much longer process of fascist hegemony-building, which has been underway for decades.

There have been many organizations and individuals who have been speaking out against Hindu majoritarianism over the years. People stood up courageously against the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, which took place when Modi was the chief minister of that state, and also against the hundreds of atrocities committed by the RSS since Modi came to power in 2014 at the federal level. Some of them even lost their lives, like the activist-journalist Gauri Lankesh.

But none of these moments generated the same amount of spontaneous outrage that we’re seeing now. On the one hand, I think this has to do with the fact that these two legal reforms threaten to upend the lives of so many people at once. On the other hand, I think we have to see it as an expression of discontent that has been festering for many, many years—a pressure cooker which is now exploding.

Altogether within India there are 139 million internal migrants, according to the national census, and over 200 million Dalits and a hundred million Adivasis (or indigenous people). All of these populations are incredibly precarious and increasingly dispossessed, and they too will be affected by these Islamophobic laws. That is one reason why the CAA and NRC have inspired a rebellion among these sections, especially Dalits. We’ve seen this in marches and rallies against the CAA and NRC led by the Bhim Army (‘Bhim’ refers to the Dalit liberation leader Bhimrao Ambedkar). These rebellions are particularly threatening to the BJP, because they don’t want Muslims to find solidarity with any section of Indian society that the BJP considers “Hindu.”

Many of the protests are also being led and attended by Muslim women, who in the worldview of the Hindu nationalists have no agency. I attended one of these protest sites in Bombay, where 200 to 500 people, mostly working-class Muslim women, have been sitting in for weeks. Many of the women there told me that this was their first time attending a protest, let alone partaking in any activity outside their homes for a prolonged period of time. These kinds of stories are emerging everywhere, not just in Bombay.

So these developments are extremely positive. Although, using the COVID pandemic as an excuse,

the government has evicted many of these protesters, including from Shaheen Bagh (in Delhi), which is the epicenter of the resistance. But I'm optimistic that the uprising will resume very soon, because the anger is so widely and deeply felt right now. It's not dying down.

NP: Like many of the things that the Modi government has done, the lockdown has been imposed with a very heavy, authoritarian hand. But let's step back a little bit and talk about the nature of Modi's political party, the BJP. Some people have described it as fascist. Others think of Modi as India's version of Donald Trump. How would you describe the nature of this political formation, and how does that illuminate the way in which they have responded to the present crisis?

SA: This is a longstanding debate in India, and I don't think it will be resolved any time soon, but I'll just give you a sense of some of the contours of the debate. On one side we have liberal commentators like Ramachandra Guha and Amartya Sen, who have long argued that India's democracy will or can act as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism and fascism on a large scale.

I remember before Modi's first election in 2014, there were some editorials from this camp that were reasoning that even if Modi and the BJP came to power at the federal level, the state governments would act as a counterweight to Hindutva politics, because enough of the states would not be governed by the BJP. They also argued that if some of the media fell into the hands of the Hindu authoritarians, there would be other voices in the media doggedly pursuing the truth. But I think the last six years under Modi's rule has made a mockery of this argument, frankly, because many of these so-called checks and balances have utterly failed us.

In contrast to the liberal commentators, there is a section of the left that claims that, while the Sangh Parivar (the network of Hindu organizations of which the RSS and the BJP are a part) clearly possesses some fascist tendencies, India is not in a fascist situation—at least, not yet. A fascist situation requires a mass movement, which the Sangh Parivar has successfully built, but it also requires a dictatorship, which they do not have.

People who espouse this view posit that in order for a fascist situation to emerge, there needs to be an economic and social crisis that pushes the national elites to abandon bourgeois democracy.³ This would also be predicated on the perception, or perceived threat, that the working class is growing too powerful and must be crushed.

Others on the left have rejected this view on the grounds that such formulations are based too heavily on the experiences of interwar Europe and cannot simply be mapped onto the case of India or the Sangh Parivar, which is a different form of fascism with distinct characteristics.⁴

I think that both of these approaches by the left have validity and warrant further thought and debate. That being said, it is unlikely that the Muslim women who are sitting in against the CAA and NRC—some of whom have faced down an active shooter—are waiting for the left to resolve this question before they continue their fight. In other words, the resistance against Hindu authoritarianism doesn't rely on us resolving these theoretical dilemmas.

Moreover, whether we call it "fascist" or not, what we know is that the condition of Indian democracy is dire. Press freedom is at a low right now. Activists are being imprisoned, and minorities are being lynched by the RSS in pogroms such as the one that happened in Delhi in February, which resulted in at least 53 deaths (most of whom were Muslims).⁵ People who participate in these pogroms are treated with complete impunity. On top of that, an entire state of 12.5 million people, Kashmir, has been kept under a total lockdown and communications blackout for more than 200 days now.

Most frightening, perhaps, is the fact that the Hindu authoritarians, the Sangh Parivar, also constitute a mass movement, which spans civil society. The RSS, by its own estimate, has around five to six million members and more than 56,000 branches (or shakhas) across the country. The Sangh Parivar consists of hundreds of organizations that penetrate right down to the household level. They have unions, women's organizations, think tanks, educational institutes, service organizations, and more. In this sense I would say that compared to the other new varieties of right-wing authoritarianism—or populism or whatever you want to call it—led by Le Pen or Trump or Bolsonaro, the movement that Modi is leading is perhaps the most advanced of all of them.

NP: Can you say more about the structure of the BJP? Who is part of its base, and how has the party changed since its inception?

SA: The BJP was formed in 1980, and since then it has been viewed as a party of the upper castes. Its founding members were mostly Brahmins, and it historically has had a high proportion of support from the upper castes, as compared to the middle and lower castes. I think that makes perfect sense, given its Brahminical worldview.

For example, the RSS, which is the leading cultural organization of the Sangh Parivar, openly aspires to replace the Indian Constitution with the Manusmriti. One of the leading ideologues of the RSS, Madhav Golwalkar, called the Manusmriti “the greatest lawgiver.” The Manusmriti is a religious text where the rules of the caste system are most clearly spelled out. It mandates that the lower castes, the Shudras, meekly serve the upper castes. It specifies a number of rules and punishments to be used essentially to keep lower-caste people subservient. One example of that is if a Shudra man has sex with an upper-caste woman, he can be castrated or put to death. This is a book that the RSS worships. By contrast, Ambedkar, one of the leaders of the Dalit liberation movement and one of the founders of India, used to publicly burn the Manusmriti.

These were and continue to be the ideological bearings of the Sangh Parivar. But I think it's important to understand that for the upper castes it's not simply a devotion to this particular interpretation of Hinduism that draws them to the Sangh Parivar, it's also the fact that in India the category of caste and the category of class roughly overlap. So, in the mind of the capitalist supporters of the BJP (who are also upper caste) it's in their class interest to control and dominate the poor and laboring castes.

There's also a sort of dilemma that is operating here. Many political scientists posited that the BJP could not possibly establish a base among the majority of India, which is comprised of lower castes—OBCs [Other Backward Classes], Dalits, and Adivasis—given these groups' material interests are directly at odds with the programmatic orientation of the party.⁶

Also, to complicate the story, the BJP was formed in the 1980s, a time when the electoral system in India was being completely shaken up. The Congress Party “system” was in decline, and for the first time in independent India, the lower castes had begun to participate in elections effectively.⁷ In particular, there was a new party formed called the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which explicitly opposed the domination of lower castes by the upper castes and made it a point to expand representation of lower castes.

So, the BJP had a problem—specifically, how could it compete with parties like the BSP, which appealed directly and programmatically to the lower-caste populations? To address this problem, the BJP started to have internal discussions as early, I think, as the early 1990s. Based on these discussions, they experimented with different models to try to attract lower-caste voters, ranging from the cooptation of Dalit leaders and the appropriation of Dalit icons, like Ambedkar, to trying to extend patronage and service networks to Dalits and Adivasis.

But it's only really recently that these strategies have started to bear fruit for the BJP. Recently, in fact, the BJP has expanded its base significantly among the lower castes. It's said that part of the reason for their landslide victory at the federal level in 2019 was because of a surge in support among Dalits, other lower castes, and, to a lesser extent, Adivasis, who had actually already started supporting the party a decade ago. Interestingly, the BJP meanwhile hasn't alienated its upper-caste core. This was something that the leaders of the BJP were afraid of in their social-engineering experiments, as they called them—in their efforts to try to rope in the lower castes.

NP: How has the BJP managed to be successful in attracting the lower castes?

SA: One clue can be found in a new autobiography called *I Could Not Be Hindu*, by Bhanwar Meghwanshi, who was an RSS member and also a Dalit.⁸ He joined the RSS when he was a child and quickly became a dedicated activist. But, gradually, the contradictions emerged for him. Despite the fact that he's this exceptionally capable cadre, he can never be promoted to a higher-level position in the RSS. He wants to become a pracharak, a missionary, but eventually he's taken aside by an RSS leader and told, "I personally have no problem with you being a Dalit but others in the organization would have a problem, so it's better not to disturb the peace."

While the author of the autobiography accepts these explanations for a while, he eventually can no longer tolerate the hypocrisy and leaves the RSS. For the author, and perhaps for many other former members of the RSS, the contradiction between the words (that Hindus are all part of one big, united family) and the actions (where some are treated as inferior) are too stark and they can't be reconciled.

But there's another interesting aspect of this autobiography, where the author is enumerating the various explanations or justifications the RSS uses to shut down so-called bothersome questions, like: Why are animals treated better than Dalits under Hinduism? Why, for example, do Hindus worship the dung of cows, but they won't share a meal with Dalits? One such attempt at an explanation by the RSS is that the "worst" aspects of caste, like untouchability, were imposed by medieval Muslim invaders and were never part of the "original," ancient Hindu practice, which simply viewed the caste system as a means to efficiently divide labor in society.

I found his autobiography interesting because it explains the granular ways in which the RSS tries to ideologically indoctrinate lower-caste people. But there's also another strategy used by the RSS, which has been written about by Anand Teltumbde—another prominent Dalit intellectual, who was recently imprisoned for his activism. He's written about how the BJP is trying to aggressively appropriate the image of Ambedkar.⁹ If you read some of the BJP's texts, they claim that Ambedkar was a Hindu nationalist and that he was impressed by the RSS, for example. Of course, all these stories are baseless, but they've still met with some degree of success in winning over these sections, whose interests are directly at odds with Hindutva.

In addition to these forms of ideological conditioning, there are also material dimensions of Hindutva. In this regard there is growing research, the most important of which is by the political scientist Tariq Thatchil, which suggests that Dalit and Adivasi support for the BJP is incumbent not on, necessarily, the ideological buy-in, but rather because these groups have been steadily receiving reliable services from the BJP's partner organizations—private social service organizations that are affiliated to the Sangh Parivar.¹⁰ The most important ones are Seva Bharati (which mostly targets the urban poor) and Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (which targets Adivasis in remote areas).

Essentially, these organizations embed themselves in areas where there is a high concentration of Adivasis or Dalits and where the welfare system is failing to reach or provide for the people. These organizations will offer health care or education with no strings attached, thereby fulfilling an

essential service for the poor. In exchange Dalits and Adivasis reward the BJP with their votes. Thachil argues that the BJP was able to draw on this strategy for the many years when it wasn't in power either at the federal or the state level because these private networks of service don't rely on government funding. They rely on voluntary donations and voluntary labor, which is the hallmark of the Sangh Parivar.

Of course, now that the BJP has taken power, and they have a very strong electoral mandate, they're also using the state's financial resources to enlarge their support among these sections. There are a few initiatives that seem to have been more effective than others in this regard. There's a financial inclusion program, which was started in Modi's first term, an affordable housing program (the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), and then there's a program that provides gas fuel connections for cooking to poor people. They've also provided public goods, such as the construction of roads and electricity.

Some analysis suggests that these programs did indeed help enlarge the BJP's support in the 2019 election, particularly among large sections of the rural population, including the rural proletariat and Dalits. I still think the fact that you see these classes giving their votes to the BJP is quite puzzling, particularly because in Modi's first term the economic conditions didn't unambiguously favor them. In fact, unemployment was at a 40-year high in Modi's first term. The government originally promised to create 20 million jobs and created maybe 1 or 2 percent of that. On top of that, in 2016, Modi initiated a demonetization initiative, where 86 percent of the currency in circulation was suddenly declared illegitimate, bringing on financial catastrophe for small producers and poor people.

But perhaps as far as voting behavior is concerned, these new welfare programs and private sources of welfare have in a sense overshadowed the economic failures of the BJP, at least temporarily. I've seen some analysis that suggests it might be explained by the novelty of these programs. Some of them were newly created, while others were inherited from the previous Congress regime and simply rebranded. But Modi has also spent an unprecedented amount of money just touting the success of these programs through advertising. All of these variables need to be examined with much more in-depth historical and sociological study.

NP: That's fascinating and very important. They're very opportunistic, and, of course, because there's no coherent, plausible opposition at the moment it's easier for them to pull people in their direction. So, let's turn to the opposition and the left. How are various left forces intervening at the moment, and what steps do you think need to be taken to consolidate the opposition—the opposition around the CAA and to Hindutva in general? How can a viable political left be built in India?

SA: The organized parliamentary left in India, as probably in most of the world, has been in a long crisis, which spans decades. In many parts of the country, unions have been reduced to bureaucratic appendages of industrial management and have been unable to keep up with the rapid structural changes in the neoliberal economy. The proportion of temporary and casual or migrant laborers has shot way up compared to the permanent workers, who typically constituted the core union membership. Politically, the left really only viably contests for power in one state, which is Kerala.

But as far as the CAA and the NRC protests go, there's a lot of potential for the left to begin to rebuild. In Kerala the Left Front government led by the CPI(M)—the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—has been carrying out regular rallies and protest meetings across the state, even in small towns and villages, where they're educating people about how their rights will be affected. They even organized a 600-kilometer-long human-chain, where people took a pledge to protect the Constitution against the Hindutva onslaught.

But the parliamentary left's presence has been more or less limited to Kerala and a few university campuses when it comes to their intervention in this particular political moment. And in these sit-ins, as I was talking about, where Muslim women are putting their lives on the line, very rarely do we see the parliamentary left showing up, organizing people, and providing resources. I think that is a missed opportunity.

In order for the left to constitute a real challenge to the rising Hindutva tide, it has to see these spaces as opportunities, not just to expand its own agenda but also to learn. I also think the left would benefit from a deeper engagement with anti-oppression activists who have been urging it to expand its definition of class struggle beyond the point of production to include struggles, not only for citizenship, but also against caste oppression, or against land grabs, or in support of #MeToo-type movements—what feminists call struggles around social reproduction. These are the areas where, I think, India has seen the most vibrant resistance in recent years.

So, the role of the left has to be first and foremost to listen to the members of these struggles, because, frankly, the left has been late to the game. They have to work with these various groups who have been involved in these struggles, to build solidarity, to build trust. If they do this, I believe the left could play an important role in uniting these groups to build a larger counter-hegemonic force. This will be a long and drawn-out process, but, unfortunately, as the right tends to understand better than the left, there are really no shortcuts when you organize to change the course of history.

Notes

1. Suvojit Bagchi, "Howrah station turns into 'hellhole' for hundreds of stranded passengers," *The Hindu*, March 25, 2020.
2. "Courting death and injury, scores of migrants killed in accidents on way home," *Outlook*, May 17, 2020.
3. See, for example, Achin Vanaik, *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism: Secular Claims, Communal Realities* (2017).
4. See Jairus Banaji, ed., *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India* (2013).
5. Jeffrey Gettleman, Sameer Yasir, Suhasini Raj, and Hari Kumar, "How Delhi's Police Turned Against Muslims," *New York Times*, March 12, 2020.
6. See for example Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (1991).
7. For more on this topic, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (2003).
8. Bhanwar Meghwanshi, *I Could Not Be Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS* (2020).
9. See Anand Teltumbde, *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis* (2020).
10. See Tariq Thatchil, "Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India" (2016).