

These are two letters we have received from our friends in Kolkata, India. The first sheds light on the historical rise of the BJP, the plight of Muslims, and other atrocities of the Indian nation-state to contextualize the significance of the mass uprising at Shaheen Bagh, which began in December of 2019 and lasted for several months, rapidly spreading across the country. In the second letter, our friends examine the government's lockdown (supported by the colonial-era Epidemic Diseases Act) and reflect on the role of the media as a key element of the regime's political power, and offer some thoughts on the insurrectionary memory of Shaheen Bagh.

Two Letters From Kolkata

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chogeography of our surroundings. One vital aspect of the policing of space, among others, is to relinquish the possibility of other space-times from our imaginations.

If Shaheen Bagh was not merely a protest but a gesture, a practice whose affective intensities traversed bodies in collective affinity and opened up a horizon for ungovernable becomings, then the question for us is whether the gestures that animated those present in Shaheen Bagh can be so easily forgotten.

Walter Benjamin reminds us that the specters of the past are always here in the present, but their image is fleeting, appearing in moments of danger. In recognizing that image, everything is at stake—lest the calls of our dead for vengeance be drowned by the march of history.

It is in recognizing this image of the past that the potential for redemption exists. And only through this redemption can we answer the cries of the dead. We must not forget the hundreds who were slaughtered during the anti-CAA protests; nor those who were lynched by Hindutva mobs, their deaths mocked by the criminal “justice” system. We must not forget the migrant laborers who lost their lives due to the lockdown, nor the daily brutality of caste, nor all the rapes and the murders. We must not forget the daily grind of shit and misery.

The past still appears in the anger of migrants, in the unexpected riots that erupted in Bangalore, in the protest of farmers in Punjab who blocked the railways. It would be mistaken, we would argue, to judge these events in terms of linear causality, for that is precisely the logic through which such events are recuperated. Our task instead is to uncover in them the threads of *continuity* that are present. This is not to impose some “unity” onto disparate struggles, but to recover an *insurrectionary memory*, one that would obliterate liberalism’s stranglehold.

We are hopeful, in spite of everything, that the desires and gestures that were present at Shaheen Bagh still manage to find their expression in fugitive spaces, biding their time. In the coming days, our task is to foster such zones of opacity and spaces of fugitivity, to find each other within them. For now, we pay heed to the words uttered by the young poet, Aamir Aziz, who came of age during the anti-CAA protests: “Everything will be remembered.”

Two Letters From Kolkata

Liaisons

Everything Will Be Remembered

“There’s a real battle taking place. And what’s at stake? It’s what might broadly be called popular memory... if you are in charge of the memory of the people, you are in charge of their vitality.” – Michel Foucault.

“Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” – Walter Benjamin.

The rhythm of the clock resumes, it takes hold of our bodies, it plunges us into the despondent and dark waters of normality. Pulled down by the weight of linear time, we fall, and forget. We forget that not so long ago, our bodies were animated by a different kind of rhythm—the rhythm of revolt.

“Everything is normal, there is no problem,” said a resident, recently, of Shaheen Bagh. Except for a mural, no trace remains of what took place. The tents where people shared food, poetry, and songs have been cleared to make way for traffic. The shops lining the stretch that had closed down due to the protests have resumed business. It is as if *nothing* ever happened.

In this operation, memory itself emerges as a site of struggle. The imposition of collective amnesia is the means through which “the blood that has dried on the codes” remains obscured and governmental apparatuses resume their functions. Recuperating the past is essential for the linear temporality of our social order. As “peace” resumes, we forget the bodies of the oppressed, buried in the debris of history.

A re-encoding of popular memory is at work with respect to Shaheen Bagh. In recent months, the media has intensified its war on popular memory by spinning heady conspiracy theories about secret Bollywood drug rings. But in this war, the state has also found an ally in the pandemic. As upholding “social distancing” became a prerequisite for being a moral and upstanding citizen, the lines between public space and the “unruly ghettos,” between us and the Other, were re-entrenched. Policing also has a spatial aspect, operating through the psy-

then-editor Bobby Ghosh to resign and pulled the tracker down. TV licenses have been handed out to those who take a pro-establishment stance or are funded by businessmen with sympathies for the BJP. They earn revenues through state-sponsored ads and content, while the state gets good press.

Even with all this, however, we are inclined to disagree with the democratic theorists of good communication when they say that this consists of an assault *on* the media; on the contrary, we see an absolute strategic investment being made in the media apparatus—the purging of dissident individuals is a part of this operation—so that it may be reconstituted, without any illusions, as an apparatus of glory.

It would be mistaken to think that the shaping of public opinion is a purely cognitive process wherein mere information is relayed; on the contrary, public opinion is shaped through affects. Just shortly before enforcing the lockdown, Modi asked people to engage in the vulgar spectacle of gathering on balconies and clapping and banging utensils as a show of support to health workers. In recent years, we have seen the cow take political center-stage, thanks to its sacred status in Hindu religious mythology, and BJP supporters organized cow-urine drinking parties as a means to cure themselves of the virus. It is all too easy to dismiss these acts as “ignorant”—mere capriciousness on the part of an out-of-touch despot—yet beneath the spectacular stupidity, what this really entailed was a powerful reorientation and management of affects. Egged on by media channels, such rituals were a massive PR exercise designed to reaffirm faith in the government and in the figure of Modi himself, after his legitimacy had been threatened by months of popular protests and disaffection.

This is exactly where the ritualistic nature of spectacular news plays such an important role. Through this affective, pre-cognitive, and psychological assault aimed at hearts and minds—one whose hold the neutrality of facts simply cannot dispel—the media helps constitute the very *people* who buy the regime’s lies, who are willing to kill and even die for it in the name of the nation’s, as well as their own, salvation. Communication has never been neutral, but is synonymous with the intensification of apparatuses of control.

Shaheen Bagh

Dear Liaisons,

Long before the pandemic imposed itself on India’s collective psyche, the intolerable had already been lodged deep into the fabric of our daily lives: Islamophobic lynchings, caste atrocities, the garlanding and celebration of rapists, butchers and murderers as national heroes, the perfection of lying into high art by the obscene spectacle of news media, witch-hunts of political dissidents, democratic institutions shedding all “democratic” pretensions and turning against their very demos, concerted assaults on minorities through the twin terrors of policing and policy, the systematic destitution of the already destitute, “detention” camps, obscene levels of inequality—all of this shrouded, protected, and defended by way of nationalist hysteria. This had been our daily diet of normalcy.

Indian Democracy and the BJP

“Democracy is in danger!” “Is this the final nail in democracy’s coffin?” For six years now, the left-liberal political opposition has never ceased to remind us of how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or “Indian People’s Party,” is endangering the democratic spirit of the Indian state, to the point that such statements have become banal truisms. Yet, and perhaps especially because of how ingrained it is as political common sense, this idea deserves further scrutiny. Did the BJP really just magically coalesce out of the ether one day to parasitically occupy hitherto pristine political institutions—like a virus from the outside—or was it the result of contradictions immanent to the very project of the post-colonial Indian nation-state? After all, in 1999, then in 2014 and 2019, the BJP was elected *democratically*.

Established in 1980, the BJP is the parliamentary wing of a wider family of Hindu nationalist organizations known as the “Sangh Parivar” (RSS family). Its immediate political precursor was the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), or “Indian People’s Association,” but much of its ideology can be traced to the key organization of the “family”—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—the “National Volunteers Corps” known as the RSS—which was founded in 1925. The RSS, which purports to be a “cultural” and not a “political” organization, is an advocate of the ideology of *Hindutva* (Hinduness), a brand of nationalism that prioritizes Hindu cultural traditions and values and seeks to create an “Akhand Bharat” (“Undivided India”), based on the universalization of such values. The RSS’s political ideas primarily draw from the works and thought of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, widely considered to be the father of *Hindutva*. Paradoxically given the honorific of “veer” (brave), Savarkar was a cowardly and repugnant little man who, while in prison, repeatedly begged the British for concessions. His other prominent accolades include justifying the use of rape as a political weapon against minorities and being an ardent admirer of Italian and German fascism, going so far as to draw a comparison between German Jews and Indian Muslims: *“But if we Hindus in India grow stronger in time, these Moslem friends of the league type will have to play the part of German Jews.”*

Aiding the state’s carceral operations are news channels which have given up any pretense of having anything to do with the truth. Opponents of the regime have long denounced the terror of “fake news” carried out in joint collaboration by the media apparatus and the BJP’s IT Cell, but—like the democratic theorists of communicative action before them—they reduce the media to an instrument of political power rather than something constitutive of political power itself. “Speaking truth to power”—countering propaganda with the neutrality of facts—profoundly misunderstands the stakes of the media’s political offensive.

In his book *Laudes Regiae*, Ernst Kantorowicz notes how political acclamations have been indispensable “for the emotionalism of fascist regimes,” and Carl Schmitt saw the immediate presence of the acclaiming people as a more legitimate expression of popular will than parliamentary democratic institutions. Acclamation, or the apparatus of glory, plays a fundamental role in the legitimation of sovereignty. While it is true that acclamation today no longer manifests itself in the form of theological rituals or the immediate presence of the people, it would be a mistake to think that our modern secular democracies have done away with it. If it is the “People”—that representative fiction in whose name one can always butcher living beings—who are sovereign, then acclamation resides in the process of forming “public opinion.” It is precisely here that the counter-revolutionary role of the media is revealed: it is the instrument par excellence involved in the shaping and constitution of “public opinion,” and it is in this light that the collusion between the Indian state and the media should be understood.

Since the BJP came to power, the media has increasingly come under the state’s stranglehold. Dissenting journalists have been attacked and even murdered by Hindu nationalists. Government spending for advertisements—a major source of revenue for print media—has been frozen for papers taking a line critical of the government. Media One, a channel in Kerala, had its satellite link disrupted for criticizing the government. Another paper, The Hindustan Times, was working on a hate tracker chronicling the various hate crimes under the Modi regime. The government, clearly not pleased with the development, forced

harmful from their long journeys, many died in centers that became sites of superspreading and whose horrific conditions made their health even worse. The only response of local administrations was to let people die, either from the virus or other conditions, as the infection burned through, only concerned with minimizing the spread into villages.

Once out of quarantine, people faced starvation and unemployment. Millions fell back into poverty, as youths who had managed to get relatively better paying jobs in cities as technicians, programmers, engineers, and nurses, came back empty-handed. With 122 million jobs lost in April alone, three-fourths of those in the informal sector, and a further 11 million white collar jobs lost by September, the poorest families have been the worst affected, bearing the majority of the lockdown's economic devastation.

Socially, there has been a resurgence of horrific practices like female infanticide, child marriage, child labor, and human trafficking. While economic conditions are a major cause of this, the situation is further compounded by the intensification of caste oppression. A large majority of migrant workers are from lower caste backgrounds. As they returned, arriving from cities that were focal points of contagion, they were branded with the stigma of being potential carriers of COVID-19. Isolation and ostracization have pushed innumerable families to the brink, making them vulnerable to increased victimization from within and without.

Apparatus of Glory

"We do not lack communication, on the contrary we have too much of it," wrote Deleuze and Guattari. We are inclined to agree with them that what we lack is "resistance to the present": the present panorama of suffering, state repression, and widespread devastation would not be possible to such an extent without the government's dominance of the media apparatus. With all protests now confined to the digital sphere, over the past six months, the state and its police have launched an unprecedented assault on the population. Students, journalists, activists, lawyers, teachers, artists—none of us are sure to escape prison today.

The BJP's first real taste of electoral success came in the years immediately leading up to and following the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque) in 1992. The site of the Babri Masjid, a nearly 500-year-old mosque, was declared to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, a Hindu deity, by Hindu nationalists. On December 6th, 1992, the Sangh Parivar organized a rally of over 150,000 people at the site. After incendiary speeches from prominent BJP leaders, in a matter of hours, the mob charged at the mosque and brought down the entire structure. The incident led to widespread communal discord¹ throughout society, and over 2,000 people lost their lives in the riots that followed. The religious polarization caused by the Babri Masjid allowed the BJP to eventually form their first majority government in parliament in 1999. This is to simply ascertain that Islamophobia, coupled with a toxic brand of majoritarian nationalism, are a fundamental part of the BJP's DNA. But the BJP's Islamophobic intervention was a causal catalyst—a strategic intervention meant to exacerbate the tensions and fissures already existing within the social fabric.

The BJP's rise in 2014 cannot be separated from the broader political context of widespread discontent in the face of decades of neoliberal policies, as well as a Congress racked by corruption scandals. Aided by a slick advertising campaign and a well-oiled PR-machinery, the rise of Modi was in many ways a recuperation of this popular discontent. As Walter Benjamin once said, "*behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution.*"

Today, as the BJP strives to strip millions of Indian Muslims of their citizenship, and as political struggles are waged around, through, and in its name, Indian "citizenship" itself deserves further scrutiny. Instead of being some self-evident truth, the ideal citizen-subject has historically been produced through a range of strategies and tactics. At the heart of this lies the question: who has historically qualified as an Indian citizen and who has not?

¹ In the Indian context, "communalism" generally refers to religious-driven tensions between communities. Hindu-Muslim riots, for example, are described as communal riots. The term is also used in a more sinister way (i.e. any Muslim-specific demand may be described as "communal" by secularists, and the term is used to describe Kashmir separatists as well); on the other hand, liberals also describe Modi and the BJP as "communal."

Citizenship as a concept is intricately bound up with nation-states, which themselves only manage to materialize by strictly establishing boundaries and distinctions. One such distinction is that of *majority* and *minority*: the former constitutes what is considered to be the “natural soul,” or core of the nation, and the latter—constituted through a lack of “natural soul”—form the means by which the majority is further identified, delineated, and solidified in its values and norms. The loyalty of minorities, then, unlike that of the majority, cannot be taken for granted. Citizenship might be defined as a sort of *permanent tribunal*—minorities must constantly stand trial to prove their fealty to the nation. When it comes to proving their loyalty, they are marked with a question that can never quite be erased – a question mark can remain, but always with the potential of metamorphosing into the mark of a “terrorist” or “traitor.” The tribunal of citizenship allows minorities to be subjected to a permanent coercive surveillance wherein constant sacrifices are demanded as proof of loyalty. Yet no sacrifice is ever enough.

In the age of Modi, all this is painfully evident. Muslims are lynched with impunity for their choice of meat, the state passes entire bills stripping them of their citizenship, and “anti-national” is the term of choice to describe anyone critical of the BJP’s Islamophobia. But the question of whether a Muslim can be an Indian citizen is not new. It goes back to the Partition of 1947 and the establishment of the Indian nation-state.

Partition was the event that threw existing identities and histories into question and simultaneously allowed for the congealing of new ones. More than half a million people lost their lives in the turmoil as “minority” populations in different areas were driven out: the Hindus and Sikhs from the territories of West Pakistan, and Muslims from East Punjab and neighboring tracts in India. Fourteen million people were displaced and turned into refugees, and an immense number of people were looted, raped, and maimed.

It was against this backdrop of violence that the identities constitutive of the Indian nation-state were formed. One such identity was that of the “Nationalist Muslim,” for which there was no equivalent Hindu category. Since the late nineteenth century, politically-conscious

fanned the outrage. Jamlo, a 12-year-old girl from Chattisgarh, who was working in Telangana, journeyed 140 kilometers by foot before falling dead from exhaustion 60 kilometers from her home. In Maharashtra, 15 migrant laborers fell asleep from exhaustion on rail tracks and were crushed by a train. The fact that humans weren’t allowed to use transportation while the transportation of goods continued uninterrupted reveals the antagonism of the economy—the circulation of goods—to life itself.

Modi trotted out public addresses to try and manage the criticism and anger. With deflections and by appeals to charity and a sense of national duty, the government has tried to construct the narrative that it is up to the people to help each other. At the same time, Modi also made many emotional displays, asserting that he was hurt the worst by what befell the public, but was forced to do it for the greater good.

Though opposition politicians attacked the BJP for the unplanned lockdown, state governments across party lines largely followed the same pattern of neglecting public health measures, enacting the brutal enforcement of lockdowns, offering nearly zero economic and social aid, and hindering the movement of migrant laborers. One major reason for forcing laborers to stay in cities was to ensure that the labor market remained whenever the lockdown was lifted.

Millions of migrants continued to defy the movement ban by walking on highways, spontaneous and scattered protests broke out among thousands in cities like Hyderabad and Bangalore, and public shock and outrage increased as stories of tragedies on the highways kept coming: in May, the government eventually relented and allowed special trains to carry people stranded in cities back to their home states. The arrangement, however, remained meager and chaotic for weeks, managing to carry relatively few people, against the millions stranded. By July 1st, according to the government’s own estimate, more than 10 million people had walked from cities to their home states and villages.

After arriving back at their villages, the suffering only grew. The migrants faced forced quarantining into hellish quarantine centers, with little in the way of food and basic hygiene, let alone medical treatment, as healthcare facilities are virtually non-existent in rural India. Already

precedented powers. Under the cover of the pandemic, the government thus sought to upend labor and welfare laws, expand police powers, push for further privatization, and wipe out the fledgling popular resistance movements emerging across the country in the wake of Shaheen Bagh.

Alongside the brutal enforcement of the lockdown, the total absence of action on public health measures continued for a long time. Large businesses took to massive layoffs, with no program from the government to avert or curb them, and there was also no national moratorium on rent or utility bills. The worst affected, however, were migrant laborers, beggars, and sex workers, who have minimal to zero savings and live on daily wages often in cities far away from the barebones familial and social support available in their home villages.

It is important to point out that the significant increase in the population of migrant laborers is a direct result of two decades of neoliberal policies devastating rural livelihoods—the responsibility of all governments, regardless of whichever party has been in power. For years, farmer suicides have been growing at an alarming rate. It finally took the virus to expose the reality of migrants and initiate a political conversation about their lives.

Across the country, millions of migrant laborers became homeless as landlords kicked them out, seeing them as a liability in case the lockdown dragged on. The government's decision to refuse support to even the poorest in terms of housing, income, and food relief—alongside the blanket ban on public transport, which made it impossible for them to return to their native villages—shocked even the imagination of the Indian mainstream, usually committed to an extraordinary degree of apathy when it comes to social violence.

Faced with such devastation, millions of migrant laborers took to walking back to their villages—a journey often hundreds to nearly a thousand kilometers, and many times even further away. Images of swelling masses on national highways, walking under the Indian summer's scorching sun—among them the elderly, the young, the pregnant, and the sick—flooded television screens by the first week of April and

Hindus held two camps: there were “Hindu nationalists”—the political ancestors of the BJP—who prioritized Hindu culture and traditions, and “secular nationalists,” those whose nationalism was rooted in secular and democratic principles. The first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is an example of the latter. Regardless of the group one belonged to, the nationalism of both groups was never in doubt. Indian Muslims, however, received a very different distinction—that between “Nationalist Muslims” (supporters of Indian nationalism) and “Muslims” (all Muslims, whether politically active or not, who were not explicit supporters of Indian nationalism). All Hindus, whether driven by secular or Hindu values, were primarily nationalists. Muslims, however, were primarily *Muslims*.

To weaken the freedom movement, the British had long fostered discord between Hindus and Muslims through their divide and rule policies; however, British efforts to win the Muslims over to their side (in what was no doubt a strategic move) had already sown seeds of doubt regarding Muslim loyalty in the nationalist imagination. Post-Partition, Indian Muslims weren't just any minority. They were the minority who had agitated for Pakistan. If they were to now choose India as their place of belonging, in order to earn their citizenship, they had to demonstrate their sincerity. The Muslims who remained in India, it was feared, harbored sympathies for Pakistan. Rumors spread they were storing arms. Were these really for self-defense, which they should at any rate have entrusted to the government? What right did these people—potential Pakistan sympathizers, defectors-until-yesterday, traitors-in-waiting—have to stay in India?

This was not just a fringe discourse confined to Hindu nationalists. Such questions were raised by secular nationalists and Congress party leaders as well. Writing in the paper *Vartman* in 1947, Babu Sampurnanand, then Education Minister in the Congress Government of Uttar Pradesh, expressed his fears about a war between India and Pakistan: “our worries will be greatly increased, for it is not impossible that the sympathies of our Muslim population will veer towards Pakistan.”²

Reality, however, was somewhat different. For most Muslims, “it

2 Gyanendra Pandey, *Can a Muslim be an Indian?*

was, as many who lived through those times recall, primarily a question of where one could live in relative mental, and physical, peace.” Many of them went back and forth across the border as they had done pre-Partition, simply because they had family and friends there. In northern India, significant sections of the population, especially Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Pakistan (who had been victims of communal violence themselves), as well as the Hindu rightwing leadership, demanded that Muslims be expelled from India and be sent to Pakistan. It was in this climate of fear that most Indian Muslims had to make a choice.

While such suspicions may have been birthed to a large extent by the exceptional circumstances of the Partition, in its aftermath, they did not just fade away. At the time of the inception of the Indian nation-state, amidst the turmoil of the Partition, for Indian Muslims, proof of loyalty through sacrifice—manifest by the shedding of one’s own blood—became the password to citizenship. “It is a password that has been demanded of Muslims in India, in one form or another, ever since,”³ and perhaps never more so than now.

This is why to oppose the BJP—in the name of some ideal Nehruvian democracy—is to completely misunderstand the terrain of battle: even the ideal citizen is already a product of power. Even the purest of democracies, that of Athens, subjugated all living beings (*zoe*) to a particular life (*bios*)—the life of the Polis (administration of the city state). Exclusion is not an anomaly, but is built into the heart of concepts that ultimately seek to render all life governable. The authoritarian and liberal poles of the state exist in a dialectical relationship: the Magician-King who rules through terror and the Jurist-Priest who binds through contract are not mutually exclusive, one is liable to switch into the other at any given moment. For the sake of our liberation, we must not lack the courage to dream a little bigger and expand the political horizon of our emancipation.

³ Gyanendra Pandey, *Can a Muslim be an Indian?*

series of developments that occurred with these groups in the lead up to the lockdown. These revelations have largely been ignored in the mainstream media, but are crucial to understanding the government’s actions.

Their research cautioned the government against a coercive, China-style lockdown, emphasizing instead the need for stockpiling PPEs, training an auxiliary and supportive healthcare workforce, enhancing ward and ICU capacity across the country, and procuring ventilators, etc. It warned that “generalized large-scale transmission is inevitable with devastating numbers spaced by time and location,” and further noted any lockdown would have little impact. The second paper mapped the possible spread of the infection in India’s four mega-cities—Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bengaluru—and presented action plans around community-based testing and quarantining as a means to curb the worst of the pandemic: “a national lockdown is not quarantine or isolation. In Indian conditions such a lockdown provides social isolation for only the rich who live in less dense and high-floor space areas. To some degree it can protect them from the spread... But, for the poor, without high levels of door-to-door screening and the fastest possible quarantining of those found positive, a lockdown will only help the virus spread intra-community.”

The recommendations made by the ICMR were ignored by the government. Though none of the expert bodies had officially recommended a lockdown, the government still went ahead with it. All businesses and factories were closed, except those dealing with pharmaceuticals, food supply, news media, and utilities. All public transport, schools, and daycare centers were shut down. When a panel of members from across the multiple expert groups met with the government at the end of March, they were bewildered and frustrated by its lack of preparedness.

The enforcement of the lockdown wasn’t a disastrous or poorly planned policy with the intention of protecting public health, but an opportunistic projection of state power over social and economic life that would in any other context be difficult for even Modi to pull off. In terms of optics, it gave the government an easy out from its inaction throughout the crisis, and at the same time allowed it to assume un-

colonial government had blamed the spread of the plague on the moral degeneracy of Indian religious practices, so too did Modi's government blame the spread of the virus on a religious gathering of Muslims that caused a minor spike. This was blown out of proportion by Modi's media lapdogs, who helped metamorphose the virus into a "Muslim virus" by relishing in conspiracy theories about a vast "Corona Jihad." Just as the brunt of the colonial government's punitive policies were borne out by the poor, whose huts were hosed down with disinfectants and razed to the ground, today's migrant laborers endured the worst of the lockdown, hosed down with chemical disinfectants in broad daylight. As pointed out by Dwaipayan Banerjee,⁴ in the government's handling of the pandemic, one finds an interplay of the two colonial approaches to epidemics: on one hand, the use of punitive powers granted by a state of emergency to stamp out all dissent; on the other, a laissez-faire approach that protects the "economic interests" (of the wealthy) while India's already-moribund public health infrastructure inches towards total obliteration.

The Hindu nationalism and orthodox jingoism of the BJP do not undermine the "true spirit" of the state, as the left-liberal view would have it, but are instead the face currently adopted by it. The atrocities and disastrous policies being enacted are not an aberration brought by Modi, but fit into a greater constellation of the state's own historical actions. Once we examine the dialogue that took place within the Modi administration during the months of January to March, an image of the state's rationality emerges in sharp relief.

After the first case of COVID-19 on Indian soil was confirmed, several expert and advisory groups were formed with the mandate of guiding the government response to the pandemic, along with the Indian Council on Medical Research (ICMR), the apex body on clinical research in India, and the NITI Aayog, a policy think tank under the Government of India. *Article14*, a news outlet run by a collective of investigative journalists, accessed presentations, meeting minutes, and other documents that weren't made public, and pieced together a

The end of 2019 was marked by a global wave of insurrections, and India was no exception. In December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed by the Indian Parliament. This act came on the heels of the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), which would require every Indian to provide a set of documents to prove their citizenship. The implementation of the NRC in Assam saw the exclusion of over one million people, who were then deported to detention camps. Assam has a long history of xenophobia against Bengali immigrants (especially Bengali Muslims), a sentiment often given a progressive sheen under the rhetoric of "indigenous rights," while simply serving to amplify state-centric frameworks of segregation and political borders. In 1983, over 2,000 Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh (according to unofficial counts, the numbers are a lot higher) lost their lives in the pogrom that came to be known as the "Nellie Massacre." While Muslims had no doubt been the prime target of the BJP's implementation of the NRC in Assam, the final result also saw the exclusion of a large number of Bengali Hindus, who comprised a significant section of the BJP's voter base. It was in the wake of this that the CAA was implemented. The CAA would allow illegal migrants from the countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to opt for citizenship as long as they were Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, or Parsis—as long as they were of any religious origin but Islam.

The CAA was passed on December 11th, 2019, and protests erupted almost spontaneously throughout the country. Shaheen Bagh, a neighborhood in Delhi's Jamia Nagar area, emerged as the most enduring symbol of the anti-CAA protests. Though there are a few rich businessmen as well as professors who belong to the nearby university, Jamia Millia Islamia, Shaheen Bagh is largely looked upon by its more well-to-do neighbors in the adjoining areas as a "ghetto-like" locality of lowly-placed Muslims. Largely comprised of carpenters, welders, plumbers, and grill makers, it is a place to procure cheap labor, though its population is otherwise seen as "wild" and "uneducated"—definitely to be kept at a distance. Up until 1990, Shaheen Bagh had no electricity or sewer

⁴ Dwaipayan Banerjee, "Fantasies of Control: The Colonial Character of the Modi Government's Actions During the Pandemic."

lines, and today potable water is still scarce—the children of poorer families spend hours fetching water from taps mounted inside the lanes. In a strange fact linking the history of the neighborhood with that of the BJP, a major population boom happened after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. Fearing for their safety due to communal riots, Muslims from mixed localities migrated to the area and set up homes. Today, it is a densely populated area with a fairly diverse population, with varying views when it comes to Islam. Nonetheless, the divisions between the social classes are well-marked and maintained and people belonging to these separate worlds respect the boundaries.

No one in Shaheen Bagh is unfamiliar with Jamia Millia Islamia—they all know someone who studies or has studied there. For many of Shaheen Bagh's youth, it is the institution of their dreams, a place where they one day aspire to study themselves. On December 15th, 2019, the Delhi police carried out a brutal assault on the university. They forcibly broke their way in, vandalized the institution, fired tear gas inside libraries, and violently beat up students. The brute nature of the incident—a display of state power in its naked ferocity—sent a ripple throughout Shaheen Bagh, a ripple that broke down the walls separating the people within. With no political backing or formal organization, the neighbors of Shaheen Bagh decided to come together, take to the streets, and block the highway.

Before looking more closely at the overcoming that took place in Shaheen Bagh, it is worth noting the “secular” left's role in these events. As some friends wrote in the wake of the anti-globalization movement, the left “is an integral part of the neutralization mechanisms peculiar to liberal society.” This seems evident when one recalls that the first wave of discontent against the NRC and CAA was spontaneous and *violent*. Buses were vandalized, tires were burned on the streets, and railway property was damaged. The left, along with the liberal parties, responded by condemning the violence, distinguishing between “good” civil protests and “bad” violent ones. Once the left had established the grip of its informal bureaucracies on an ostensibly “leaderless” movement, it began to speak the language of democratic good sense.

potential “contagion” of ungovernable attitudes and bodies in revolt.

Martial rule was imposed in cities, forcible house searches were conducted, the infected were sent to be “quarantined” in hospitals (which was often seen as equivalent to a death sentence, absent public health infrastructure), the neighborhoods of the poor were hosed down with disinfectants, their possessions confiscated, and the roofs and walls of their huts were torn down to bring in light. In some cases, in this drive for purification, entire huts were razed to the ground. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was arrested for his writings on the colonial administration's plague measures after Pune's Special Plague Officer, W.C. Rand, was assassinated. Elsewhere, armed confrontations broke out between the poor and the army and police. Even after it became clear that the spread of the plague was not dependent on localities, the poor remained the privileged target of the act, as their houses continued to be demolished and their possessions consecrated. As more armed confrontations followed and the threat of a united Hindu-Muslim front emerged—conjuring the specter of the 1857 insurrection, which had almost overthrown colonial rule—the colonial administration changed its tactics. By the late 1890s, it adopted a much less punitively interventionist outlook. This accounts for the laissez-faire approach taken to the influenza epidemic in 1918, which was simply allowed to ravage the population.

In Modi's handling of the pandemic, the echoes of colonial governance are many. Just as the bubonic plague had arrived at an opportune time for the colonial government, so did COVID-19 for Modi and the BJP. Even after repeated attempts—from widespread media slander and the threats of politicians to a programmed killing of Muslims in Delhi with the complicity of the police—the government failed to kill the “contagious” spirit of Shaheen Bagh. Just as the 1897 Epidemic Diseases Act had allowed the colonial administration to attack insurgent sections of the population, so did the pandemic in 2020 allow the government to assume extraordinary punitive powers to go on an unprecedented carceral assault against potential dissidents on trumped up charges. As the protest sites and blockades were cleared, through its police, the state was able to re-establish its sovereignty over public space. Just as the

In April, through an ordinance, the Modi government enforced the colonial-era Epidemic Diseases Act. Ostensibly designed to protect frontline healthcare workers, the ordinance—as well as the lockdown itself—earned the government praise from well-meaning activists and the left-liberal intelligentsia, who saw these as necessary steps.

The enforcement of the Epidemic Diseases Act allowed the state to unleash an inoculatory regime that increasingly blurred the line between national and biological immunity, between the threat posed to the human body by the virus and the threat posed to the social body by the government's critics and political dissidents. To be guilty until proven innocent—so said the new ordinance with respect to those seen as “causing grievous injury.” It also authorized the police to conduct forcible searches, seizures, and imprisonments.

In a sense, the invocation of the Epidemic Diseases Act was a strategic response on the part of the Indian state, one that used the pandemic as a pretext to stamp out all dissent—a strategy pulled right out of the colonial playbook. The act itself dates back to 1897, when the bubonic plague was ripping through the population and there was widespread flight from cities that were concerned commercial hubs, like Bombay (now Mumbai). One of the reasons the colonial administration treated the bubonic plague as a singular crisis, compared to malaria or the ensuing influenza epidemic, for example, was the large-scale flight of capital and labor that threatened its interests. But another significant factor was that, prior to the plague, Bombay and Pune had become hubs of anti-colonial activity and had seen experiments in local self-governance. The plague itself was seen by the colonial officials as evidence of failure on the part of Indians to rule themselves. Viewed through the racial discourse of colonial medicine, the plague was understood as a result of the moral degeneracy of Indian religious practices, of native “filth” and “darkness,” allowing the colonial administration to set up a punitive legal and police regime around fears of “contagion.” It is precisely here that modern humanitarianism—speaking the language of “protection” and “public health” while intensifying its attacks on an insurgent population—finds its point of origin. The bubonic plague became a pretext for the colonial administration to not so much attack the virus as the

These neutralizing mechanisms in the name of secularization were on full display during the protests at the university. “*La ilaha illallah*” (“There is no god but Allah”) were the words written on the walls of Jamia Millia Islamia in December that became the source of contention between, broadly, two student camps. On one hand, there were those who objected to the words’ effacement, reiterating that the CAA and NRC were an assault against Muslims in particular, and that Muslims needed to be able to assert themselves. On the other, there were students who were largely leftists and liberals—who had somehow appointed themselves as the spokespeople of the movement—who claimed that the words were “communal” and against the “secular” values of the movement. Painted next to these words, as if to defuse their effect, were slogans characteristic of the Indian left: “Secular India,” “Be United,” “Civil disobedience,” and “*Sab ek hain*” (“All are equal”).

In this incident, there are two things worth pointing out. The first is that the secularism the left invokes—that of Nehruvian democracy—was always premised on an inclusive exclusion, its “universality” nothing but a strategic cloak necessary at a particular historical juncture to establish certain boundaries, categories, and distinctions—and therefore legitimacy—for the fledgling post-colonial Indian nation-state. It would be wrong to understand this “secularism” as some sign of historical “progress”: far from addressing or changing the relations within the social body which were at the root of communal tension and violence, the Indian state’s “secularism” strategically recodified those same relations within the framework of the post-independence Indian state. In other words, this secularism is not opposed to communalism, but is perfectly coextensive with it—it is its other side. The second is that, in the name of some nebulous “unity,” by denying the specificity of the Modi regime’s anti-Muslim policies, and by policing the expression of religious minorities, the left plays a role not too dissimilar from that of the state: it adopts a discretionary gaze which allows it to make distinctions between “good” and “bad” Muslims.

In all this, the left reveals itself to be the party of counter-insurgency par excellence. The more our faith in the democratic fictions of the state breaks down, the more the left seeks to preserve them. The more

it becomes obvious that the law is nothing but war itself, the more the left wants to reaffirm our faith in juridical fictions. The more it becomes apparent that we must organize amongst ourselves and build our own power—learn to share, care for, and protect ourselves and secede from the murderous games of the social—the more the left speaks of “civil society.” In the left’s scheme of things, all intensity must be *neutralized*, all discontent *pacified*, and then sacrificed on the altar of the state. Still bound by the historical shadow cast by Lenin’s corpse, the left dreams of its ideal nation-state, its ideal police. It prefers to forget that states only flower on the manure of broken bodies.

When the women of Shaheen Bagh took to the streets and blockaded the road, it was a monumental step creating a deep fissure in the oppressive geography of the metropolis. While public demonstrations in India are a dime a dozen, the irruption of the ghetto into the streets upsets the racialized logic of the metropolis, whose “public order” is premised on the exclusion of the “ghettoes” from “public space”—on synthesizing a memory which bears no traces of their existence. Hence the bizarre statement of the Supreme Court that protests must take place in their “designated” places, and the media’s outcry over Shaheen Bagh causing “public inconvenience.” Our modern liberal democracies are premised on the hypocritical fiction of a split between the spheres of the public and the private. The “public” is the sphere of serious politics whereas the “private” sphere of the home is depoliticized, to lend support to a whole network of dominations. Herein lies the novelty of Shaheen Bagh: the protests were led by the neighborhood’s women, the majority of whom were homemakers. In the literature surrounding the Indian nationalist freedom movement, one already reads about a women’s “emancipation” premised on preserving and enshrining their role as caretakers of the home, the spiritual private sphere, an emancipation premised on their exclusion from the serious sphere of politics. It is these hypocritical fictions to which the act of courage shown by the women of Shaheen Bagh laid waste.

In the cold December winter, underneath the tent put up at the protest site, women—mothers, grandmothers, and grandchildren—hud-

Lockdown

Dear Liaisons,

In our last letter, we wanted to communicate the experience of Shaheen Bagh, but did not have the time to elaborate on what came next, in the form of a lockdown. Much after India detected its first COVID-19 case on January 30th, 2020, the Modi government showed little recognition of the issue. From January to March, the BJP was preoccupied with countering the anti-CAA protests, horse-trading legislators to rout elected state governments, organizing a pogrom in Delhi, and welcoming Donald Trump. States were left to come up with their own plans for handling confirmed infections through the last week of March. Then, on March 24th, 2020, a nationwide lockdown was declared by Prime Minister Modi, with a notice period of four hours. Much like the rest of the world, the lockdown suspended the most basic rights of movement offered under bourgeois democracy, exacerbated existing social tensions, intensified political borders (both in terms of geography and daily life), and gave the state carte blanche to launch a punitive assault on its population.

thing. As the phrase “social distancing” entered our political lexicon and became part of our everyday lives, after one hundred days, the women of Shaheen Bagh finally ended their indefinite sit-in and headed to their homes. In a final insult to popular memory, as if to make us forget the land of poetry that was Shaheen Bagh, the police cleared everything from the spot, making sure that nothing remained.

In our next letter, we want to write to you about the devastation the lockdown imposed, but we also want to share our thoughts about the persistence—as *insurrectionary memory*—of the experience of Shaheen Bagh.

dled together on mattresses and blankets to share their stories. They refused to be represented by any political party. Arrangements were made so that *namaaz* (the Muslim prayer) could be offered outside the tent. Along with their stories, people shared biscuits, juice, and tea. Iftar was served to women in the evening to end the day’s Ramadan fast. Hundreds of thousands of people started pouring in to share poetry and music, to laugh and to show solidarity.

The media and the political parties sneered: “How could these “ignorant” and “uneducated” women emerge from their “ingrained backwardness” and take to the streets in their hijabs? What did they know about laws and politics? Who was paying them?” Yet beneath the jibes and condescending bluster, one could sense their fear. Fear—because no matter how hard the media tried to spin Shaheen Bagh as a “Muslim issue,” it turned into a nationwide movement comprised of people from all religions and walks of life—Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Dalits, Jains. That people come together outside of institutionally mediated codes, that they share food, poetry, and music, that the demographic separations that undergird all technologies of government melt away, that the walls between us and the Other perish—not through the official channels of political representation, but through actual *hospitality* and the reception, into our lives, of the Other—all these things are intolerable to power. And ultimately, the fear that many other Shaheen Baghs would bloom.

In January 2020, I attended a sit-in protest organized by Muslim women in Kolkata’s Park Circus, inspired by the events at Shaheen Bagh. When I went there, I didn’t know anyone, but was hugged by an elderly Muslim man, a decorator at the nearby mosque who invited me to join him some day for a free meal. I felt a sense of belonging in a way the daily misery of capital’s atomized existence rarely allows us to feel. As night fell, I witnessed the diverse throng of people gathered there—people of different genders, religions, and castes—share stories, blankets, and food. In the distance, the local mosque bathed in the glow of the moon. Often, people would leave the site to go say their *namaaz* at the mosque, then return and resume their activities. There was something spiritual about that experience. The professional leftists, while

appreciative of the number of people gathered, expressed their chagrin at what they perceived to be the protest's religious element. It goes without saying, of course, that "professional" leftists are quite the religious zealots themselves. In Shaheen Bagh too, many had turned to God as a source for their salvation. Based on his experiences of the Iranian uprising before the establishment of Khomeini's theocratic regime, Michel Foucault described "political spirituality" as "a certain practice by which the individual is displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position. It's no longer being the subject that one had been up to that point." In this sense, if we can say that what emerged at Shaheen Bagh and spread across the country was a "spirituality," this spirituality should not be understood as synonymous with religion—it is something common to all social upheavals, found both within and outside them, insofar as it entails a *re-enchantment of the world* and our relation to it.

Contrary to a "secularism" that merely channels and sacrifices all discontent on the altar of the state, my own impression was that this spirituality, far from being a "regressive" hindrance to the otherwise "progressive" nature of the protests, was one of its pillars of strength. One of the songs popularized during the anti-NRC protests was a rendition of the Pakistani Marxist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem "Hum Dekhenge" (We Shall See). Echoing Benjamin's messianism, the poem, which was written as a protest against the tyrannical regime of Zia Ul Haq, talks of a time to come when thunder would crack over the heads of rulers, when crowns would be thrown off and thrones overturned, a time in which the coming of the messiah would usher in the end of all tyranny as Allah would rule through the people. Regardless of the shortcomings of the sit-ins – and there were many—they embodied Faiz's figure of vision—"certainly we, too, shall see"—by giving us a glimpse of another space-time not governed by the logic of the commodity. Perhaps, also, they gave us an embryonic glimpse at *another possible world*.

This is why the government tried its best to use the media and its spokespersons to discredit the protests, citing "public inconvenience," reducing them to a "Muslim issue," and invoking the fear of a "dark future" of rapes and kidnappings if they succeeded. One of the func-

tionaries of the ruling party even gave the call to "shoot the traitors!," and another gave a bloody ultimatum: if the streets were not cleared by the time of Donald Trump's visit on February 24th, 2020, he would take matters into his own hands. Violence erupted in northeast Delhi as Muslim neighborhoods, houses, and stores were targeted and burnt down by Hindu mobs, with the police either watching as mute spectators or being complicit in the violence. Four mosques were burnt down by rioters and over fifty people lost their lives, the majority of them Muslims. Fearing for their personal safety, many Muslims had to leave the neighborhood for their ancestral villages. Over 1,000 displaced Muslims sought shelter in relief camps. Even amidst this horrific storm of communal violence, the spirit of solidarity witnessed in Shaheen Bagh shined through, with Hindus and Sikhs coming to the aid of besieged Muslims. The state and the media quickly went into overdrive to paint the Delhi riots as a case of spontaneous communal violence, but nothing could be further from the truth. It was a programmed act of retaliation, an attempt to kill the protests raging throughout the country – to break their spirit—by instilling fear through brute force and violence.

Though we might be accused of embellishing the events at Shaheen Bagh—it is true that most of the demands articulated there didn't exceed a democratic framework—such a limited understanding would be extremely reductive. After all, as Agamben noted in his reflections on Tiananmen Square, "democracy and freedom are notions too generic and broadly defined to constitute the real object of a conflict." Elsewhere, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney warn us of "the false image of enclosure" that "convinces us that we are surrounded" and must "remain in the emergency." This false image appears in the analyses that interpret what took place at Shaheen Bagh as a simple conflict between constituent citizen-subjects and the state. Refusing to acknowledge the fugitive spaces opened up by and within Shaheen Bagh, such an analysis already adopts the state's gaze, enclosing us within the logic of the emergency. To articulate the real object of this conflict is precisely our letter's modest aim.

Although the sit-in at Shaheen Bagh continued even after the riots, its strength dwindled, and COVID-19 would soon put an end to every-