

# Beyond the First Wave

## Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic from Kolkata, India

EKABALI GHOSH

**Abstract** The paper is based on a diary written by the author during the early months of the pandemic in March 2020. It explores the various ways in which the pandemic turned various areas of her life upside down including education, political work etc. The paper, written later, is a reflection and an attempt to understand these months in retrospect. Excerpts from the diary provide examples while the reflections attempt to make social and political sense of her experiences. Among other things, the author tries to delve into the political situation of her home state, West Bengal, around these months and locate it in the context of the rise of the global right. It is also a document that gives an opening to understand the inner lives of young, urban people in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

---

**Keywords** COVID 19 in India – pandemic – second wave – vaccines in India – Bengal elections 2021

---

### The Beginning

21<sup>th</sup> March 2020

The situation so far: Coronavirus first entered my conscious mind when a friend who has family in China showed me a video of a car spraying disinfectants into the air. The move was orchestrated by the local authorities somewhere in China, presumably where his parents were living. The point he made was that spraying disinfectant in the air would not stop the spread of the virus, but it would be spectacular enough for the layperson to be calmed by it. The scene looked positively dystopian.

After that, I followed the situation every now and then and was annoyed by how the response to the virus was mostly panicked white people. We made jokes about it in university. We called Europeans funny, sensitive and stupid: jokes that are only fun when you make them at the expense of white people (which Europe is dominated by). I do not exactly remember when the first case of COVID-19 was documented in India. But by the second week of March, I was washing my hands thoroughly for twenty seconds. However, I was still not openly talking about COVID-19 to my family or warning them about handwashing techniques. My family consists of me and my mom but in the next apartment live my aunt who is asthmatic and an uncle who is a senior citizen. (...).

25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020

From tonight onwards for the next 21 days, this country goes into lockdown. I read it as a necessary measure. It might actually prevent the spread of the pandemic in India. But god, the repercussions on my mental health are terrible. And I am not the only one. All over social media I see people write about how horrible they are feeling. More than one person is talking about how they are suicidal. To add to this, someone died in China of a hantavirus infection. I saw one person at least writing about being confused and freaking out for a moment over this other virus (hantavirus). My mother reacted quite virulently when she heard about the hantavirus case and declared that China must be conducting some experiment which is resulting in the creation of these viruses. I did not correct her at that point but I will have to tell her later that the hantavirus has been around for a few decades now. I think #hantavirus trended on Twitter too for a while.

Looking back at the beginning of the pandemic brings unpleasant memories: the closure of my university in Kolkata, where I was a student of the Department of English Language and Literature (primarily studying literature), the excessive dependence on family, the feeling of suffocation as we were all holed up in homes none of us really liked.

In the early months of the pandemic and the lockdown, I had interviewed a few peers, most of them struggling with mental health issues and some identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum. All of them reported feeling worse at home and increased suicidal urges. One person told me specifically that they felt pushed into the closet again. Not visibly queer and still closeted, I had the benefit of not having to deal with family pressure. Nonetheless, I felt that the lockdown was pushing me further away from those I cared about. For more than a month, my passport, which I had updated, was in transit. I have grown up with the corruption, oppression and squalor of the Global South but I had never felt more locked into one corner of the world than what I felt in those days. I needed the passport to apply to PhD programmes abroad. A government document stuck between Kolkata and Delhi held the key to my future.

### The Migrant Crisis Unfolds

28<sup>th</sup> March 2020

There is no good news. The pandemic is spreading to the suburbs, towns and villages now. Cases in which people have taken the illness to these places are only now emerging. There is no statistics yet of how many infections have been passed on by these people already. Meanwhile, at Delhi's Anand Vihar today (which is the bus terminus for long distance travel in Delhi), more than a thousand migrant workers have appeared trying to catch buses to their native places. There is no space left for social distancing. These people cannot afford it. And neither can most of this country. I shudder to think of what might happen when these people actually go back to their villages. Some are walking hundreds of kilometres to go back to the villages as without their temporary jobs in Delhi they cannot live in that city. They have no money.

I only remember the migrant crisis in images. People crowding at stations and bus stops in hundreds to get out of their urban workplaces, desperate to go home. Horror awaited them at home as local governments subjected them to inhuman treatment, sanitizing them with road disinfectants in at least one place, when they returned (INDIA TODAY 2020). The body of the migrant became the site for the pandemic, to be used, washed, ex-

tracted labour from, and thrown out as one liked. Millions walked back home and hundreds died walking, as public transport was blocked. Heavily pregnant women were not exceptions. The summer heat of the Indian climate made things worse. Some died on the rail tracks where they had been resting (SCROLL 2021). All these people had attempted to defy the lock and key of government dictum. They too, much like me and my peers, had felt locked in. They were afraid and claustrophobic like us. But unlike us, being locked in had far more direct an impact on their incomes.

### Students, Fellows and Scholarships

It would be wrong to suggest that all my peers were well off, however. Research project fellows in our university have not been paid their salaries in ages. As a result, almost all the research projects have been stalled. A dear friend used to work in one such project, it was her only source of income and she has an education loan to pay off. Her family is not well to do. She ultimately dropped the project work and took on work in an NGO. However, people found ways in the university to support such people. In my friend's case, her first unpaid salary was paid directly out of the pocket of a professor who was handling the project. It kept her afloat for a month and allowed her to look for work. Yet, a whole generation of underprivileged students were pushed into working as their scholarships slowly started dwindling. As late as November 2020, students were not being paid their scholarships. This is attested by the suicide of a student in Lady Shree Ram College for Women on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020 (JHA 2020). Such stories abound. My own scholarship payment, which consists of a comfortable sum from the University Grants Commission and is one of the more secure scholarships available, was extremely irregular. Scholarship payments by the state government to non-NET scholars in MPhil and PhD courses, were erratic as well. These processes have likely pushed a large number of underprivileged students out of academia and university itself. We do not have the exact numbers.

### Interpersonal Relationships, Activism and Social Media

In the realm of relationships, the lockdown made things worse for plenty. Women reported being stuck with physically abusive husbands. In my vicinity, one marriage fell apart too, as what used to be a closed doors extra-marital affair of one partner became known to the other partner due to the lockdown. In some cases, people went back to the painful relationships they had abandoned in order to avoid loneliness. Even the standard cishet students who had abandoned family life in favour of hostels or living in with partners found that with the hostels closed and work drying up, they had to return to their homes. The mental health of students was disturbed and that reflected in their results. To add to this, with nothing else to do, politically minded youngsters took to fighting on social media. Soon, it stopped being a struggle against oppressive state mechanisms and became more of a toxic war of mud-slinging between various left factions. The worst hits were of course, taken by the women and the smaller groups. Every day during the lockdown, there was a new “tea”, a new person getting cancelled or bullied. Stuck at home, without work or classes, sections of students dedicated long hours to trolling one another. However, there were some legitimate attempts at humour by a broad opposition. For example, a group called “Local Train Kinte Chai” (“Want to Buy a Local Train”) spontaneously emerged on Facebook around July 2020 and gathered thousands of members. The group intended to mock the Modi government for privatizing the railways, a cheap service which was the backbone of the public transport system in India.

The arguments between left groups which were involved in serious offline work also spilled over to social media (this is not new, young left activists have always brought their grievances about other groups on social media for the last half a decade at least). However, generally, there was shift away from protesting and towards community building work. The university based leftist science researchers took to using their knowledge to manufacture sanitizer and distribute it for free. A JU Commune was set up. The commune managed to provide food to economically deprived people once a day during the pandemic and managed to

do great work in a lot of slum areas. The commune is still running and JU Commune still participates in political programmes as “JU Commune”. Most people cooking for the commune were male students. This is not to say that patriarchy in university left circles has been dismantled. We have seen that men do take up public cooking roles (chef etc.) but private home based and unpaid cooking is always relegated to women. However, in this case, the men were unpaid and volunteers.

There was private grievances from at least one other leftist activist who communicated to me over the phone about how certain young men, in their zeal for serving people were not following adequate isolation measures once they recovered from COVID-19. As a young left feminist who has dealt with such men in the past, I find this believable. There is a sense of the real enemy being somewhere else and a machismo involved in trivializing health. There is also a tongue in cheek joy in defying government protocol, which is almost schoolboyish in nature. When you consider that most of these men are in their early twenties, or late twenties without regular paid work and often living with parents, that last bit about childishly defying authority without considering long term harm starts to make more sense.

Online, the far more interesting developments happened in the MeToo movement. Students may have been stuck at home, but they still did expose abusive people on social media. I would have said that rounds of MeToos were a phenomenon in university activist or students’ circles online after the lockdown which started on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 but unfortunately, they are not. Generally, in the politically conscious circles of Kolkata students, MeToo allegations come in spates. The pattern was not broken during the lockdown with dozens of allegations appearing on Facebook.

Perhaps the most stunning of these revelations was the “Boys Locker Room” incident in Delhi. A group of young boys, mostly from Delhi ran an Instagram chat which was a repository of compromising pictures of their female peers. Following the revelations of this case, a similar Google Drive controversy unfolded in Kolkata where a group of university going men were accused of keeping a similar repository of their girlfriends and exes in a Drive to be shared amongst themselves. The allegations could not be taken up legally as none of

the women who had been involved with any of the men wanted to lodge a formal police complaint. But it led to considerable controversy, resulted in a fair number of online panels and media attention. Many of the people associated with the Google Drive incident in Kolkata ended up being from my university and unsurprisingly enough most of them were from significantly affluent families (one was from a political family). Under normal circumstances, this would lead to a demonstration and General Body meetings of students in the university. None of that was possible in the early days of the pandemic. Instead, people posted on social media.

Social media did not so much as replace offline protest spaces. The social media space was already developed and hence people kept turning to that space. Stringent rules were placed on demonstrations in the early part of the lockdown which virtually killed off the anti-NRC and anti-CAA protests. It was only after a degree of unlocking did people start assembling again for demonstrations, but only in small groups.

31<sup>th</sup> March 2020

There is a video doing the rounds in which a doctor in North Bengal Medical College is talking about how they do not have enough masks to deal with coronavirus disease.

In a televised meeting yesterday, the Chief Minister of West Bengal decided to requisition private hospitals with their staff to deal with the novel coronavirus. It might not be a bad idea as government infrastructure is poor to say the least. So much of this pandemic has been created by governments not spending enough on their healthcare programmes and generally not taking healthcare seriously and relegating it as secondary to other concerns.

Migrant workers are the worst hit in this crisis. Yesterday there were reports of migrant workers being sprayed with bleach at Bareilly in order to prevent infections (PANDEY 2020). Today, I just saw a report online that an eight month pregnant woman and her husband have been forced to walk a hundred kilometres in the middle of the lockdown, because the husband's employer turned both of them out without any money (HINDUSTAN TIMES 2020). This too, has happened in Uttar Pradesh and some locals who saw them walk offered the couple an ambulance to go back home in Meerut.

The first national lockdown which followed the state-wide shutdown in place in West Bengal managed to curb democratic spaces, resulted in a massive migrant crisis and deteriorated mental health. But the larger question we need to ask is, was the national lockdown really necessary so early on in the pandemic? What was the Indian government hoping to do by imposing it so early and throwing so many lives in jeopardy?

Lockdowns bring authoritarian governments certain advantages as will be made evident from this piece. To add, unlike the Americans and the British, Indians are quite aware that their healthcare system is in shambles. Perhaps the Indian government was hoping to contain the spread of the virus in this country by imposing an early lockdown, knowing full well that healthcare here would never be able to cope up with a pandemic. Perhaps the early lockdown itself is a proof of the failure of privatized healthcare and neoliberalism in this country. Perhaps the deaths of so many individuals directly related to the lockdown is a result of decades of underfunded healthcare in this country and an authoritarian government which will stop at nothing to curb dissent. The anti-NRC-CAA protests died out soon and various state apparatuses used the pogrom in Delhi to justify the arrests of several political activists many of who have to this day not been released and remain incarcerated under the draconian UAPA Act.

Early in the pandemic, I wrote an article on the lockdown and the lives of persons with disabilities. That article never saw the light of day but some of the worst hit and little spoken about victims of the pandemic were persons with disabilities. Government services were provided in a completely uncoordinated way. And the social lives of persons with disabilities changed completely. A blind student told me that she understands the world through touch and since touch puts her and everyone else now at risk, she is in trouble. In a sense, her description reminds me of being blinded doubly. Once medically/biologically through the social process of producing disabilities and once by the way her tactile act of "reading" her surroundings has been curbed by circumstances. But even as the lockdown and the pandemic went ahead, students with disabilities showed that they were aware of the importance of writing their own stories. One university based group of per-

sons with disabilities did a series of talks by persons with disabilities on how they were spending life under lockdown under the hashtag “#DisabilityDialoguesCoronaTimes” (FSD JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY YOUTUBE CHANNEL). Several persons with disabilities responded that they did not have the privilege of easily accessing the terrace or (in cases of locomotor disabilities) walking inside the house. Eventually, as the lockdown would be gradually eased, many of them would leave home sometimes to join work. However, the deprivation faced by most persons with disabilities continue to be very real.

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020

People are not taking the lockdown seriously. I went out to do groceries yesterday and saw several dozen people loitering in the main road close to my home. To be honest, I volunteered to get the groceries with my mother (usually it is mom and aunt doing groceries together) because I am sick of being at home. It felt good to walk about on the streets but there were a lot of people who were roaming about purposelessly. This is particularly true for young people with bikes and cycles who can go out and are roaming about on unpaved streets (smaller main roads, areas that are not “key” in the city). Procuring milk is becoming difficult as you have to wait for the new lot of milk to arrive in the evening and then sort of pounce on the shopkeeper. We got four packets. Usually a packet lasts us two days. I was sort of hoping that we would not find it in the nearest shop, so we could take a second walk to the market but that did not happen. It is contradictory on my part to judge people roaming about when I will pick up any excuse to go out but crises bring out contradictions in people.

Meanwhile, I am joining an activist venture to distribute essentials like sanitary napkins, milk powder and soap to women in need, especially to low income women who have children. I wish I could claim that the innate nobility of my nature has urged me on to this path but it is really a terrifying need to be out in public, instead of being at home. If it does come down to having to go out and work for relief, I guess I will find more material for this diary. More than one activist today opined that we may run out of essentials like soaps and milk powder at some point. One of them was afraid that we will end up with the hungry masses looting shops eventually. I do hope it does not

come to that. But if it does, I sincerely hope the hungry masses dethrone the right wing first.

For LGBTQ+ persons the horrors of living with family are not surprising to imagine. If the lockdown pushed many into the closet, the unlock phase has not been particularly kind either. This is especially true of LGBTQ+ students who are now stuck at home and do not have the respite of attending university. One such person is constantly in touch with me. He comes from an underprivileged family which although economically deprived does not waste a single minute in abusing their female bodied son. His existence is a shame, his relationship is shameful, he is beaten up every few days. He brings shame to the family. However, both circumstances and will prevent him from escaping his family home. If in this case, the home is the centre of violence, in another person's case, public life was no kinder. Even as the lockdown was being slowly eased, there was a transphobic attack on another transman in his hometown by right wingers. This person was marked because of his left politics and was attacked in the most transphobic of rhetoric which moved into physical violence. If this was a time for regular university classes, he would still face transphobia but at least he would have a support system in the relatively more queerfriendly atmosphere of the university. One of the biggest issues of LGBTQ+ persons in India is access to safe and non-exploitative work especially for those without the benefit of an English education. The pandemic has only dried up incoming work for blue collar LGBTQ+ workers and skilled students without access to the English language find that the online ecosystem of outsourced jobs is of no use to them. While it is largely an LGBTQ+ issue, job availability is broadly related to capitalist economies and the need of companies to seek increasingly cheap and exploitative labour. No surprise then that the English educated young queers find it relatively easier (but only just, compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers) to access the job market, and the Bengali educated ones are gradually pushed out of it. In that sense, the pandemic has laid bare the chinks in the armour of neoliberalism. In India where an aspirational class barely want to be reminded of the teeming millions who live without nutrition and healthcare, the pandemic has punctured the myth

of glitzy, sexy neoliberalism. Poverty, squalor and the dying gasps for oxygen rule this country.

### We Were Naïve in 2020

What strikes me most when I look back on 2020 is how naïve we all were. To think that the pandemic would be sorted in two months, to assume that India would see its peak by mid-May 2020, to think that life would be back to normal by June, July or even September. To make a huge deal about newly infected hospitals feels so childish at this point. To even think that a vaccine would solve all of our problems. Even the most informed political minds around me assumed that the peak in India would mean about 70,000 cases in total. There were people who assumed that COVID was a problem of the temperate climes, because the “summer heat” would protect us in India. Unsurprisingly, most people who believed this were boomers. But I miss the humour with which people fought the virus in its early days before it killed so many people. A sweetshop in southern Kolkata had introduced a rather gross looking “corona mishti” (corona sweetmeat) and a friend had remarked that this is a preparation for a later corona themed pujo pandal. To think that normal pujos will be back in September or October. We have collectively been so naïve! How silly of us!

But was our naivete also not a coping mechanism? How would I have taken it if I was told in March that my university life as I knew it had come to an end. Our ridiculous optimism about the end of the pandemic perhaps gave us, as a culture, enough time to adjust to life.

12<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Somewhere in a Muslim locality in Kolkata, several people beat up police who went to impose the lockdown. (Times Now video reproduced in THE ECONOMIC TIMES 2020) So of course, savarna Hindu Bengalis are doing what they do best: spreading Islamophobic rhetoric. The Chief Minister, herself an authoritarian who depends on Muslim votes for her election is being accused of appeasing the Muslims. The RSS and BJP IT Cells are of course fanning this flame. But BJP propaganda is not all. The problem lies with the ingrained Islamophobic hatred that Hindu Bengalis carry in themselves. I hear horrible things said by my family about Muslims every day. I check

them and they take offense at that. After a point, it seems futile to engage.

Apart from the attack on the policeman, some videos of people being out on the streets in Muslim dominated areas became popular on news and other media. Not a lot of underprivileged people are following lockdown measures, simply because it is not possible for them. I had a conversation with one of my friends who lives in such a locality and is a Muslim herself. She was talking about how most poor families in her locality cram into a 100 square feet space. These are families of 5-6 people. Even if a woman has to change clothes, the men have to leave the room. People do not have space to sleep inside their living spaces. Many of these men try and find abandoned auto rickshaws in which they sleep at night. Often, they will share the same space with dogs. How is soap supposed to work for these people? They do not have 24 hours of water supply. They fetch water in buckets from local taps that are at least 500 meters away. That water is then rationed throughout the day. How do you expect such people to follow government guidelines? Not much development takes place in these localities either. It is almost as if the state conspires to keep these people poor. But hey! Muslims are responsible for every problem this country has. Can't find your ladle in your kitchen? Blame a Muslim. Heater not working properly? Blame a Muslim! Half-educated General category brat not getting a job? MUSLIMS!

Looking back at the diary, I am also reminded of large scale Islamophobia that we all saw during the pandemic and how obviously state sponsored some of it was. Tablighi Jamaat was suddenly to blame for the spread of COVID in India and several Muslim foreign persons were incarcerated in Indian prisons as late as July. It was only in December 2020 that the Delhi High Court acquit all persons associated with the Tablighi Jamaat case. (THE WIRE 2020) There was large scale Islamophobia in Kolkata as well as a reputed Bengali news media company's name was visible on a poster which showed a sloganeering Muslim man with a list of COVID hotspots in the city. Casual jabs about Muslims refusing to wear masks became a regular thing in most middle class Bengali Hindu households. And to be honest, as I travelled later to ghettoized Muslim majority localities, I did notice that the number of people wearing masks was actually lower compared to other places. But that

should not be chalked down to their being Muslims, rather it should be analysed sociologically through the lens of poverty and class. Similarly low rates of mask wearing can be noted among working class people. There is a question of convenience and there is a question of the lack of access to education. To add to it, there is a significant and not unfounded suspicion of the Indian state among Muslims. A practising Muslim friend told me that Muslim youth in her locality were going about wearing sneakers to escape police raids during the lockdown so that they could quickly run away and vanish from the roads. There is a tongue in cheek resistance to what is considered state intervention, there is a bit of laughter and humour involved in the same resistance.

Such resistance towards oppressive states during pandemics has a history in India as the Spanish flu pandemic, which was then called the Bombay fever had significantly created anger against the colonial British government in the native press (SINGH 2020). There is a growing body of literature on the cholera epidemic and colonial rule in India. Some literature exists on cholera and other contagious diseases too. Regarding the former, David Arnold writes that the British put into prison women who acted as demons or goddesses of the disease; a move that exposes the threat posed by such folk practices towards colonial rule (ARNOLD 1993). Arnold also writes about the insensitivity of the British government to the religious sentiments of Indians in their attempt to tackle plague. Contagionism ruled the response to plague in India and in 1896 a riot started in Bombay along with an attack on the city's hospitals. Plague was considered to be an "invasive" foreign disease coming from the port of Hong Kong and it was believed that it would take over the commercial life of India. Therefore, stringent controls were imposed by the British. This high handedness led to anti-British sentiment and protest meetings continued towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in different parts of India (ARNOLD 1986). Current high-handed responses to working class and migrant labourers during the pandemic by the Indian state echo the British colonial state's responses. It is also not surprising that the control of bodies by an Indian state in slums, ghettos etc. is not taken well amongst dwellers in these regions, particularly since the state has actively failed in protecting

them and has even incarcerated them. To add to this, there is the issue of Bangladeshi migrants in ghettoized areas who live in desperately poor conditions. How can social distancing be successfully practiced in such areas? And more importantly, what would these communities be when they are distanced, when all one has to navigate a hostile state is a community.

There was significant talk among the left about how we should rather stick to the terminology of "physical distancing" rather than "social". India, much like other hierarchical and classed societies already has significant distance between people from various classes. To add to this, South Asia and India particularly is a caste society where not touching someone from a lower caste is normalized in many regions of the country. Under such circumstances, "social" distancing will only reproduce inequality.

The Indian government managed to communalize a pandemic which killed millions around the world. People from North East India were attacked in Delhi under a renewed axis of medicalized racism. Yet, when one looks at the way in which the pandemic turned out eventually, i.e., the course of the pandemic after I closed this diary, we are surprised by how our experiences of the pandemic are deeply embedded with the oppressive nature of the Indian state, its follies and the flaws of even the West Bengal government, which when this article was being written in November 2021 was yet to reopen schools and universities even after a second wave brought on by massive electoral gatherings.

September and October of 2020 saw large gatherings on the streets of Kolkata due to the upcoming Durga Pujo, the biggest festival of the Bengali Hindus who dominate the city. While initially it was the shoppers who flooded the roads, later on during the actual days of the pujo, pandal hoppers and merrymakers took over the streets. Had there not been a High Court order prohibiting pandal hoppers from entering the inside of pandals, people would have actually stood in queue, pushed and shoved etc. as they do to get into famous pandals during other years. The state government of West Bengal was reluctant to restrict any such movement knowing full well the fatal consequences of a COVID-19 wave. More importantly, the ruling party in West Bengal seemed to

be afraid of the strongest opposition at the point which was Hindutva based and keen on polarizing every issue. A lawyer closely associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) filed a petition in Kolkata High Court. It is also important to mention here that several political leaders of the TMC (and previously even leaders of the CPIM) are associated with organizing committees of several Durga Pujos. Without that High Court intervention however, the post Pujo first wave would have been far worse. In contrast, prayer gatherings on Eid on Red Road were cancelled in Kolkata to prevent crowds, in both 2020 and 2021 (JAVED 2021). The Muslims I personally know spent their Eid holidays at home taking part in muted celebrations with their families. There are reports of Muslims forgoing shopping in favour of donating to charity (WAJIHUDDIN 2021). Yet, the majoritarianism of Indian political society is such that Muslims would still be held responsible for the spread of the pandemic.

Looking back at my diary, I think it is necessary to explain my own positionality and the tense political situation of West Bengal in 2020. I spent much of my university days in India as a left wing feminist activist who campaigned against misogyny within the left and fought against fascism and right wing majoritarianism. My location as a political activist determined many of the ways in which I experienced the pandemic and observed society and politics during the same. This came in handy in observing the dreaded second wave in India which came in the heels of several state elections in India.

In order to understand the callousness over the state elections in India, we must understand the political situation in West Bengal and India in late 2020, early 2021. West Bengal, my home state, had been ruled by the left front, a coalition of various left parties, from 1977 until they lost popularity quickly from 2006 onwards (there were several issues but their obstinacy in support of land acquisition proved to be a key one in their ousting). Subsequently, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), formally the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) formed a government after the state election in 2011. However, the slow death of the left front was visible from the Lok Sabha elections (national parliamentary elections) in 2009, when the front lost to an alliance of the TMC-INC and SUCI in key seats. Out

of the 42 Lok Sabha seats allotted to West Bengal, CPI(M) won 15. TMC (AITC) alone won 19.

Flash forward to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal: The BJP in West Bengal made significant gains against the TMC displacing the CPI(M) as the second largest party in West Bengal. They hope to repeat TMC's performance in 2009 and 2011, first sweeping over the central parliamentary (Lok Sabha) elections and then the state elections (Vidhan Sabha). It is this desire for the BJP (the ruling party at the central government) to form a state government in West Bengal that made the elections here so crucial. Consequently, no political party were willing to cut down on gatherings, rallies etc. during this time. The BJP is Hindu nationalist and deeply allied to big capital in the country but they had managed in West Bengal to capture some important vote banks, including those of key Dalit communities. Increased presence of the BJP led to West Bengal being a deeply polarized state.

Although politics in West Bengal had been long dominated by middle to upper class and caste bhadraloks complete with their hypocrisies, it had never seen such open and toxic Islamophobic rhetoric spewed in mainstream platforms in the past four decades. West Bengal is a state which still lives with the scars of the Partition of India. In Kolkata itself, large tracts of land are colonies where the older generation still remember eastern Bengal (later East Pakistan and Bangladesh) and the struggles of the early refugee days (HISTORY EXTRA 2017).

With such a sensitive background, it is quite easy to set communal tensions aflame. The BJP gave every government fault a communal turn and projected the majority, i.e., the Hindus, as the victims and the TMC government as working against their interests. The left which did not wish to ally itself with the CPI(M) found themselves cornered into supporting a degree of lesser evilism because the alternative, the BJP, was likely to start a massive disenfranchisement campaign against Muslim voters. After the gains of the BJP in 2019, the party started investing large amounts of money into West Bengal. Overnight key TMC leaders shifted to the BJP. A name developed for these people – “dolbodlus” or people who change their party. The insult is similar to calling someone a turncoat. National level BJP leaders came down to small



towns in West Bengal to hold demonstrations. Film stars, sports personalities etc. were wooed into joining politics by both sides. Arguably, BJP caught the bigger names. The Prime Minister conducted some 20 public meetings for the BJP's election campaign in West Bengal. The BJP organized a massive "brigade" in Kolkata's Brigade Parade Ground on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. The press predicted that some 10 lakh (1 million) people would gather in brigade on that day (NEWS 18 2021). Other media houses put the expected figure at 7 lakhs (700,000) (TIMES NOW 2021). It is difficult to get an exact figure of how many lakhs really attended the brigade, as several left activists claimed that the crowd management was tweaking standing arrangements to make the crowd look larger. Nonetheless, we can safely say that a few lakhs must have attended the brigade on 7<sup>th</sup> March. The Prime Minister himself descended upon the parade ground from a helicopter. The whole thing was a spectacle and the pandemic was mostly forgotten. Even before the brigade of the 7<sup>th</sup>, the left front, in alliance with the Indian National Congress and Indian Secular Front, held its own brigade on 28<sup>th</sup> February. That rally too, was no less crowded. Last but not the least, the TMC supremo, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, herself led a large number of rallies. Reports from the time suggest that supporters of multiple electoral political parties said that they were not scared of COVID-19. It is of no surprise that when the delta variant struck, nobody was really well prepared. Cases were climbing higher and higher even before the last phases of the polls concluded. Counting of votes on 2<sup>nd</sup> May showed that the incumbent TMC won power again, a landslide victory against the BJP while the BJP displaced the left front and became the main opposition in the state. The rightward shift of power in this state was therefore legitimized during the pandemic through meetings, rallies, demonstrations and large gatherings of people. Even as elections took place in full swing, schools and colleges remained closed.

There was another factor to the rise of the deadly second wave, and this too connects to Hindutva. In Uttarakhand's Haridwar, millions of pilgrims had gathered for the Kumbh Mela. The largest gathering consisted of estimated 3.5 million devotees. Devotees did not pay heed to warnings, and to be honest, one cannot completely blame

them when the state deliberately permits overcrowding during a pandemic. Distancing protocols were thrown out of the window. Those devotees who were infected with COVID-19 in the mela brought back the disease to their home states. In other words, what we saw during the second wave was inevitable given the way both central and state governments acted.

These gatherings were not completely out of the blue however. Political demonstrations had begun on a small scale once the March-April 2020 lockdown was eased. This was to a degree required as authoritarian governments prefer to pause political protest under any excuse possible. However, these protests were small. The first large leftist demonstrations were organized after the gang rape and murder of a Dalit woman in Hathras. Most of these protests happened in late September 2020. By then, dissenters and the opposition had caught on to the centre's policy of using the pandemic to curb dissent. By December, farmers had marched into the borders of Delhi demanding the revocation of three Farm Laws which would corporatize agriculture. Although people had given up quickly on the anti-CAA protests in March, they were not willing to fall for the same in December. The farmers sat there throughout the cold Delhi winter. It was only in November 2021 that the Prime Minister announced the revocation of the Farm Laws. Between these months, through most of the year, thousands of farmers sat in key locations and protested even as the media forgot about them. (DWIVEDI 2021).

Meanwhile, schools and universities remained closed until November 2021 in West Bengal. The move was considerably controversial. An important distinction between pandemic-related leftist struggles in the Global North and in India is that while in the former leftists wanted educational institutions to remain closed due to safety issues, in India students and activists fought to reopen universities. The closure of universities led many vulnerable students to drop out of education completely. Economically underprivileged children in government run schools were the worst hit as these schools rarely had the technology required to engage in online classes. Corporation run schools in Kolkata simply reallocated its teaching staff to administrative work related to handling the pandemic. In my time in West Ben-

gal, I noted a steady decline in the average age of precarious labourers in the service sectors (food delivery, e-commerce delivery etc.)

Many activists who campaigned for the closure of schools and cancellation of examinations in 2020 gradually abandoned those stances as they realized that this was harming vulnerable students the most. Never before had I heard the phrase “digital divide” used so often and so correctly. Digital education is very much an impossibility in India at the moment. Two cyclones have passed through West Bengal during the pandemic and both have left telecommunications in shambles. Students from the Sunderbans areas are particularly vulnerable as cyclones leave the delta without electricity for months sometimes.

25<sup>th</sup> May 2020

I missed a couple of days due to personal reasons and then Amphan happened. Amphan is the worst ever cyclone I have seen first-hand. I cannot begin to describe how terrifying the whole affair was. The cyclone started showing severe effects on Kolkata from 5 pm onwards on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May. By 6 pm, it was ravaging the city. We shut off all our doors, windows, everything possible. The power was cut off and the wind was howling outside. And we would have been used to it had it just been howling. It was far worse. The wind made noise as it hit things everywhere: there were thuds, bangs, a series of sounds I cannot describe in a language that is not my own. There was a constant khat khat sound, the wind roared, things fell and crashed. With the wind came lightning and rain. But the rain was not so much the problem. When we walked up to the terrace the next morning, we found pieces of a used ceramic bathroom basin lying about. Many areas in the city are flooded. More importantly, power supply throughout southern Bengal has completely collapsed, as have river embankments. Internet services (broadband and mobile) were severely disrupted. There was no water, from the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup>. I wish I could show you what our area looked like on 21<sup>st</sup> evening. For miles upon miles there was no electricity. All I could see was miles upon miles of pitch black darkness. On the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, we carried water up from the tank at the base of the building to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. Various other families too did the same. We paid 2000 rupees to get a rented generator later to propel the water to the overhead tank. Showers were limited and restricted. We barely bathed with two mugs of water (we

still use buckets and mugs to bathe here). 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> were by far the worst with the summer heat started getting back on track as the cyclone had passed. Anyway, a few minutes ago, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, power supply was finally restored in our ward after locals gheraoed the municipal councillor.

Disaster profiteering should be illegal. With power ravaged all across the city, one candle costs 40 rupees. People supplying drinking water are charging a few hundred rupees as deposit money which they do not want to return later. Some five thousand trees have collapsed alone in Kolkata and removing those trees will take ages. The corporations and municipalities, already burdened with COVID-19 and working with less people than required, cannot handle the removal of so many trees. Private individuals are removing these trees for a very high amount now. For one tree that needs to be removed on the main road, one of these traders were asking for 40,000 rupees plus the wood from the tree. In our ward, the councillor was gheraoed yesterday by members of a working class neighbourhood who still do not have power.

You can understand that social distancing has gone for a toss. Today itself as people were gathered to see the tree that was causing the power outrage in our neighbourhood being felled, they stood all huddled together. You will expect them to be more careful but a lot of them have been lulled into a false sense of security as we do not have any reported cases of COVID-19 in our ward. Women from Naskarpara (the working class area which gheraoed the councillor), had barged into the party office and started yelling expletives. I cannot imagine that they maintained social distancing as they did that. Even as relief work starts, I am 100% sure, COVID-19 cases will also rise.

Perhaps the biggest lesson I learnt after Cyclone Amphan was that digital education would never work in the current state of connectivity in India. Later we realized that unless we could start regular in person classes we would only be harming students from the most vulnerable communities. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation runs several schools for the most underprivileged of people in Kolkata. The poorest of the poor come to study in these schools. Teachers in corporation schools have been assigned public health duties during the pandemic. Being away from school for such a long time will likely result in the youngest of them forgetting entire alphabets and numbers.

There is considerable anxiety around how many children will drop out of the education system. As already elaborated, the college system too is falling apart. And for this we have to hold the state government of the AITC, which is part of the opposition at the centre, as accountable as the BJP. Education is part of the concurrent list, which means both the central and the state governments can contribute to it. Political parties in charge of both governments could hold large meetings and demonstrations during election season but they cannot vaccinate all students and reopen universities, libraries etc. at partial capacity. The same logic applies for public transport. The curbs on public transport have been far too great which has resulted in people crowding the few buses still plying on the streets. Meanwhile, the autonomy of state universities (here I am excluding central universities where autonomy is already endangered) is being threatened by the state government as it stops all entrance examinations for bachelors' and masters' programmes into some universities. This would otherwise not be a concern had the state government not tried the exact same tactic once before in 2018, during an admission season rattled by the ruling party's corruption. The SFI, which is the students' organization of the CPI(M) in my university is already campaigning by organizing open air classes on the main road in front of the university (DAS 2021). Such organization might become increasingly more common as the dream of a "Digital India" falls flat on its face. The gaping holes in digitization, and the myth of privatization has been ripped open during the pandemic.

### **Vaccines during the Second Wave**

Privatization has spelt doom for healthcare in India and this became increasingly clear during May and June, when the second wave was at its peak and demand for vaccines was ever rising. Not only did the central government absolutely fail to provide vaccines to everyone but their policies also created roadblocks to smooth vaccinations for the state governments. Vaccinations had started in India in January 2021 but were opened to the public in March 2021. Initially only essential workers could take the vaccine but eventually it was opened up to senior citizens (60+ of age) and to those with very specific comorbidities. From 1<sup>st</sup>

April onwards, vaccination was opened for people above the age of 45 from and from 1<sup>st</sup> May onwards for people above the above the age of 18. However, there has been significant vaccine hesitancy in many people and the government's actions have not helped allay people's fears. Firstly, Bharat Biotech's Covaxin was granted Emergency Use Approval by the DGCI on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2021 even though Covaxin had not finished its third stage trials at that point and hence was incapable of submitting efficacy data (THE HINDU 2021). While the better known vaccine, Covishield (the Indian version of the Astra Zeneca vaccine) had international trials to fall back upon, Covaxin did not have internationally recognized data. To add to this, there was the question of whether the government would vaccinate everyone for free. In January 2021, NITI Aayog official Vinod Paul declared that the government could at most vaccinate 300 million people for free (PILLA 2020). As part of my left activism, I had written a piece in International Viewpoint on the problem of COVID vaccinations in India (GHOSH 2021).

It is important to remember that this the same government whose ruling party aimed to gather about 1 million people in Kolkata alone on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021. After all, leaving a large part of the population unvaccinated would result in the creation of a market for private players. Moreover, the BJP made a campaign promise out of a basic right. They claimed that if they were voted to power in West Bengal, they would bring free vaccinations to all residents of the state (SCROLL STAFF 2021). Note that from the beginning of the pandemic it was the central government comprised mainly of the BJP which was handling the vaccine situation. People were not deprived of vaccinations in West Bengal because of the state's mismanagement; it was because the centre had done all in its power to limit access to it through privatization of healthcare. Even as registrations for the vaccination of the "18 and above" group started on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2021, the government portal for registration crashed. Slots for vaccination were few and only available online initially and demand was high due to the raging second wave. First, the digitization of vaccinations pushed less tech savvy populations out of the system. Next, coders found ways to beat the government website and automated the process of booking slots. Further, they

put out their codes online which resulted in more coders, engineers and the like getting access to it (PYTHON REPO 2021). Ultimately, being tech savvy was not just enough. One had to have tertiary level knowledge of programming in order to book a vaccination slot, for a vaccine they were paying extremely high amounts of money for.

Those that wanted the vaccine at government centres waited overnight in long lines at the risk of infection. A separate profession of “line keepers” developed in the semi-urban areas, people who would wait in queue in front of government centres (private centres are not widespread in small towns) for those patients who could afford to pay. Some centres had to announce that they were out of vaccines even as a few dozen people were still waiting outside. In my close proximity, an uncle caught COVID-19 five days after visiting a vaccination centre. There were other reports of infections spreading at these centres as well. In the middle of the second wave, while demand for the vaccine was raging, the government decentralized the process and allowed the manufacturing companies to make super profits. The central government bought only 50% of the vaccines at a lower rate. The states had to compete with the private sector to access a part of the other 50%. The states paid higher prices now for the same vaccine, compared to the centre, essentially making the states compete with one another for limited supplies. This decentralized and liberalized policy continued from 21<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 6<sup>th</sup> June 2021, when the centre partially reversed its policy and declared that it would buy 75% of the vaccines to distribute to states and fixed upper caps for vaccine prices in the private sector. However, at the height of the pandemic, the centre let vaccination be a privilege to most of the country's citizens. Even now, a dose of the Oxford-Astra Zeneca jab costs about 780 INR in the private hospitals and a dose of Covaxin costs 1200 INR. While the announcements on 6<sup>th</sup> June were a relief to most Indians, we must remember that the first private sector vaccines were administered for 250 INR each. Moreover, public health is a right and vaccinations should be completely free. But the Indian public are so used to corruption in the health sphere that a large-scale democratic movement around such demands is almost impossible at the moment. Given the state of COVID vaccination in India, one can hardly imagine

that this is also the country that carries out the world's largest immunization campaign against polio.

Vaccinations are not spectacular business and do not make for entertaining media. However, much of the second wave was well covered by most media houses particularly because of how unavoidable it was in the public life of an Indian. One could simply not ignore the second wave and the oxygen crisis. Thousands died without oxygen and yet, the central government still claims that no death due to lack of oxygen happened during the second wave in twelve states (KUMAR 2021). Hospitals were afraid that they would run out of cylinders. In Sagar Dutta Government Hospital, multiple people were sharing one cylinder. Private hospitals billed patients exorbitant amounts and hospital beds were almost always unavailable. Citizens groups developed in order to share leads on available hospital beds and oxygen cylinders. The CPI(M), which had lost in the state elections badly nevertheless did good work during this time. It's organization, Red Volunteers, managed to arrange for oxygen cylinders for people all over the state. Another important activity for these youngsters was to find out leads on available beds as government updates became obsolete after a few hours of being made public. Moreover, the second wave was particularly harmful for crematorium workers who are almost completely dalits and who work in the most unsanitary of conditions and without the most basic of protections.

On May 15, the West Bengal government announced severe restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19 (WB GOV 2021), some of which were in effect for months afterwards. The government insisted that these measures should not be called a “lockdown” but nonetheless the loss of jobs and small businesses was very real. While during the lockdown of 2020, I had felt desperation and suffocation, the lockdown of 2021 gave me a degree of relief and a bit of hope that cases might start going down in another couple of weeks. This, despite my knowledge that restrictions would result in the loss of livelihoods. Towards the end of May, Cyclone Yaas struck southern Bengal and left property damage in its wake. The effects of climate change became ever clearer. Tornado-like formations razed down small shops in front of Bandel Church in Hooghly district (10DIK24 NEWS 2021).

I have never seen or heard of anything like this in all my life and yet they happen now, once a few months during bad weather days.

After the oxygen crisis came the black fungus crisis. Grotesque images of people who had recovered from COVID-19 but had developed mucormycosis infections flooded the media. India, the diabetes capital of the world and where oxygen had been administered in unsanitary conditions during a crisis, unsurprisingly saw a surge in mucormycosis. Amphotericin B could not be found during the first months (JAYANTH 2021). To add to that, the irony of surviving COVID-19 but falling prey to the far less common mucormycosis never failed to disturb me. It almost became a reminder of how uncertain our lives are.

There is nothing that I can say to all those people who lost their loved ones. And there are plenty such people around us. These were not brave soldiers who died in battle. Most of these deaths were completely avoidable if not for the faults of states, companies and global capitalism. In a different world without climate change, without increasingly frequent pandemics, they could have led full lives. Their family members and loved ones are still grieving even as another wave threatens our collective conscience as we populate our streets without masks, ignoring sanitizers and as restaurants and hotels are opened up. While the uncertainty used to bother me, I have grown used to it now. Now, I am gradually preparing myself for the possibility that the pandemic may never completely go away.

## References

- ARNOLD, DAVID 1986. Cholera and Colonialism in British India. *Past and Present* 113, 1: 118–151.
- 1993. *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-century India*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- DAS, PRAJANMA 2021. Propaganda or eye-opener: SFI is conducting Open-air Classes on Current Affairs at Jadavpur University's Gate. *Edex Live*. August 10, 2021. <https://www.edexlive.com/news/2021/aug/10/sfi-open-air-classes-current-affairs-jadavpur-university-pegasus-modi-cov-id-23157.html> [05.10.2021].
- DWIVEDI, SUKIRTI 2021. "Find A Solution": Supreme Court To UP, Haryana Governments Over Farmers Blocking Roads." *NDTV*. August 23, 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/farmers-protest-delhi-noida-road-blocked-you-have-to-find-solution-supreme-court-on-roads-blocked-by-farmers-2516781> [23.10.2021].
- FSD JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY. *YouTube Channel*. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLZSV9s564G2gHxqRD512yQ> [25.10.2021].
- GHOSH, EKABALI 2021. COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA. Vaccination as Class Struggle. *International Viewpoint*. June 9, 2021. <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7176#nb1> [23.10.2021].
- HINDUSTAN TIMES 2020. Coronavirus Update: pregnant woman, her husband forced to walk 100 km without food; rescued by locals. March 30, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/locals-help-pregnant-woman-her-husband/story-s9QEWktmfZ4sKXDx3KUKyI.html?fbclid=IwAR0BVWXJWUgV56lUh-G5lY7iVUZXXT2Mvzy4dkNus6yfRAPpixrukNiZgnE> [07.12.2021].
- HISTORY EXTRA 2017. After Partition: colony politics and the rise of communism in Bengal. August 11, 2017. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/after-partition-colony-politics-and-the-rise-of-communism-in-bengal/> [26.11.2021].
- INDIA TODAY 2020. Coronavirus. Migrants sprayed with disinfectants on road in UP, Bareilly DM assures action. March 30, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-migrants-sprayed-with-disinfectants-on-road-in-up-bareilly-dm-assures-action-1661371-2020-03-30> [11.11.2021].
- JAYANTHA, A.S. 2021. Shortage of Mucormycosis Drugs to Continue. *The Hindu*. June 3, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/shortage-of-mucormycosis-drugs-to-continue/article34715130.ece> [25.11.2021].
- JAVED, ZEESHAN 2021. No Eid Prayers on Red Rd for Second Year in a Row. *The Times of India*. May 8, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/no-eid-prayers-on-red-rd-for-second-year-in-a-row/articleshow/82467271.cms> [26.11.2021].
- JHA, TANYA. No Scholarship Money, No Laptop, No Hostel: LSR Student Dies by Suicide. November 10, 2020. <https://thewire.in/r.ights/lady-shri-ram-college-student-aishwarya-reddy-suicide-online-classes> [25.11.2021].
- KUMAR, PARIMAL 2021. No Deaths Due to Lack of Oxygen in 12 States. *NDTV*. August 6, 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-oxygen-supply-deaths-no-deaths-due-to-lack-of-oxygen-in-12-states-health-ministry-sources-2504227> [26.11.2021].
- NEWS18 2021. West Bengal Polls: BJP Targets 10 Lakh People at PM's Brigade Rally on March 7. February 23, 2021. <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/west-bengal-polls-bjp-targets-10-lakh-people-at-pms-brigade-rally-on-march-7-3466418.html> [24.11.2021].
- PANDEY, ALOK 2020. Bleach Sprayed on Migrant Workers in UP over COVID-19, Kerala uses Soap Water. March 30, 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-india-lockdown-disinfectant-sprayed-on-migrants-on-return-to-up-shows-shocking-video-2202916> [07.12.2021].
- PILLA, VISWANATH 2020. India to immunise 300 million people with COVID-19 vaccine in the initial phase, says NITI Aayog's Vinod Paul. *Money Control*. December 12, 2020. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/coronavirus/>

- india-to-immunise-300-million-people-with-covid-19-vaccine-in-the-initial-phase-says-niti-aayogs-vinod-paul-6220041.html [25.11.2021].
- PYTHON REPO 2021. COVID-19 Vaccination Slot Booking Script. Last Updated November 17, 2021. <https://pythonrepo.com/repo/pallupz-covid-vaccine-booking> [26.11.2021].
- SCROLL 2021. Migrant Crisis. Covid Lockdown: Over 8,700 people, many of them migrant workers, died along railway tracks in 2020. June 03, 2021. <https://scroll.in/latest/996519/covid-lockdown-over-8700-people-many-of-them-migrant-workers-died-along-railway-tracks-in-2020> [25.11.2021].
- SCROLL STAFF 2021. BJP promises free Covid vaccine after coming to power in Bengal, Trinamool says 'jumla'. *The Scroll*. April 23, 2021. <https://scroll.in/latest/993115/bjp-promises-free-covid-vaccine-after-coming-to-power-in-bengal-trinamool-says-jumla> [25.11.2021].
- SINGH, MADHU 2020. Bombay Fever/Spanish FLU: Public Health and the Native Press in Colonial Bombay, 1918-1919. *South Asia Research* 41, 1: 35-52.
- THE ECONOMIC TIMES 2020. Watch: Locals flouted lockdown norms, attacked police in Kolkata. April 11, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/watch-locals-flouted-lockdown-norms-attacked-police-in-kolkata/videoshow/75094872.cms?from=mdr> [26.11.2021].
- THE HINDU 2021. Coronavirus. India Approves COVID-19 Vaccines Covishield and Covaxin for Emergency Use. January 3, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/drug-controller-general-approves-covishield-and-covaxin-in-india-for-emergency-use/article33485539.ece> [25.11.2021].
- THE WIRE 2020. Delhi Court Acquits All Foreigners Accused in Tablighi Jamaat Case. December 15, 2020. <https://thewire.in/law/tablighi-jamaat-markaz-case-delhi-court-acquits-42-foreign-nationals> [26.11.2021].
- TIMES NOW DIGITAL 2021. PM Modi in Kolkata: Over 7 lakh supporters, 1,500 CCTVs; how WB capital is bracing for mega show on March 7. March 5, 2021. <https://www.timesnownews.com/kolkata/article/pm-modi-in-kolkata-over-7-lakh-supporters-1500-cctvs-how-bjp-is-bracing-for-mega-show-on-march/728579> [22.11.2021].
- WAJIHUDDIN, MOHAMMED 2021. Mumbai: Muslims skip Eid shopping to help the Needy. *The Times of India*. May 11, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-muslims-skip-eid-shopping-to-help-needy/article82535515.cms> [26.11.2021].
- WB Gov 2021. Announcement of West Bengal government. May 15, 2021. <https://wb.gov.in/upload/MCLNEWS-210515104135699.pdf> [16.05.2021].
- 10DIK24NEWS 2021. Yass Ashar Aagei Ghurni Jhorer Kobole Banel. *YouTube Channel 10dik24 News*. May 25, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojyVVil7qTY> [27.11.2021].

**EKABALI GHOSH** is a PhD student and Felix scholar at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London. She is a left feminist activist trying to address intersectional issues in her academic and activist work and is deeply concerned with the rise of the right wing globally. At the time of writing this diary, she was a 26-year-old M.Phil. scholar at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and lived with her mother at their shared apartment in Kolkata, India. Currently, she resides in London and is a year wiser.

SOAS University of London, Center for Gender Studies  
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG  
e-mail: ekabalighosh@gmail.com