**South South Forum on sustainability -SSFS 7**

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Session: **Confronting the Triple Trap: Pandemic, Economic Downturn and Climate crises. India**

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The triple trap: Pandemic, Economic Downturn and Climate crises in India is a crises with the power of n as it exposed simultaneously the crises of governance, fragility of democratic rights and the surfacing of a national security deep state.

The Indian state like the 40 other majoritarian illiberal democracies with right wing populist leadership has used the pandemic as an opportunity to amplify an medical crises as an emergency to increase their control over citizens and expand their influence in both regional and international spheres.

The crisis labelled a ‘humanitarian’ and systemic crises coincides with dual impact of neoliberal capitalism and militarised globalism. It is uneven and combined in its impacts, as it seeps into governance, institutions and society.

I explain this with reference to India and the triple trap.

Given India’s inability to resolve the colonial border issues with Pakistan and China, and in order to gloss over internal discriminations based on caste, class and gender, there has been a gradual shift from a negotiated nationalism to one of territorial xenophobic nationalism, that can support and entrench a postcolonial regressive elite. In a system where there have been voices of liberal questioning, legitimate opposition, multiple conversations; embedded rights- despite aberrations, social and peoples movements, organic intellectuals, women’s and other liberation have caused anxiety to capital and its enablers. The right wing regime believes that to achieve a hegemony they require both the use of force and the privileging of a muscular nationalism and supremacy. The enemy abroad is clearly now the enemy within.

This tendency of using military values in civilian life has increased manifold with the current regime in power the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose core and cadre rests on militant privileging of majoritarian upper caste Hindus and entrenched Islamphobia in citizenship hierarchies. Their role and understanding is the long term creation of a Hindu national state in opposition to the secular, plural, federal aspects of the Indian Constitution. Their economic policy coincides with deepening neo liberal globalisation with a nationalist twist (tweaked to bar China, Pakistan and other threats).

Despite the increase in growth and GDP numbers that made India an emerging power in the last decade, the deep inequalities (that coincide with caste and religious minorities), low investment in social sector especially health and education; increase in military expenditures, crony capitalism etc, have increased the underlying contradictions and anxieties in Indian society. This conjuncture enabled the electoral victory of a Hindu majoritarian populist leader PM Modi whose credentials based on a muscular Hindu nationalism, and presiding over mob violence against minorities were publically known credentials since he was the chief minister of Gujarat state.

Ece Temelkuran (<https://thoughteconomics.com/ece-temelkuran/> ) explanation on knowing populism and its difference with nationalism, only when you experience it can be used for framing Indian populism and comparing it with (those in Turkey, Philippines, Egypt, Pakistan.) Where, populism is ‘the act of politicizing and mobilising ignorance to the point of political and moral insanity.’ The point left out by Ece is the eliding of external and internal militarism that influences both domestic and international positioning as well as material and social relations.

The national security and neo liberal discourse go hand in hand and is not new in India. But BJP projects itself as the party of national security. A discourse that they took over from Indira Gandhi- (especially 1971) she controlled national security. But BJP with 1998 Pokhran II nuclear tests, then 1999 Kargil controlled conflict they portrayed themselves as party of NS. Constant threats of Pakistan, Islamic extremism, Maoism are combined eliding the external with the internal. Public opinion surveys (Pew as well as Lok Niti show majority people confirm these as major national security issues.)

**Pandemic as war**

The PM and the Home minister in almost every reference on the Pandemic have mixed metaphors of health crises as a war. Amit Shah “we will win both wars Covid and LAC”; PM Continuous use of Corona as invisible enemy and medical workers as soldiers without uniform. (<https://thewire.in/politics/narendra-modi-amit-shah-covid-19-china> ; <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/all-states-did-good-work-in-battle-against-covid-19-amit-shah/articleshow/76264910.cms> )

Such militarist discourse 1. Diverts attention from lack of health facilities to the idea of threat and enemy, in. fact in early days the spread of the virus was blamed on a Islamic congregation. 2. Justifies use of emergency/ exceptional methods which have been used like the lockdown-or lockout of millions of migrant workers. 3. Justifies ‘sacrifice’ for nation followed by ‘obedience’ to leader 4. Is used to place emergency and draconic legislation to curb citizens – in India many activists and journalists were arrested after they had participated against laws that changed citizenship rights in India just before the Covid crises broke out. 4. Takes away from the dignity of care workers and militarises the medical professionals. “sacrifice’ warriors—who have to die if necessary. And ‘honours’ citizens as ‘colateral damage’ during war, thus dispensing with citizens right to life as they are ‘sacrificed’ in war.

So what did Indian ruling regime do during Covid?

Economy

Even as the Indian economy shrinking and set to shrink by 4.5%, Indian Government has put out on unreal and non transparent statistics .

1.The covid crisis revealed the lack of health infrastructure as well as the poor treatment of workers in cities who come from rural areas and face inadequate basic housing etc. The long walk and return of rural working class- internal migrants (8 million?) to villages was witnessed by the world after the harshest lock down, that pushed these invisibilised workers back to their native villages as works sites shut overnight.

2. Step up privatization, While announcing Covid-19 relief the PM also removed key public sector industries out of the strategic sector, opening privatization of sectors from railways, coal, insurance, oil, energy and others. Privatization of Indian railways took first steps in June where GOI invited private players to run trains to 109 destinations.

3.Diluting hard won labour laws in favour of corporates

4.Monetising land for small farmers making sale and transfer of land to corporates easier

5.Shift to self reliance and develop agriculture, but there seems no clear plan as to how to do to this. Some relief measures like minimal increase in MGNREGA; small benefits to unemployed and senior citizens; a universal insurance scheme; and delivery of food grain to 8 million of poor as part of Covid recovery plan till October 2020. But implementation and actual delivery have not shiwn results.

3. Defence budgets increased 2020 by 5.8% of last year, but remains 1.56% of Indian GDP. Even as there is a clamour for increase in defence spending. India’s defence budget is about five times more than health care. So Defence accounts for 11% of India’s overall expenditures and health for 2%.

Climate change and environment:

Even as India battles Covid, Indian Government

1. Notified the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification for all future projects that side lines “precautionary” principle” and creates ex-post-facto route, and doles out only minor fines for violations of environment regulations.

Environmental clearance given to almost 191 projects during Covid-19, so activists and those effected did not get an opportunity to file representations, objections or discuss impact on affected people, during Covid. Including a plan for a new parliament. Including expansion of an oil refinery in Assam, that involved knocking down an elephant corridor boundary wall etc. Rail and infrastructure projects in Goa that will lead to destruction of hundreds of hectares of forest and sanctuary land in Goa, and many other places. The Environment ministry argued that these quick clearances were needed for seamless growth. Coal, uranium and other mining and extraction, despite opposition from indigenous tribes. And 36 projects in protected sanctuary areas. Activists argued rules laid down not followed and in respose to their mobilization, a couple of sanctuaries were saved. See for example: (<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/despite-covid-lockdown-environment-ministrys-expert-panels-race-to-clear-projects/> )

2.Initiated the auction of 41 coal blocks for commercial mining, that boost the private sector in India. In a oblique reference to this sale, UN Secretary General Guterres stated that coal which is polluting should not be part of a recovery plan. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/world/no-reason-for-any-country-to-include-coal-in-covid-19-recovery-plans-un-chief-6477091/>)

Analysis shows that proportion of forest areas cleared for projects like mining since 2014 are 68% of total in the last 39 years.

Activists say the proposed first EIA will encourage violations to continue undeterred, resulting in massive rise of GHG emissions and other air pollutants. And negatively impact farmers, fisher folk, adivasi (indigenous) communities- Citizens coalition ‘Build India Back Better’ ( [www.livelaw.in](http://www.livelaw.in) )

Defence, Militarism and National Security

The Sino-Indian border confrontation in June 2020, however was not escalated especially by the Indian side who played down the violation of borders that left 20 soldiers dead and injured. Meanwhile India orderd 33 fighter aircraft from Russia at a cost Us$780 million.

Removal of Article 370 that gave special status to the State of Jammu, Kasmir and Ladakh and bifurcated and changed their status. Even as 700,000 soldiers in Kashmir to fight 150 militants. 55 internnet shut downs many properties destroyed in the hunt for militants. Also altered laws that had prevented alienation of land to non Kashmiri men. Extension of AFSPA in Nagaland, curbing civil right.

Meanwhile lockdown was also crack down on activists. World Press Freedom Index put India 140 out of the 177 countries. Brazil 107th; Report said that there was not just hostility but hatred towards journalists in India and Brazil. In 2019 alone, 36 instances of attack and 198 attacks between 2014-2019. (reported in the [www.telegraph](http://www.telegraph) 3/7/20 at: ) the perpetrators have not been punished. Besides FIR and police harassment.

Similarly to students who led movements, especially women students.

The impact of Covid has been felt unequally. Muslim informal workers who are about 50% in urban areas, were stigmatised when they Covid-19 was communalised in the early days and this continued. Women informal workers have suffered more loss of jobs and the burden of caring for their families with barely no wages for months. Poor children dependent on mid day meals have had to go hungry as schools closed and some even searched for scraps as child labour shows up its ugly face again.

The reason this new authoritarianism have come together across the globe, is that they are all the outcome of neo liberalism and militarist external relations. There is a combination of onslaught on democratic institutions within states and disregard of international law and multilateralism between states.

The reality is that reforms with quicker growth; suppression of dissent to facilitate capital and power; structural exclusions and discriminations, as Professor Amit Bahduri has said, “subverts the neutral role of the state, which needs to act like a fair umpire”, which then regulates the excesses of not just workers but also capital; not just of dissenters but also regimes and so on. (Bahaduri 7 July 2020, Indian Express at <https://indianexpress.com/profile/columnist/amit-bhaduri/> ) But regimes of right clearly on side of corporates.

Resistance:

From civil society, some sections of academia, judiciary and opposition. But remains weak, fragmented and uneven.