

Governing the Pandemic: Negotiating Democracy in our Time

(Research Agenda)

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1. While much of the act of governing the CoVid19 pandemic was conducted - not by the State - but by a plethora of self-organized solidarity groups and even unorganized social initiatives, a phenomenon variously called 'social governance', 'biopolitics from below' or even 'social policing' – this project proposes to focus on its implications for the state of democracy in India. It argues that the pandemic has opened many a democratic site outside the architecture of State institutions.
2. The literature in this respect seems to oscillate between two extremes: On the one hand, there is the commonplace narrative of the great tragedy that democracies have been forced to meet with, thanks to the outbreak of the deadly pandemic. On the other hand, and parallel to it, the over two-year long and counting pandemic also led people to rebel against the Covid diktats issued from time to time by the WHO and the government agencies. The anti-masking movement - mainly in the West - is only one of them. The opposition was at times not so acute. It expressed itself in the form of a healthy disrespect for the laws and protocols. The writings in this direction often take us to a carnivalesque extreme in which celebration of democracy is believed to be marked by the complete breaking of rules that were meant for controlling the body.
3. Recent writings on democracy across the globe, however, portray a very gloomy picture of its decline and decay regardless of regions and continents. A recently published report, for instance, points out that the share of people living in autocracies has gone up from 49 percent (2011) to 70 percent (2021) whereas the share of people living in autocratizing countries has gone up during the same period from 49 percent to 70 percent with the proliferation of the number of such States. Many of these research consortiums have already pronounced the secular decline of democracy across the board.
4. The report also points to the decline of democracy that precedes the surfacing of the virus in late 2019. The decline, according to this report, set in regardless of the surfacing of the virus although it is true that the process has only reinforced it.
5. If pandemic has played a key mediating role in this context, then the factors that contributed to the decline are – individuation, inequality and selective exposure. The fear from the virus was so acute that – as Giorgio Shani puts it – has made 'the entire humanity our enemy'. Every other person turns into a potential suspect carrying within himself the deadly pathogen and - maybe unwillingly - spreading it amongst us. Secondly, the pandemic - by all accounts - has exacerbated the existing inequalities and in many cases introduced newer ones. These inequalities are on occasions known to have taken on a racist character. Thirdly, the poor, mainly unskilled migrant labour ironically also serves as the crucial bridgehead for restarting the economy insofar as the delivery boys, the health professionals, frontline workers, scavengers and sweepers are pressed into service and exposed to the virus. It implies what is called 'arbitration of death' in the sense that the pandemic brings into play a sovereign power that decides who must die in order that the rest of the society feels safe. The quarantining principle brought forth as it were the unmitigable schism between those whose lives matter and those whose lives do not and hence could be dispensed with at will for the larger safety

and security of the society. Each of these three strands adds a neo-Malthusian spin to the neoliberal process that accelerates the process of democracy's decline.

6. What we call 'social governance', by contrast, is facilitated by social vigilantism, indigenous medicinal practices and life per se trumping over identity. The project proposes to conduct select ethnographies in order to illustrate how in each case newer solidarities are formed or preexisting solidarities are strengthened. Village-level solidarities found a new lease of life insofar as the migrants coming from outside were not let in, without being quarantined, impromptu quarantine centres were set up on treetops, in crematoriums, on floating boats and so forth, night vigil was organized by the villagers particularly in areas close to international borders. Such social initiatives opened new vistas of mutual aid and democracy in our country. Besides, there was a new concern for indigenous medicinal practices. Some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, have the habit of quarantining their members when they run fever in the bodies, or even abandoning their villages and taking shelter in jungles when the fever hits the entire settlement. There have been attempts at bringing these practices back into circulation by the State agencies. Moreover, we also noticed that many of the solidarities in fact transcended the preexisting ethnic lines.
7. The crucial question is: Are these two spheres of democracy – of State-led and social governance – mutually exclusive? What implications does social governance have for the state of our democracy? The state of our democracy is the accumulated – albeit contingent - product of these two spheres. We refer to three broad trends in this connection: (a) The very practice of governance seeks to come to terms with the solidarities through a myriad 'calculations' and mediations and these force considerable flexibilization mainly at the 'lower levels of institutions'. In other words, we hypothesize that the lower levels of institutions are more open to the practices of social governance than the higher ones. If it is 'a web of government' as Foucault would have put it, it was certainly a fractured web. We are interested in discovering these fractures and ruptures within the web that increasingly makes it look less like a closely knit web. (b) While there has been an unprecedented proliferation of social solidarities, did all of them eventually give themselves to any centralization or as Foucault would describe it, 'colonization'? Democracy's new solidarity sites are relatively autonomous and self-regulating. Pandemic brings into play new solidarities that are not universal, but are specific to the context and have often limited life span. (c) Are these solidarities governed as they are by contingent and 'practical' (Samaddar 2023) ethics, whatever happens to justice in the society? Solidarities governed by multiple ethical principles of justice do not articulate a singular 'order' so to say – a concept which is almost coterminous with even any rudimentary idea of justice. Does fragmentation of the 'spheres of justice' beget a single society or many societies? Do we then think of democracy without being nested in a body? Does democracy have the inherent tendency of undermining the body? Isn't democracy an embodied idea?