ISSN: 2456-9550
JMC
December 2021

Interview

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Volume 5, 2021

THE JMC REVIEW

An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory

http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/

JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
NEW DELHI-110021

SYSTEM SHOCKS: COVID 19 IMPACTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR SHAKUNTALA BANAJI [*]

SANDHYA DEVESAN NAMBIAR[†]

Introduction

Shakuntala Banaji is Professor of Media, Culture and Social Change in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, where she also serves as Programme Director for the MSc Media, Communication and Development.

Professor Banaji's research addresses the intersection between socio-political contexts, media, identities and participation. Her focus is twofold: first on the lives of children and young people in different geographical and class contexts, with a critical take on the ways in which rhetorical conceptions of creativity, citizenship, development, participation and digital media construct the notion of agency, and position child and youth subjectivities. And second, on the ways in which historical propaganda and current disinformation, misinformation, toxic speech and hate speech are reconfiguring the public spheres of India, the UK and other nations. These themes have been pursued through ongoing and recently completed projects – The European Commission Horizon 2020 Young 5a funded project, CATCHEyoU, and, Personalised Media and Participatory Culture (2015-2018) in collaboration with American University Sharjah, funded by the LSE Middle East centre's Academic Collaboration with Arab Universities Programme. Her edited book with Sam Mejias, Youth Active Citizenship in Europe: Ethnographies of Participation, was published with Palgrave in 2020. Current research includes a WhatsApp misinformation grant which will be forthcoming as a new book, *Social Media and Hate* with Routledge in 2022.

[*] The interview was conducted online on 19 July, 2022. The interview was transcribed with the assistance of Ms. Pratishtha Jindal, a student of the Department of B.A. Programme, Jesus and Mary College..

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Sandhya Devesan Nambiar (SDN): **Professor Banaji, would you like to start off by commenting on the general impacts of Covid 19 in the UK and in India, and the global impact on education?**

Shakuntala Banaji (SB): I think the best way to start off talking about the pandemic here is to just put it in context, which is that in January 2020, when I was, I teach a large class on global media and mainly focused on the Global South**,** and media and the Global South**,** and during that class, at the beginning of every lecture I always start off by doing a check-in with the students to see what is going on. We often have over forty or fifty nationalities represented within the eighty or ninety students who take that class and we usually do a check-in just to see what the national news is doing in each country's context so we might look at India, Nigeria, South Africa, China, Taiwan, various different places.

One of the things that we noticed and my co-teachers noticed too in that course was that a lot of Chinese students in the lectures and third week of January 2020 were saying that Covid 19 was dominating the news. Covid 19 was not only dominating the news, Covid 19 was also something that was concerning them in a political context because the government in China was responding very strongly.

It was literally the first time, in a medical context, that I was starting to hear the word "lockdowns" and I was starting to hear the word "quarantine", and yet a lot of the rest of us, people from other countries, didn't take it seriously at the time.

It was actually something that was very problematic in terms of our own behaviours, our own attitudes and in fact, my memory of it is that not only did we *not* take it seriously, but there was also a sort of 'why is China focusing on this', kind of attitude.

Within three weeks of that class, several of us had gotten sick, so I was already by the middle of February. By the third week of February, I was really sick, I was coughing my lungs out, I had gone to the GP, and various colleagues of mine were sick as well. We had tried to talk to the administration of the university to say there is this thing going around the world, and what is this, and no one was being signed off from work, we were really sick and all the students came in and told us that you have this thing called Covid 19.

SDN: In the context of observing these differential responses, was there also a sense that the spread of the pandemic coincided or intersected with any other social or political parameters, and responses?

SB: So, I want to talk a little bit about the attitude – *because* it was coming from Asian students and from Asian countries people were really not taking it seriously, and the doctors here were not taking it seriously. It was when the first 5 or 6 cases started getting reported from Italy, and then those dramatically rose that suddenly the British government took an interest in it, and then the university administration acted quite promptly. And so I happen to be a lucky person who was at a university which acted really quickly to shut down.

By the 13th of March we (LSE) were closed, and that was a huge shock to the system. Primarily, it was a shock to the people in administration, of course, but it was also a shock to those of us who teach because we suddenly had no access to our students in a physical capacity. We were

sent home and the country went into lockdown 10 days later, so there was an unprecedented level of emotional and mental trauma that a lot of our students were experiencing, because their families were back home, they were separated from them. Some people made the decision to fly back very suddenly, in which case they were separated from their cohorts.

And they went into extended quarantines – some people for two weeks, some people for four weeks, and in different places. They were isolated, they had technological issues, even *we* had technological issues at our end. We were absolutely not equipped in any way to take all of our materials online and yet we coped somehow. I mean it was a shock because we were in an emergency situation and I think it was something almost of a relief for people to say – 'this is an emergency situation'. Everyone was saying 'okay, we will get back to normal after a month', then 'it will be two months and we will get to normal', and I think in that sense by May 2020 people were having this sense that this is going to go up to the summer. Then people were saying it would be over by the summer, and so I think there was absolutely no sense of guiding principles coming to us either from governments [or institutions] and we were seeing this across the world.

SDN: The pandemic obviously affected different classes and sections of people very differently, and these inequalities have only been exacerbated since. What did this look like in University departments and for the students?

SB: Now, at the time everyone assumes that the pandemic is something that everybody experiences at the same time, but actually depending on how many people were dying, the sounds of sirens on silent streets, whether you were allowed out to go to the market or not, it affected people differently. So a trip to the supermarket as my students said, became something that was fraught with danger. You were absolutely terrified. The ones who worked double jobs, so there were some who worked double jobs, doubling up as a sort of working staff for fast food joints and things like that. They either lost their jobs or were so busy that they had no time to do other things, because they were delivery workers who were being called on to do all kinds of stuff at the beginning of the pandemic. Here in the UK as we know that happened during the second wave and the really big wave in India too.

And what happens is that the balance of labour shifts from those who are doing in-city work, whereas for those who are doing long-distance or delivery work, the risks are insanely high. We were not warned and people at that time thought this was a pandemic that was driven by hand-to-hand contact or it was only contagious in the sense that if you *touch* something, so people's cleaning routines were off the scale. I remember my students having a discussion on Zoom, about how they were disinfecting and we were all disinfecting everything, and so there was a sense of extreme tension and paranoia which crept in around that, and yet the *air-borne* nature of this wasn't something that was being talked about.

So in a university that has as its motto 'knowing the causes of things', of course almost instantly LSE started doing research on this, and I know a lot of sister and brother institutions across the country started doing research on the impacts of Covid, on what it all meant. But I think what very few people did was to take a global perspective and to look at the way in which it affected people in different areas. So some of our students with relatives who were dying in the US, in Italy, in the UK, in China, were in a terrible state of distress. The death counts were high in those

initial months and people were not allowed to mourn because everything was supposed to continue as normal, online. This was because everyone thought it was just a wave and it was going to finish, and it was going to be over soon.

So I think here comes the first huge mistake we set up: we were busy setting up *digital* infrastructures, and far less busy setting up *emotional* infrastructures to support and contain and calm, and to allow trauma to be spoken about. And now moving on to two years from that, it's possible to see the enormous damage that was done over these two years to not only young people I think, but to my generation as well.

Just to give you an example: if you happened to live in a multi-generational household as several of my black-British and British-Asian students live in multi-gen households, there was this absolute terror that you were going to lose the older members of your family because of something the younger members of the family were doing, that people were going in and out, and the emotional stress lasted not weeks, but *months*. I mean absolutely months, when there was no vaccine in sight.

And I think that that sort of intolerable pressure on people who were being told that you have to continue as normal with your jobs online. I mean there was a lot of sort of complaint but there was also a lot of compliance and a lot of acquiescence. We just sort of recorded our lectures, and put them online. It was almost sort of instantaneous that all these recordings were being used even when we were sick. I worked all the way through the first incredibly long bout to two months of pneumonia, constant treatment for various different ailments, and am now living with 'long Covid' like many of my students, who had it in January 2021. Some of them had the worst bouts of covid here in the UK. They had brain fog, they found it really difficult to submit essays, and so on.

SDN: This is a good point to note that it has deeply affected the 'normal' functioning of people and institutions, which it has in India as well. Would you say that there has been a certain pushback from institutions as well, including 'tough', authoritarian measures adopted by states to return to the state of pre-Covid 'normalcy'?

SB: Let me talk about the parallels between issues to do with civil liberties that took place in both the UK and in India during the pandemic, particularly regarding various things to do with Black Lives Matter or to do with the misogyny and the way in which the state used the pretext of closing down protests around issues of public health, and then started encoding that into policy.

But I want to start with *disinformation*, which is what I work on. So one of the very first things that you might have noticed at the start of the pandemic both in India and in the UK was the massive amount of medical misinformation and disinformation that was being circulated – from the sort of nonsense about the ways in which you drink a particular thing, like Bolsonaro telling his supporters you just need to drink chloroquine, and (Boris) Johnson was saying 'it's fine you can go on I have shaken everybody's hand' and as long as you are confident and you take your Vitamin C's and Vitamin D's you are going to be fine, and in India, it was banging pots and pans.

So you have got global disinformation very much linked to the rise of the far-right and we saw that at work. We saw that actually in the University setting, different people, who were clearly exposed, downplaying the dangers because they had heard x, y, or z, was something that was safe. And the clear message coming out of Asia (which had dealt with a previous outbreak of SARS) was that you have to take care of air filtration and mask up, and those were the two messages which have been going out, in terms of air-borne particles from the very beginning.

Now, what happened in India was that this got displaced onto racism, because there was a massive amount of disinformation about Muslims, about Muslim delivery drivers, about Muslim patients who were being left outside hospitals and not brought in you know the idea of who was a super-spreader and who wasn't. It was very much linked to other kinds of racial misinformation and racist disinformation that take place around pandemics. So the Ebola crisis was very much linked to the AIDS crisis, the way in which these things get associated with particular groups of people. In the UK, the news kept making a big deal of the fact that black and ethnic minority populations were the ones dying in the highest numbers and the speculation was very much in that old 1950's developmentalist racist mould, that these are people who don't take care of public health, rather than these are the communities that serve largely in occupations which are *public-facing*, in what were then the sort of the key worker occupations as bus drivers, cashiers, content producers, who are constantly out there in the streets, unable to get away from the pandemic.

The same thing was happening in India – people who were at the cutting edge were working working-class people who came from the sort of minority/minoritized communities, Dalit communities, and the kind of discourses around purity and cleanliness, which were then taking place were extremely dangerous for public health because rather building up public health infrastructures which could serve *everybody*, money was put into things which served only very small parts of the population. It was the same here, and the same there – if people had private health insurance that was okay (while others collapsed).

Now, how does this link to protesting? and I think it's really important to say that the notion of having a national spirit was one which is called on by the far-right, so not only did my students get to see in action this notion of the 'British stiff upper lip', 'let's treat it like a world war': the war metaphors were in use in all of the media. It was 'we are going to defeat this', 'we are going to put our hard hats on', 'we are going to get past this', and much the same thing in India. If you were not with the State, whatever completely misinformed view they were taking or whatever confused options they were giving you, then you were somehow with the pandemic, you were on the side of the virus and the virus, of course, largely got associated with particular groups.

In the UK, by 2021, my students from all of Southeast Asia and East Asia were getting attacked in public, they were getting spat at when they were going to the tube stations and when they were walking to and from class, they even got attacked on campus, they were told they were super spreaders, they were told they were the ones that had originated the pandemic. In India, Muslims were finding that they were in the same position, so I think all attempts at protest were being characterised as somehow either dangerous to public health and therefore proving that you people were irresponsible or they were characterised as anti-national and this was used to shut down many BLM protests, this was used to shut down obviously the anti-CAA protests in India, it was used to shut down a vigil by women about the murder of a young woman by a police

officer in the UK. These kinds of things were then codified in the UK into Bills, such as the Criminal Justice Bill, which basically takes away our right to protest.

This was something that I thought was going to happen right at beginning of the pandemic, I think probably somewhere around March or April 2020, when I thought that largely the kind of measures being brought in were both ill thought out and would lead to more authoritarianism. This doesn't mean that I am against large mask mandates or that I am against large measures to change air filtration quality. It means that I could see that what was being done was not only too little too late but that it was serving a completely different agenda both in India and here. So, we have talked about the sort of mental health implications of all of this but actually, there are much more or equally grave implications for democracy.

SDN: Would you like to comment further on the impacts on democratic rights, and on the media's role in disinformation?

SB: First of all, [they have been] ignoring people's rights; second of all, the largely anti-masking, anti-vaccine misinformation which started to arise across the world, in India as much as here, around sort of public health alternatives that were being broadcasted at the time, I think has done enormous damage to the notion of protest because the far-right, and the very far-right protesting against the right has then become the way in which protest is conceptualised, and anybody who has an either liberal or left outlook which considers socialist healthcare or which considers collegiality and sort of a commitment to other people's public health and safety is considered to be either an authoritarian leftist or liberal. And now [we see] the re-conceptualization of what it means to be authoritarian during the pandemic, where if you ask for some kind of social solidarity between people, you are seen as the authoritarian cutting down on you know the rights of libertarians**.**

I think it's supremely dangerous because that is a very popular opinion and it can be picked up by lots of people as saying, "oh, you won't let me do this." Meanwhile, quietly the rights of everyone are being eroded and the health system is being degraded to the point where it simply can't cope and becomes more and more privatised or privatisable, and it's probably one of the most depressing and dangerous conjunctions that my incoming students have ever entered. Take, for instance, the fact that many, many of my students, many of my very brilliant students, did not get visas to go anywhere in Europe for conferences to which they had been accepted. Now, with the opening up of the world, the sort of refusal to accept that we are still in a pandemic means that some conferences are saying "No, we are not going to have the online option. We are going to do everything offline."

Meanwhile, consulates are saying we are not accepting people from these countries because they don't have vaccines, you know, they don't vaccinate their populations and they are not saying it directly – they are simply not giving them appointments to get visas. So, there are multiple layered discriminations with people writing to me saying, 'I might not be able to turn up for my course because I won't get a visa, because it takes six months to get a visa now. I only got my letter from you yesterday. That means I won't be able to turn up till November.' And it's having knock-on effects on the kinds of people that can end up coming if you don't need a visa, if you already have loads of money, and if your parents weren't hit by the pandemic. We have had terribly tragic cases of people who lost their parents during the pandemic, and lost their ability to

pay fees and therefore ended up either having to drop out or work two jobs to support themselves and you know in extremely distressing situations.

SDN: We have not yet studied the material and emotional impacts of Covid especially in Universities at all – what it has done to these student populations and the demographic in the short term.

SB: Absolutely, they have not and I don't think we have yet seen the repercussions of the incredible stress that both fear, real, very real fear, during the pandemic, plus repression, plus inequality, has put on people across the world.

SDN: We now seem to be moving towards more closed off national borders, impacting the movement and associations of people. Related to that is the question of how we now square the consequences of a pandemic, with an argument for or against a strong state – vis-à-vis having more decentralised kinds of institutions or organisations. During the height of the pandemic here for instance, there were very few local agencies available to really take on that massive work. So, do we argue for a stronger state, or do we argue for stronger communitarian networks?

SB: So, I think I will repose the question, why does it have to be either a stronger state or stronger communitarian networks? What we have seen across the world is that *three* tendencies that were already happening before the pandemic have become far worse –

The first one is a tendency towards authoritarian governance and that sort of fascist authoritarian governance where the lives of some people don't count, whether that is refugees and migrants here in the UK or on the US border or black people's lives or Muslim lives. And those lives not only do not count the same as other people's lives because the government and the ruling party have dictated that's how it is, and the media pick it up but equally that has seeped into the consciousness of fellow citizens so that you have a sort of everyday fascism taking place that was a tendency already in many countries towards this.

The second one was crony capitalism, the extreme neoliberalisation of everything. So everything that these authoritarian regimes touched was basically in collusion with the private sector and not just with *any* private sector. We are not talking about small business interests, we are not talking of the medium businessmen who own a firm with fifty people or a hundred people, we are talking of billionaire businessmen who lose *billions* on a daily basis and don't think twice about it.

So the refinancing of private business through the State and then the channeling of that money into the campaigns for the state has been documented in the UK, in the US, through Trump's campaign, through Johnson's campaign. We know that Russian funding has funded the Conservative party where now there's all the rhetoric that we don't take money from Russia, we know that that's continuing to happen, and we know that Saudi oil dollars are funding various campaigns in some of these countries, we know that in India there are hookups between billionaires and the ruling party, so that's the second thing.

And the third one was a kind of very slow and creeping ideological attitude in the education sphere which has been taking place over a long time, so it didn't just happen yesterday but

technology is clearly implicated in this. The idea that certain kinds of teachers and certain kinds of students are dangerous to the nation, that their critical thinking is dangerous to the nation, and the idea that you need to be technologically smart but that you don't need social science and humanities knowledge is something that has not just started with the pandemic, it started long ago but we are seeing it now in the most brutal way, in the way funding is being channelled only to particular universities, only to science and maths in STEM subjects. But equally, we have just been told in the UK, something that was so shocking to me is that arts and humanities courses where students are seen not to have "high paying jobs" within six months of graduation, are now no longer going to be eligible for government funding.

And literature, philosophy, sociology departments are closing down. One of the most wonderful philosophy departments in the UK has decided it's going to cut almost all its staff, agglomerate with someone else.

This has been happening as I said pre-pandemic, but the pandemic with its attitudes about who gets a course and who doesn't has accelerated that, and what we are going to see in future generations is just sort of a massive, massive dearth of people who have that sort of liberal arts knowledge and critical thinking ability.

That is not to say that scientists don't have that but is it say that the discouragement and the imbalance in terms of what universities would be turning out in these countries, it's just sort of monstrous, it's actually monstrous, and we are seeing it in the sort of devastation that's taking place in a local University – Goldsmith's, which had a long reputation for a very sort of radical tradition of education but which has now absolutely smashed its own workforce, cut courses and literature and Black Studies, Women's Studies, has suspended the Head and Deputy Head of Department of Media for just being honest with the students. So we are entering a moment when technology says modernity, but that technology is being used both *to surveil and to curtail* all of the sort of liberal educational goals and values that we have had in the previous years.

Now, looping back to your question about protest, if everybody is losing their jobs, the people who are doing this kind of work, the people who are researching this, the people who talk about literature and arts are losing their jobs, and you are ending up in a world where there is very little room for manoeuvre. You are working twenty hours a day, trying to make ends meet at the one end of the spectrum, or sixteen hours a day doing something mindless and boring. That's really sort of distressing and that's all just in order to pay the rent and now we have what's called "the cost of living crisis", so there is just no time to protest against not being allowed to protest.

SDN: That's right. What would you say are the compounding effects of this on the student community?

SB: Every single thing [has been affected], so when I speak to my students if it isn't one thing, it's another. If you are not nursing a grandmother because there's no space in the local hospice as you said, institutions which run on sort of charitable and philanthropic grounds have been absolutely depredated over the last three years, if you are not doing that then your house is filled with sewage or you are struggling to pay the heating bill or you can't find a rental accommodation and the list goes on and on.

And in all of this of course, it's inequitable, but it's even more inequitable because the long-term disability of people who have been affected by the pandemic is something that is not discussed either by the Left or by the Right. And that's for various reasons, I mean people on the left want to get up and fight again, but you can't do that by ignoring disability and caring responsibilities which have fallen on people because of the pandemic.

So what we need is so sort of some kind of much more caring, you ask where should we go from here, we need a sort of better and caring understanding of what it means to mobilise, what it means to organise, and a much more inclusive one, which allows for people who cannot physically come and sit in protest or for whom it's too dangerous to physically come and sit in protest. And that does mean that there needs to be a displacement of strength in the nongovernmental, you know, sort of non-state sector, onto those who have the capacity to do it. Not in a way which burns them out, but in a way which gives others hope, and if they don't want to do that, then they have somehow ceded ground.

So what we need, obviously, is a more *caring* State, as well as a far more regulated nongovernmental sector that is not regulated by the state, but regulated by *principles*. But at a time when people from that sector are being imprisoned for stating their views, for supporting people, who are not only being imprisoned, but are being hounded and victimised, I see very very little hope for that sector being able to carry the burden.

And therefore what we need is another strong, caring or a grouping of strong, caring political parties which can come together and lead people, and there seems to be very little leadership [at the moment] in the UK, very little leadership in the US, very little leadership in France, very little in India, and the list goes on and on.

I am holding out some hope for Lula and the Workers Party in Brazil and we have seen a few countries in Latin America currently actually voting out these sorts of ideological neoliberals and authoritarians and voting in something different. Let's hope, fingers crossed, that something like that happens. I don't think there's any swimming pool big enough in India to see what's happening in Sri Lanka take place, so we need it to come as a kind of ground change but that doesn't mean strong government, it just means better government.

SDN: Thank you for this interview Prof. Banaji, and for these incredibly important and insightful interventions.