



A made-in-India shock doctrine, with a little help from Latin America

Posted [Apr 27, 2021](#) by [Sayandeb Chowdhury](#) and [Rajendran Narayanan](#)

[Ecology](#) , [Imperialism](#) , [Inequality](#) , [Strategy](#) ↗ [Global](#) , [India](#) , [Latin America](#) ≡ [Commentary](#) ♦ [Decimation of Federalism.](#) , [Disaster Capitalism](#) , [Featured](#) , [Feaured](#) , [naomi klein](#) , [The Shock Doctrine](#)

How can this inequality be maintained if not through jolts of electric shock.

—Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War*

In *The Shock Doctrine*, renowned journalist Naomi Klein presents a searing account of how disasters were used as cover to steamroll market fundamentalism by authoritarian regimes in Chile and Argentina, among others. The title alludes to the practice of psychiatric shock therapy used in the early twentieth century. She calls this *disaster*

capitalism, defined as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities.” For instance, Klein talks about how the U.S. government saw wrecked post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans as an opportunity to use “moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering.” In short, there are several examples of how neoliberal deep states are eked out by gaslighting an economic crisis at an exigent moment to pawn civil liberties and natural resources.¹

We might ask: What is the context? It is to understand the shifting—and sliding—terrains of constitutional politics in present-day India. And to do so, we need to look at illiberal or undemocratic regimes as examples.² In this context, several polemical comparisons have been made between the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s autocratic tendencies and those of Adolf Hitler. This comparison has enjoyed durability given the allegiance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) mothership Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party. Recently, political theorist Partha Chatterjee has offered a characteristically brilliant study of popular sovereignty and its competing models in Europe and Asia in the last two centuries. Some of what RSS brings to the Nazi project and why Modi represents a new kind of capitalism in India is evident in this work. However, how the violent Hindutva precepts of the current BJP regime are being foregrounded as part of a larger neoliberal apparatus remains an open question, which has assumed special weight in light of the pandemic.³

Here, we present some parallels and variants of Klein’s work. While an assertive Hindutva deep state was already a work in progress under Modi, what is striking is how the contingency of the pandemic has been used to mask it with a no-holds-barred steamrolling of market reforms. Monopolized decision-making and subversion of democratic deliberations have further aided in the manufacture of a *shock automata* with which the government-corporate nexus is repeatedly stinging the public. It is in this context that Modi’s pitch for privatization, at the cost of social spending, has strong resonances with Augusto Pinochet of Chile and the military junta that ruled Argentina in the 1970s and ’80s. This comparison, similar in many aspects, will bring to relief some of



A woman is consoled after her husband died due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outside the mortuary of a COVID-19 hospital in Ahmedabad, India, April 20, 2021. [Photo/Agencies]. From “India logs record jump in virus cases,” China Daily, April 23, 2021.

the malignant policy parameters of the current regime in India, which otherwise militate against both common sense and democratic principles.

In a military coup in Chile on September 11, 1973, Pinochet overthrew the socialist government of Salvador Allende, assassinated the duly elected president, and went on to rule Chile for the next seventeen years. Soon after Pinochet's insurrection, the new-fangled National Intelligence Directorate, "trusted" with the safeguarding of "national interest," was involved in large-scale human rights violations, including murder, detentions, "disappearances," and torture of civilians and dissenters. While the National Intelligence Directorate was disbanded in 1977, the Pinochet regime continued to crush civil liberties and muzzle dissent. The report of the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation presents a sobering account of these human rights violations.⁴ These were supplemented by prescriptions on economics by the Chicago School of free market economists under the guidance of Milton Friedman. Orlando Letelier, Chilean ambassador to the United States and minister of foreign affairs under Allende, presents a scathing critique of the free market model, the consequences of which were disastrous. The external payable debt increased by 20 percent in just one year, food production and consumption decreased, unemployment increased, and people's overall well-being drastically plummeted. Chile is hence a pointed example of what happens when dictatorship is wedded to crony capitalism.⁵

Pinochet presents an anchor for us to look at India under the BJP. Let us first look at the economic front. According to Oxfam India, the top 10 percent of India's population holds 77 percent of the country's wealth.⁶ The growing inequality coincides with a steady decline in the corporate tax to GDP ratio from over 3 percent in 2010–11 to a meagre 0.9 percent in November 2020.⁷ In contrast, in 2019, the consumption and unemployment was at its worst in four decades.⁸ Early data of the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey suggest that nutrition parameters for women and children have either worsened or stagnated between 2014–15 and 2019–20.⁹ Moreover, infant mortality rates in some states increased in 2017–18.¹⁰ Writing about the slump in human development in Chile during Pinochet's regime, Letelier notes: "The inhuman conditions under which a high percentage of the Chilean population lives is reflected most dramatically by substantial increases in malnutrition, infant mortality.... It is, in short, slow starvation."¹¹

India has historically paid scant attention to public health. COVID made matters worse.

No wonder the country was found teetering when it was confronted by a pandemic of that scale mounted on the rickety foundation of national well-being. The anxiety and discontent were further aggravated as Modi summoned a unilateral lockdown, bringing India's large informal workforce (approximately 500 million people) and their families to the fulcrum of

life and death. The sight of thousands of helpless and resilient migrant workers making epic journeys across the nation is now part of the nation's miserable archive of calamities. Millions were left hungry and foraging for survival and over a thousand people have died due to starvation, exhaustion, or accidents.¹² The government's much touted relief measures stood at a mere 3 percent of the GDP, contrary to its misleading claims of 10 percent.¹³ Worse still, in the government's own admission, there was no data on workers' lockdown-induced deaths and distress. The shock of the shutdown in April and May 2020 without adequate social protection measures continued well into the months of October and November.¹⁴ As per the Hunger Watch Survey by the Right to Food Campaign, 27 percent of respondents continued to have no income in October 2020 and only 3 percent went back to pre-lockdown income levels.¹⁵ As on January 1, 2021, the Food Corporation of India had four times the buffer stock norms of 21.4 million tons of rice and wheat.¹⁶ But despite overflowing food stocks in government warehouses, the public distribution system for food supplies was not universalized. On the contrary, the government prescribed cutting food subsidies for the poor.¹⁷ The closure of public schools partitioned children along digital lines, further widening the existing socioeconomic gaps. While the poor have been forced to plough new depths of hunger and alienation, the government seems to be celebrating inequality as a virtue, as evidenced by its deeply fallacious statistical reasoning in the *Economic Survey*.¹⁸ Alluding to government austerity in times of a humanitarian crisis, Klein refers to *Business Week's* description of mid-1970s Chile as a "Dr. Strangelove world of deliberately induced depression."¹⁹

The annual Union Budget for 2021–22 was an opportunity to set straight the massive imbalance between the poor and elite. However, the budgetary allocations for welfare and the social sector have only been reduced.²⁰ There was an overall decrease in public spending on health, education, food, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act—the pillars of social security in India. Several public sector units have also been arbitrarily privatized.

All along, the substrate of the entire operation has been a reification of majoritarianism and a concomitant deification of Modi. This program did not emerge in a day. After the BJP won the 2019 central elections with a thumping majority, the government of India amended the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, which gave it wide-ranging and discretionary powers to declare any person a "terrorist" without trial. Numerous human rights activists at odds with the government have been arrested since with unsubstantiated charges. The amendment to the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act was followed by the amendment of the Right to Information Act, making it easier for the government to withhold information, thereby further reducing its commitment to transparency and accountability. Thereafter, overnight, with a macabre sleight of hand, the government of India unconstitutionally revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir.

It then passed the xenophobic Citizenship Amendment Act, drawing India's Muslims into the most severe threat to their life and livelihood since India's Partition in 1947. The Citizenship Amendment Act poses a severe threat to Muslims lacking official documents as they are likely to be rendered stateless and forced to be in detention camps. The experience of its implementation in the Indian state of Assam bears testimony to this horror. Foregrounding the treatment of civilians and dissidents by the Pinochet regime on the plank of privatization merits comparison. As Letelier wrote:

The violation of human rights, the system of institutionalized brutality, the drastic control and suppression of every form of meaningful dissent is discussed (and often condemned) as a phenomenon only indirectly linked, or indeed entirely, unrelated, to the classical unrestrained "free market" policies that have been enforced by the military junta. This failure to connect has been particularly characteristic of private and public financial institutions, which have publicly praised and supported the economic policies adopted by the Pinochet government, while regretting the "bad international image" the junta has gained from its "incomprehensible" persistence in torturing, jailing and persecuting all its critics.... This particularly convenient concept of a social system in which "economic freedom" and political terror coexist without touching each other, allows these financial spokesmen to support their concept of "freedom" while exercising their verbal muscles in defense of human rights.²¹

This mirrors the Modi regime to an astonishing degree. Like the Pinochet regime, the BJP regime has centralized its mechanism of arrests and detentions invoking the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and using the National Investigation Agency. There is, however, one subtle difference between the two regimes. Unlike Pinochet, the BJP regime has decentralized its acts of vandalism and violence. Consequently, one does not often see a civil war-like situation, but instead, splintered acts of violence, local riots, lynching of atomized Muslims, and disparate abject violence against women and Dalits.

All through the pandemic, Modi's unilateral acts of populism were advertised as examples of quick and bold decision-making. He appeared repeatedly on television and, with premeditated theatrics, asked the country to come together for inanities such as banging plates and lighting lamps, effectively converting a public health emergency into a faith-based jamboree. The government even tried to fabricate the onus of this national calamity to a small congregation at a Delhi mosque. Moreover, the fundamental policy paralysis notwithstanding, the Modi government undertook several initiatives in the first months of the lockdown. The PM CARES Fund was announced, in contravention to not only the established relief funds but also shielding it from the Right to Information Act and public scrutiny. Second, the government launched a controversial surveillance app (Arogyasetu) in the name of corona-inventory, which cyber experts deemed invasive. Third, the government inked a \$63 million deal to buy big-ticket weaponry from the United States,

while also giving a final go-ahead to the ₹200 billion remake of the parliament area in the national capital.²² All this has meant that at the other end of a suffering nation, it was business as usual for the government. But more business was in the pipeline. Soon after, the government drafted a pernicious Environment Impact Assessment 2020 and gave away mining and airport leases to big corporations. All this was done without the Indian Parliament having been convened even once, and without any public deliberations or debates. A New Education Policy was also clumsily launched.

Writing about the Latin American experience of market fundamentalism at odds with democratic idioms, Klein notes: “All these incarnations share a commitment to the policy trinity—the elimination of the public sphere, total liberation for corporations and skeletal social spending.”²³

In short, authoritarianism, witch hunting, and using every armature of the state as a vehicle of propaganda were already thriving in India. The COVID-19 induced crisis provided the opportunity to further upend constitutional provisions and federal principles. When, after a gap of five months, the Parliament reconvened on September 14, 2020, within a week, with unprecedented haste and by overruling procedures, the Indian government was found hurriedly passing several contentious legislations with little or no consultations: the three farm laws (which have since become a major crisis in the making) being the most blatant. In addition, there was the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act and three codes concerning the working class. In the case of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, the new amendments make it virtually impossible for nonprofit organizations to operate without toeing the “official line.” As a consequence, the revered global watchdog, Amnesty International, has pulled out of India.²⁴ Concerning labor, twenty-nine labor laws were slashed down to three contentious labor codes. Each of these codes weaken the social protection of the working class and widen the already expanding net of precarity. Not only are these laws morally dubious and constitutionally questionable, but the claims that the codes would make labor markets more flexible and hence would improve the so-called ease of doing business, is also misleading.²⁵ Moreover, the working class is inextricably linked to the historically disenfranchised communities such as Dalits, Muslims, and Adivasis who will be further pushed to the margins. Such dilutions of labor laws are eerily similar to the decisions made by Martinez de Hoz, a landed gentry who became the finance minister in military-ruled Argentina in the 1970s. Alluding to his actions, Klein notes “de Hoz’s first act as minister of the economy was to ban strikes and allow employers to fire workers at will.” In a thirty-one-page advertisement in *Business Week*, the then Argentinian government declared that “few governments in history have been as encouraging to private investment.... We are in a true social revolution, and we seek partners. We are unburdening ourselves of statism, and believe firmly in the all-important role of the private

sector.” As noted in the book *True Crimes* by Michael McCaughan, within a year of this, wages declined by 40 percent and underemployment soared.²⁶

It is at such times that the judiciary is meant to check state excesses and uphold individual freedoms. On the contrary, the Indian judiciary’s genuflection to the government has become rampant, the apex court having failed to protect the lives of the poor and the hungry. In fact, in response to a petition on wage compensation for migrant workers during lockdown, the Supreme Court demonstrated Olympian apathy when it asked, “if they are being provided food then why do they need money for meals?” As Gautam Bhatia argues, while the Supreme Court has shown uncharacteristic urgency in hearing the bail plea of a brazenly right-leaning journalist, it has been visibly and determinately lackadaisical in other pressing matters: unlawful incarceration in Kashmir, electoral bonds, illegal incarceration of social activists, and so on.²⁷ Most have been languishing in prisons without trial for two years. As per an analysis of the archaic sedition laws (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code), “65% of nearly 11,000 individuals in 816 sedition cases since 2010 were implicated after 2014 when Modi took office.”²⁸ The political scientist Jan-Werner Müller refers to such actions by populist governments as *discriminatory legalism*, which, put simply, amounts to: “for my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”

To conclude, lack of a potent opposition force, the mendicancy of the mainstream media, and the judiciary’s thinly veiled favors to the government have been aiding Modi’s singular usurpation of power. The pandemic created the additional advantage of a nation without inquisitorial collectives—be it the spaces of the university, congresses of civil society, or in arts and cultural practice. Clearly, the viral phobia was used as a game of distraction, so that the utter failure of the government could be obscured from public scrutiny while several policies that would embolden the small clique of private enterprises could be put into force. It has also been a game of control; of forcing consent and bypassing rules and procedures. The parallels with *The Shock Doctrine* are hence obvious. What Modi administered—and with spectacular obstinacy—is a diabolic mix of whataboutery, falsity, and hatred. All while a nation, under total internment, was numbed into a state of consenting paralysis. At the other end of the pandemic, what has been irreparably damaged is the very edifice of democratic engagement and institutional structures, thereby setting a slippery precedent for future governments.

The authors would like to thank Sakina Dhorajiwala and C. Rammanohar Reddy for suggestions on an earlier draft. The authors also thank Jayati Ghosh for her comments on a later draft.

Notes

1. ↪ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).
2. ↪ Madhav Khosla and Milan Vaishnav, "The Three Faces of the Indian State," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (2021): 111–25.
3. ↪ Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
4. ↪ United States Institute of Peace, *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002).
5. ↪ Orlando Letelier, "The 'Chicago Boys' in Chile: Economic Freedom's Awful Toll," *Nation*, August 1976.
6. ↪ "India: Extreme Inequality in Numbers," Oxfam International, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021.
7. ↪ Zico Dasgupta, "The Impossible Trinity Facing Budget 2021–22," *Hindustan Times*, January 23, 2021.
8. ↪ S Subramanian, "What Is Happening to Rural Welfare, Poverty, and Inequality in India?," *India Forum*, December 12, 2019; Radhicka Kapoor, "Understanding India's Jobs Challenge," *India Forum*, September 10, 2019.
9. ↪ Dipa Sinha, "Why NFHS-5 Data Merits Serious Concern and Urgent Action," *Wire*, December 24, 2020.
10. ↪ Jean Drèze, Ashish Gupta, Sai Ankit Parashar, and Kanika Sharma, "Pauses and Reversals of Infant Mortality Decline in India in 2017 and 2018," *SRN*, November 8, 2020.
11. ↪ Letelier, "The 'Chicago Boys' in Chile."
12. ↪ Anindita Adhikari, Navmee Goregaonkar, Rajendran Narayanan, Nishant Panicker, and Nithya Ramamoorthy, "Manufactured Maladies: Lives and Livelihoods of Migrant Workers During COVID-19 Lockdown in India," *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63 (2020): 969–97; Aman, Kanika Sharma, Krushna R, Thejesh GN, "India Non Virus Deaths During Lockdown," *Zenodo*, July 4, 2020.
13. ↪ Jayati Ghosh, "A Critique of the Indian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Industrial and Business Economics* 47 (2020): 519–30; Debraj Ray and S. Subramanian, "India's Lockdown: An Interim Report," *Indian Economic Review* 55 (2020): 31–79.
14. ↪ Abraham Rosa, Amit Basole, and Surbhi Kesar, "Tracking Employment Trajectories during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Indian Panel Data" (Centre for Sustainable Employment Working Paper #35, Azim Premji University, Bangalore, 2021).
15. ↪ Dipa Sinha and Rajendran Narayanan, "Hunger, Nutrition Are Worse than Before Lockdown: PDS Must Be Universalized," *Indian Express*, November 26, 2020.
16. ↪ Himanshu, "The Mere Existence of MSPs Will Not Do Much for Indian Farmers," *Mint*, February 11, 2021.

17. ↪ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/to-cut-subsidy-bill-niti-paper-says-lower-coverage-of-food-security-law-7207884/>
18. ↪ [“Inequality and Growth: Conflict or Convergence?”](#) chap. 4 in *Economic Survey 2020–21*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Finance, 2021).
19. ↪ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.
20. ↪ Dipa Sinha, [“The Budget’s Blurred Social Sector Vision,”](#) *Hindu*, February 3, 2021.
21. ↪ Letelier, [“The ‘Chicago Boys’ in Chile.”](#)
22. ↪ Sriram Lakshman, [“U.S. Approves Sale of Missiles, Torpedoes to India,”](#) *Hindu*, April 14, 2020; Rohan Deshpande, [“Centre’s Rs 20,000-Crore Central Vista Redevelopment Plan May Sit at Odds with Delhi Heritage Rules,”](#) *Scroll*, June 11, 2020.
23. ↪ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.
24. ↪ Sumit Ganguly, [“The Death of Human Rights in India?”](#) *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2020.
25. ↪ K. R. Shyam Sundar, [“Critiquing the Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2019,”](#) *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 32–33 (2020); K. R. Shyam Sundar, [“Occupational Safety Continues to be Ignored as a Right,”](#) *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 39 (2020); [“New Labour Codes and Their Loopholes,”](#) *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 40 (2020); Ravi Srivastava, [“Myth and Reality of Labour Flexibility in India,”](#) *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 59 (2016): 1–38.
26. ↪ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.
27. ↪ Gautam Bhatia, [“A Plaintive Lament on Liberty That Rings Hollow,”](#) *Hindu*, January 20, 2020.
28. ↪ Kunal Purohit, [“Our New Database Reveals Rise in Sedition Cases in the Modi Era,”](#) *article-14*, February 2, 2021.



About Sayandeb Chowdhury

Sayandeb Chowdhury is an assistant professor at Ambedkar University, Delhi.

About Rajendran Narayanan

Rajendran Narayanan is an assistant professor at Azim Premji University, Bangalore, and is affiliated with LibTech India.

Connect