

APRIL 2022

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A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



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Bollywood and the Indies

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COMING IN MAY

Africa

COUPS HAVE BEEN SPREADING like a virus across the Sahel and West Africa. But a closer look can uncover long-established local and transborder networks and social structures at work underneath what may seem from afar to be a wave of “democratic backsliding.” Similarly, as African governments struggle to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic without a fair share of vaccines and other resources, patterns from past states of emergency may resurface. *Current History's* May issue will cover these trends and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **The Revealing Demise of Chad's Strongman**
Judith Scheele, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Marseille
- **Apartheid Paranoia and Pandemic Lockdowns**
Hlonipha Mokoena, University of the Witwatersrand
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- **Disability Rights and Religion in Uganda**
Tyler Zoanni, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
Ninth in a series
- **Centering Africa in Global History**
Nemata Blyden, George Washington University

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“[L]ayers of negotiation exist between anti-minority sentiments and people’s everyday respect for multireligiosity.”

Religious Spaces, Urban Poverty, and Interfaith Relations in India

ATREYEE SEN

In the late 1990s, I started doing doctoral fieldwork in a Mumbai slum that had been roiled by large-scale Hindu–Muslim riots in 1992–93, which had challenged the cosmopolitan reputation of the commercial capital of India. I was keen to uncover the ways in which women from this slum who had political affiliations with a regional Hindu nationalist party had participated in the communal riots. While talking with the women, I realized that they would usually parrot the anti-migrant and anti-minority propaganda disseminated by the nationalist party’s ideologues. Sometimes they used fairly stereotypical anti-Muslim rhetoric (claiming that Muslims propagate terrorism in South Asia, for example) to explain their political positions. During the course of my fieldwork, however, I discovered that many of the same women who displayed strong anti-Muslim sentiments had also helped many Muslim women in their locality during the riots, even hiding them in the safety of Hindu homes.

The Muslim women sheltered in these secret sanctuary homes had been dressed up in saris and made to wear signs of Hindu womanhood (such as vermilion on their foreheads, and a necklace of black beads worn by married Hindu women), so that they could be introduced as extended kin to visitors. The Hindu slum women eventually guided the Muslim women through the riot-afflicted streets and helped them escape to more peaceful areas of the city. During the two-month period of severe communal discord in Mumbai, these Hindu nationalist slum women took part in

looting shops and vandalizing religious or business properties owned by Muslims. At the same time, they protected Muslim women from being raped or killed during the riots by Hindu men targeting minority women.

Later in my fieldwork, when I had developed stronger relationships of trust with the slum women, I asked them about their paradoxical behavior. One of my interlocutors, Savitri, said: “In the world, we are Hindu nationalist. At home, we are all women—across religious divides. You *do* some things to be religious, and you *do* some things to be human.”

Communal violence has shaped the history of India and regulated its regional borders; it has also determined the contours of everyday life and deeply influenced the way communities perceive each other. After maneuvering and stirring up tensions within this complex communal landscape, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won with a thumping majority in the 2014 national elections, taking the helm of the central government in New Delhi. This victory was followed by a series of coercive anti-minority decrees, such as the curfew and communication siege in majority-Muslim Kashmir, which began in 2019. There have also been Hindu–Muslim communal clashes, notably the 2021 Delhi riots over the Citizenship Amendment Act, which marginalized Muslims.

Another action that received a fair amount of national and international media attention was the Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, known as the “Love Jihad” law, enacted in 2020 by the BJP-ruled northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The state government became the first to pass a law banning conversion by force,

ATREYEE SEN is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Copenhagen.

fraudulent means, or marriage. This law was an aggressive political response to what various right-wing Hindu groups collectively described as the “Love Jihad,” a conspiracy theory that Muslim men were plotting to seduce Hindu women with the purpose of converting them to Islam. Interreligious marriages were openly criminalized by the Uttar Pradesh state government, especially if a Hindu woman had embraced Islam after her marriage.

Many of these developments involved the complex coalescing of Hindu nationalist social and political forces, as the BJP has cultivated a worldwide following across class and caste divides. These forces have generated local and global concerns about the precarious future of minorities in India.

The phenomenal popularity of the BJP and the brutal face of state-supported Islamophobia have impacted in large and small ways the everyday beliefs and micro-exchanges that have long informed intercommunity relations in India. As lynchings and other attacks on Muslims, rapes of minors and minority women, and skirmishes and widespread riots have made headlines, questions have been raised about the strain on the overall social fabric. Can ordinary people maintain interfaith relations in contemporary India? Or will interfaith exchanges be relegated to a romantic or historical past in which communal inclusivity was upheld as a cultural value?

My fieldwork in many urban slums in Indian cities shows that mistrust, fear, and anger continue to lie at the core of interfaith debates. Yet there are spaces and places where syncretic traditions are so deeply accepted that ordinary people can use multiple strategies to maintain those ties without visibly challenging dominant Hindu nationalist discourses. Many low-income urban communities remain under the radar of nationalist directives, and carry on *doing* quotidian acts of benevolence to retain certain facets of humanity (as exemplified by Savitri in the introductory vignette). When it comes to managing, using, and passing through religious spaces, ordinary people especially are more open to the social and spiritual power of shared prayers, dialogues, and mutual assistance. It is this *doing* (which may be different from what people are *saying* in order to remain inoffensive within Hindu orthodox sociopolitical environments) that I want to capture in the following discussion.

FRICION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

The Indian city often provides an opportunity for poor migrants to step away from their insular rural environments and occupy work and residential space with people from different religious and regional backgrounds. Sometimes these encounters lead to tensions. For example, when Muslims and Christians eat nonvegetarian food in factory kitchens shared with Hindu vegetarian workers, this often leads to interreligious conflict in the workplace. Intercommunity marriages are also not very well accepted within poor communities, and this creates tensions in mixed localities.

People tend to be vocal, at times violent, when they disapprove of such perceived transgressions at home and in the world. Despite these frictions, laboring communities do find ways in which to navigate and manage interfaith relationships. They may do this by separating kitchens and meal schedules, or by creating social spaces outside the remit of the home where interreligious couples can meet with extended kin.

Over the past two decades, I have conducted research in the slums of Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. My main area of interest has been the relationship between urban poverty and nationalist politics. This research also led me to believe that layers of negotiation exist

between anti-minority sentiments and people’s everyday respect for multireligiosity.

I particularly remember the case of a Hindu station master who had installed a statue of the Hindu god Ganesha in one of the commuter stations in Mumbai. He believed that his station had no record of train crashes, passenger-related accidents, or youth suicides on the tracks because this elephant-headed god was a good-luck charm. Many station masters succeeded him. They would all protect and make offerings to this deity that sat in the middle of the train platform.

And then a Muslim station master arrived. He and his family simply carried on worshipping the deity. Not because he believed in Hinduism, but because it was tradition. He believed in the luck that this deity brought to his station. I never encountered Hindu commuters who objected to this practice, and train passengers from various religious backgrounds joined the Muslim station master in his prayers to this powerful savior-deity. This collective sharing of a small public ritual did

*Many interfaith relations among
the poor are not about
religion at all.*

not come under the radar of radical nationalist groups. But perhaps this ritual was made possible by its taking place in a space characterized by human flows, a train platform in the city. The fleeting nature of human interaction in that space allowed brief exchanges of shared belief, as people quickly dispersed from these encounters and returned to the bustle of their uncertain urban worlds.

I would suggest that a significant proportion of interfaith relations among the poor is not about religion at all, but rather can be influenced by a mesh of social, political, and economic determinants.

In January 2020, a mosque in Kerala, a state in southern India, hosted a Hindu wedding. This event received a lot of media attention, since it appeared to symbolize harmonious interfaith relations in an era of communal hatred and disparities. The Hindu couple tied the knot according to Hindu ritual, in front of traditional lamps. The marriage was solemnized by a Hindu priest. The Muslim Jamaath committee had decorated the mosque for the function. Members of both Hindu and Muslim communities turned out in large numbers to witness the marriage. Apart from hosting the wedding, the mosque committee served a vegetarian meal to around 1,000 guests. The mosque also offered wedding gifts, giving the bride gold and plenty of cash.

Newspaper reports stated that the bride had lost her father a couple of years earlier. Since the beleaguered family lacked the resources to conduct the wedding and lived in a rented house, which meant that they did not have the security of owning a home or any other property, the bride's mother sought help from the mosque committee. (News reports offered no explanation as to why the bride's mother did not seek help from the Hindu community, or whether her class, caste, or widowed status dissuaded Hindus from offering her support.) The secretary of the committee made a case for the wedding to be hosted on the mosque premises.

Though the media portrayed the wedding as an important social event against the backdrop of religious divides, underlining the vitality of communal amity, the fact that the bride's family was in a fragile economic state provided essential context. The impetus for the mosque to host the wedding lay in an obligation and opportunity to provide financial support to members of the same neighborhood, despite their belonging to a different religion.

This context is key to some of the most significant interfaith exchanges among economically underprivileged social groups. With meager resources at home, communities remain open to other religious institutions that could support them in a crisis. In this particular context, the use of the Kerala mosque as a space for Hindu religious rituals also became politically significant. Both Hindu and Muslim communities exhibited mutual support while navigating the dangerous terrain of nationalist politics.

A year after this event, in December 2021, social media was flooded with news of Hindu nationalist groups disrupting Christmas celebrations in schools, colleges, and other secular spaces in India. A video that went viral and created a furor documented how low-caste Hindu women in the southern state of Karnataka fended off male members of a Hindu supremacist organization when the men barged in and tried to disrupt Christmas celebrations in their home. The men reportedly asked the women why they were celebrating Christmas, and also demanded reasons for the absence of vermilion on their foreheads to show that they were married Hindu women. One of the women asked the group of men, "Who are you to question us?" The women also insisted that it was solely their decision if they wanted to celebrate Christmas. They told the men to "get out" of their home.

Many of my Hindu interlocutors in the slums of Mumbai kept images of Jesus Christ and Sikh Guru Nanak next to the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses that they worshipped. Whereas they would introduce themselves to the world as practicing Hindus, their everyday religious practices at home remained outside the remit of societal responsibilities and validation. Even though these were not examples of direct interfaith exchange, they highlighted how the home was a sacred space in which multireligious traditions—whether they involved formal prayers or food, music, and festivities—could be celebrated and defended from the intervention of religious orthodoxies that thrived in the public and political domain.

PANDEMIC HUMANITARIANISM

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India has been one of the worst-hit countries, suffering a large number of fatalities—around 500,000 as of January 2022, according to the official count (which critics said was a serious underestimate).

A scramble over scarce health-care resources and the ensuing blame game exposed the preexisting social fragmentation and intersectional inequalities between religious communities that often characterize unequal urban citizenship in India. For example, mosques where Muslims congregated for Friday prayers were shamed for allegedly hosting super-spreading events and stereotyped as sites for “corona-bombing” and a “corona jihad” against Hindus.

In 2021, a catastrophic second wave of COVID-19 overwhelmed India’s health infrastructure. Hospitals were running out of beds and oxygen. Critical drugs were unavailable to the masses, while being sold in thriving illegal markets in Indian cities. Social media platforms were flooded with desperate messages from patients and family members pleading for information on available oxygen cylinders and hospital admissions.

As government authorities struggled to cope with the scale of the crisis, places of worship across India, including mosques and gurdwaras (Sikh religious spaces), opened up to help the needy. Once accused of breeding “corona jihadis,” these spaces turned into care centers for COVID-19 patients. Several media reports stated that the acute shortage of beds in intensive care units persuaded spiritual leaders, committee heads, and members of minority religious groups to turn their large halls, wedding venues, and prayer rooms into makeshift wards equipped with beds and oxygen cylinders. Moulana Umer Ahmad Ilyas, chief preacher of the Delhi-based All India Imam Organisation, made a prominent appeal to all Muslims across India to open mosques and madrasas (religious schools) as COVID-19 centers.

Even small prayer rooms were turned into isolation facilities. Food and medicine were often offered by neighbors and members of wider religious communities. Most mosques and gurdwaras clearly stated that they would admit people of all faiths.

Despite Mumbai being the financial hub of India, its hospitals were also running out of space, and the city was reeling from the oxygen shortage that affected the whole country. Scores of people died due to lack of oxygen supplies in hospitals, compelling the Indian Supreme Court to step in and order the creation of a task force that would conduct an “oxygen audit.” In response, several

Jain temples, mosques, and churches in suburban Mumbai collaborated with local nongovernmental organizations and charities to turn their spaces into temporary hospitals and oxygen facilities. While the affluent sections of Mumbai’s urban population could afford to go to private hospitals, poor communities could only seek medical attention from local minority religious organizations. Churches in central Mumbai that were located close to hospitals also turned themselves into free isolation facilities for low-income nurses and medical staff, regardless of religion.

For poor households in Mumbai, which had more access to aid in mosque-run care facilities than in hospitals, this gesture from minority communities was a clarion call offering selfless service. According to one of my Hindu interlocutors from the slums of Mumbai, who was offered daily fruit packages and oxygen treatment in a local mosque (after being denied medical attention in overwhelmed hospitals): “When you are being rescued from death by a hand, you don’t ask if the hand that saved you belonged to a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, or Sikh.”

Most of the volunteers worked more than 20 hours a day during the peak of the crisis and had to make difficult decisions about whom to admit to these small facilities.

Despite the discrimination and atrocities they face as a religious minority in Mumbai, mosque leaders appealed to Muslim volunteers to show their humanity for all people in the city, since that is what Islam teaches its followers to do. “Virus does not have a religion,” said one of the leaders of a mosque that had set up an outpatient department to treat patients with mild symptoms. Again, the people admitted to these temporary facilities were of all faiths.

These acts of care show how spaces of worship can become fluid, open, and accessible during a crisis. They can also return to their earlier status as closed-off spaces for religious devotion when a period of emergency comes to an end. Being human and *doing* humanitarianism in order to collectively overcome a calamity means relying on ordinary people’s empathy for each other, which might dissolve again when communal tensions precipitate other modes of crisis. Despite the complexities in these forms of exchange, medical staff, doctors, health experts, and epidemiologists across India acknowledged that interfaith

The poor received medical aid from minority religious organizations in the pandemic.

initiatives to save lives were notably successful during the pandemic, whereas government institutions proved to be unprepared for the viral surge.

SHARED SHRINES

Beyond crises and calamities, there are several kinds of interfaith space that are embedded in poor communities and emblematic of their syncretic traditions. Though some of these spaces have been targeted and destroyed by local Hindu nationalist organizations, many are covertly protected and cared for by local communities. While doing fieldwork in a periurban locality in Kolkata, I came across two such spaces that were used so regularly by poor people that even the local right-wing nationalist groups could not envisage their erasure.

When I started conducting research in this neighborhood, which I will call Bonkupara, I discovered that the low-income Hindu inhabitants were emotionally attached to two Muslim shrines. These shrines were dedicated to prominent Muslim *pirs*, or spiritual leaders, who were mystical helpers of the poor in the late seventeenth century. According to oral traditions in the area, one of the mystics served as a guide who supported infertile women with miracles and magic; the other helped his ordinary followers appreciate the value of knowledge and learning for the future of mankind.

The inhabitants of the neighborhood believed that if they visited these shrines, they would be relieved of their suffering. These troubles were related to two major social anxieties: women's incapacity to bear children, and students' failure to pass school and college exams. (The stakes of such exams are high, because marginalized children cannot gain access to the labor market without basic education.) One of the shrines was called "Baby Shrine" (in Bengali, the local language), and it was visited mostly by women. The other was called "Exams Shrine." Both shrines were known as spaces that helped and healed the poor.

Radha, a resident of Bonkupara, regularly visited the Baby Shrine and prayed for a child. She had been married for ten years and could not become pregnant. She was mocked by her peers for being barren. She tried to balance her life between working as a maid in an affluent upper-class household in the main city and receiving fertility treatments both from a clinic and from traditional medical practitioners. Nothing seemed to work until she heard about the Baby Shrine and the healing powers of the Muslim saint.

During a conversation about her frequent visits to the shrine, I discovered that Radha had asked her employers for financial assistance in order to receive fertility treatment in a private hospital in Kolkata. But they refused to bear the cost, nor would they give her a loan. Eventually she started visiting the shrine of the holy man and crying her heart out. After several months of praying for a child at the shrine, she became pregnant, and subsequently she gave birth to her "miracle child." Radha said:

What is Hindu and Muslim in my baby story? My employers were Hindu, the doctors were Hindu, the traditional medicine men were Hindu, all the temples I went to were Hindu temples. And I didn't get a child. It was my visit to the Baby Shrine which gave me my little boy. I spent no money there. If there is a place where poor people can go for healing, we will just go there. Religion will not matter. All that matters is that a shrine of a Muslim man fulfilled my life as a mother.

Radha continues to visit the shrine in the hope of conceiving a second child. She also sweeps the areas around the shrine, lights candles, and volunteers for community activities that protect the shrine from verbal and physical attacks by local right-wing male youth. "Women of all ages and all faiths come here to ask for help with having a baby. Hoping has no religion [*ashar kono dharma nei*]," she tells these nationalist men. Many other childless women did not experience miracles, but the shrine remained a safe space for them to share their grief with others.

Despite the feminine and emotional environment created by the Baby Shrine, the Exams Shrine was far more popular in the neighborhood. People of all ages, whether they needed to pass exams in schools and colleges, or prepare for interviews and aptitude tests as part of a job application, would drop by the Exams Shrine. Roghu, the son of a wage laborer who was the first person in his family to receive a graduate degree, told me that he would pray at the shrine for several weeks in the run-up to his exams.

The Hindu pantheon features a goddess of learning, Saraswati, who is worshipped frequently in Hindu households during examination periods. But Roghu said that his visits to the shrine did not involve praying to any Hindu deity. He was simply there to pray for help with passing exams in a space that had a reputation for being powerful and yielding results. He said, "There are so many Saraswati deities

all over the city, and they are instituted and worshipped in all schools, including mine. But this space has power. It is not a general place of worship.”

To the regular devotees of both shrines, who mainly came from Bonkupara, it didn't matter that these shrines were embedded in a Muslim tradition. Some things were more important than narrow religious differences. The inhabitants of Bonkupara did not have the power of economic advantages, access to decent medical treatment, elite schooling, expensive tutoring, or formal training for job interviews. But they had the power of a shrine; and that space gave poor communities across religious cultures the confidence and comfort to face competitive challenges in the city.

EVERYDAY INTERDEPENDENCE

Many kinds of interfaith relationships, including marriage, friendships, and shared celebration of religious spaces and festivals, are considered to be rebellious, bringing shame to the family, defying the sanctity of community boundaries, and leading to communal hatred. Representations of interfaith relationships in India tend to reinforce these sentiments, whether an advertisement gets

taken down for daring to depict a mixed marriage, or right-wing groups turn to online trolling and violence in the name of preserving the Hindu religion. Minority communities often feel dejected, defeated, and denied basic citizenship rights. Against this backdrop of societal objections, hate, and anti-minority state laws, however, there are still lingering sentiments of care and appreciation for cultural diversity and interconnections.

Interfaith dialogues are typically perceived to be formal, strategic conversations between two or more religious groups, often mediated by peace or justice organizations. But I suggest that sections of the urban poor relate interfaith exchanges to everyday traditions of interdependence and entangled perspectives on humanity, and they often navigate sacred spaces as safe harbors where people with social and economic challenges can seek help. Even as Hindu religious identities become ever more politicized in contemporary India, there is still a profound competence exhibited by ordinary people who defy calls for absolute separation between communities, and informally use their sacred spaces as arenas for *doing*—retaining and reviving old and new forms of interreligious reverence. ■

“[T]he category of women with disabilities is an amorphous entity, precariously perched on the intersection of gender and disability, but not owned by either the disability or the women’s rights movement.”

Slow Progress for Women with Disabilities in India

RENU ADDLAKHA

It is not always the case that one witnesses social transformations directly connected with one’s identity in one’s own lifetime. This has been my good fortune as a female with congenital visual impairment, born at a time when having such a deficit was a curse that predicted lifelong trauma for the family even before the disabled body took on a life of its own as a social being. Stigma, self-blame, fatalism, financial hardship, an endless search for a cure within available biomedical systems and alternative medicines, and prayers and penance—this is how my parents would have described my infancy and childhood. My early memories are of wearing thick glasses as a toddler, being looked at with pity and aversion by adults, being constantly monitored by my parents, having no playmates, suffering isolation and bullying in school, and sitting by myself in empty classrooms.

Disability and Equality

Eighth in a series

Fast forward half a century. In a vast expanse of the Indian landscape, the above description would still be valid. But much has happened since the 1960s when it comes to the issue of disability, both discursively and institutionally. Considering these changes through a reflexive lens as both an observer and a participant in this process is both rewarding and painful. The realization that so much that I went through would have been unnecessary, had a different perspective on disability been at play, fills me with a strange emptiness. On the other hand, the fact that so much can be changed when disability need not be considered

the lifelong curse that it has been for eons is empowering. But between possibility and reality, there is still a yawning gap.

It may be said that disability as a human rights issue was propelled globally by the United Nations through its declarations of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 and the International Decade of Disabled Persons from 1983 to 1992. Before that, disability was a peripheral issue, confined to the domains of social welfare in state policies, and programs and service delivery in the civil society sector.

The movement of disability from an impairment-centric medical issue to a rights-based social issue was mediated in India, as in most other countries, by the law. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and the United Kingdom’s Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 inspired collectives like the Disability Rights Group in New Delhi, which became the fulcrum of campaigns for disability-specific legislation in India. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in 1995, set the stage for highlighting disability not only as an individual medical problem, but also as a social phenomenon of stigmatizing disabled individuals and their families.

This understanding of the social construction of disability, which had taken shape during the 1970s and 1980s in the Western world, made its way to India through advocacy by disabled activists like Javed Abidi, J. L. Kaul, and Lal Advani, among others, who had been exposed to the social model while visiting Europe and North America. They became founders and members of leading disability organizations in India. Their groups began collectively lobbying the government in the 1990s for

RENU ADDLAKHA is a professor at the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, New Delhi.

the passage of disability-specific legislation, constituting a powerful cross-disability forum. But the members of these groups were mainly elite men, and they conceptualized disability as a gender-neutral social issue.

Around the same time, the women's movement in India began widening its concerns to include a greater focus on sexual and reproductive health in response to the AIDS pandemic as well as the UN Beijing Platform for Action of 1995. A case of involuntary hysterectomies in a state-run home for intellectually disabled women in 1994 in Pune district, Maharashtra, eventually led to bridge building between the women's and disability rights movements after women's groups opposed these violations of the sexual rights of developmentally challenged women, but disability rights groups did not join them.

Feminist support for disability rights has not been unconditional. Extant provisions of the Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 and the Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act of 1994, allowing selective abortion of fetuses in cases of prenatal disability, have only recently been opened up for discussion by a few feminists in disability studies. By contrast, in the context of widespread preference for sons in India, it was felt legitimate to outlaw the use of available medical technologies for knowing the sex of the fetus so that female fetuses would not be terminated and further skew the national sex ratio. But the abortion of a disabled fetus did not merit any discussion at the time.

In fact, cases of antenatal disability selection have been increasing. This is clear from the number of pleas coming before the courts for termination beyond the gestational age limit for abortion, which was only recently increased from 20 to 24 weeks. In all such cases, a medical board constituted by the court sets the terms of adjudication. It often comes down in favor of termination of the disabled fetus for a variety of reasons, ranging from postnatal nonviability of the fetus to the projected costs of lifelong medical management exceeding the financial resources of the petitioner.

A handful of feminist activists and scholars who were either disabled themselves, like Bhargavi Davar and Anita Ghai, or carers for disabled relatives, such as Asha Hans, became the torchbearers

for disability within the women's movement from the mid-1990s. Through their writings and advocacy, they have played an important role in engendering the issue of disability through the lens of feminism. Even though the mainstream disability rights movement in India continues to be largely male-dominated, feminist disability scholars and activists have succeeded in carving out a niche to examine the lived realities of women with disabilities (wwds) and to work for their empowerment through grassroots interventions and lobbying the state.

A prime example of such initiatives is the Women with Disabilities in India Network (WWDIN), of which I am a founding member. WWDIN, started in 2013, is an independent, cross-disability, virtual platform run by and for women with disabilities who have come together to exchange views and advocate for policy interventions. Its objective is to bring visibility to the lives of this multiply disadvantaged minority group by highlighting both disability and gender as intersecting variables. Indeed, wwds constitute a heterogeneous group, since disability and gender also intersect with other socio-demographic factors, such as type of disability, class, caste, ethnicity, or rural or urban residence. Some of WWDIN's prominent members

include disabled feminist dis-

ability activists and scholars like Jeeja Ghosh, Nandini Ghosh, Nidhi Goyal, Sandhya Limaye, and Kuhu Das.

Another important development that has played a big role in bringing gender and disability to prominence is the increasing amount of research at the postgraduate level, particularly in departments of women's and gender studies, as well as Centres of Social Exclusion, which are distinct administrative units separate from other social science departments. I have had the opportunity to examine many such theses by young scholars working not only in the large institutions of higher learning located in metropolises, but also in smaller cities and towns. One of the factors contributing to this scholarship is the increasing number of wwds, particularly women with visual and mobility impairments, entering higher education. Of course, outside such privileged institutions, which are few and far between, the situation is still very grim, given the size and diversity of India's disabled population.

The mainstream disability rights movement in India continues to be largely male-dominated.

DATA GAPS

Moving beyond anecdote (in the form of fact-finding reports, media reportage, and small-scale cross-sectional research) to hard macro-level data, in order to obtain the evidentiary basis for legal and policy changes to improve the life conditions of WWDS, is a tall order in India. Most of the state's existing macro-level data-gathering efforts, apart from the Census, do not incorporate disability. When it is incorporated, it is not disaggregated by gender. This makes it impossible to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem of disability and its gender implications.

The last Census, from 2011, puts the total number of WWDS in India at 11.8 million, out of a total disabled population of 26.8 million, comprising 2.1 percent of India's total population of more than 1.3 billion people. That this is a gross undercount can be gauged from the World Health Organization's estimate that 15 percent of any given population can be presumed to have disabilities. As in other low- and middle-income countries, the majority of persons with disabilities in India (69 percent) reside in rural areas, which means they lack access to even basic health, education, and employment facilities. The plight of WWDS in such a situation can be imagined.

The 2011 Census has other limitations, including its recognition of only seven types of disability—movement, seeing, hearing, speech, mental retardation (*sic*), mental illness, and multiple disabilities. Nonetheless, the Census is the only database to provide a national profile of the disabled population. Even with gross undercounts, it captures the difficulties of the lives of WWDS. Although the percentages may not seem to vary widely, when these are translated into absolute numbers, the disparities are stark.

As expected, disabled persons residing in urban areas in India have higher educational status than their rural counterparts; measured by an aggregate of educational attainment, from primary schooling to higher and professional education, the ratios are 69 percent and 31 percent, respectively. Around one-third of persons with disabilities are between the ages of 10 and 29, which corresponds to the fact that 65 percent of the Indian population is under 35. The second-largest disabled age cohort (21 percent) comprises those above 60 years of age.

The gender gap among disabled persons narrows as the population ages, until the number of disabled women outstrips men among those 90 and over.

This is in consonance with life expectancy trends by gender in the nondisabled population.

The rate of Indians with disabilities who are single (41.7 percent) is nearly as high as among their nondisabled counterparts (46.3 percent). But more disabled men than disabled women are married (the ratios are 62 percent and 54 percent, respectively), testifying to the patriarchal advantage of the former. This finding is important because marriage is typically considered the most important event in an Indian woman's life, conferring the status of full personhood.

In the same vein, more disabled women fall within the divorced/separated and widowed categories (13 percent) than both their disabled male (6 percent) and nondisabled female counterparts (2 percent). This finding indicates the level of destitution among WWDS. Some studies show that most WWDS marry men who are older, infirm, and not well off.

The Census points to higher prevalence of mobility-related and multiple disabilities in rural areas, whereas disability in hearing and speech was found more often in urban areas. Could these differences be attributed to non-biological factors? Sensory modalities like seeing and hearing may be more necessary to optimal functioning in the urban environment; any deviations from the norm may be more easily identified and labeled in such a context. Similarly, the rural economy, dominated by agricultural activities, requires more physical mobility; difficulty in movement may easily become an obstacle in day-to-day life outside cities and small towns.

Looking at types of disability through a gender lens, trends among disabled men and women are more or less similar, except that men outstrip their female counterparts in the category of disability in movement (the ratios were 23 percent and 18 percent, respectively). The number of women with disabilities exceeds the number of men in the categories of seeing and hearing. Because of social restrictions on the physical mobility of women outside the home, difficulty in movement may not be considered so disabling for a majority of women, whereas for men, who occupy the public sphere, any limitation in that area challenges their lives in a more fundamental way. Women's mobility disabilities may be statistically undercounted because of these assumptions.

Around two thirds (64 percent) of disabled people in India, across all seven categories of disability, are grouped in the nonworker category of

dependents and students. This underscores the absence in the state's discourse of any notion that a disabled person can productively function. The gender gap among disabled workers is also noteworthy: 47 percent of men and 23 percent of women were employed. Yet small-scale surveys and ethnographic studies have consistently shown persons with disabilities, including WWDS, engaging in housework and productive work in the informal economy, which does not seem to be registered in the Census.

This highlights a glaring contradiction between India's guarantees of human rights and citizenship and the denial of these rights to a sizable section of its population. If a majority of persons with disabilities do not have livelihoods, this reflects social and political neglect more than any incapacity or inability to engage in work.

INACCESSIBILITY AND EXCLUSION

Accessibility is a critical concept and a primary goal of the disability rights movement, since most if not all of the disadvantages suffered by persons with disabilities stem from barriers created by an insensitive society that does not recognize the existence of this large segment of the population in its midst. These barriers may be physical, infrastructural, environmental, institutional, attitudinal, or information-based. Either individually or in combination, they can lead to the denial of rights, entitlements, and services.

Persons with disabilities cannot access health, education, livelihoods, recreation, and more in the absence of accessible and safe infrastructure, which is often lacking due to negative stereotypes, neglect, prejudice, and discrimination imposed by the nondisabled world. Many studies and interventions have noted that enhancing physical accessibility is not an exorbitantly expensive process, as businesses and other organizations often claim it is, attempting to abdicate their responsibilities. The situation is so bleak that the vast majority of persons with disabilities in many parts of the developing world, including India, have no knowledge of accessibility as a concept and right.

WWDS in India are at a dual disadvantage in this regard, because no gender perspective is incorporated in infrastructure design. For instance, none of the available mobility aids, such as wheelchairs, tricycles, or crutches, are manufactured with specifications suited to the needs of WWDS. The Indian government's Aids and Appliances scheme does not have any specific standards or customized

options for WWDS. Consequently, men with disabilities have greater potential access to such assistive technology than their female counterparts. The gender gap in access can be gauged from the figures available from the Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India: the ratio of male to female beneficiaries is at least 2 to 1.

Disability and gender are inextricably intertwined in the lives of WWDS, and nowhere is this more apparent than in restrictions on mobility outside the home. Even if infrastructure is accessible, WWDS first must be in a position to exit their homes to gain access to it. The physical inaccessibility they face is an outcome of the deep-rooted negative stereotypes that society has constructed about them—they are presumed to be weird, unattractive, asexual (or hypersexual), incapable, always in need of support. Since they are excluded from the traditional roles of wife, homemaker, and mother, their intrinsic worth is constantly challenged. In such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that society would make any extra effort to accommodate them in a respectful and dignified manner. Indeed, both in infrastructure and in services, conception and implementation of gender-friendly accessible features are poor.

OVERSIGHT AND POLICY NEGLECT

India's legal regime has proved to be ineffective in ensuring that disabled citizens, particularly female citizens with disabilities, enjoy civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. This is a reality that needs to change.

Although disability is not included as a prohibited ground of discrimination under the Indian Constitution's Article 15 on fundamental rights, the Supreme Court has recognized persons with disabilities as a vulnerable group to whom the principles of equality and nondiscrimination should apply. In this muddled state of affairs, WWDS remain far from achieving either *de facto* or *de jure* equality. Extant legal provisions like those on "lunacy," covering both mental illness and intellectual disability as grounds for divorce, continue to be used and misused. Far more men than women use such claims in divorce cases. Similar instances of gender- and disability-based discrimination are also found in inheritance laws.

The policy landscape is equally dismal. Falling between the cracks, WWDS are neglected within both disability-specific and gender-specific policies and programs, aside from some perfunctory provisions that exist mostly on paper. Although

there are disability-specific provisions in the form of affirmative action (known as “reservation”) in education and employment, patriarchal logic ensures that the bulk of the benefits goes to men with disabilities, since WWDS are not singled out as a group requiring special attention. In women’s empowerment programs, such as reservation of seats in legislatures and local bodies, more benefits go to other groups of women, like the lower castes and tribes (referred to as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes), who are also marginalized but still have more clout than WWDS.

In the jockeying for benefits among different social groups, persons with disabilities, particularly WWDS, find no place. They are excluded from sexual and reproductive health programs, due to the power of stereotypes linking disability with asexuality and unsuitability for marriage and motherhood, even though the 2011 Census found over half of WWDS to be married. In flagship government schemes like Right to Education and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, WWDS are absent. Gender budgeting—mainstreaming a gender perspective in the allocation of resources and determination of expenditures in order to promote gender equality—has not been applied even in disability-specific policies and schemes. In light of this precarious positioning, it is necessary to highlight WWDS’ needs and concerns, making them a separate constituency for strategic intervention.

Yet the category of women with disabilities is an amorphous entity, precariously perched on the intersection of gender and disability, but not owned by either the disability or the women’s rights movement. As a discursive category, it is only in the past few years that it has made its presence very slowly felt in the domains of law, policy, and media. For instance, some measures, like providing reasonable accommodations to disabled women who come to register police complaints, have been incorporated in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013, which also invokes statutory rape provisions when a case involves sexual assault on a woman with disability.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 lacks a separate article on women with disabilities, unlike the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which India signed and ratified in 2007. But it does speak about

equality between men and women (presumably referring to those with disabilities) in its preamble.

Chapter II of the 2016 Indian law, on rights and entitlements, again makes reference to women (and children) in the context of equality. Chapter V, on social security, health, rehabilitation and recreation, mentions support for women with disabilities for child care, livelihood provision, and sexual and reproductive health care. Chapter VI, on benchmark disabilities (registering above 40 percent on a scale of impairment of normal function, as determined by a recognized medical practitioner in an elaborate certification process), provides for prioritization of women with disabilities in poverty-alleviation schemes and other government-run development programs. It also reserves 50 percent of seats on disability advisory boards at federal, state, and district levels for women.

Though the scattered mentions of WWDS in India’s laws may not appear to mean much, any registration of their presence in the legal space has the potential for instantiating change on the ground in the long run. One can think of ad hoc references

*Disability and gender are
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(even if they are inserted merely for tokenism) as beacons of hope, considering the harsh realities of the lives of WWDS in the country. Just as the experience of being disabled exposes them to multiple discriminations in the

domains of culture, society, politics, and the economy, the specificity of each particular disability creates its own obstacles, needs, and requirements.

Even if we avoid comparisons both with non-disabled women and with disabled men, it cannot be denied that the operation of patriarchy is differential. Nondisabled women do not experience the sexual annulment and gender role deprivations experienced by their disabled counterparts; nor do men with disabilities experience the same erasure of personhood that is often the lot of their female counterparts. The complex issues affecting WWDS must be understood in relation to their differential locations within the overlapping and intersecting frameworks of patriarchy and ableism.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As someone who has witnessed and experienced developments unfurling in India over the past half-century around disability in general and WWDS in particular, it appears to me that a lot has

changed. My observations cannot be generalized for the whole country, given my specific position as a disability studies scholar residing and working in the capital city. But due to some recognition in national policies and programs, largely driven by India's being a signatory to the CRPD, and some visibility in popular media outlets, disability is registering its presence in a limited fashion in the public sphere as a human rights issue rather than just a matter for social welfare or charity (though those perspectives are also still very much alive). Meanwhile, thanks to the proliferation of social media through mobile phones, more people with disabilities are able to find virtual communities while sitting in their homes.

Thus, recognition of disability as a social issue has been propelled by a combination of international law and technology. These developments have worked in tandem with neoliberal capitalism and postcolonial, postmodern epistemology to create the space for putting marginalities of all

kinds at center stage, both for understanding and for action.

Generational changes are also exerting their influence in the arena of disability. Many Millennial and Generation Z disabled persons, at least those in higher education and vocational training, appear to have more self-confidence and higher aspirations than members of my generation. WWDS of this younger cohort are more assertive of their femininity and display a greater consciousness of personal agency. Men with disabilities are attempting to transit from a subordinate to a more empowering form of masculinity.

But the road ahead is not easy. So much more has to change before the goal of total inclusion can be achieved. But it is so encouraging to see the drive to overcome and the gleam of self-pride as a newer generation of persons with disabilities in India, particularly women, challenges entrenched structures that for so long have been the sources and sites of their oppression. ■

“The current Afghan society that the Taliban are trying to rule has been transformed by a media and civil infrastructure that offered people glimpses of a democratic and pluralistic future.”

Transformations in Afghan Media and Culture Through Cycles of Upheaval

WAZHMAH OSMAN

In US foreign policy circles, there is a common sentiment that the United States and its NATO and European Union allies introduced Afghans to democracy, modernity, and media freedom with their trillions of dollars in aid, training, and capacity-building efforts during the US-led coalition’s twenty-year-long war in Afghanistan. That notion fits in neatly with past British and Russian colonial rhetoric that imagined Afghanistan as a backward place that was perpetually stuck in time and incapable of progress. This dominant image of the country as forever static and unchanging is so ingrained and rigidly fixed in the minds, policies, and theories of Western technocrats that there is no room for deviance from these preconceived notions. Thus, the past and present of Afghanistan cannot be seen as being on a continuum of change or as subject to the swinging pendulum of culture wars—perceptions that Western countries are afforded even when they have brutally repressive governments.

Afghanistan, however, has a long history and tradition of reformist movements and cultural contestations, though they have been repeatedly disrupted and truncated due to wars, occupations, and invasions. As historian Robert Crews observes in his 2015 book *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation*, Afghans have “a cosmopolitan sensibility” that draws “strength from an intellectual tradition that has long imagined Afghans as central

to global politics. This way of thinking . . . reflected a sense, built up by the collective memories of millions of Afghan families, of a shared past stamped by various kinds of diaspora experience, of inhabiting all parts of the globe far beyond the borders of their country.”

Since the 1979 Soviet invasion, Afghanistan has been subsumed in almost half a century of wars. In his 2012 book *Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan*, the Afghan-American writer Tamim Ansary shows how the modern history of the country, from 1840 to the present, has been marked by cycles of disruption and destruction, every forty to sixty years, led by powerful empires seeking to further their own geopolitical ambitions. If this history of Afghanistan were depicted as a graph, it would be a wavy line with many dizzying rises and falls, including some jagged peaks and valleys resembling the country’s mountainous terrain. The ascents and peaks would represent eras of relative peace, development, innovation, and progress; the falls and valleys would stand for the periods of war and disruption.

The harsh contours of this history are replicated in the trajectory of every sector of Afghan society, from economics, industry, and infrastructure to governance, the environment, and agriculture. This has had devastating effects on all aspects of Afghan culture. In this article, I trace the overlapping highs and lows of the Afghan cultural, media, and arts sectors, starting with the prewar golden era in the 1960s and 1970s, and then focusing on the post-9/11 internationally funded media boom and the subsequent Taliban takeover.

The jagged cycles of Afghan history have, of course, similarly impacted the everyday lives of its people. Powerless against the tides of geopolitics,

WAZHMAH OSMAN is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies and Production at Temple University. She is the author of *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* (Copyright 2020 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois Press), from which portions of this essay have been adapted.

diplomacy, and war, they have had to endure many abrupt starts and stops in every aspect of their lives, from personal and family aspirations to careers, education, training, and apprenticeships.

Due to dispossession and displacement, as well as the destruction of their cultural institutions and the targeted killing of media personalities and producers during the long series of wars, the Afghan media industry has lost tremendous talent and a well-honed tradition of production styles. The commonly applied terms of “brain drain” and “human capital flight,” in their focus on national economies and the net gains and losses of migration, do not capture the totality of the impact. The loss of human talent, including media makers, and especially in cases of forced migration, dispossession, and displacement, brings about a far more profound cultural loss for a nation that cannot be quantified and instrumentalized only in economic terms.

In my book *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars*, I examined the rapid emergence and expansion of the Afghan media sector and its role in the development of an increasingly robust, albeit still fragile, public sphere in post-9/11 Afghanistan. I also studied the cultural contestations that this rapid media proliferation was producing and the political economies that were sustaining it. This article builds on my research into that period, spanning the two decades of the post-9/11 US and EU mission and interventions in Afghanistan. Additionally, I provide analysis of the current situation of the Afghan media since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and suggestions of where it may be headed amid rapidly unfolding geopolitical events.

FROM GOLDEN ERA TO SOVIET AND MUJAHIDEEN RULE

Although the legacy and efficacy of the many development and nation-building projects that were launched by Western countries during the US war in Afghanistan remain complex and highly debated, their media sector interventions are largely deemed to have been a success. Yet in order to fully understand the media boom of the post-9/11 era, it is important to set it in historical context and look back to another golden era of media in Afghanistan, in the 1960s and 1970s,

which in many ways set the foundations of this recent media vibrancy. In fact, many of the songs and music videos that were produced in the post-9/11 era and broadcast on Afghanistan’s more than 50 television channels were remakes of songs first composed, produced, and broadcast in that earlier era.

In the 1960s and 1970s, King Zahir Shah and his cousin and prime minister, Daoud Khan, launched a series of ambitious projects in the cultural, economic, political, and social spheres with the goals of modernizing the country and improving its standing in the world. Many of Zahir Shah’s policies and plans were codified in a new constitution in 1964. This charter officially transformed Afghanistan into a constitutional monarchy, created an elected parliament, and included an equal rights amendment and a freedom of speech clause. Shortly thereafter, Daoud Khan ordered an end to obligatory veiling and purdah (the separation of men and women).

Alongside these political transformations, the state also funded the creation of numerous media training facilities, as well as media outlets such as newspapers, radio and television broadcasting stations, film production and music recording studios, theater programs, and literary salons. The government’s support for the arts

and experimentation with freedom of speech also allowed many private media institutions to start up, including some that took an oppositional stance toward the state. These new state initiatives and media outlets led to a time of unprecedented cultural expression and prolific output.

In the award-winning documentaries *Breaking the Silence: Music in Afghanistan* (2002, directed by Simon Broughton) and *Dr. Sarmast’s Music School* (2012, directed by Polly Watkins and Beth Frey), the filmmakers interview prominent musicians who experienced this golden era. They reminisce about the prewar heyday of the Kharabat neighborhood of Kabul, an historic artists’ district that was destroyed after the Soviet withdrawal, during the Afghan civil war. They describe a time of robust experimentation with diverse musical styles ranging from traditional to pop, with versatile adaptation of instruments and sounds from Western to Indian, Pakistani, and Iranian musical traditions. The lyrics fused celebrated classical poetry to folklore, drawing on authors of the early

*Post-9/11 Afghanistan
experienced a surge in new
media creation.*

Persianate literary canon, such as Rumi and Hafiz, as well as the oral and folkloric traditions of Pashto and Uzbek poetry.

This rich tapestry of music, which could be heard in concerts, cafes, and the streets of Khara-bat, spread to the rest of the country via the airwaves of Radio Television Afghanistan, the national broadcasting station, resonating with all segments of the population. The quality of the artistry of this period made a lasting impression. During the 2000s, many of the lyrics, compositions, and songs from the 1960s and 1970s were recreated and recycled, along with stars of that era who served as the judges and master trainers or *ustads* on Afghan musical competition shows such as *Afghan Star*. This popular reality TV series, a local mashup of *American Idol*, *Pop Idol*, and *The X Factor*, aired on Tolo TV from 2005 until the Taliban returned to power in 2021.

Many of the media and cultural achievements of that golden era came to a sudden halt with the Soviet-backed communist coup and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR in 1979. Numerous media makers, stars, and intellectuals were killed. Others fled and became refugees, along with half the population during that period. The iconic pop star Ahmad Zahir and the prominent composer Ustad Nainawaz were among the cultural luminaries who were killed or disappeared.

Some media and cultural workers remained in Afghanistan and joined a new pool of Soviet-sanctioned talent that continued to produce films and radio and television programs, even as resistance to Soviet rule grew in the provinces, outside the major cities. In the 2019 documentary *What We Left Unfinished*, filmmaker Mariam Ghani, daughter of then-President Ashraf Ghani (who would flee the country during the 2021 Taliban takeover), reflected on the film productions that were started during the decade-long Soviet occupation but were left incomplete because of the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent mujahideen takeover.

Once the mujahideen resistance forces took Kabul in 1992, conquering the last stronghold of the Soviet-backed Afghan government, a civil war broke out between factions that had united to defeat a common enemy. Out of this bloodshed emerged the Taliban regime in its first incarnation. Many of the gains made by the media in the previous decade once again came to an end. The 1990s saw a six-year blackout of all media outlets

under the Taliban, aside from their own Radio Sharia.

The mujahideen were ruthless with anyone suspected of working with (or even during) the Soviet occupation or the Soviet-backed communist government. In 1996, they publicly hanged and castrated former President Mohammad Najibullah. Many media makers had the foresight and luck to flee to other countries, realizing that the mujahideen were close to taking over. Since the United States did not take in Afghan communists during this period, they mostly ended up in Europe or Canada. Some unlucky ones who did not get out were killed. In some cases, the Taliban killed family members of artists and media makers if they had any relatives who remained in Afghanistan.

THE POST-9/11 MEDIA BOOM AND BUST

After the defeat and ouster of the Taliban in December 2001 by US and British forces, the international community launched a new era of nation-building and development in Afghanistan. Alongside the US-led military occupation, dubbed the “forever war,” international development agencies ushered in tens of thousands of consultants and aid workers, as well as an influx of over a trillion dollars in donor funding over the next two decades for the country’s reconstruction and rebuilding. Up to 80 percent of Afghanistan’s gross national income consisted of international aid, with the United States being the largest donor.

The Afghan media and communications sector was identified as an especially important priority for development and a key means of “winning hearts and minds”; thus it became one of the most heavily funded recipients of aid. As a result of this unique political economy, post-9/11 Afghanistan experienced a surge in new media creation. Soon there were dozens of new broadcast television and radio stations, mobile telephone providers, and a fledgling Internet infrastructure. For a variety of reasons, including high illiteracy rates, television and, to a slightly lesser degree, radio were the media formats at the center of the most publicly visible and politically charged national debates and social movements.

I assessed the everyday influence of these new media forms and outlets via production and reception studies, along with content analysis of the most popular genres on Afghan television. My interviews revealed that after experiencing decades of war and its brutalities, including the rise of Islamism, warlordism, and misogynistic and

sectarian violence, traumatized Afghan citizens had high expectations of the media and journalists. These audiences wanted the media to bring justice and retribution to local and international warlords who had long been sowing the seeds of armed conflict, gender violence, and sectarian strife. My conclusion was that Afghan media producers were meeting those demands. At great risk to themselves, they were providing platforms for local reform, activism, and indigenous concepts of modernization to challenge both local conservative groups and foreign imperialism.

After decades of ethnic, racial, tribal, gender, and class violence, the media was providing a space for debate, healing, and justice. Public service announcements, news, and political satire filled the airwaves. Media makers investigated and exposed corruption, abuses of power, and violence committed by local and international forces and government officials.

An influx of imported dramatic serials provided their avid and large viewership with glimpses into the diverse lifestyles, cultures, and gender and sexual practices of people from around the world. At the same time, Afghan versions of Western reality television programs, such as the popular *Afghan Star*, were creating a space for the appreciation and cultivation of Afghan pop, classic, and folkloric music.

Via these popular genres and formats, the media sector also opened up spaces crucial for private and public discussion of important national and cultural issues. Meanwhile, public demonstrations were proving to be a powerful social force. Uprisings, vigils, and protests, organized by Afghans from every socioeconomic background, and addressing all kinds of issues, became commonplace across the country. Combined with the power of collective action and protests, the development of a relatively free and robust media helped create the key features of a public sphere. As a counterbalance to the government, warlords, and foreign interests in Afghanistan, this emerging Afghan public sphere was trying to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace.

Yet there was, and still is, a huge cost to this sudden emergence and rapid expansion of a public sphere. Even before the latest Taliban takeover of the country in 2021, violence against media makers was a serious problem. They were subject to threats, physical attacks, and death for providing people with programming they wanted to watch and information they needed to seek justice.

Like the wider public, Afghan media makers were caught between warring ideologies, ranging from Islamism to socialism, capitalism, and developmentalism. Islamists attacked foreign programming and the influence of secular and progressive local programs, alleging that these shows were corrupting women and youth. The presence of women on screen, whether they were hosts, newscasters, reporters, or actresses, particularly incensed hardline Islamists.

Powerful elites, including politicians and warlords within and outside the government, also routinely targeted media makers for exposing their egregious and nefarious actions, past and present. One high-profile example was the 2020 shooting of filmmaker, actress, and police captain Saba Sahar, who survived the assassination attempt. Another was the killing of newscaster Mina Mangal by unknown gunmen in 2019. There have been many others. According to Reporters without Borders, Afghanistan ranks as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists and media makers.

In a dystopian country where guns, local militias, foreign militaries, and physical force constituted the status quo, the one sector that offered the most hope to ordinary people as a means of countering the power abuses of the elites, and bringing them to justice, was also the most vulnerable to their retaliation. As a result, self-censorship became ever more prevalent. I noticed this in my content analysis and across the board in my interviews with media producers, hosts, newscasters, actors, and journalists, who were reaching the limits of their courage and of Afghanistan's tenuous media freedoms. I ended my book with a warning and call to action for media owners, the Afghan government, and the international community to protect media makers. This was not just a question of personal safety; the future of independent media, and therefore the future of Afghanistan, depended on it.

TALIBAN 2.0 AND THE FUTURE OF AFGHAN SOCIETY

Even after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan by force in August 2021, the developments of the past twenty years, including the important achievements in media and culture, have not all come to a halt. Many of the larger and more commercially successful media outlets and venues are still active, but are operating at reduced capacity and subject to the Taliban's rapidly shifting codes

of conduct and censorship. This is in sharp contrast to when the Taliban first emerged in 1994 as a major force in the Afghan civil war and began governing parts of the country.

As a young freelance reporter and filmmaker, I was sent on assignment to Afghanistan in 1999, during the height of the Taliban's regime. To describe that first Taliban era as Atwoodian, on the scale of the darkest, most misogynist scenarios of science fiction, would not be an overstatement. Secrecy and fear of violence permeated everyday life. Still, brave women teachers ran underground schools, women doctors practiced clandestinely, and women activists like the members of the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women documented the Taliban's abuses and had their recordings smuggled out of the country.

The Taliban banned all independent media and tried to establish a broadcasting monopoly with their Radio Sharia. Watching movies, listening to music, drawing, or reading had to be done in secret rooms and basements. The Taliban's Department of Vice and Virtue, a police force, patrolled across the country to monitor people's activities and adherence to the regime's draconian codes of dress and conduct. Anyone could be whipped, incarcerated, or executed without due process, at the whim of the Taliban foot soldiers, some of whom were still boys.

After twenty years of global interventions, the Afghanistan of today is a very different nation than it was in the 1990s, when Afghans were traumatized by the violence and lawlessness of the civil war and the Taliban were even welcomed in some areas for bringing a modicum of security with their harsh brand of Islam. The current Afghan society that the Taliban are trying to rule has been transformed by a media and civil infrastructure that offered people glimpses of a democratic and pluralistic future. A new generation of Afghans has tasted the promise of self-expression and political participation, work connected to the global economy, social mobility, and more educational opportunities for everyone.

As scholars of the public sphere such as Arvind Rajagopal and Bruce Robbins have written, nations rarely have a unified, single public; rather, they are often split into publics and counterpublics. Likewise, the Afghan public is split into many groups with differing viewpoints and ideologies, yet more

people than ever before are refusing to tolerate theocratic or autocratic rule by force. Women, who dared not exit their houses during the first Taliban regime, are protesting regularly on the streets of major cities.

Afghan media organizations and individual media makers in exile are continuing to produce work and to make sure that Afghanistan stays in the international news cycle. Having been at the forefront of the Afghan culture wars, media makers were recognized as an at-risk group by some international organizations and governments, and some of them were evacuated by the international community in August 2021.

Some of the more fortunate research subjects and interlocutors with whom I worked for my book have managed to leave Afghanistan, both before and after the Taliban takeover. They are trying to continue their work in exile, while navigating the hardships of becoming refugees and new immigrants. Najiba Ayubi, an internationally recognized journalist and the managing director of the Killid Group, an Afghan media outfit consist-

ing of ten radio stations and two weekly magazines, and Roya Sadat, a prominent television and film director and writer, are in the United States. Sanjar Sohail, the news director of Saba TV and editor and publisher of

Hashte Subh, one of Afghanistan's largest daily newspapers, who left for Canada before the Taliban takeover, has managed to secure asylum for some of his staff in Canada and Germany. Likewise, my research assistant, journalist and translator Basir Bitra, and his family were also given asylum in Canada after the Taliban takeover.

Currently, Roya Sadat and her husband and creative partner Aziz Deldar are working on a documentary in the United States. They have had to put on hold a fiction film that they had started in Afghanistan because the crew and cast are scattered around the world now. Najiba Ayubi is working on a novel while giving public talks on the situation in Afghanistan. Sanjar Sohail is continuing to run *Hashte Subh* from exile. And Basir Bitra is volunteering as a freelance translator and interpreter with Afghan refugees.

Of course, the majority of Afghanistan's cultural workers, like the rest of the population, did not receive international support or have the means to leave, and were not prioritized for evacuation.

*The risks associated with media
and journalism are at an
all-time high.*

Television and media professionals who stayed have to walk a slippery tightrope when engaging with the Taliban and their censors. The risks associated with media and journalism are at an all-time high. In one instance, a Kabul University professor, Faizullah Jalal, was arrested and imprisoned in January 2022 after criticizing a Taliban official on a television talk show and calling him an uneducated donkey. Shortly thereafter, Jalal was released due to international pressure and offered asylum by the Netherlands. He refused to leave Afghanistan, though his family did.

There is also a widening rift within the leadership of the Taliban. Moderates are aware of the seismic shifts in Afghan society, and some are trying to persuade the hardliners to be less draconian in their interpretations of Islam. While hardliners are organizing all-male counterprotests, carrying signs with slogans such as “Women who do not veil are not Afghan” and instituting mandatory veiling for women who work on screen in television, moderates are going on television to show a softer side of the Taliban. In January 2022, on a popular talk show on the Pashto-language television station Shamshad, a heavily bearded Taliban official in traditional clothes surprised the female host during the cooking segment when he said that he knew how to cook. He proceeded to cook a stew for her and the rest of the crew, and then they all sat down and ate together.

On another political talk show, a Taliban official debated Western gay marriage with the hosts and other guests. Even if the debate consisted mostly of disdain, this signals something greater. Today’s Taliban are not the Taliban of yesteryear, cut off from the world, reciting the Quran in their cave networks. As much as the hardliners want to keep the media down and cosmopolitan ideas out, this Taliban generation, like the rest of the Afghan population, also grew up with mobile phones, hundreds of radio and television stations, and the extensive media bazaars of Pakistani border cities like Peshawar and Quetta that have become hubs for pirated content from around the world.

After the US and NATO withdrawal, Afghan society, more globalized and complex than ever before, will no longer settle for warring mujahideen militias and one-party rule imposed by force and violence. Afghans want a diverse public sphere and representative politics, no matter how difficult, to match the tapestry of their own multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. In this aspirational and inclusive society, which Afghans are discussing and planning in the diaspora, on their media platforms in exile, the Taliban exist as one of many political parties, with their own media venues. The Taliban also know that if they do not yield to the wishes of the domestic and global Afghan public sphere, the swinging pendulum of cultural change will strike them out of power sooner rather than later, as many are predicting. ■

“[T]he distribution of COVID-19 aid shows that Bangladesh has not progressed much in terms of looking after its poor populations.”

COVID-19, Poverty, and Inequality in Bangladesh

LUTFUN NAHAR LATA

Although Bangladesh has faced political unrest, military coups, and natural disasters that made headlines around the world over the past few decades, its government and people have also gained wide recognition for their achievements in poverty reduction as well as their resilience and success in managing large-scale disasters. But the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be different. Alongside the specific impacts on its health systems, which have struggled to provide proper treatment to the influx of hospital patients, the country has faced severe social and economic challenges over the past two years.

In 2020, when the novel coronavirus hit the world, Bangladesh was preparing to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its independence, gained in its 1971 war of liberation from Pakistan. In that year, when over 80 percent of the population was living in extreme poverty, US national security adviser Henry Kissinger labeled Bangladesh the world’s “basket case,” suggesting that there was no hope for the nation to overcome its impoverishment and cope with the natural disasters that it seemed to face each year. Yet in fact, Bangladesh achieved lower-middle-income status in 2021.

Articles published in the *New York Times*, *Nikkei Asia*, *Deutsche Welle*, and the *Wall Street Journal* in 2021 featured success stories from Bangladesh, focusing on its gains in human development and disaster management, and its stellar economic growth rates over recent decades. As *Deutsche Welle* noted, Bangladesh’s economy had posted annual expansion in the range of 8 percent for years, and now has a gross domestic product of over \$305 billion. Bangladesh’s economy currently

is ranked as the 41st-largest in the world, and forecasts suggest that it could double by the year 2030.

Bangladesh has also made great progress in other areas, including key health and education indicators. According to UNICEF, in 1991 the infant mortality rate in Bangladesh was 64.2 deaths per 1,000 live births; since then it has fallen to 20.1 per 1,000. That means one infant dies out of every 50. In Pakistan, by contrast, one in every 22 newborns does not survive.

At present, 98 percent of Bangladeshi children nationwide have completed primary schooling, and there are more girls in secondary school than boys. This has been achieved in large part due to the female stipend program, introduced in 1993 to increase the completion rate for higher secondary education among rural girls. Its success has reduced gender inequality, leading to a higher rate of female participation in the labor force than in neighboring countries, including India.

Nonetheless, Bangladesh still faces enormous challenges, including reducing violence against women and girls and upholding the constitutional principle of secularism. Tensions between those who participated in and strongly supported the war of independence and those who collaborated with the Pakistani military continue to divide Bangladesh’s political landscape, often causing conflict. That in turn reduces the efficiency of government service provision, including the public health system. Its shortcomings were exposed by the spread of COVID-19, when it failed to respond adequately to the rapid increase in patient numbers and care requirements.

Bangladesh confirmed its first COVID-19 case on March 7, 2020, four days before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic and urged governments to act swiftly against the rapidly spreading virus.

LUTFUN NAHAR LATA is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland.

Experts speculated that the virus may have entered Bangladesh earlier but was not detected due to inadequate monitoring. As of January 4, 2022, the country had recorded more than 1.5 million cases and 20,081 deaths.

LOCKDOWN PAIN

With so many documented cases, Bangladesh has been one of the worst affected countries in the world. But despite the initial stumbles and inadequate efforts by all key stakeholders—national and local government officials, doctors, and nongovernmental organizations—to contain the spread of the virus, the official mortality rate associated with COVID-19 has remained low, compared with other developing countries. After a peak in late June and July 2020, the infection and mortality rates slowed substantially, even though the government did not enforce its lockdown strictly in the initial stage of the pandemic; millions of people remained out in the streets, especially in Dhaka, the capital.

Nine days after the virus was first detected in Bangladesh, the government decided to close all educational institutions. The country's first COVID-19-related death was recorded on March 18, 2020, prompting the government to impose a nationwide travel ban a week after that. For the next two months, the lockdown proceeded through different phases. A ban on travel to distant districts and social-distancing rules were imposed, but were widely ignored at first. Then the government deployed the army to enforce the rules.

Many people lost their jobs in the lockdown; nearly 11 million left Dhaka after failing to find work, furthering the spread of COVID-19 in outlying regions. Researchers noted that people facing these financial uncertainties were hit at the same time with rising prices for commodities and food shortages in poor and marginalized sections of the country. By some accounts, the lockdown doubled the share of the population living in poverty to 40 percent. There was also widespread social stigmatization of infected people and the frontline health care workers who treated them. Psychological stress was manifested in an increase in suicidal tendencies among individuals under lockdown.

In February 2021, the WHO congratulated Bangladesh for its effective efforts in controlling the

pandemic. An increase in COVID-19 cases was seen in districts sharing land borders with India by the end of May 2021, however, leading to a catastrophic second wave driven by the highly transmissible Delta variant. Numbers of daily cases and deaths broke every previous record. The government declared that a seven-day lockdown would start July 1, 2021. As with the first lockdown in March 2020, the announcement sparked an exodus of migrant workers from Dhaka; thousands crammed into dangerously packed ferries. The government deployed the army to enforce the lockdown strictly. Following another rise of cases from the Omicron variant in January 2022, however, the government had not declared any lockdown; instead, it issued an 11-point directive that included mandatory vaccine passes and restrictions on events and transport facilities.

As in other developing countries, the pandemic has severely affected Bangladesh's economy. The GDP growth rate fell to 2.4 percent in 2020, from 8.2 percent the year before. (Real GDP growth rebounded to 5.2 percent in the 2020–21 fiscal year.) The lockdown and other efforts to slow the spread of the virus suppressed domestic economic activity and led to lost earnings for the private sector, including small businesses and low-income workers in

both rural and urban areas. The ready-made garment industry, which accounts for nearly 84 percent of Bangladesh's total exports, suffered from the slowdown in international markets. The World Bank estimated that remittances from Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad fell \$14 billion in 2020, down 20 percent from the year before. In addition to contributing to the national economy, these remittances are a crucial source of income for migrant workers' families.

Apart from the financial impact, COVID-19 has created additional risks to food and nutrition security through disruptions to food production, distribution, and access. According to estimates from the World Food Program, before the pandemic approximately 25 percent of the population in Bangladesh was food-insecure, and 36 percent of children under five years of age were suffering from malnutrition. Since the pandemic began, studies show that malnutrition rates for children have increased. According to a UNICEF report, 1.7 million children in Bangladesh suffered from malnutrition in 2019;

*Poor people suffered the most
due to the lack of a social
security system.*

the figure rose to 1.9 million in 2020. This highlights the impact of the pandemic on marginalized and vulnerable populations.

With many disasters, the impacts are felt more strongly among underrepresented groups in society. In Bangladesh, COVID-19 has disproportionately affected women's employment; many women working in the informal sector lost their jobs. Among other significant secondary effects, studies have traced an increase in domestic violence to pressures related to the pandemic. Moreover, poor people, who make up perhaps the largest marginalized group, have suffered the most due to the lack of a comprehensive social security system in Bangladesh.

PRESSURE ON THE POOR

When the government imposed a lockdown on 75 percent of the country on March 26, 2020, in a bid to contain the virus, tens of millions of people were immediately thrown out of work with nothing to fall back on. The lockdown resulted in a temporary loss of 5 million jobs in the transport sector, 7 million in the small and medium enterprises sector, 3 million in the construction sector, and 3 million in the manufacturing sector. Recent data published by the Atlantic Council show that a further 20 million people who were previously employed in informal-sector jobs, including rickshaw pullers, transport workers, day laborers, street vendors and hawkers, and construction laborers, became unemployed temporarily due to the measures taken by the government to stop the spread of the virus. In addition, 10 million agricultural workers lost their jobs. These urban and rural poor informal workers who rely on daily income suffered a temporary reduction in average income of more than 80 percent.

The pandemic has hit the urban poor hardest, due to a lack of savings as well as the absence of social safety nets. The urban poor have also suffered the most because historically, most social protection programs in Bangladesh have been designed to reduce rural poverty. In the sudden lockdown, nearly 646,000 slum residents in Dhaka who worked in the informal sector lost their regular income. Many slum residents, such as rickshaw pullers, day laborers, and domestic workers, have jobs that require them to go out in public. There is no work-from-home option for them. Most lost their jobs during the lockdown.

Photojournalist Mohammad Rakibul Hasan talked to some slum residents in Dhaka at the

height of the lockdown in 2020, while taking photographs for his project, "The Last Savings." He found that most were struggling to feed their families. Hamida Begum, a domestic worker out of work due to COVID-19, said, "We only have forty taka [less than 50 cents] at home. We have to drink poison if we cannot go out for work. Who will save us from hunger?" Another slum resident, Aklima, a 35-year-old mother of three, sent her children to live with relatives in her home village since she was unable to procure enough food for her family. Every morning, she and her rickshaw-puller husband and their youngest daughter had only water to drink. She was able to cook just once a day.

The rural poor also had to reduce their food consumption. In 2020, the World Bank reported that 69 percent of urban households and 63 percent of rural households in Bangladesh reduced their food intake because they could no longer afford their usual three meals a day. A survey on the impact of COVID-19 conducted between March 31 and April 5, 2020, by BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh, found that 18 percent of urban and 10 percent of rural respondents had no food stored at home, while 37 percent and 21 percent, respectively, had only enough food to last one to three days.

Several newspaper articles reported that during the lockdown, rickshaw pullers still went out for work but were instructed by law enforcement authorities to return to their homes. Local ward councilors and NGOs informed slum residents about the severity of the virus. But government officials failed to provide any help in facilitating social distancing or distributing masks and hand-sanitizing solution. NGOs have played an important role in providing water, masks, and hand sanitizer to the urban poor, most of whom live in crowded slums with poor hygiene and sanitation. Diseases like COVID-19 can spread very quickly in the slums. The urban poor cannot afford soap, masks, or medicine to prevent and treat such diseases; distancing is impossible for many due to crowded living conditions.

NONGOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES

During my own interviews in May 2020 with slum residents in Dhaka, I learned that they received soap from NGOs such as WaterAid, which also set up handwashing stations. A community leader named Noyon, in a Dhaka slum called Sattola, said a project sponsored by Urban

Partnerships for Poverty Reduction built some public water-distribution facilities in the slum in April 2020 and gave five bars of soap to each family so that they could wash their hands frequently.

NGOs also played an important role in the early stages of the pandemic in March 2020. In the Dhaka slums, NGOs mobilized community leaders to promote awareness about hygiene. In Khulna and Narayanganj, city officials worked with community leaders to distribute leaflets about handwashing and wearing face masks. The awareness campaigns and distribution of hygiene products by NGOs have had a substantial impact, but they formed only part of the local response.

Apart from NGOs, local community members made their own rules to enforce strict compliance with the lockdown. They instructed shopkeepers to keep their shops closed unless they sold essential items such as food and medicine. They also informed NGO officials and other donors which families were most in need of assistance so they could help the most vulnerable. When tenants failed to pay the rent, landlords refrained from pushing for payment or carrying out evictions.

Bangladesh's urban poor have still not received enough state assistance, despite the government's April 2020 promise of a stimulus package of over \$11 billion. By late April, the government declared that 35 million people had received food relief. But some poor residents received no help from the government at all. My research in the Sattola slum in Dhaka revealed that one-third of residents received food aid, but the resources were not distributed equally. "Some poor people have received government relief packages, but the distributors have prioritized their relatives' and followers' needs," said a local resident, Tania. Due to a lack of access to this government aid, many among the urban poor had to rely on NGOs to fill the void. Local NGOs have provided financial assistance only to the most vulnerable groups, however.

AID DISTRIBUTION FIASCOS

The urban poor also suffered the most in the pandemic because historically, most of Bangladesh's social protection programs have been designed to reduce rural poverty, a pattern that can also be seen in the response to COVID-19. On April 6, 2020, the government launched a special "open

market sale" operation in the wake of the lockdown, offering rice at just \$0.12 per kilogram. But desperately hungry people attacked the relief convoys and attempted to loot them. Others who asked for food handouts were also attacked, as were some journalists who covered the misappropriation of food aid. Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies pursued charges against hundreds of elected officials, ruling party members, and suppliers for stealing the cheap rice meant for the poor.

Due to operational challenges, including violations of social distancing norms, the government suspended the food aid program a week after it began. Critics of the program argued that the national strategic food reserve could have been jeopardized if opportunists had bought subsidized rice and resold it at a higher price on the open market. But the government did not replace the program with an alternative, leaving the urban poor at risk of starvation. Instead of simply suspending the program, the government could have devised a process to mobilize community leaders and target

aid to poor communities. Alternatively, with the help of local administrations, it might have set up centers in poorer areas where people could have come for free meals. Despite these problems, by late April 2020, 35

million people had received government food relief. This initiative helped the country avoid a hunger crisis during the pandemic.

The government also announced that it would deliver cash transfers to 15 million people. On May 14, the government provided 5 million poor families affected by the COVID-19 crisis with a cash grant of 2,500 taka (around \$30) each, delivered through widely used mobile financial services such as bKash, Rocket, Nagad, and SureCash. The beneficiaries included floating populations, rickshaw and van pullers, day laborers, ferry and dock workers, salespeople at shops, small traders, barbers, street vendors, and manual workers engaged in construction, agriculture, poultry and dairy farms, transportation, and other private businesses.

The problem was that the beneficiaries were identified by local administrations and elected representatives. This resulted in a biased selection process that was heavily influenced by the political affiliations of those seeking assistance. On July 9,

*Stigma deterred the urban poor
from disclosing symptoms
or seeking treatment.*

the *Daily Prothom Alo*, the country's largest-circulation newspaper, reported that the vice president of the Rajshahi City Farmer's League, a branch of the ruling party, had received 2,500 taka, even though his income level obviously should have made him ineligible for the cash transfer. That incident was one of several that revealed how the beneficiary list had been compiled based on political affiliation rather than economic need.

After an investigation of a list of beneficiaries, the Ministry of Finance had to remove 493,200 people who belonged to affluent families. Similar anomalies have been found in other relief programs, including food assistance.

Meanwhile, the urban poor mostly avoided going to hospitals during the first quarter of 2020. Bangladesh has a fragile public health infrastructure, with just 127,000 hospital beds nationwide, including 91,000 in government-run hospitals. There are only 737 beds in intensive care units; just 432 of these are in the public health system. Consequently, it was very hard for health service providers to test for coronavirus infection and to isolate and treat patients confirmed to have COVID-19.

Furthermore, most of the intensive care facilities are concentrated in Dhaka. Even affluent people found it difficult to find a bed in an intensive care unit when COVID-19 was at its peak in 2020. Initially, many hospitals did not admit patients with COVID-19 symptoms; doctors feared that without properly designated facilities, other patients might become infected with the virus. As a result, the urban poor hardly had any access to the health care system in the early days of the viral outbreak.

DENIAL IN THE SLUMS

Some of those I interviewed told me that there were no COVID-19 patients in their slum but that there were some in nearby middle-class neighborhoods. Similarly, the *Daily Star* newspaper published a report in 2020 on slum residents' perspectives on COVID-19 that said the prevalent view was, "There has been no coronavirus patient in this slum. This is a rich man's disease." In fact, an October 2020 study conducted by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research in collaboration with the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, found that by July 2020, 45 percent of Dhaka's population—and 74 percent

of those living in slums—had already been exposed to the virus.

There are several reasons behind the urban poor's state of denial about the spread of the virus in their slums. The main reason is fear of social stigma. Newspaper articles in 2020 reported severely negative perceptions of COVID-19 patients. Residents even blocked construction work on a dedicated hospital for coronavirus patients in Dhaka's Tejgaon industrial area. Contractors had to halt construction in the last week of March 2020 after panicked locals protested, fearing that the hospital would spread the virus in their neighborhood.

In May 2020, the *Daily New Age* reported that members of the historically stigmatized Bihari community who were living in the Geneva Camp area of Dhaka were denied admission to a local hospital for coronavirus treatment. Instead, they were forced to self-quarantine in their crowded residences.

The *Daily Star* reported in April 2020 that locals protested when the government decided that deceased COVID-19 patients would be buried in the Khilgaon-Taltola graveyard in Dhaka. They insisted that the government find a safer place for the burials outside of Dhaka. Due to this protest, the government abandoned its plan. Instead, since April 2020, COVID-19 casualties have been buried in the Rayerbazar graveyard, located on the outskirts of north Dhaka.

Some health practitioners also received threats from their neighbors, and ultimatums that they either leave their jobs or move out. That kind of stigma deterred the urban poor from disclosing symptoms of COVID-19 or seeking medical treatment. Most did not get tested even if they experienced symptoms. For example, in July 2020, the *Daily Star* reported that a man and his children had flu-like symptoms for 20 days, but none of them had been tested. He said, "Why would I? There is no coronavirus in the slums. Besides, I don't know where to get tested. I don't have the money for treatment either, so why bother!" Further research suggests that the urban poor mostly resorted to buying nonprescription medicines meant for colds and fevers. Many died without receiving any treatment.

FLAWS TO FIX

In 1971, Bangladesh was born as a new state with a dream to establish a just society—a society where everyone, not only those in power, could enjoy the benefits of development. In the past fifty years, Bangladesh has achieved remarkable

success in its economic growth and in improving development indicators. It has also experienced devastating cyclones, famines, and floods, and managed them well. Yet the distribution of COVID-19 aid shows that Bangladesh has not progressed much in terms of looking after its poor populations.

The nation's pandemic management strategies further revealed that the government is still hesitant to work with NGOs, including civil society groups, community-based organizations, trade unions, and other voluntary organizations. The non-governmental sector plays an important role in providing microfinance, education, and health services, and has established networks in different parts of the country. But the government did not initially consult with NGOs or use their resources in the process of drawing up the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19.

Bangladesh followed the developed countries' model of using lockdowns initially to contain the spread of COVID-19. Developed nations, however, have strong economic bases and can provide better social safety nets for their disadvantaged populations. Bangladesh was unable to provide the minimum daily wage to its poor citizens during the lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021. The government implemented some stimulus packages in 2020, but it provided hardly any cash assistance or food relief during the lockdown period in July 2021.

Corruption in the health sector, and the difficulties that the urban poor face in accessing health services, show how a state can inadvertently promote health inequalities through its system. Social stigma associated with COVID-19 has made poor people more vulnerable and deterred them from visiting medical facilities or seeking care. To deal with pandemic-related stigma, the government needs to work with local religious and community leaders and local NGOs to provide accurate information about the disease, disseminated in the local languages.

It would also be helpful if local governments and local NGOs informed slum communities about the nearest COVID-19 testing centers and the nearest hospitals that treat COVID-19 patients. More importantly, the government should set up a monitoring team to ensure that the poor are not denied access to available health facilities for COVID-19 treatments.

Finally, Bangladesh needs a socially just safety net to beat this pandemic. That requires effective partnerships between government, NGOs, and community organizations. It also requires an understanding of the structural barriers that are widening the divide between the haves and the have-nots. That gap must be minimized not only to tackle the pandemic, but also to establish a just society. To build a developed and fair country, the government of Bangladesh needs to ensure that the dividends of growth are enjoyed not just by the elite, but by all citizens. ■

“By learning lessons from the past, Nepal’s tourism industry can determine a different path for itself in a post–COVID-19 world.”

The Quest for Sustainable Tourism in Nepal

SANJAY K. NEPAL

After staying closed to foreign visitors until 1951, Nepal opened its doors to international tourists following the first successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1953. In the mid-1960s, Nepal started developing and promoting mountaineering and trekking, jungle adventures, and mystical cultural journeys. Tourism development accelerated rapidly during the 1980s and the 1990s, but suffered due to the Maoist insurgency that lasted from 1996 to 2006. The number of foreign tourists declined dramatically during that period, as many foreign governments issued travel advisories discouraging travel to Nepal.

The post-insurgency period brought relief to the sector. The end of the armed conflict led to accelerated growth in infrastructure buildup and an unprecedented rise in tourist numbers. Today, tourism is vital to Nepal’s economy: the sector contributes over 7 percent of gross domestic product and provides jobs to more than 400,000 people. The industry is concentrated in five clusters: in the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, the Annapurna Conservation Area, and the Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) and Chitwan national parks.

Nepal is primarily focused on adventure tourism. But most growth in service infrastructure has occurred in budget-friendly tourist facilities; there are few higher-end establishments. Despite the growth, visitor numbers have remained relatively low by comparison with major tourist destinations in Asia, like Thailand, due to Nepal’s distance from international travel hubs and a lack of targeted development and promotion strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the industry almost to a standstill. The number of foreign visitors in 2021 declined by more than 80 percent compared with pre-pandemic levels.

The future of tourism in Nepal in a post-COVID-19 world must be considered in this context. It is also important to look back at the history of tourism development and evaluate the periods when corrective actions could have led the country to a more sustainable path. Nepal must remain focused on addressing sustainability issues associated with climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity, which pose severe risks to the country’s main tourism locations, particularly in the mountains.

FROM FORBIDDEN KINGDOM TO HIPPIE MECCA

The autocratic Rana regime lasted for more than a century (1846–1951), isolating the country by forbidding most foreign visitors. Except for occasional scholars and royalty invited by the ruling dynasty, Nepal was the “forbidden kingdom.” It is estimated that between 1881 and 1925, only 153 Europeans entered the country. The post-Rana regime introduced democratic governance under a constitutional monarchy, opening up opportunities for modernization and rapid economic development.

The timeline of Nepal’s tourism development indicates several distinct phases. The country quickly became a high-profile destination for elite travelers and explorers once it was opened for travel. Nepal’s desire to emerge from its geopolitical isolation coincided with the threat of territorial expansionism next to its borders. This threat was posed by China, which annexed Tibet in 1951, and later by India, which annexed Sikkim in 1975.

In 1950, Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal reached the summit of Annapurna. The ascent of Mount Everest by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 put Nepal on the global map of remote adventure tourism destinations. This gave rise to regular mountaineering expeditions in the

SANJAY K. NEPAL is a professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Management at the University of Waterloo, Canada.

Everest and Annapurna regions, as well as jungle safari expeditions in the tropical lowlands, mostly focused on Chitwan.

In 1955, the British travel agency Thomas Cook offered the first organized tour of Nepal for Western visitors, and a Russian entrepreneur opened the Royal Hotel in what was formerly a Rana palace. The same year saw the completion of the Tribhuvan Highway, linking Kathmandu, the capital city, to the Terai lowlands. The Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation was established in July 1958, with one Douglas DC-3 aircraft offering connections from Kathmandu to a few other Nepali cities and to the Indian city of Patna. By 1961, the number of annual visitors to Nepal had reached 4,000. Yet my conversations with some former Everest climbers suggest that there was very little development of tourism infrastructure at that time, even in Kathmandu.

The second phase of tourism was characterized by the hordes of counterculture-seeking Westerners who arrived in the late 1960s and early '70s, during the so-called hippie era.

This period was characterized by drug-fueled, boom-and-bust tourism enterprises in Kathmandu, exemplified by the spectacular rise of Jhoché, a part of downtown inhabited by the Newar people, an ethnic group indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley. Jhoché became the magnet for budget tourists looking for simple home stays, cheap thrills, easily available drugs, and like-minded companions, becoming known more popularly as “Freak Street.” An excellent account of countercultural influences in Kathmandu during that period can be found in Mark Liechty’s book *Far Out: Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal*, published in 2017.

When the Nepali government decided to force these notorious drug-oriented visitors out of the country in 1972, Jhoché was one of the communities in Kathmandu that experienced a dramatic decline in tourism-based livelihoods. This era shaped the future trajectory of tourism development in Nepal. Instead of pursuing an exclusive form of high-quality tourism development focused on a limited number of visitors, the industry was unplanned and unregulated, opening the door to an onslaught of budget tourists from Western countries.

The ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 put Nepal on the global map of adventure tourism.

The third phase brought steady growth in tourism, followed by a leveling-off period that lasted until 1985. New hotels were built to accommodate the growing number of overseas visitors, though mostly in Kathmandu and Pokhara, a lake-side city 130 miles west of the capital that serves as the gateway to the Annapurna region. Expansion of air services was also a priority during this period.

The industry grew more focused on trekking, as Thamel became the adventure tourism hub in Kathmandu’s central core. Whereas Jhoché had thrived by proffering drug-fueled tourist experiences, Thamel was frequented by mountain climbers and adventure tourists interested in trekking, rafting, and jungle safaris. One of the oldest tourist establishments in Thamel was the Rum Doodle Restaurant, frequented by famous climbers like Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner, Junko Tabei, and Ed Viesturs.

Under the Tourism Act of 1964, the Nepal Tourism Development Committee was formed in 1969. The first Tourism Master Plan, completed

in 1972, recognized the importance of developing Nepal as a distinctive destination, suggesting improvements in existing sites, services, and facilities, the expansion of tourist areas outside Kathmandu, and

international publicity campaigns. Subsequent plans stressed the need for increased foreign exchange earnings from tourism, employment creation, and broader geographical distribution of tourist activities, including the establishment of regional centers. Tourism received a separate ministry-level status in 1977.

Within a short span of time, tourism became one of the country’s most important sources of foreign exchange. As the number of visitors grew, Nepal established its reputation as an adventure tourism destination. Contrasting with the previous era, when hippies were the predominant visitors to Nepal, trekkers, mountaineers, and wildlife tourists dominated this era of tourism. The country’s first national park—Royal Chitwan National Park—was established in 1973, followed in 1976 by Mt. Everest National Park; both were later designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Today, these two parks are part of the main clusters of tourism development in the country.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS AND CONFLICT

The fourth phase of accelerated growth in tourism occurred between 1985 and 1993. The government used its economic strategy, the Seventh National Plan (1985–90), to stress the need to attract high-value tourists, simplify tax and tariff structures, steer government and private investments into tourism, and intensify marketing and promotion in other Asian countries. It also emphasized heritage conservation and diversification of basic infrastructure required for tourism, such as roads, airports, major hotels, tourist information centers, and banking services. The industry's growth continued, fueled by internal market reforms and airline deregulation, until 1999.

It was also during this phase that Nepal's first community-based tourism program, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, was implemented in 1985. The conservation area quickly became a premier trekking destination in Nepal, surpassing even Everest. It also gained international fame as a community-based sustainable tourism destination. The project was initiated by the Nepal Trust for Nature Conservation, a national nongovernmental organization. This was the first protected area in the country that was managed by an NGO rather than the government.

The project was developed based on the assumption that local people are the best custodians of their natural and cultural heritage. As such, residents were strongly encouraged to get involved in conservation and development activities. Later, this participatory governance model was emulated in other protected areas in the country—for example, in the management of the Kanchununga Conservation Area (east of the Mount Everest region), established in 1997, and the Manaslu Conservation Area, set up in 1998. Today, there are six conservation areas, twelve national parks, three wildlife reserves, and nine wetlands of international significance. Many of these protected areas are important destinations for promoting sustainable forms of tourism.

Nepal's tourism industry entered its fifth phase between 1999 and 2006, when the country went through a highly volatile period of conflict. Previously, tourism development in Nepal had not been affected by political changes. But now the industry came crashing down due to almost a decade-long civil war set off by the Maoist insurgency.

With the exception of “forced solicitation” of donations by the Maoists, tourists were generally

safe. But visitor arrivals plunged in 2000 and did not return to pre-insurgency levels until 2007. The number of visitors from North America, Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand declined by more than 50 percent. Major events in the conflict disrupted transportation links; the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu's international airport, for example, resulted in the suspension of numerous flights to Nepal for six months.

The post-2006 phase saw the abolition of the monarchy and the installation of a republican system of government. This provided much-needed political and economic stability, and facilitated an unprecedented level of investment in tourism and growth in tourist numbers. But the industry was dealt another blow by the devastating April 2015 earthquake that killed almost 9,000 people and destroyed many tourism establishments as well as some key infrastructure.

It may be too early to suggest that tourism in Nepal has entered the next phase, since it is still uncertain how much longer the COVID-19 pandemic will wreak havoc on the industry. It is safe to say that Nepal's future tourism trajectory will depend not just on how long the pandemic lingers, but also on whether the industry learns any lessons from its consequences. Some of these lessons could include promoting a form of tourism that also boosts other productive sectors (such as agriculture, horticulture, and indigenous handicrafts), limiting the unplanned proliferation of low-quality hotels, promoting and strengthening community-based tourism practices, and enhancing visitor experiences focused on health, wellness, and cultural awareness.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The tourism phenomenon in Nepal during the late 1960s and early 1970s was a bit puzzling to most Nepalese, whose only direct exposure to Western culture and mannerisms came via interactions with tourists. Today's citizenry is much more familiar with foreign cultures, and perhaps can more easily relate to ideas of travel, exploration, wilderness, and cultural experiences.

Roughly 10 percent of Nepalis work as labor migrants (mostly in the Gulf countries), and there is now a sizable diaspora in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Nepal has also climbed up the ladder in global rankings for human development indices. Domestic and diaspora tourism in Nepal are both on the rise.

What this all implies is that there will be tremendous future demand for tourism resources, from both domestic and international tourists. But despite the country's potential, I have been frequently dismayed by the lack of foresight shown by Nepali policymakers, by tourism professionals' disregard for sustainability, and by the focus on short-term, high-volume enterprises over quality and long-term growth.

Nepal is often compared with Bhutan, given their geographical proximity and the stark differences in their approaches to managing tourism development. When Bhutan made the decision to welcome tourists in 1974, there were many lessons it could draw from Nepal's foray into the sector. The most important lesson was not to follow in Nepal's footsteps. Early on, Bhutan realized the importance of promoting a type of tourism that focused on few visitors but maximum revenues, through selective marketing and promotion of the country as a place to seek novel natural and cultural experiences rooted in the ancient traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism.

In Nepal's case, during the early phase of tourism development, the desire to open the country to international visitors as an economic strategy as well as a way to connect to the world at large took priority over protection of its natural and cultural resources. Though the country was poor and landlocked, it would have benefited from a carefully planned approach, like Bhutan's, that placed a higher value on its resources and set premium prices for the unique experiences they offer.

Indeed, there is only one Everest to climb in the world, and only one Lumbini (the birthplace of Gautama Buddha) or Pashupatinath (an important pilgrimage site for Hindu devotees of Lord Shiva) to visit for religious and spiritual reasons. The Kathmandu Valley's ancient heritage consists of seven UNESCO world heritage monuments, along with the country's two national parks that carry that designation. The country is small but very diverse geographically, biologically, and culturally (over 125 languages are spoken by its citizens). Its mountains, boasting 8 of the world's 14 peaks taller than 8,000 meters, remain major draws for mountaineering and trekking expeditions. Nepal has established 20 protected areas and 9 wetlands designated under the Ramsar Convention, which provide refuge to iconic wildlife, including 915 bird species.

Despite these unmatched advantages, Nepal's tourism industry today is still primarily based on

providing budget accommodations, cheap thrills, and low-quality experiences. The industry is characterized by unsavory professional practices and short-sightedness.

Bhutan, in contrast, has continued to pursue a very different path, focusing on low-volume, high-quality tourism. Having visited Bhutan multiple times and done some work on tourism, community, and conservation issues there, I am familiar with some of the challenges associated with the sector in that country. Bhutan's tourism development is centralized, tour itineraries are highly controlled, and there are limited opportunities for local residents to get directly involved in providing services to tourists. Who can or cannot participate in the industry is a question left to the bureaucrats based in Thimpu, Bhutan's capital. Tour agencies and tour guides are politically well-connected people. In other words, tourism is not a free enterprise. But these challenges pale in comparison with Nepal's march toward a growth-at-all-costs strategy.

Nepal failed to capitalize on its mysticism, adventure potential, and high service quality, just as had been the case during the early 1960s. By the 1970s, Nepal was already awash in budget tourists who were showing up in various parts of the country and demanding good services at a fraction of the cost they would have paid elsewhere. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, budget tourism was exemplified by the large number of backpackers in the Everest and Annapurna regions, putting undue pressure on local resources, food supplies, and communities' sense of health and well-being. The competition to provide services to tourists was so intense that it forced host communities down the path toward exploiting and undervaluing their tourism resources. Unfortunately, such trends have been tremendously difficult to reverse in the subsequent development of Nepal's tourism industry.

TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY?

Before COVID-19 struck, 2020 had been designated as the Visit Nepal Year, with the goal of attracting two million tourists. In 2019, the country had 1.17 million foreign visitors. The goal of nearly doubling that figure was crazy even to contemplate—Nepal simply does not have the infrastructure to support that scale of tourism. On the contrary, roads haphazardly dug in the mountains not only have increased the frequency and intensity of landslides, but also have ruined the aesthetic appeal of the landscape.

Anyone on a domestic flight can witness the impacts of this rampant road construction in Nepal's mountain regions. Annapurna used to be one of the premier trekking destinations, its mountains beckoning adventure-seekers from all over the world. Today, the Annapurna region is crisscrossed by hazard-prone roads. Meanwhile, Everest has become overly commercialized and crowded with tourist lodges: there were 47 lodges in the region in 1983, rising to 418 by 2019. Some of these lodges are basic, with substandard hygiene and sanitation. Tourist services such as food and Internet access are outrageously expensive. Many tour guides are more focused on extracting money from their clients than on ensuring a quality, safe experience.

The Kathmandu-based tourism industry is oblivious to the fact that the city's alarming pollution remains a major deterrent to tourists, despite the city having several UNESCO heritage sites. Tourists who might otherwise decide to extend their stay in Kathmandu no longer do so, and would be happy to simply bypass the capital city if it did not have the only international airport in the country. Thamel, the hub of tourist services in Kathmandu's core area, has turned into a mini "sin city," unlike its image two decades ago as a gateway for adventure travel. As a former resident, born and raised near Thamel, I am dismayed by what it has become, a hedonistic destination for many local residents and some tourists.

COVID-19 has given the global adventure tourism industry an opportunity to reset. Nepal can take advantage of this opportunity by learning lessons from its past failures and from Bhutan's successes in sustainable tourism development. Ways of doing business need to change in order to be able to survive a similar crisis in the future. One can be cynical about changing the morally bankrupt social-political order in countries like Nepal, where corruption and crime have been institutionalized. But the sensible development and promotion of adventure tourism could pull some of these countries back from the brink of economic and environmental collapse.

The pandemic has had cumulative and long-lasting effects on Nepal's tourism economy, including losses of jobs and income and rising debts. These, combined with climatic influences on the mountains and other sensitive ecosystems

in the lowlands, must be taken seriously by the government. Will the industry heed calls for changing course and reforming its practices, or will it go back to its business-as-usual model after the pandemic? There is a fundamental disconnect between what the industry preaches (sustainability) and what it practices (growth expansion). This disconnect must be fixed before we can consider the future of tourism.

During the pandemic, the global community has collectively witnessed the positive effects of a temporarily deindustrialized world, as ordinary citizens from Kathmandu to New Delhi, and from Los Angeles to Milan, have marveled at smog-free skies and clear horizons. This offered a glimpse of what was lost in the seeming madness of unremitting economic growth and industrial development, indicating the possibility of an alternative future of clean air and water, well-protected natural resources, healthy ecosystems, and healthy people.

The environmental externalities of tourism development must be addressed if Nepal seeks to reorient its practices toward sustainability. The industry's environmental costs include high levels of air pollution (from heavy vehicular traffic and crowding), waste generation (in a country that lacks recycling facilities), diminishing open space (due to road expansion and new housing), land degradation (as when forests are cleared to build new lodges), and wasteful building practices and architectural designs, to name a few.

But early indications suggest a return to normal; the Nepali government issued a record 394 climbing permits for Mt. Everest in 2021. Though this number may not seem large, each permit stands for the combination of the climbers involved, the additional support staff required for each expedition, the volume of tents and gear, and the logistics required to move climbers and their gear to the Everest Base Camp, where they may be stationed for as long as two months. I have been to the Base Camp six times, mostly during the spring season, and every time it has felt crowded (claustrophobic, too, as you are immediately surrounded by steep vertical mountains on all sides), dangerous (you stand on shifting glaciated ground below major avalanche chutes), and tense, with the thin and cold air—the camp is at an elevation of 17,500 feet.

The industry was unplanned and unregulated, opening the door to crowds of budget tourists.

The impending impact of increased warming in high mountain tourism destinations is a major issue that needs to be considered with a sense of urgency. A recent study concludes that the Himalayan glaciers have lost ice ten times more quickly over the past few decades than they had on average since the last major glacier expansion 400 to 700 years ago, a period known as the Little Ice Age. Not only are the glaciers retreating, but increased warming has also resulted in the formation of moraine-dammed lakes that are prone to bursting. This phenomenon, known as glacial lake outburst flooding, has occurred in the Everest region, for example in 1987, destroying tourist trails, lodges, and power lines. Such incidents are likely to increase in frequency and intensity as warming trends in the high mountains of Nepal continue.

The implications for mountaineering are also serious. A recent study conducted by researchers from the University of Maine suggested that the South Col Glacier, between the summit of Everest and the Base Camp, has lost more than 180 feet (54 meters) of thickness in the past 25 years. This suggests that climbing in the future will be much more hazardous than it is today.

Businesses and professionals engaged in the industry must focus their attention on new ways of thinking about and practicing tourism. The pandemic has prompted renewed interest worldwide in sustainable forms of tourism. For many, the idea has become a marketing label or a form of greenwashing, rather than genuine adoption of sustainable technologies and practices. A different interpretation of sustainability is necessary, focused on small-scale, community-managed, culturally sensitive, quality experiences, contributing to both human health and the well-being of people and wildlife.

The pandemic has forced people to reconsider their values, relationships, and place in the world. There has been a resurgence of interest in smaller ecological footprints, carbon-neutral growth, green energy, promoting public transit over cars, and similar ideas. Responsible, ethical, regenerative, and mindful tourism is not just a set of new labels but part of an emergent value system that a broader segment of society is ready to embrace.

Sustainable tourism practices must also focus on issues of ethics, equity, race, identity, inclusion, and justice. Nepal can make a difference by

promoting a type of tourism that is focused on natural rejuvenation, wellness, and spirituality, given the country's abundant biodiversity resources and its cultural strengths rooted in Hindu and Buddhist ways of life. It can offer experiences grounded in local communities and their empowerment, ensuring that tourism benefits accrue to people with the least access to other development opportunities. This has been done before in both the Everest and Annapurna regions, where tourism has lifted communities out of persistent underdevelopment and poverty despite the absence of other government-run economic initiatives.

Such social goals could be embedded in climate and environmental protection programs. Tourism development will be sustainable if it is focused on broader and long-term societal goals, but advanced by narrowly targeted, short-term projects that effectively demonstrate the linkages between development, environment, and society.

PROMISING DESTINATIONS

Since the opening of its borders to the outside world in 1951, which was a radical departure from the past, most political changes in Nepal have not affected tourism development negatively, apart from the Maoist-led insurgency. The 2015 earthquake disrupted tourism for about two years, but the industry

bounced back, benefiting from the country's relative calm as a fledgling democracy. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector is facing a bigger test.

Despite the country's wealth of natural attractions, tourism development in Nepal has largely proceeded by reacting to global trends and patterns of demand, rather than developing and promoting a brand focused on exclusivity and quality, meaningful experiences, and sensitivity to local cultural traditions. Unplanned growth and lack of effective regulations (both economic and environmental) have resulted in high-volume, low-value tourism, in contrast to better planned examples of development, as in Bhutan.

Nepal's tourism industry was accorded a measure of importance as part of a national development strategy that never materialized in practice. Successive plans neglected to improve tourism infrastructure or to diffuse investments beyond the five regional clusters. The lack of any clear strategy

Bhutan has pursued a very different path, focusing on low-volume, high-quality tourism.

for managing the present scale of tourism has left the industry itself to determine the country's capacity, resulting in haphazard growth, overexpansion in certain areas, and neglect of other promising destinations, such as the Far Western region. This region is largely unexplored by tourists, and it features interesting biodiversity, such as snow leopards; impressive landscapes of rolling hills and alpine meadows; pristine lakes and forests; and notable cultural traditions, including pre-Buddhist religious practices. It is also inhabited by some of the poorest communities in Nepal and could greatly benefit from a well-planned sustainable tourism development project.

By learning lessons from the past, Nepal's tourism industry can determine a different path for itself in a post-COVID-19 world. For that to occur,

governments at all levels must work with the private sector and local communities to devise plans and practices that are more in tune with the values of contemporary global society while responding to large-scale climatic and environmental changes. At the local level, citizens must be encouraged and incentivized to adopt sustainable behavior and practices in their daily routines, whether as tourists or otherwise. Global tourism is a force that brings together the globalists and the locals—a powerful agent that can facilitate dialogues between the two. Tapping into this positive interaction and channeling it into concrete local actions is what sustainable tourism ought to be about. I hope the Nepali government and its citizens realize this potential before it is too late. ■

Bollywood's Majoritarian Politics and the Independent Alternative

ASHVIN IMMANUEL DEVASUNDARAM

Comedian Vir Das's state-of-the-nation monologue *Two Indias* oscillates between the vision of a tolerant, secular, diverse democracy and its descent into a totalitarian dystopia. As he suggests, India is an ideational concept made possible by the intangible and often inexplicable glue that binds its historically disparate and fissiparous body politic. The power to enact and reinforce India's secular democratic premise of "unity in diversity" has resided ultimately in the imagination, intent, will, and actions of the Indian people. This spontaneous popular agency to perform and sanctify the distinctive everyday practice of unifying ground-level communitarianism has become moribund in recent years. The Hindu fundamentalist *sangh* (family) of organizations, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have hacked away at it through their segregationist, hate-instigating Hindutva politics.

The tenuous social fabric of a now nominally secular democracy is being torn apart by relentless ideological mass conditioning of the nation's Hindu majority population to support the ruling political regime's goal of establishing a Hindu supremacist state. These schisms and polarities, spotlighted by Vir Das, are mirrored in the contemporary Indian cinema ecology. Since its coeval ascendancy alongside India's tryst with neoliberalism in the early 1990s, modern Bollywood has played a pivotal role in peddling, shaping, and annealing the majoritarian agenda of enforcing a mono-religious Hindu *rashtra* (nation).

Particularly since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meteoric rise at the helm of the BJP's

landslide election victory in 2014, Bollywood blockbusters espousing triumphalist ultranationalist themes, valorizing war against India's arch-rival Pakistan, and promoting Hindu religious values and rituals as synonyms of Indian identity have been commercially successful thanks in part to political patronage. *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, *Mission Mangal*, and *PM Narendra Modi* (all released in 2019), *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020), and *Bhuj: The Pride of India* (2021) are a few examples of mainstream films that exploit the zeitgeist of populist hypernationalism rampant in vast swaths of contemporary India. A distinct example of Bollywood being co-opted into the BJP's populist playbook is Modi's public use of a slogan—"How's the *josh*" (meaning passion or zeal)—from jingoistic war drama *Uri: The Surgical Strike*. The catchphrase was brandished subsequently by other BJP politicians and their followers, who are known as *bhakts* (believers).

Bollywood family sagas privileging traditional *sanskari* Hindu values range from Karan Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) to Sooraj Barjatya's *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* (2015). They conform to the political ideology and distorted vision of a historically rewritten Hindu nation where religious minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, and other vulnerable groups are erased from the national narrative. The normalization of majoritarian ideology in popular Bollywood is an important instrument in this broader attempt to reshape Indian society, particularly at a time when a "religious parliament" held in the holy city of Haridwar in December 2021 provided a platform for Hindu religious leaders to call on ordinary Hindus to take up arms and enact genocide against minority Muslims.

Bollywood has supplied an array of voluble spokespersons and emissaries to validate and extol the agenda of the BJP and Modi. Stars such as Akshay Kumar have offered hagiographic paeans to Modi and his policies. Kumar's unabashedly

ASHVIN IMMANUEL DEVASUNDARAM is a senior lecturer in world cinema at Queen Mary University of London. He is also associate director of the UK Asian Film Festival—London and directed the UK Heritage Lottery-funded documentary *Movies, Memories, Magic* (2018). His latest book is *Indian Indies: A Guide to New Independent Indian Cinema* (Routledge, 2022).

obsequious and apolitical April 2019 interview with the prime minister ran across mainstream Indian news channels. Another Bollywood actor, Kangana Ranaut, is a self-appointed defender of the BJP, weaponizing social media and engaging in an outré Twitter dispute with the pop star Rihanna over the government's heavy-handed response to protesting Indian farmers.

Historically, the commercial Hindi film industry, now known ubiquitously as Bollywood, has had a long-standing reliance on a melting pot of creative, technical, managerial, and service personnel from multifarious socio-religious backgrounds. The broader breakdown of the secular constitutional Indian state under BJP rule is metonymized by the current religious fault lines in Bollywood. The industry's Muslim stars are increasingly being denounced and singled out for stigmatization. Shah Rukh Khan's son Aryan was embroiled in a criminal investigation and imprisoned in 2021 on unsubstantiated charges of drug possession. In 2015, Aamir Khan was pilloried by the right-wing Hindu political establishment, its nationwide acolytes, and mainstream news media for expressing concern about rising intolerance in the country. Interfaith Bollywood couple Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor drew opprobrium for naming their sons Taimur and Jehangir, allegedly after Muslim potentates of the past.

UNCONVENTIONAL ANTIDOTE

In this tempestuous context, the antidote to Bollywood's amplification of nationalist narratives serving the status quo has been an ascendant wave of independent Indian films. Charting the scene's evolution since 2010 in my book *Indian Indies*, I delineate the archetypical characteristic of this alternative cohort of films as unconventional, critical, and oppositional thematic content. This divergent and outspoken propensity of new Indian Indie films—in a cross-regional range of languages, unlike Hindi-dominated Bollywood—is particularly significant considering the ongoing clampdown on freedom of speech and expression by the BJP regime, specifically the escalating censorship of dissenting voices in cinema.

Indies perform the important task of undermining the state's Hindutva agenda by disrupting the majoritarian ultranationalist narrative that is

uncritically proliferated by mainstream Bollywood. Through cinematic counternarratives, several Indies reimagine socio-religious unity, cooperation, and cohesion. They problematize patriarchy and expose the enduring abomination of the caste system. In essence, these films orchestrate small acts of subversion.

Devashish Makhija's visceral *Ajji* ("Grandmother," 2017), deploying tenebrous lighting, austere design, and a blanched color scheme, charts the saga of a slum-dwelling grandmother who seeks to avenge a sexual assault on her young granddaughter by the profligate son of a powerful local right-wing Hindu politician. The film foregrounds the solidarity between the elderly, so-called lower-caste *Ajji* and her local Muslim butcher, whose adroitness in dismembering goat carcasses provides the chopping board for *Ajji* to cultivate her own customized use of the butcher's blade. Picking up the baton from *Ajji*, Makhija's *Bhonsle* (2018) returns even more explicitly to the theme of politically influenced societal discord. The film's eponymous lone crusader revolts vio-

lently against xenophobic and misogynistic sensibilities in the Marathi heartland.

Similarly, a spate of socio-politically incisive Malayalam films, such as Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), have intrepidly

exposed entrenched patriarchy in Indian domestic spaces and structural family hierarchies. The film also reveals intersectional aspects of religious orthodoxy and political expediency that manipulate a pliable population with inflammatory social media messages. *The Great Indian Kitchen* unveils an endemic culture of WhatsApp pogroms and misinformation dispersion on Facebook, demonstrating the paradox of Digital India: technological neoliberalism is the most potent recruit in the violent enforcement of Hindutva authoritarianism. Challenging Bollywood's turn-a-blind-eye policy regarding Dalit lived experience, a new wave of Dalit Indie cinema encompassing films such as *Visaranai* (2015), *Maadathy: An Unfairytale* (2019), *Seththumaan* ("Pig," 2021), and *Jai Bhim* (2021) have thrust into the mainstream the perennially problematic and singularly Indian issue of caste-based discrimination.

The new wave of Indies has also served as a springboard for expanded homegrown web series, such as *Sacred Games*, *Tandav*, and *Paatal*

*Indies disrupt the ultranationalist
narrative proliferated by
mainstream Bollywood.*

Lok on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. These series present trenchant and interrogative interpretations of the ruling establishment, the political status quo, the mainstream media, social structures, and current affairs. But repressive measures by the state, in synchrony with moral policing by public votaries of the Hindutva agenda, are threatening to silence these critical voices.

In 2021, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting revealed a draft Cinematograph Amendment Bill, claiming unilateral power to revoke the censorship certificates of previously cleared films and future releases. Digital streaming platforms that had enjoyed a measure of freedom from the draconian dictates of the Central Board of Film Certification have now been corralled into the ambit of an intensified state-controlled censorship regime. Some of the main avenues for Indie films to articulate dissenting counternarratives appear set to be foreclosed.

The ministry has also made the controversial move of merging four independent, publicly funded institutions—the Films Division, the National Film Archive of India, the Directorate of Film Festivals, and the Children’s Film Society of India—under the banner of the National Film Development Corporation. This is another attempt to stifle creative autonomy in a monolithic entrepreneurial model. As demonstrated by the 1969 Latin American Third Cinema manifesto, however, escalating authoritarianism by repressive state apparatuses can stimulate new and innovative strategies and counternarratives to circumvent censorship and political domination. The independent feature and documentary sectors in India no doubt will devise their own workarounds and detours.

NEUTRAL TERRAIN

As its credentials as a global film industry expand, Bollywood appears to have embraced its role as cultural soft-power proponent of the current Indian government’s ongoing program of parochialization, religious ultranationalism, and ideological entrenchment of a theocratic Hindu state. In contrast, the independent Bengali-

language film *Dostojee* (“Two Friends,” 2021) is a revealing portrait of contemporary India told through a coming-of-age tale of friendship involving two inseparable eight-year-old Muslim and Hindu boys in a remote village in West Bengal.

The film’s idyllic rural landscape, flanked by a river, suggests a fragile liminality—a silently volatile borderline bifurcates the village’s Muslim and Hindu residents. The film invokes the specter of the 1992 demolition by Hindu political extremists of Babri Masjid, a historic mosque in Ayodhya, and the event’s cascading impact in the dismantling of the constitutional architecture of secular Indian civil society. A microcosm of this monumental rupture in the Indian timeline is manifested in the Hindu villagers’ mobilization to celebrate Lord Ram, while the Muslim inhabitants are galvanized to build a replica of the Babri mosque, in their respective communal enclaves within the village.

The two boys, whose families’ threadbare neighboring dwellings are separated by a flimsy bamboo barrier, construct their own *terra nullius*. On this neutral terrain, their playful interactions and flights of fantasy prevail against the village’s encompassing miasma of religious orthodoxy and its politics of hatred, exclusionism, and invidious ethno-religious ideology. Through its child’s-eye view, the film’s depiction of a deceptively charming and whimsical rite-of-passage odyssey acts as an apologue for India’s disintegrating multi-religious edifice. Akin to Vir Das’s monologue on a Janus-faced country, the film flits between allegory and eulogy.

In a haunting coda, the young Muslim boy, unable to bear the grief of separation from his Hindu *dostojee*, returns to their erstwhile playground—a grove ensconcing a tree on whose bark is etched the duo’s initials. Instinctively, the boy mimics the plangent cry of a cuckoo. His effort to hail his absent friend and the invisible bird’s echoing call reverberate in harmony with the swaying trees. This reverie-soaked cinematic moment seems a contemplative elegy for Hindu–Muslim harmony and unity torn asunder. *Dostojee* leaves its audience to lament the loss of the old India and face a creeping fear of the new. ■

Pakistan's Fragmented Megacity

NICHOLA KHAN

Karachi's history has been wrought from Partition, massive in-migration, unchecked growth, and multiple population displacements. In this megacity, Samira Shackle's background as a British-born journalist of Pakistani heritage mirrors the dilemma of the outsider position, which, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss (in his book *Tristes Tropiques*), is one of "chronic rootlessness," and is also the anthropologist's. Shackle's feat is braiding this outsider experience, with its accidents of birth and place, into a portrayal of Karachi's recent history—creating a palimpsest of urban human existence that stretches across a highly stratified, territorialized, and fragmented megalopolis of violent borders and divisions. These factors confine most other analyses, both academic and journalistic accounts, to accumulated knowledge from single locations, and leave much of the city an outsider to itself.

Carved from three related partitions, Karachi's geography speaks to a complex back-and-forth involving broader national, political borders across Pakistan, the region, and retreating empire. First, the British partition of the Raj transformed swaths of India into Pakistan, colonial Indians into independent Pakistanis, and Karachi into a refugee city swollen with new migrants, and swelling massively thereafter—a historical trajectory Shackle deftly covers. Now encompassing an estimated 23 million residents, Karachi is projected to be the world's largest city by 2030—and will predictably attract still further in-migration with its shiny lures of conviviality, work, and profit.

Second, Shackle outlines in broad brushstrokes a complex urban geography of ethnicized and political divisions, which nourish multiple

opportunities for extortion, corruption, and other illegality, inextricably enmeshing gang warfare, crime, and party politics with the spheres of government, law, and policing. These entanglements reveal a further transversal layer of partitions, borderings, severances, blockades, and no-go areas—a practical "second geography of corners," turnings, and suddenly switching alliances—which make permanent strangers of neighbors and render the city's immensity, beyond its residential enclaves, unknown to most inhabitants.

The third partition involves barely regulated large-scale construction and high-level corruption. These, Shackle discovers, reveal uneasy alliances between developers, politicians, military–corporate expansion, criminal gangs, and illegal land acquisitions reaching deep into the city's earliest slums and settlements. New flyovers, bridges, expressways, and luxury residential developments compel evictions that are interlaced with multiple layered memories of other forced relocations and dispersals, and with the disappearances of activists, journalists, and communities throughout decades of military operations. Such repressions crush people's spirits and push them underground, into new neighborhoods and situations of subterraneity, semi-legality, and fear.

If the city map is the visual elaboration of historical loss, break, and exile, it is also a utopian capitalist vision driven by accumulation via dispossession. Beneath Karachi's horizon of new skylines lurks the uneasy presence of erasures—the ghosts of evictions, killings, slum clearances, demolitions, and encroachments by the state, the muscle power of gangs, the violence of left-wing thugs and religious diehards, and the overarching menace of the military—Pakistan's most powerful institution, which subsumes as mere puppetry the institutions of democracy and political leadership. Unlike the studious recording of the displacements of Partition, one effect of a city's fracturing by decades of military repression and political

Karachi Vice: Life and Death in a Contested City

Samira Shackle
Granta Books, 2021

NICHOLA KHAN is a reader in anthropology and psychology at the University of Brighton, where she is co-director of the Centre for Spatial, Environmental and Cultural Politics. Her latest book is *Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

violence—and the dismantling and expansion of Karachi’s skylines—is to leave the contemporary pathways of dispossessed people comparatively uncharted. Sacrificed to the city’s growth, the *goth* (village or small neighborhood, in Sindhi) forcibly relinquishes its dwellings and human displacements to memory and demolition for a new urban future that fails to efface all traces of violence.

COMPLICATED TOPOGRAPHY

Shackle’s account begins with the 2003 Lyari turf wars between gangs, and ends in 2018 with a High Court decision in favor of claimants contesting land appropriations as illegal—a ruling that was reversed months later. The book opens with Shackle’s first impressions of Karachi, on her journey from the airport through the chokeholds of traffic that render car passengers vulnerable to armed robbery, past the crowded facades of faultily constructed buildings, toward the wealthy tree-lined avenues of the Clifton and Defence districts. Here, amid the luxury of marbled floors, lawns, and gardens with coral trees—which decorate Shackle’s home—residents are distanced from the complicated topography of ethnicized and sectarian killings, gangs and mafias fattened by extortion, and unique regimes of terror. Though the residents’ perspective is filtered through English-language newspapers, Shackle’s achievement is to elucidate the minutiae of everyday life by grounding realities in the thickness of richly fashioned description, and in the individual lives of her five interlocutors.

Her purview across the terrain of urban inequalities and difference is mobilized by these five key workers and citizen-activists, after whom the chapters are named. Safdar is a Pakhtun ambulance driver from a village in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa who is now living in Landhi. Parween is a teacher-turned-activist from the predominantly Baloch neighborhood of Lyari. Siraj, descended from Bihari “Mohajirs” (migrants) of the 1971 Bangladesh war, is founder of the Technical Training Resource Centre (TTRC) in Orangi, site of Mohajir–Pakhtun killings in the 1980s. Jannat is a young mother from the Sindhi Kachehlo tribe living in the East. And Zille, an “accidental” though seasoned crime reporter for the media network GEO, is from a Shia Mohajir community in Landhi.

*Beneath Karachi’s horizon of
new skylines lurks the uneasy
presence of erasures.*

Shackle approaches Karachi’s social demarcation of territories and neighborhoods through the key lenses of ethnicity and urban violence, followed by framings centered on infrastructure, land, displacement, growth, and dispossession—the concerns of contemporary urbanists. This enables her sense of movement and the wider “cityscape.” For a charity ambulance driver like Safdar, however, transitive movements are blocked by impossible traffic—thwarted, interrupted, rerouted, or altogether stopped. Transport is the city’s lifeline and its bane. Safdar and Karachi’s roughly 500 other Edhi Foundation ambulance drivers have a vernacular vision of urban life honed on scrubby borderlands, decaying colonial facades, ill-designed concrete monoliths, and the thick miasma of body bags mixed with pollution and exhaust fumes.

Shackle’s title, reminiscent of *Miami Vice*, implies a fast-paced narrative thriller, which seems disingenuous; her detailed insights, if neither literary nor academic, are those of finely crafted journalism. They suggest the different ways in which variegated

forms of urban movement interact with the heterogeneity of urban time: from the frenetic pace of lightning-fast evictions, random and targeted killings, and collapsing buildings, to the slow expansion of households beyond

the capacity of their dwellings, unending court cases, building projects that never finish, and—in Safdar’s case—long periods spent waiting in hospitals with his brother to mitigate the excruciating encroachment of his childhood polio. The last “wild” polio frontier in the world, apart from Afghanistan, is Pakistan.

Shackle also highlights the everyday structural violence and inequality that assault women’s bodies through child marriage and multiple pregnancies that deplete maternal health. These are the focuses of Parween’s nascent activism in her own home and neighborhood. Here in Lyari, women sit outside on rugs forging intimacies in the densely crowded streets and alleyways, while local gangsters such as the notorious Rehman Dakait (“Rehman the Bandit”) use young children to run drugs, but offer the double-bind of community protection from rival gangs and the police. At the same time, the gangsters’ presence renders women vulnerable to sexual assaults, which eventually drive Parween’s family away. Their large

home is occupied by gangs and used as a place for killings or storing dead bodies. But Perween still maintains links with Lyari, becoming an outspoken activist against the gangs. After the devastating nationwide floods of 2010, in order to organize assistance for victims, she is forced to join the gangs' relief front, the Lyari Resource Centre. Eventually she returns to live in Lyari, but not in her former home, which is riddled with bullet holes, patterned with blood splatter stains, and replete with the lingering stench of death that no cleaning can erase.

In Khatore, likewise, poor Sindhi families prize education, but circumstances funnel girls into early marriage, a fate mothers endow by embroidering their daughters' dowries from birth onward. Though intelligent, Jannat is engaged at 16. Her husband faithfully drives her to school, but the concurrent labor of handwashing laundry, collecting firewood, and tending goats proves excessive. She earns her higher secondary school certificate, but her first pregnancy summarily curtails any further educational hopes.

STREET WARS

Other neighborhoods—such as Orangi, where Manghopir Road demarcates the Mohajir–Pakhtun border—are blighted by political killings and gang wars. With the TTRC, Siraj had successfully fought to put Orangi on the electricity grid. Siraj's parents, like many displaced in the 1971 Bangladesh independence war, built their house incrementally, whenever they could afford more bricks. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) dominates the district, unassailable after being given free rein by President Pervez Musharraf in 2002 in exchange for political support. Its members fight the Pakhtun Awami National Party for control of the area, and extort goat-skins from small businesses during the Eid-ul Adha festival.

On a bus journey home, Siraj's Pakhtun driver is killed in a burst of shooting. Siraj is shattered: by such unforeseen punctuations of shock and grief are people's lives undone. He subsequently joins the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), which has managed to have numerous unplanned areas mapped and recognized. His mentor, Perween Rehman, had been investigating apparent government–mafia collusion in the siphoning of public water supplies into private water tankers. When she is murdered, the police instead blame the growing Taliban presence.

Thereafter, the OPP's work to map unregularized settlements is halted.

Meanwhile, Zille's natural predilection for drifting is contained by his professional requirements for self-censorship, the need to be mindful of the violent territorialization of the city, a climate of severe state restrictions on media, and violence targeting journalists. He takes increasing risks to understand the gangs' operations, becoming the first journalist to break news of Rehman Dakait's death in an "encounter," or planned police killing. He witnesses meetings between government ministers and gang leaders, evoking the memory of an earlier photograph depicting then–Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto sitting comfortably with Dakait. In April 2012, after a leader of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party was shot by a rival gang, gun battles erupted between gangsters and around 3,000 police officers. Five days of intense clashes and blockades ensued, after which the police disastrously retreated. In a subsequent intense episode of Sunni–Shia fighting, Zille is shot, raising questions about the compromises to personal safety required of crime journalists in Karachi.

The Pakistani Taliban's ascendancy is the backdrop for displacees from the massive 2010 floods arriving in Karachi, as Shackle turns to the violence of religious sectarianism and extremism. During the Shia festival of Ashura, Safdar, having recently accepted a forced marriage, is standing by with his ambulance; Zille is both attending and reporting from the procession. Apparently out of the blue, a massive bomb explosion scatters body parts widely, killing thirty and injuring many more. The Taliban Tehreek-e-Pakistan claims responsibility. Forty days later, another Shia procession is bombed. After an attack on the Karachi airport in 2014, also claimed by the Taliban, these bombardments culminate in the "Karachi Operation." Rangers, the state's paramilitary law enforcement troops, patrol the city like an occupying force, arresting thousands of suspects while their victims' corpses fill the streets. The Taliban, Lyari gangs, and the MQM vanguard all suffer terminal losses. Their retreat gives free rein to corrupt developers.

From her ancestral village, Lal Baksh goth, Jannat gazes wistfully at the development of the Bahria Town residences, which tantalize her with glossy dreams of participation in a new future. But the gradual encroachment of the incongruous construction, crude and ugly—alongside illegal demolitions of the goth's agricultural and grazing land,

upheld in court—makes it clear that the poor are excluded. With the 2018 election of Imran Khan as prime minister, the army's grip tightens.

Shackle's depictions center on ethnic and territorial politics, gangs, and neighborhood movements for rights and representation. These are expressive of "life and death" crises of dwelling,

stability, and identity. While Shackle rightly resists the easy closure of invoking "resilience," Karachi's unmitigated expansion and transformations will undoubtedly continue, propelling people into new habitations and neighborly disorientations, proximities, and possibilities for coexistence yet to unfold. ■