

By JASON KEITH FERNANDES



Narendra Modi and António Costa: A Dangerous Tango in the Times of COVID-19  
It was somewhat surreal reading one of the Twitter posts of António Costa, Prime Minister of Portugal, on March 5. In his tweet Costa indicated that he had “had an excellent conversation today with Narendra Modi” and whom he “congratulated on the good results achieved in containing the pandemic in a country as large and populous as India.”

Perhaps the Prime Minister of Portugal has been obtaining information about India from more reliable sources. From my review it is clear that rather than contain the spread of the virus effectively and limit the discomfort of citizens, Prime Minister Modi has botched up the Indian response to the pandemic, by choosing to ignore essential services, reinforce Hindu culture in multicultural India, and assert the muscle of the state. Rather than save lives, these options have in fact resulted in a many avoidable deaths.

Take, for example, that, as the realisation that we were facing a pandemic hit, Modi’s response was to call for a nation-wide 14-hour people’s curfew (*Janata curfew*) – from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. – on March 22. While this curfew was wildly successful within the country – or at least in urban centres– grinding the country to an almost complete halt, pandemonium broke out at 5 p.m. that day, when Modi had called for a public appreciation of those delivering essential services, by clapping and banging of plates. Across India, in addition to getting onto their balconies, roofs and windows, citizens poured out onto the streets, forming processions and clapping, banging kitchen utensils, and ringing bells in supposed appreciation. I say supposed appreciation, because these actions were actually extremely similar to the Hindu rituals that scare away evil spirits. All this was the direct result of Modi’s speech. Rather than use the opportunity to explain the workings of the virus to the country, he had appealed to nationalistic and religious sentiment, resulting in public processions which may have done more to ensure communication of the virus.



When a lockdown was eventually announced it was almost immediate, unlike the earlier call for the people's curfew which was provided a three-day notice period. The result was panic-buying, emptying of stores, and most importantly the almost immediate loss of employment for vast numbers of daily-wage labourers for whom no provision was made. Most daily wage earners were denied their wages, included back-wages. As a result of the freezing of public transport it was impossible for these members of the precariat to return to their villages. Better planning would have indeed saved India's labouring poor from the shocks of the lockdown.

Now reduced to making journeys of hundreds of kilometres in the scorching summer heat by bicycle, or even foot, these marginalised persons have faced police violence from the forces trying to maintain this lockdown. Attempting to avoid the roads, these labourers have used railway tracks and been killed, fallen victim to other accidents, or simply fallen dead from dehydration or hunger. Some accounts estimate close to four hundred deaths as a result of the ham-handed response to the pandemic. Where they have reached home safely they have often been drenched with bleach and similar chemicals as disease-preventive measures by local authorities.

And if this insensitivity to the most vulnerable of the Indian polity were not sufficient a vicious Islamophobia has been unleashed in the country through a systematic campaign which suggested that Muslims in India were deliberately spreading the virus.

As a result of all this mismanagement, the director of India's premier medical institution, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi has suggested that COVID-19 cases are increasing at a alarming pace. The predictions of the director have come true as on March 10

the cases have spiked to 67,000, including a single largest spike of 4000 cases that day.



In such a context, one wonders what Prime Minister Costa was congratulating his Indian counterpart about?

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Portugal has been pushing to embrace India for a while now. In many ways this is a welcome move given that despite official rhetoric, India's annexation of Goa, then part of Portugal, has long complicated the relationship between the two countries. However, what is disconcerting is that this embrace is on-going at the very moment when democratic rights are increasingly being suppressed in India and its image as a liberal democracy falters. For example, the visit of the President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa in mid-February took place in the context of the most violent attacks by the police on university campuses in Northern India. All of this was in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the Parliament December 12, 2019, which flouts India's secular constitutional principles by making religion the basis for offering asylum.

All of these issues may not matter for a Portuguese state that seeks to secure commercial and business interests in the reportedly growing Indian economy. However, it does matter that the Prime Minister of Portugal is deliberately misrepresenting facts about the Indian state when he continued to tweet "We decided to join forces to achieve the vision of a world that is safer, based on shared prosperity and the defense of democracy." The suggestion that contemporary India is safer for its minoritized groups, or is defending democracy, is a huge slap in the face of those Indian communities. Indeed, unconfirmed reports indicate that it was on the basis of Portugal's intervention that a resolution condemning the CAA was not passed by the European Parliament. The resolution suggested that the CAA could trigger the "largest statelessness crisis in the world and cause widespread human suffering." Portugal's interest seems demonstrated by a segment of Costa's tweet where he asserts "we concluded that it is more important than ever to hold the #EU-#India Summit during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU."

A coldblooded attitude to doing business with India, seems to approximate a colonial attitude of extracting resources from a territory where rights are held in abeyance. The citizens of Portugal should be doubly concerned because history has demonstrated clearly that such coldblooded pragmatism, while beneficial in the short run, has devastating impacts on domestic democracy and freedoms in the long run. As Costa's tweets demonstrate, he is already blatantly misrepresenting the nature of the relationship with India and the situation in that country to his own citizens. Perhaps this is "the post-#COVID19 world" that Costa indicates that he and Modi "reflected on" in their conversation.



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