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Singing about the dark times in the US and India: notes on situated understandings in our age of essentialisms

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In an age where essentialisms and reductionisms appear to drive the politics of hate in most parts of the world, this essay seeks to explore the insight, hope and room for manoeuvre offered by situated local knowledges. Counterposing the "white working class" category in public discourse in the United States with the newly emergent political category of Muslim women protestors in India, the article questions the assumption that all essentialisms necessarily contain exclusionary potentialities.

Em uma época em que essencialismos e reducionismos parecem guiar a política do ódio na maior parte do mundo, este ensaio procura explorar o *insight*, a esperança e o espaço de manobra oferecidos pelos conhecimentos locais situados. Contrapondo a categoria "classe trabalhadora branca" no discurso público nos Estados Unidos com a categoria política recém- emergente de mulheres muçulmanas manifestantes na Índia, o artigo questiona a suposição de que todos os essencialismos necessariamente contenham potencialidades de exclusão.

Keywords: class; essentialism; far right politics; India; United States

"In the dark times / Will there also be singing?" asked Bertolt Brecht, and famously replied, "Yes, there will also be singing / About the dark times." Writing as the COVID-19 pandemic is reaching its fifth month, it appears that the world as we have known it is shedding its skin. Yet we are still in no position to see clearly the entity that is emerging. However, the arrival of, and responses to, the pandemic have thus far not altered the fact that we are living in an age where essentialisms and reductionisms appear to drive the politics of hate in most parts of the world. This article seeks to explore the insight, hope and room for manoeuvre that situated local knowledges offer, especially in our present dark times (harking back to Haraway 1988 and Collins 1990). By offering a comparison between contemporary cultural politics in the United States (US), where I have been engaged in long-term fieldwork, and in India, my home place, I wish to query too brisk a dismissal of all essentialisms as fundamentally exclusivist.

I am not here wanting to return to the now highly contested notion of "strategic essentialism," one attributed to Gayatri Spivak (1988) and then rejected by her five years later (Danius, Jonsson and Spivak 1993), apparently for its appropriation by ethno-nationalists. Rather I turn to Terence Turner's (1993) notion of "critical multiculturalism" in order to make the point that there are instances, in what might be called multicultural contexts such as India, where essentialist appeals are effective as critical means for fighting discrimination and, simultaneously, as progressive means for enabling, ensuring and maintaining inclusivity — especially when exclusionary forces are at work. I do so because I worry that, by throwing out the proverbial bathwater, we may also be discarding the possibilities for an inclusive politics that draws upon grounded/situated, even essentialised, forms of difference. Counterposing the salience of the "white working class" category in recent US public discourse with the also recent but only brief heyday of Muslim women protestors as a category to contend with in the Indian context, I wish to raise the following question: Do all essentialisms necessarily contain exclusionary potentialities?

To gain some measure of the deepening darkness of our times, it is worthwhile to consider the report released by Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in the summer of 2019. The report conservatively estimates that at least 70.8 million people fled war and violence in 2018, the highest figure since World War II (UNHCR 2019). More than half of these refugees were children, suggesting that a huge proportion were the desperate survivors of conflict rather than economic migrants. He noted grimly that young children would hardly be making hazardous journeys overseas in search of improved economic opportunities; they have been fleeing for their lives. The vast majority of these traumatised survivors have sought shelter in neighbouring countries, notably Turkey, Pakistan and Uganda, and not in the affluent countries of the Global North. As for the latter, and speaking especially about US policies towards refugees approaching from its southern border, Grandi described the situation as a global "crisis of solidarity."

In the US under Donald Trump, this "crisis of solidarity" has persisted even when war-afflicted people have finally been admitted into the country. Covering an anti-refugee backlash in St. Cloud, Minnesota, in June 2019, a *New York Times* report contains a vignette about one of the white anti-immigration activists they interviewed: "One woman bemoaned the so-called no-go areas of the city where there is a high Somali-American presence. 'They were just —' she said, searching for the words to describe the offending behavior of the Somali-Americans. 'They were just walking around'" (Herndon 2019). This statement is a telling indicator of just how unwanted today's war survivors are in the US. We have also all heard, of course, reports of the "send her back" chant at Trump rallies, a chant directed at the best-known Somali-American war survivor, Representative Ilhan Omar.

The "white working class" in the US

So what accounts for the current American mood of xenophobia and racism directed against helpless and desperate populations fleeing conflict? The standard explanation runs as follows. Over the years the Democratic Party forgot about the white working class — the unemployed industrial workers and coal miners living in the Rust Belt — leading this enraged constituency to assert itself by electing the nativist and chauvinistic Trump. In this narrative, we are being asked to believe that the white working class has uniquely been singled out for victimisation by processes of capital accumulation and that its members were then uniquely taken for granted by the Democratic Party. At the same time the argument asks us to ignore the vast multi-ethnic and segmented character of the US labour force that has been battered by decades of neoliberal policy; and to overlook the cynical neglect of African-Americans by Democrats secure in the knowledge that these citizens would have no choice but to vote Democrat as the Republican Party had veered ever rightwards in recent decades.

Writing as an anthropologist who has been involved in long-term fieldwork with industrial workers and coal miners in Indiana, the home state of current Vice President Mike Pence, the scorned white working-class narrative does not ring true. In the first place, it is distinctly odd that Americans today are clamouring to identify themselves as working class, as nebulous a category as the middle class identification that I heard claimed by all my research participants when I first conducted fieldwork there between 1989 and 1991. Sharryn Kasmir and I have suggested that what we are seeing here is the reification of a racial status group in place of class and that the term "working class" has now been recoded to mean "white" (Mathur and Kasmir 2018). For those social analysts including myself who have always prioritised class analysis, this misappropriation of our analytical and political language is egregious. For us, class must be understood as a social relationship, not an identitarian status category. Also, there are doubts concerning whether or not classic Trump supporters can be accurately identified as working class (a significant number are small entrepreneurs, for example) though they are, of course, predominantly white. Again, detailed breakdowns of voting behaviour in states like West Virginia (pers. comm. Ann Kingsolver), as well as anecdotal material from my Indiana research, show that there were Bernie Sanders voters in the

Democratic primaries who eventually voted for the Republican Trump in the national elections. They were influenced by Trump's appropriation of Sanders' language, though not committed to Trump's racist and nativist agenda. The "angry white working class" narrative is not leak-proof, in other words, and may also need to be re-examined in the European context where it is often wheeled out.

I first arrived in Indiana in the world-changing year of 1989 and not long after the local labour movement had been galvanised by what has since become the legendary Pittston strike. This strike, by thousands of mineworkers employed by the Pittston Coal Company in south-western Virginia, erupted when the company cut off retirement and health benefits to about 1 500 retired miners, disabled miners and miners' widows. The strikers followed the non-violent civil disobedience tactics of the civil rights movement and women strike supporters, such as the Daughters of Mother Jones group that comprised miners' family members, played a key role.[1] Thousands of supporters from United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and other unions had poured into Camp Solidarity, UMWA's operational base and place for housing non-resident strike supporters. Amongst them were the Indiana labour union members that I came to know during my fieldwork. The Pittston strike remains a beacon for the US labour movement, exemplified in the final pilgrimage made by a terminally ill coal-miner friend from Indiana (since sadly deceased) to the strike's 30th anniversary celebrations that took place at Castlewood, Virginia, on July 27, 2019.

Trump's rhetoric about ending what he calls Obama's "war on coal" may have garnered him some support in 2016 amongst coal miners in the US, but this rhetoric was not attractive (or soon ceased to be so) to any of the coal miners I know in Indiana. As I understand the concerns of my research participants, the overriding issue for them has been the same as it was during the Pittston Strike, the fear of being deprived of pension and healthcare benefits after a lifetime of backbreaking and dangerous work. This fear is all the more real as the coal industry seems poised to disappear without fulfilling its obligations towards its workers, past and present, a factor that made the recent passing of their pensions legislation a significant (though partial) victory.[2] One of the coal miners that I met during my fieldwork went on to become a major environmental activist in Indiana. But even those who may not have gone as far as he did in his environmental concerns are unlikely to be seduced by Trump's rhetoric of bringing back the coal industry. As the current UMWA president, Cecil Roberts, said to the Democratic Party candidates at the start of the 2019/2020 primaries process, coal miners are interested in debating the Green New Deal proposal that some of them were offering and other plans to combat climate change to see whether they are consistent with decent wages and work regimes (UMWA 2019). Mineworkers are not fantasising about the triumphant return of the coal industry: first, because the Trump administration has clearly been unable to deliver this; and, second, because recent experiences with the coal industry have not been promising (as demonstrated by the Blackjewel coal company that paid its workers in Kentucky with cheques that bounced as it filed for bankruptcy in July 2019).[3] The miners' distrust is not surprising, of course, considering their historical experience of the coal industry.

The foregoing suggests that coal miners (and indeed other members of the US working class) cannot automatically be regarded as Trump supporters. Yet liberal and left-leaning commentators often assume that they are while right-wing commentators are eager to encourage this assumption. Moreover, vocal Trump supporters who like to style themselves as the white working class also tend to misappropriate and incorrectly apply the language of the left. When, in 2017, white supremacist marchers raised their voices in Charlottesville against finance capital, for example, they were most assuredly not drawing upon Marxian thought. They were referring, instead, to the global conspiracies so beloved by the Far Right.[4] The language of the Left has been muddled in, re-signified and redeployed by the Far Right and needs to be reclaimed if it is to be of any heuristic value. The term "working class" is itself a long-time staple of the vocabulary of the Left, but it has been repurposed to refer to a racial status group, the white working class. Although this misappropriation may have begun in far right circles, the formulation remains

relatively unchallenged in public and academic discourse and has become commonplace in its new connotation. The exclusivist language coming from the so-called white working class would indeed seem to point to the dangers of essentialism and reductionism in contemporary politics. However, it is important to remember that there are members of the working class who happen to be white but are not white-supremacist. Second, use of essentialist language is conceivable here only because it refers to a racial status group rather than to class characteristics. Given class mobility, however, class membership is an impermanent and fundamentally unsuitable basis for essentialist politics. The essentialist logic on display in the current moment is that of old-fashioned white ethno-nationalism — a dominant and emboldened racial status group has chosen to impersonate the working class as a "white working class" and to proclaim that its members are more American than anyone else.

The Hindu Right in India

Though Trump has not yet managed to build his "big, beautiful wall" in the US, a much longer fence already exists along 70% of the more than 4 000 km border that separates India from Bangladesh. Made of barbed wire nearly 2.5 metres in height, partially electrified and guarded by India's Border Security Force, the wall is intended to keep out so-called Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh. A 2010 Human Rights Watch report found that as many as 900 Bangladeshis were gunned down by the Border Security Force between 2001 and 2010, many of them farmers tending their lands close to the fence. The language of "Muslim infiltrators" as against "Hindu refugees" has been rife in the pronouncements of India's Home Minister Amit Shah — from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)[5] — in respect of the exercise of compiling a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the north-eastern state of Assam that borders on Bangladesh.

The Hindu majoritarian preoccupation with supposedly illegal Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants dates back to the Assam agitation of the late 1970s and early 1980s — one of the first separatist insurgencies of "India against itself," to use political scientist Sanjib Baruah's (1999) formulation and book title. The Assam movement was born out of dissatisfaction amongst residents of this frontier state with the influx of migrants from East Bengal that first began almost 100 years ago, during the colonial era, and continued into the postcolonial period. The discontent, based on a nativist objection against the mostly Muslim East Bengalis, went largely unheard by a series of post-independence central governments that largely adhered to the principles of secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution. By 1979 the discontent had escalated to such an extent that it took on a political form, the Assam movement. When it adopted a secessionist character, its actions were met by military repression. After six years of unrest, the Assam Accord of 1985 was signed between the agitators and the Indian National Congress government led by Rajiv Gandhi. It specified March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for treating immigrants to the state as legitimate residents and acquiesced to the agitators' demand for the deportation of all those who had migrated to Assam after that date. However, a succession of central governments, including previous BJP-led governments, made no effort to implement this provision (Pisharoty 2019). The figure of the "Bangladeshi infiltrator," however, initially forged during this agitation in Assam, remains an overwhelmingly powerful construct within the contemporary imaginary of the Hindu Right.

When a BJP-dominated state government was voted into power in Assam in 2016, the process of updating the NRC in the state took off in earnest, with a view to deporting all those who had arrived in Assam after the Assam Accord's 1971 cut-off date. This chilling policy singles out Bengali Muslims, a category of people whose lives straddle a border that has been drawn, redrawn and renamed numerous times — including the 1905 Partition of Bengal in the days of the British Raj that created East and West Bengal; the 1947 Partition of India, which rendered the border an international boundary between India and East Pakistan; and the 1971 Bangladesh War that transformed it into a frontier separating India from the then newly independent state of Bangladesh.

Each historical iteration has brought increasingly dire consequences for the marginalised Muslim populations on the Indian side of this border.

Anthropology doctoral student Bhargabi Das is currently conducting fieldwork with former East Bengalis who inhabit the charlands of the Brahmaputra river in Assam (Das 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b; Das and Radheye 2020). Chars are temporary islands created by the dynamics of accretion and erosion of rivers, fluid and precarious ecologies that are vulnerable to floods and, increasingly, the effects of climate change. Das's interest in stigmatised Muslim populations in these shifting waterscapes could hardly be more timely as they face the double calamity of climate change and the Indian government's most recent NRC initiative. Whilst attending NRC hearings during July and August 2019, months of monsoon rains and flooding in the region, she observed impoverished and unlettered char dwellers (now also flood-ravaged) being called upon by disposing officers to provide documentation to prove their citizenship. Some months later there was a re-verification drive for NRC claims. Where previously people had been offered 15 days' notice to appear for their hearings at the NRC's *seva kendras* [district help desks], she found that re-verification hearings were being set with just 12–24 hours' notice and at NRC *seva kendras* that were situated as far as 300 km away. With 1.9 million people excluded from the NRC when it was finally published in August 2019, a significant number of people in Assam are at imminent risk of becoming stateless.

There are Hindus in Assam who, as post-1971 immigrants, have also been listed as foreigners. But the BJP's Narendra Modi-led central government has moved to provide them recourse through the swift passage of the ostensibly compassionate Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. That act expedites the granting of Indian citizenship status to non-Muslim religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, but does not offer this privilege to any Muslim applicants. This is the first time that religious profiling, prohibited by the Indian constitution, is explicitly being used to deny citizenship to Muslim applicants. Speaking in parliament in November 2019, Home Minister Shah mentioned extending the NRC to all of India. His comment stirred up fears that the NRC and the CAA would be used in conjunction to exercise a pincer-like effect on the citizenship status of Muslims throughout India: the NRC to declare as foreigners impoverished Indian Muslims lacking requisite documents, the CAA to ensure that they are ineligible to apply for citizenship.

The CAA's promulgation prompted immediate public protests in Assam, on the grounds that "Bangladeshi" Hindus — regarded locally as interlopers as much as "Bangladeshi" Muslims — were no more welcome there than the latter. In addition, however, protests against the CAA, but with an entirely different complexion, rapidly spread throughout the country. The countrywide protests were explicitly protests against the NRC's countrywide all-India implementation of legislation that discriminates on the basis of religion.[6] People across the country, of all ages and religious, ethnic and caste backgrounds, and of varied political persuasions, surged out into the streets to protest the anti-Muslim character of the new law. It was as if an evil spell had been broken — millions defied the government in order to defend Indian secularism, with songs and slogans and public readings of the Preamble to the Constitution of India. Young people in particular, many of whom had never before expressed political views, were the first to dominate these demonstrations. In those states not ruled by the BJP, the state governments undertook not to implement the NRC and CAA. In BJP-ruled states, police repression of public dissent was brutal, especially in Uttar Pradesh where more than 20 people were shot by the police, and where protests and funerals alike were muzzled by the state government.

It is important to bear in mind that these protests were being sustained in an India run by BJP's Modi and Shah, where savage and drastic steps were taken overnight. One example is the short-circuiting, on August 5, 2019, and without notice, of the constitutional relationship between Kashmir and the Indian Union. This was followed by a complete communications blackout in the Kashmir valley and arrests and detention of mainstream and pro-Indian Kashmiri politicians.

By reversing laws and an agreement that had, from the time of independence in 1947, prevented Indians from buying land in Kashmir, the government signalled that India is not interested in the predominantly Muslim Kashmiri people but in their land.[7] They have thereby turned Kashmir into India's own Palestine, a place where "normalcy" is maintained only by use of force and without respect for historical treaties and international processes. This is an India where so-called beef lynchings have become commonplace, namely the killing by mobs of Hindu *gaurakshaks* [cow protectors] of Muslims suspected of eating beef, since cows are sacred for Hindus. This is an India where Muslims are labelled anti-national even for saying that they feel frightened — because doing that shows India up in a poor light. This is an India where dissident intellectuals have been not just persecuted but actually murdered for their views — such as Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh. Nevertheless, the protests against the CAA and NRC raged until they were halted by the COVID-19 lockdown on March 24, 2020. The protests were remarkably reminiscent of the non-violent civil disobedience and non-cooperation movements that characterised India's decolonisation struggle.

When the protests first began, Prime Minister Modi contemptuously remarked that the protesters could be identified by their garb, implying that they were being staged only by Muslims. Yet it soon became difficult to sustain this narrative, as the calls by student marchers for protest against the CAA and NRC were echoed by Dalit groups,[8] the gay community, trade unions and the entire political opposition. The scale of protest also punctured Modi's claim: a *Bharat Bandh* [national shutdown] called by the trade union movement brought out an estimated 250 million protesters across the country on January 8, 2020. If there was an initial concern with flaunting the multireligious character of the opposition to government-imposed anti-Muslim measures, it soon gave way to an unapologetic resistance that refused to downplay Muslim involvement.

The Shaheen Bagh protest

An important outcome of this ferment was that Muslim women were catapulted into Indian public life and a sit-in protest in the New Delhi neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh, begun on December 15, 2019, by a group of Muslim women, their children and grandchildren, became a potent emblem of this historical moment. Anthropologist Shiv Visvanathan (2020) deems them "an Indian articulation of Václav Havel's classic essay, 'The power of the powerless.'" Ordinary Muslim women, many of them wearing hijab*, nikab* or burqa, some in their eighties and even nineties, stepped on to the Indian public stage for the first time. Theirs was a distinctive presence and essentialisms abounded, of course (cf. Gogoi 2020). They included those characterising the women negatively, disseminated by the BJP in their poisonous campaign during Delhi's February 2020 local government elections (portraying them as uneducated women misled by their cunning and potentially violent menfolk). They also included those characterising the women positively, albeit defining them almost only in terms of motherhood. Meanwhile, the women of Shaheen Bagh and their innumerable supporters waged a determinedly secular campaign, drawing on India's traditions of non-violent struggle. But there is no denying these women's essentialised iconic status in that moment.

Shaheen Bagh women amply demonstrated their agency in these months — folding a 24/7 sit-in protest into their daily routines and chores, and challenging those who attempted to speak in their name. This included Prime Minister Modi who had claimed to have acted on their behalf when he pushed through the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, the provision of which had, in fact, become legal requirement two years earlier through a Supreme Court ruling that outlawed the practice of Muslim men divorcing their wives by uttering the word *talaq* three times (Naqvi 2019). Observers suggest that the resistance of these women to the CAA and NRC can be linked to their situated and subjugated knowledges, to their experience as Muslim and women in an always patriarchal and increasingly Hindu-supremacist

and inhospitable India. As Farah Farooqi (2020) has argued, it is also crucially necessary to understand the lack of privilege of the Shaheen Bagh area to make sense of the protest:

> Most of the women at the protest site are homemakers, while some have jobs. One protestor told me that her husband is a construction labourer. She contributes to the household income by cleaning and washing in several houses. "What to do baji," — sister — "I have six daughters to look after," she said. "After finishing my work, I come here. Modi has pulled the rug from under our feet." … Many view this as a battle where their lives are at stake. This seems to be the reason for their fearlessness.

There can be little doubt that some of the women viewed their own actions through an essentialist lens, locating their capacity for struggle in the fact of motherhood. Bahrunissa, one of the women who had initiated the Shaheen Bagh protest, told US-based international media company CNN that she felt compelled to participate in a street protest for the first time in her life because of the brutal police attack on student demonstrators at the neighbouring Jamia Millia Islamia University on December 15, 2019: "They tried to stifle the voices of our children. So, as mothers, we decided to stand up" (cited in Gupta, Suri and Hollingsworth 2020). This essentialist sentiment recurs also in the many Shaheen Bagh-inspired occupations of public space that were subsequently led by Muslim women elsewhere in Delhi and in cities all over India. Oral historian Kavita Panjabi (2020) documents the words of a protester at Kolkata's Park Circus:

> Jamil, who has been coming here since the first day with 18 women from her family, explains, "If a housewife steps out then something extraordinary has happened, something really terrible has happened. *Hindustaan ki sarzameen*, the land of Hindustan, *Hindustaan ki mitti*, the very soil of Hindustan, beckons us in its sorrow. As mothers we understand the sorrow of this earth, of the mother who sees her children divided, their lives drenched in blood, their home poisoned with hatred. They have passed a law questioning our very right to our own land, now they are threatening our very existence, now we cannot keep quiet."

Although they spoke from their specific experience as Muslims, women and (frequently) mothers, the core women protestors of Shaheen Bagh saw themselves, and were seen, as standard bearers of the Gandhian tradition of non-violent struggle, nurturers of "a new kind of satyagraha"[9] (Datta 2020). The Shaheen Bagh protest site became a key location in the geography of the resistance against the CAA, NRC and NPR, drawing activists and volunteers who distributed food and blankets for the freezing winter nights, organised a makeshift clinic, set up a small library in a bus shelter, held classes for the protesting women's school-age children and created street art. The heart of the Shaheen Bagh sit-in was its hastily constructed stage where ordinary people of all classes and religious backgrounds took turns to speak or sing, alongside well-known activists, intellectuals and performers. Shaheen Bagh's emblematic status proved intolerable for Hindu supremacist groups and BJP-leaning media organisations, who began to denounce the sit-in as a traffic hindrance. Threats of violence from the Hindu Right became palpable as the February 2020 Delhi local government elections approached and the BJP turned the dissolution of the Shaheen Bagh protest into a major campaign issue. In the lead-up to the polls, musicians and performers, both the legendary and the unknown, extended their protection to the protestors through round-the-clock concerts and other performances that lasted over several days. India's syncretic artistic traditions — the entangled Hindu-Muslim character of Indian classical music, for example — were emphatically foregrounded in this protest. For all that the occupation of Shaheen Bagh had been initiated by the Muslim women of the immediate area, its vision was expressed in the language of the centuries of muddled co-existence of multiple religions in the subcontinent.

This was a vision that spread rapidly, and protests modelling themselves on Shaheen Bagh mushroomed in public squares across Delhi and all over India. The February Delhi local government elections delivered a resounding defeat for the BJP and a huge win for the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party. Stung by this electoral humiliation, BJP cadres attacked another Shaheen Bagh-type protest in Northeast Delhi on February 23, 2020, sparking an outbreak of anti-Muslim violence that lasted several days. Even whilst large-scale anti-Muslim pogroms were taking place

in one section of Delhi, the prime minister and the home minister were occupied with playing host to US President Trump in another part of the capital city, and they failed to move quickly to halt the violence. Shortly thereafter the rise of COVID-19 made the continuation of the Shaheen Bagh protest infeasible and on March 23, 2002, it was shut down by the government. The issues raised by the Shaheen Bagh protestors — such as the Indian state's discriminatory stance against its Muslim minorities — have, however, only intensified during the COVID-19 lockdown, now in the guise, for example, of Muslim-blaming COVID-19 rumours that the government has made no attempt to quash.

Conclusion

Writing in more innocent times, when multiculturalism was a movement for curriculum change on university campuses in the Global North rather than the strawman that has driven the ascent of majoritarianism in many parts of the world, Terence Turner drew a distinction between "critical multiculturalism" and "difference multiculturalism." The former, he wrote, "seeks to use cultural diversity as a basis for challenging, revising and relativising basic notions and principles common to dominant and minority cultures alike, so as to construct a more vital, open and democratic common culture" (Turner 1993, 413). The latter, he suggested, fetishises difference[10] and casts cultural difference as eternal.

Whilst it seems clear that the women of Shaheen Bagh could be identified with "critical multiculturalism," and the attention-seeking category of the "white working class" in the US could be seen to be clinging to "difference multiculturism," it is important to note that both may be seen as having resorted to essentialism. Unlike the self-described white working class in the US who essentialise to exclude those they regard as different, however, the Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh have drawn inclusionary conclusions from their (apparently) essentialist self-understanding. If the members of the white working class in the US are asserting that they are more American than anybody else, the traditional Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh were saying that they are just as Indian as anybody else in India; and their supporters of all creeds were confirming that claim.

India succumbed earlier than the US to dangerous populism with Modi's first general election win in 2014. Although the determined and widespread opposition during 2019/2020 to the CAA and the NRC offers some ray of hope, one cannot ignore the fact that the BJP was re-elected in early 2019 with an overwhelming majority and will continue in government until 2024. The battle against incipient fascism, if it is able to continue, will be long and arduous. There is also a danger that the anti-CAA resistance may unlock widespread anti-immigrant sentiment for the first time in post-independence India and lead to a countrywide loss of India's current inclusive and progressive trajectory. Finally, COVID-19 will shift the political terrain in ways that are impossible to predict at present.

Whatever the eventual outcome in India — and indeed in the US — some initial conclusions can be drawn from this conjoined discussion as regards the power and use of essentialist thinking. In the US context, the exclusivist language coming from the white working class would indeed seem to point to the dangers of essentialism and reductionism in contemporary politics. This is a classic ethno-nationalist assertion, much more "white" than it is "working class," and most definitely exclusionary in its intent. The Indian case provides a contrast. There we have seen the mobilisation of masses of Muslim women, drawing on their own situated and subjugated knowledges and on India's established traditions of struggle, leading a large-scale movement for their own and others' continued inclusion — and finding widespread support across the country's population. That they have done so by apparently essentialising themselves suggests that it is necessary to acknowledge that, even in these dangerous times, essentialism does not necessarily lead to exclusivist visions of the future.

Notes

1. The Daughters of Mother Jones took their name from the famous early twentieth-century radical labour organiser Mary Harris Jones — widely known as Mother Jones — who played a critical role in many large and militant strikes by Appalachian coal miners.
2. The federal spending plan signed by President Trump at the end of December 2019 included the bipartisan American Miners Act (a bill initiated by the Democratic senator for West Virginia, Joe Manchin, at the request of the UMWA) that will use excess funds from a federal abandoned mine reclamation programme to strengthen the United Mine Workers of America retirement plan (Walsh 2019).
3. According to the *New York Times*, "workers did not receive pay for their last week on the job. Paychecks for two previous weeks bounced" (Zaveri 2019).
4. Consider, for example, Morlin's (2017) description of Mike Peinovich, a white nationalist and social media personality, better known as "Mike Enoch," founder of the Right Stuff podcast and co-host of the Daily Shoah, an Alt-Right podcast. Few in the mosaic of modern-day racists compete with Enoch's hard-line anti-Semitism. Earlier this year at a Traditional Worker Party rally, Enoch, who is from New York, said "Jewish, cultural Marxist brainwashing" of young people was indoctrinating them to be "useful idiots for the systems of international finance, capitalism and war."
5. Known for its Hindu supremacist proclivities and neoliberal economic policies, the BJP won the 2014 national elections and was returned to power with a decisive majority in 2019, both times under the leadership of its charismatic strongman Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
6. A first phase in the implementation of the NRC was to compile a national population register.
7. The special constitutional status of Kashmir was ended, and its autonomy revoked, by the BJP-led central government on August 5, 2019, through the reading down of Article 370 of the Indian constitution.
8. *Dalit* [ground down] is the self-descriptor used by India's former untouchables, the lowest of the low in India's pernicious hereditary caste system. Although caste-based discrimination is illegal according to the Indian constitution (itself drafted by an eminent Dalit leader and legal scholar), it persists in practice, as does casteist violence; and India's Dalits have had to continue to struggle for their rights.
9. *Satyagraha* [truth force] was the term Mahatma Gandhi used to refer to non-violent resistance.
10. Relatedly, Siyaves Azeri (2013) makes a convincing Marxian argument for analysing culture fetishism as a kind of commodity fetishism.

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