

Covid-19: The India Story

The Indian government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the state-society relationship that emerged as a result is perhaps the most surreal episode of the drama that has played out in different parts of the world.

Background

Since May 2014, India has had a government of the Hindu right party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is actually the political arm of the parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, literally the National Volunteer Union). The RSS was formed in 1925 and calls itself a cultural organization. Its main activities are 'educational' – it runs a huge network of educational institutions that spread vicious Hindu supremacist ideology alongside basic education. On another level of functioning, it is known to be actively involved in the production of the *communal riot* – a euphemism for anti-Muslim pogroms.

Its rise to central power in 2014 was under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the former chief minister of Gujarat where, under his stewardship, one of the worst anti-Muslim carnages was enacted in early 2002. His ascent to power in 2014 was, in many ways, a signal of what was to come and the next five years saw a huge escalation of anti-Muslim violence and an increasingly clear alignment of state institutions with the Hindu supremacism project. The media, of course, was the first casualty, turning almost overnight into a propaganda machine, training its fire only on opposition parties. There are reasons to believe that the last general election in 2019, when Modi's BJP got re-elected, was more of a *coup d'état*. Sections of the state institutions, like the Election Commission, colluded in a hundred different ways – not least by swearing in the government without the final results ever having been declared. This is not to say that the government had no popular support. By instituting a Hindu-Muslim polarization and the production of the Muslim as the 'antinational' or 'terrorist', it had managed to consolidate substantial Hindu support. The government, in this post-2019 phase, has taken a particularly aggressive posture on a range of issues – including large-scale disenfranchisement of Muslims through the newly-enacted Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), along with a National Register of Citizens (NRC). It has also been aggressive in suppressing dissent and random arrests of activists and has managed to effect this change by making the judiciary completely subservient to the government. This aspect requires more discussion later on.

Another aspect is crucially linked to what happened once the pandemic broke out. In November 2016, the Prime Minister announced [a sudden demonetization of currency notes](#)

above the Rs100 note – ostensibly to fight black (counterfeit) money and its purported, though entirely fictional, connection to terrorism. The effect was that it destroyed thousands of small businesses and livelihoods of people on the precipice. In a style characteristic of this government, it was done without prior preparation, precisely with the purpose of creating severe dislocations and, at least in part, to financially destroy the opposition parties – it is now clear that the BJP made huge amounts of money, both directly and indirectly. So did big industrialists close to the BJP.

Enter the pandemic

By 30 January, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared Covid-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and, on the same day, the first case of infection was reported in India, in the southern state of Kerala. But [until well into February, airport screening](#) was only being conducted with respect to passengers either coming directly from China or, later, from countries like Singapore, Thailand, Japan and Korea. Until 4 March, when the government announced universal screening at all air- and seaports, this was being done only at selected airports and administered to passengers only from selected countries. The actual situation on the ground was that there was [no preparedness in airports and very little checking even at major airports](#) almost until the third week of March. Worse was the overcrowding – even in major airports like Delhi – until mid-March, because there weren't enough forms available for passengers and they had to wait for hours together with no possibility of social distancing.

Practically from the time the CAA was passed by the Indian parliament on 12 December 2019, [massive protests against the CAA/NRC erupted](#) all across the country and they continued until the last week of March. These protests, overlapping with the outbreak of Covid-19, involved continuous sit-ins, initiated largely by women but joined by people at large from all communities. For the Muslim community, it was a do-or-die situation, but the protests were actually far more widespread and received support from all quarters. As compared to the first phase of protests – mainly students demonstrating in universities and later Muslims in lower income neighbourhoods – [which were violently suppressed by the police](#), this time the government was in a fix. It did not quite know what to do and how to handle the protesters. Though the protesters themselves had been discussing ways of withdrawing the movement in the face of the pandemic, the situation was complicated since easing the pressure on the government would immediately tilt the scales against them – as was to be dramatically demonstrated soon.

Parallel to this, another event indicates that the government either did not take the threat of the pandemic seriously or just did not care for the consequences. The world's two major pandemic deniers, so to speak – Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US President Donald Trump – got together for a mega event in Ahmedabad on 24-25 February. Even as the world was coming to grips with the scale of the coming challenge, a [crowd of over a 100, 000 \(125, 000 according to some\) was collected for this mega-event](#) called *Namaste Trump (Hello*

Trump), with no precautions whatsoever. And even as the this event was on, [violent attacks on anti-CAA protesters in North-East Delhi were unleashed](#) by the members of the ruling party, with one its leaders openly threatening a bloodbath in a speech made in police presence. This violence soon extended into the neighbouring Muslim localities resulting in massive losses of lives and property. It was the ruling party's signal that this was how it intended ending the protests under the looming shadow of the pandemic. The Home Minister Amit Shah was conspicuous by his complete absence from the scene for the entire period of violence and after – all of which [indicate different acts of omission and commission of government agencies](#) and party supporters that went into the making of the carnage. Sixteen RSS activists were arrested for their role in the violence even by this most partisan of police forces – for the evidence just could not be ignored any more.

Indeed, the central government and the home minister in particular [were engaged in toppling the elected Congress government](#) in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh by buying off 22 members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The government fell on 20 March and the new government was sworn in on 23 March in high drama.

Interestingly, between 9 and 12 March, while the central government was completely unconcerned about the threat of the pandemic, [several state governments mostly ruled by non-BJP parties had started taking measures](#) to avoid public gatherings. Schools and colleges, cinema halls and gymnasiums were closed down and public gatherings of more than 100 people were banned. Some governments also undertook simultaneous periodic disinfecting of public places. By the 20th of March, gatherings of more than 50 people and in some cases, 20 people had been banned.

The government wakes up

On 22 March, the Prime Minister, in a televised address to the nation, declared what he called a 'day-long people's curfew' from 7am to 9pm. People were to come to their balconies or verandahs at 5pm to clap and bang steel plates in a bizarre, popular and Puranic attempt to exorcise the virus.¹ Until then, there was no indication at all that the government had thought about the gravity of the situation. A few days later came another call – this time to switch off lights at 9pm and light a lamp. On both occasions, [it was a signal for mass frenzy and people actually came out on the streets in processions](#) banging plates and lighting firecrackers. It was a signal also that the government was telling the people that they really needed to do nothing else to stop the spread of the virus but lapse back into Puranic mode. As an aside, people who live in that mode are not closed off to other, scientific and medical advice, provided it is

¹ The word 'Puranic' (*Pauranic* in Sanskrit) is an anglicized reference that refers to a set of Hindu texts that are addressed to and meant for the populace at large, traditionally often comprising a combination of lower caste, outcaste and non-Vedic, non-Aryan people. Hindu reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries rejected these texts and advocated a return to the high texts of the tradition – the Vedas and the Upanishads. I use this term to refer to the particular 'mode of being' associated with this world, which is inhabited not just by humans but also by spirits – both evil and benign – as well as driven by the logic of appeasing or exorcising evil spirits rather than confronting evil, so to speak.

rendered with the seriousness it calls for. Here, the message from the Prime Minister himself was that this was all they needed to do – and another, neatly packaged, liminal message was then circulated through a network of informal channels: ‘Hindu pride’.

The second message was soon to be marshaled by Hindu supremacist organizations and a lapdog media to instigate [a fully fledged Islamophobia](#). It happened around the international meeting of a pious and non-political Muslim organization, the Tablighi-Jama’at, where a large number of participants were diagnosed positive after some complained of illness. Considering that the government itself had encouraged masses of people to come out in processions, it was not difficult for any neutral person to see that targeting the Tablighi-Jama’at event held much earlier – 13 to 15 March – for being responsible for the spread of the coronavirus was nothing short of scapegoating an entire community.² The media campaign in this period, which must take the lion’s share of the responsibility for targeting Muslims, has been likened to Radio Rwanda’s role in the 1994 genocide by lawyer and political analyst Suchitra Vijayan.

To return to our narrative: On 24 March, two days after the ‘people’s curfew’, the Prime Minister appeared on television once again to announce a total and complete lockdown *beginning four hours after his speech*. A partial lockdown was already in place and state governments were incrementally moving towards a full lockdown. This breathtaking step was a political move to outsmart non-BJP state governments and make it appear, in the public eye, that had not Narendra Modi intervened decisively, the disease would have spread much faster. This kind of petty politicking – rather than suspending political agendas to deal with a serious health emergency – has marked the interventions of this government throughout. While many state governments did stellar work in containing the spread of the virus and fighting it, many had now to deal with the unfortunate situation created by this announcement: literally millions of workers were left stranded in their places of work, far away from home and with no food as they began their trek back home, sometimes more than a thousand kilometers away. State governments provided free food for stranded workers for about six weeks, when all their energies ought to have been focused on ramping up their medical infrastructure. To make matters worse, the government even refused to release the funds due to state governments as their share of the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

In the meantime, the central government actually set up a separate fund from the standard Prime Minister’s Relief Fund (PMRF) that has been in existence for many decades and has been used by successive governments for mobilizing special funds and contributions during disasters. Unlike the PMRF, the new fund, called PM-CARES, is privately managed by a non-governmental organization set up by the Prime Minister himself. Citizens’ contributions are forcibly solicited for this fund that is not open to public scrutiny or auditing. It is widely

² Until much later, Hindu festivities involving huge crowds continued unabated as one of the articles linked above (by Ritika Jain) shows.

suspected that this money has been stashed away to be used as political fund for the ruling party.

The migrant worker – an endless tragedy

I have indicated the situation created for millions of migrant workers (in India, all workers are actually migrant) by the suddenness of the lockdown declaration. Though the Prime Minister, in his televised appearance, appealed to employers not to cut wages, landlords not to press for rents and so on, this was more like a public relations exercise, because unless they have some legal binding force, such appeals are likely to fall on deaf ears. The result was millions of workers suddenly faced with the likelihood of unemployment – and living in big cities with no employment means starvation and death. Equally serious is that in many poor neighbourhoods, workers have to share accommodation, often living in their homes in shifts: while one lot goes out to work the other sleeps. In a lockdown situation, without even the minimum time to plan how to go back home, it would simply mean four, five, six or eight workers crowded into small rooms with obviously no question of physical distancing. Since someone or the other would have to go to the market, chances of catching and transmitting the infection would increase manifold.

Now, the government could easily have provided transport for these workers to return to their villages before things became really bad. But it did no such thing, and it actually cancelled all public transportation, leaving hapless workers with no option but to *walk* hundreds of kilometers carrying their children and luggage. I reproduce extracts from an article by Nivedita Menon [that gives the big picture](#) of what was happening:

‘Meanwhile lakhs of migrant labour continue to be [trapped in horrific conditions](#), prey to rumours and fake news of buses being arranged, special trains being run, to their home states; and when they arrive at bus terminuses and stations in thousands, with their meagre belongings, their little children, they end up [lathi-charged in Mumbai](#), teargassed in [Surat](#). Apart from some state governments (West Bengal, Kerala, Delhi), that have taken on the responsibility of feeding these hundreds of thousands, it is largely ordinary citizens who have stepped up across the country, financially and physically, to set up networks, including those of NGOs, to prevent mass deaths by starvation – see [here](#) and [here](#), for example. The Central government’s contribution to this has been negligible, according to [its own reply to the Supreme Court \(in which it falsified data on Kerala\)](#), but that is another matter.)

And we are not even going into the collateral damage of this tragic government produced crisis – that is, the deaths due to exhaustion from the march itself, [due to police brutality, due to starvation](#). Visit this site to get a sense of [India’s villages during the Covid 19 Pandemic](#).’

And further:

'a) Throughout April, during the lock-down, news items emerged that indicated rising anxiety about the economic crisis brewing for capital because of labour shortages. To cite just a few of these – in [the agrarian sector \(Punjab\)](#); in Maharashtra [to unload cargo at ports, fill ATMs with cash](#) and staff neighbourhood stores; [in real estate and construction](#) across the country; for [the steel industry](#).

b) In an order dated April 19th, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a [Standard Operating System for the movement of stranded labour](#) (its acronym being given in brackets as SOP, though its actual acronym, SOS, is more appropriate from the point of view of migrant labour today). What this SOP establishes is

(i) an outright prohibition on migrant labour, even those tested and found "asymptomatic", from moving out of the state in which they are currently trapped, and on going back to their home states; and

(ii) the recruitment of "asymptomatic" workers in "industrial, manufacturing, construction, farming and MNREGA works" only in the state in which they are currently located (stranded), for which they must be "registered with the local authority concerned and their skill mapping be carried out to find out their sustainability for various kinds of works."

Attacks on democratic rights

Finally, a reference to the way the pandemic has been used by the current regime as a political emergency to quell dissent, to put activists behind bars under draconian anti-sedition or anti-terror laws. Of course, it is interesting that practically none of those being arrested and framed are opposition-party activists but almost without exception, non-party activists. One category of such activists had been arrested before the pandemic and have been accused of being 'Maoists involved in a terrorist conspiracy against the nation'. Most of these are older citizens – one of them an 81-year-old poet – and all of them have now been imprisoned in appalling conditions where some have contracted Covid-19. The primary case against these activists was their connection with [the Bhima Koregaon incident on 1 January 2018](#). The incident is known by the name of the village in Maharashtra, where a commemoration event of a battle two hundred years ago, in 1818, was being held. The original event had seen a particular Dalit (former 'untouchable') caste fight against their local upper caste oppressors alongside the British. It has been celebrated by Dalits as a significant event in their history, much to the chagrin of Hindu nationalists. On the day of the 2018 event, violence was instigated by them and that incident became the occasion of a massive witch-hunt.

The second group framed under grotesque charges of terrorism and sedition were young student activists involved in the anti-CAA protests. The large majority of those arrested and put behind bars are Muslim activists, largely women, though there are many non-Muslims as

well. As I mentioned earlier, before the pandemic the government was at a loss as to how to deal with these protests, and the Covid-19 outbreak presented precisely an opportunity where everyone could be sent indoors and individuals selectively targeted. Basically, the government has used this as an opportunity to settle scores rather than seriously deal with the threat posed by the virus.

Strangely, India is perhaps among the very few countries where the role of the state and public health infrastructure has practically not been debated in any seriousness during this period. The government has continued favouring its cronies at all levels, ranging from [licenses to produce Covid-19 test kits](#) to [promoting private mining companies](#) in their environmentally destructive practices and allowing [oil companies to go on raising oil prices](#) and has paid little attention to the health needs of the population. Indeed, it has left the population to fend for itself in the pandemic, both in terms of dealing with the massive job losses and the health emergency. On the other hand, it has also [stepped up its privatization drive](#) of major profit-making and [infrastructural public enterprises, including the railways](#), under the cover of Covid-19. Environmental regulations have been completely set aside to help capital make the best of this situation, as is clear from the big changes in [the new Environment Impact Assessment Draft 2020](#). The draft allows for major exemptions, aside from the big change, in that provides for *ex post facto clearance* to projects. In other words, the government is all set to let corporations make good their losses at the expense of common people and the state's resources.

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Further Readings

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