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## **INDIA'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS A MIRROR ON UNDERSTANDING INDIA'S COMPLEXITIES**

**Tinaz Pavri**

This essay examines India's response to the coronavirus pandemic as a microcosm of understanding India itself in the new millennium. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sudden lockdown of the country on March 25, 2020, took everyone by surprise. It allowed no time for preparation, cutting adrift millions of workers and migrants making up the core of India's informal workforce who were suddenly trapped without shelter in its major cities. The response has exacerbated religious tensions within the country, specifically with India's largest religious minority, Muslims. In general, it has laid bare many of India's long-standing challenges and dislocations, which the recent decades of economic development had obscured. The setback to India's economy and psyche from the pandemic and the pandemic response is expected to be deep, widespread, and long-lasting.

Beginning with post-independence India, I examine India's society, politics, and economy from the quasi-socialist eras of the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and later, his daughter, Indira Gandhi. I move to a review of India's economic liberalization during the 1990s and the transformation of the country that it brought in its wake. I look at the sea change in politics that brought into power the current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), along with its charismatic but controversial prime minister, Narendra Modi, in the new millennium. I then turn to the pandemic and the government response, which has

shone a spotlight on India's inequities and fault lines, and which above all allows us to understand modern India in all its complexity and challenge. It also serves as a case study of the tremendous and unprecedented trial that the pandemic has posed to the developing world.

## **Post-Independence India: Society, Economy, and Politics**

After independence from the British in 1947, India's independence leaders embraced a quasi-socialist economy while maintaining a parliamentary democracy. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and a Cambridge-educated Fabian socialist himself, was convinced that the newly independent country—wounded by over a century of British rule, infrastructure-poor, and with a rising tide of population, illiteracy, and poverty—needed to protect its fledgling industries from foreign competition in order to strengthen them. His political party, the independence party of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress (today, simply “the Congress”), maintained power in India through winning most of the national elections until the late 1990s. Indeed, India could be characterized as a single-party democracy in the decades after independence, so overwhelming was the support for the Congress, Nehru, and subsequent Congress party leaders. Soon after Nehru's death, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, was elected prime minister in 1966, and thereafter reelected like her father until she called for a national emergency in 1975, an extreme act permitted by the Indian Constitution under strictly limited circumstances. Citing domestic instability and foreign threat, although in reality goaded by her perception that the opposition was gaining ground, Gandhi suspended fundamental rights for the first time in independent India.<sup>1</sup> When she called for parliamentary elections again in 1977, the Congress lost for the first time, and the opposition Janata party came to power. This sea change in Indian politics, which repudiated the Nehru-Gandhi dynastic legacy, was widely hailed as evidence that Indian politics was finally coming into its own, a confirmation of the “democratic consolidation” of the former colony.<sup>2</sup>

Although Indira Gandhi was reelected in 1980, the era of single-party Congress rule in India had come to an end. After Indira Gandhi's death in 1984 (she was assassinated on the grounds of her home by Sikh bodyguards who were angered by her hard-line actions against Sikh separatists in Punjab and the sending in of troops into the Golden Temple), India entered a period of mostly coalition governments, in which the Congress was often a senior partner.

However, by the new millennium, a powerful new political force was forming across India, that of Hindutva, or the belief in Hindu strength and supremacy. Although an overwhelmingly Hindu country, India's constitution underlined a secular republic, and Nehru and the Congress party had always been strong advocates of India's minorities.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, the argument for a “Hindu

India” began to be openly articulated, and a political party, the BJP, took this on as its mantle. Steadily gaining ground in brief coalition governments, the BJP got voted into power in its own right in 1999. In the 2014 elections, with the polarizing Narendra Modi as its prime minister, the BJP was victorious again. It has since won an overwhelming majority in its reelection in 2019. While the economy has generally done well (until the pandemic, that is), the BJP has been condemned for fostering division within India’s religious communities, particularly the Muslims, as well as promoting patriarchy and casteism (through its perceived favoritism of upper-caste Hindus).

At the beginning of 2020, India was looking back at nearly three decades of economic growth since the liberalization of India’s economy in the 1990s. Privatization allowed hitherto state-held companies and sectors like infrastructure, insurance, and media to be partially owned by the private sector. As a result, Indian media went from a few nationalized television stations to hundreds of channels that brought the world into Indian homes. Foreign direct investment had been flowing into the country for decades, and a strong IT sector was now servicing the world. Economic growth ranging between 5 to 9 percent characterized many of the years during these decades, propelling hundreds of millions of Indians out of poverty and into the middle classes.<sup>4</sup>

Small businesses abounded, and the fruits of a technology revolution allowed even the poor to have access to a basic cell phone with which to conduct their business. Since much of the economy operates in the informal sphere, such access gave a powerful foothold for the relatively resourceless to become involved in the economic boom. Although, of course, problems of illiteracy, poverty, class and caste conflict, religious discrimination, and gender inequality certainly continued to be present and pervasive, the economic change was transformative. The “new India” was often heralded, and Prime Minister Modi enjoyed a wide approval despite some heavy-handed policies that backfired and ended up hurting India’s poorest.<sup>5</sup>

## **Leading Up to the Pandemic Lockdown**

Just weeks before the Western world, from Italy and Spain to the US, became convulsed with the spread of the coronavirus and scrambled to deal with the fallout, Modi had welcomed President Trump to India in a gigantic rally that underscored the friendship between these two world leaders. On February 24, 2020, in Ahmedabad, Modi’s home state, a massive crowd of 125,000 people filled a stadium and offered a delirious welcome to Trump. In all, Trump, his wife Melania, Jared and Ivanka Trump, and their entourage only stayed three days, but the trip garnered enormous publicity in India and some deals were struck.<sup>6</sup> Little did either leader know at this point that the world’s greatest economic and health

calamity in a century would be devastating their countries just a few short weeks later.

In March, Europe, the US, and the rest of the world outside of East Asia began reeling from the spread of COVID-19. On March 25, Narendra Modi summarily ordered a complete lockdown with very little notice to the 1.3 billion Indians that it aimed to cover. The lockdown, with police patrolling India's major cities to ensure compliance, was one of the most restrictive in the world. People were not allowed on the roads, there were no gatherings in public spaces allowed, and public transportation was shut down. In cities like Mumbai, where millions lived in close quarters in vast slums, forcing everyone inside seemed cruel. The images of stranded migrant workers forced to walk hundreds of miles back to their villages were indelible, and they became symbolic of the callousness of the Modi government response. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens were stranded overseas, especially in the Persian Gulf countries. Indian seamen were left without recourse on high seas as the government fumbled its response. Almost overnight, then, huge problems became evident that served to illustrate the enormous challenges that India faces in the social, economic, and political spheres.

After nearly eight weeks of lockdown, when the economy stood on the brink of collapse in many parts, India began partially opening up its remote villages (at that point mostly untouched by the pandemic), towns, and eventually all cities, even those like Mumbai, which were the worst hit. When Mumbai partly opened in early June after a strict lockdown, the pandemic was still ravaging through the city. Hospitals had run out of beds, and the private hospitals, which had been forced to open up for COVID-19 patients, were trying to circumvent the order. Health professionals, toiling without adequate protective equipment, were increasingly infected and dying. Initial testing was woefully inadequate, and dead bodies were piling up outside some hospitals. With the opening up of public spaces and transport, Indians cooped up indoors into small shared spaces came out in droves. The impact of this widespread opening amidst the raging pandemic is yet to be fully determined, but it is feared that the lack of social distancing while the pandemic is still ongoing could be disastrous, and parts of the country are periodically being forced to close down again. However, on the positive side, Mumbai's slums, feared to become super-spreaders, actually became models of effective containment. Testing has ramped up considerably. In mid-August, it hit a landmark of one million tests per day. The efficacy of these tests, especially rapid tests, remains in question, as does the veracity of the numbers of deaths, but as a percentage of the population, they are among the lowest in the world.



Figure 1: Workers scrambling to leave cities after public transportation was suspended nationwide during lockdown. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

## Economic Impact

Despite the long strides India has made in the economic arena in the last few decades, a large percentage of the economy still consists of the informal sector, including independent street hawkers, unregulated domestic workers and construction crews, and migrant workers. In India's huge cities, many of these workers, living on wages that barely secure for them a meager existence in a slum or on the streets or on the grounds of the apartment buildings in which they work, suddenly found themselves unwelcome in the places that they had toiled in day after day. India's middle and upper classes, from the security of their own residences, and filled with initial anxiety and misinformation about how the virus spread, now banned their workers from sight, and many of them began a long, harsh, and tragic journey to villages that some had left years ago. Some of the initial misinformation surrounding the spread of the virus could be blamed on the government itself and its willingness to peddle false myths and "cures" surrounding the disease, which spread like wildfire on social media. With transportation cut off across India, especially the buses and trains that were the choice of the lower classes, these hapless Indians trekked hundreds of miles out of cities, some of them dying of hunger or exhaustion along the way. Horrifying visuals of thousands of

hapless, displaced Indians being beaten by police batons in an effort to crowd control, or sprayed with disinfectant as they waited for transportation, became seared in the minds of the world.

In the precarious middle class, small shop and business owners were forced to close down and have now lost their livelihoods forever. Without a national social welfare safety net available, no substantial subsidies or salary replacement have been possible in India. Even a fund set up by the government to solicit donations and provide for poor Indians, the “PM Cares” fund, is mired in controversy and shrouded in secrecy as to its donors and amounts. Even though the government has belatedly announced some relief measures, they are few and far between and hard to apply for. There is widespread economic devastation, and the pandemic continues even after the lengthy lockdown has been lifted. In addition to the health crisis, India is now facing a hunger and poverty pandemic, the likes of which have not been seen in many decades and which has set growth back considerably.

## Social Impact

The sudden economic devastation caused by the lockdown was mirrored by a concomitant social disaster. In the best of times, India is riven by class divisions that clearly delineate life for the upper-middle and upper classes from the large percentage of Indians still existing in poverty, with a precarious middle class in between. It is illustrative to note that according to the World Bank, India’s per capita income in 2019 was \$2,104, while its median income was just \$600, which means that half of all Indians live on less than \$600 per year.<sup>7</sup> Even more startling, in 2019, according to the Asian Development Bank, 10.7 percent of India’s population lived on less than \$1.90 per day.<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely these impoverished Indians who comprised many of the displaced workers, waiting for days and weeks to be able to leave the cities they worked in, which had now become hostile to them. Domestic workers were locked out of the homes they had cared for; drivers, couriers, security guards, and vendors were all reduced to a piteous existence where they begged for food from homeowners to stay alive in the streets, hiding to escape arbitrary police brutality. In a country which has historically adhered to a caste system that designated a hapless status to the lowest castes and “untouchables,” this pandemic has brought to the fore the realization that the historical brutality of the caste system, combined with the vast inequalities in class, might have made it easier, even today, for those Indians of means to be numbed to the plight of their brethren. Of course, many did organize food, shelter, and transport to assist those without recourse, but it would be fair to say that the majority were in agreement with the government policy that cut off their workers’ lifelines with little prior preparation, in return for the mirage of safely sheltering at home from the virus.





Figure 2: Municipal workers engaged in contact tracing and data collection in Tamil Nadu state. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

This terrible exodus has already ignited some soul-searching among Indians. There were some poignant posts on social media that asked fellow Indians to look deep within to try to understand how they could so easily accept the catastrophe that had befallen some of their fellow countrymen. How is it that these displaced Indians were looked upon as a problem to be solved, rather than the responsibility of all?

### Religious Impact

In the last decade, India has truly become Modi's India. The prime minister enjoys extremely high approval ratings at upward of 60 percent. At certain times during the pandemic, his approval ratings hovered at 80 percent, although as the pandemic rages, he is being shown as someone out of his depth. Indeed, China, with whom India has had a border dispute for decades, has chosen this summer of weakness to breach the line of control on India's northeastern border, calculating that Modi was unable to respond forcefully or defend India robustly.

Modi's party, the BJP, was returned to power in 2019 with robust numbers. Since 2014, Modi's first term in office, it is fair to say that the relationship between majority Hindus and India's largest minority, Muslims, has significantly worsened. From the early years of independence, when the relationship among religions was more harmonious and India's secular nature was widely accepted, this relationship has turned tense in recent times. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Modi government had undertaken two recent measures that had made Muslims feel even more oppressed in their own land.

First, soon after reelection in 2019, the government moved to revoke the constitution's special status accorded to Kashmir, India's only majority-Muslim state. Under article 370, Kashmiris have been given special rights and privileges, including job protections and land ownership, in the state.<sup>9</sup> With the revocation, many Kashmiri state legislators and other politicians were placed under a summary house arrest, and curfews, arbitrary arrests, and emergency rule blanketed the state. A majority of Indians supported the move, while Muslims felt further alienated. Then, in December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed by the BJP-led legislature, which aimed to benefit a number of religious minorities—those who had fled neighboring Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan—by fast-tracking their Indian citizenship. Muslims were not included in the religions protected by the act, as the government said that the neighboring Muslim-majority countries were only oppressing other religions and so Muslims themselves did not need protection. This seemed exclusionary to the many Muslims who had fled countries like Bangladesh during war or famine and indeed to all Indian Muslims, especially those who, like millions of other Indians, do not always possess birth certificates or other government documents, and who viewed this as a veiled attack on their own citizenship status.

In March 2020, as the coronavirus started to make its terrible impact felt across the world, a Muslim missionary movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, held a large meeting in Delhi that was attended by Indian and foreign coreligionists. This meeting was found to be an early COVID-19 “super-spreader” event, and an effort was launched to track and test participants. Much blame was accorded to the community by frightened Indians, singling out Muslims as anti-nationalists, disease-spreaders, and rule-breakers. Hostile social media avenues openly blamed the community, and ugly rhetoric, including such terms as “COVID Jihad,” was widespread. This became another wound in the heart of Muslims in contemporary India, which will continue to linger long after the realization by the country that the coronavirus would have spread throughout the country with or without this incident; no one talks about the Tablighi Jamaat anymore, but the harm has been done.



## Post-Pandemic India

A few months into the COVID-19 pandemic finds an India that has, like many other countries, been set back many years in its development. The lifting of all boats through decades of economic development has been reversed. The lack of India's social welfare and health capabilities has been made glaringly clear. The hostility between religious communities has worsened and class conflict has deepened. The damage done will take decades to repair, and it is hoped that the repairing and rebuilding that will take place will not ignore these fault lines and cracks in Indian society that this pandemic has brought to the fore.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Numerous books and articles have been written about Indira Gandhi and the Emergency. Among the reasons scholars have cited for Gandhi taking this step was her personality, with all its insecurities and the threats she felt from an emboldened opposition. Speculation about why she ended it and called national elections includes this conclusion: that despite her authoritarian bent, she was a democrat at heart who in the end believed in the democratic process.

<sup>2</sup> Political scientists employ this term to refer to countries that have maintained peaceful democratic transitions of power over time.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 80 percent of India's population is Hindu. Muslims are the largest minority at around 14 percent, with Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, and others rounding off the rest.

<sup>4</sup> Even though this robust rate of growth was lower compared to China's spectacular rates of growth over a longer period of time, India made steady progress.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to his general divisiveness, Modi has been criticized for a number of missteps that disproportionately affected and disenfranchised the poor, including demonetization and the revocation of Kashmir's special status.

<sup>6</sup> India purchased three billion dollars' worth of military equipment and helicopters, and it imported liquefied natural gas from Exxon Mobile. A more comprehensive trade deal was aimed at soon. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51625503>.

<sup>7</sup> GDP per capita (current \$US)—India, The World Bank, 2020 available online at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=IN> (accessed August 31, 2020); Business Standard reporter, "India's Per Capita Income Lowest among BRICS: Gallup. New Delhi," *Business Standard*, December 17, 2013, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-s-median-per-capita-income-lowest-among-brics-gallup-113121600968\\_1.html#:~:text=The%20yearly%20income%20earned%20by,99th%20position%20among%20131%20countries](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-s-median-per-capita-income-lowest-among-brics-gallup-113121600968_1.html#:~:text=The%20yearly%20income%20earned%20by,99th%20position%20among%20131%20countries).

<sup>8</sup> Measured in Purchasing Power Parity, or PPP. See "Poverty Data: India," Asian Development Bank, 2020, available online at <https://www.adb.org/countries/india/poverty> (accessed August 31, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>These special privileges date back to 1947, when the first war between the newly independent India and Pakistan was fought over the status of Kashmir, the question concerning who Kashmir belonged to.