



Effect of Corona Pandemic on Indian Politics

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ABSTRACT: Some of the world's finest minds have begun contemplating the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is unanimity that the pandemic will have a disastrous impact on the global economy and will shake up the international order, there is less consensus on the kind of politics that the pandemic will spawn. In India, the situation is very different. Despite health coming under the purview of the states, the Centre has used the National Disaster Management Act to impose a nationwide lockdown from March 24. While most state governments have toed the Central line, some have been pulled up for deviating. Indeed, opposition-ruled states like West Bengal – where chief minister Mamata Banerjee is the strongest critic of the Narendra Modi government and where elections are due next year – have been singled out for criticism, despite BJP-ruled states like Gujarat also faring very poorly. Some states, on the other hand, have criticised the Centre for prohibiting the sale of liquor, one of the biggest sources of revenue, during the lockdown's first phase. There has been a wide variation, too, in the response of the different Indian states to the pandemic. States like Kerala, with its strong public healthcare system and high levels of literacy, have tackled the pandemic well while others have been laggards. A study has shown that the case fatality ratio was the lowest in Kerala and the highest in states like Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The rate of testing, the enforcing of social distancing and health infrastructure possibly explains the variation.

I.INTRODUCTION

The Narendra Modi government has had to indefinitely postpone the door-to-door enumeration and profiling of 1.37 billion Indians, who are locked in at home, fearing a pandemic, and already bearing the brunt of its economic consequences. In its first year after re-election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wanted to carry out all its top Hindutva projects, and most of it has been accomplished. The constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir, the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the 'chronological' CAA-NPR-NRC laws that threaten to strip Indian Muslims of their citizenship — all of these now feel like a distant memory. They belong to the BC period, Before Coronavirus. [1]

The Modi government likely planned more such Hindutva policies — a population control law, and a uniform civil code. Those are not viable at the moment.

After 23 May 2019, the Modi government had the political capital to put governance and economy on the back burner, even as it paid a price for it in state elections. Now, as Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, is criticised for shifting a statue of Lord Ram amid a lockdown, he can no longer play the Hindu card to silence his critics.

Like waking up screaming in the middle of a nightmare, Covid-19 has rudely brought governance and economy back on centre stage.

Covid-19 is similarly a political opportunity for Narendra Modi. And luck often favours him. If he can bring India out of this crisis relatively less affected than the West, he will be even stronger than he became after 23rd May. He will have a lot more political capital to pursue the Hindutva agenda and ignore the economic slump. [2]

So far his record on Covid-19 is mixed. He can say he did an early lockdown, not making the mistake of Britain's Boris Johnson and US' Donald Trump. But Modi has been failing on testing and providing protective gear to medical workers. He can say he was early with screening people at airports but even that had several loopholes and not all incoming travellers were screened, and he followed it up with an ill-planned lockdown that is now causing more harm than good.

But it's early days. It won't be until a few weeks that we can get a sense about whether India ducked the coronavirus or whether the inevitable happens. Meanwhile, the Modi propaganda machinery is already doing its best to keep his voters assured that he's using his supernatural powers to defeat the virus.



In what may or may not be a coincidence, the chief ministers standing out in the crisis are all in non-NDA ruled states. This does not include Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who is standing in a halfway house between opposition and NDA ally. [3]

While the loudest applause has been won by Kerala's Pinarayi Vijayan, Punjab's Amarinder Singh has earned praise for making his police force implement the lockdown with sensitivity. Rajasthan's Ashok Gehlot may not be doing a great job at PR but his alertness has so far prevented a bad situation in Bhilwara from exploding into community transmission. Uddhav Thackeray has used the crisis to cement a working relationship with his alliance partners in Maharashtra and has thus earned praise for displaying maturity. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee is using the opportunity to cement her attempts to be seen as governance-oriented rather than a politician fighting the onslaught of Hindutva. And Jharkhand's Hemant Soren is standing out in making the lockdown bearable for the poor and preparing the state for potential outbreak of community transmission. [4]

II.DISCUSSION

The country's healthcare system is overwhelmed with more than 200,000 cases and about 1,300 deaths being reported daily. India has so far administered more than 127 million doses of a coronavirus vaccine in what is the world's largest inoculation drive.

Despite a promising start in January, India's vaccine drive has been lagging. And the decision to expand it to the biggest cohort of the country's population - 18 to 45 year-olds - comes even as several states report a shortage of doses. Since the pandemic began, India has confirmed more than 15 million cases and over 180,000 deaths. It has the second-highest number of Covid-19 infections in the world after the United States.

India launched its vaccination drive on 16 January, restricting it to healthcare workers and frontline staff - a sanitation worker became the first Indian to receive the vaccine. The drive gradually expanded to other age groups - from 1 May, those above 18 years will be the latest group to become eligible.

There are no plans yet to vaccinate pregnant woman and children.

In early April, India declared that it was "the fastest country in the world" to give more than 100 million jabs. It achieved the feat in 85 days, whereas the US took 89 days and China 102 days, the health ministry said. But shortages have since affected the vaccine drive in many states with second doses being deferred.[5]

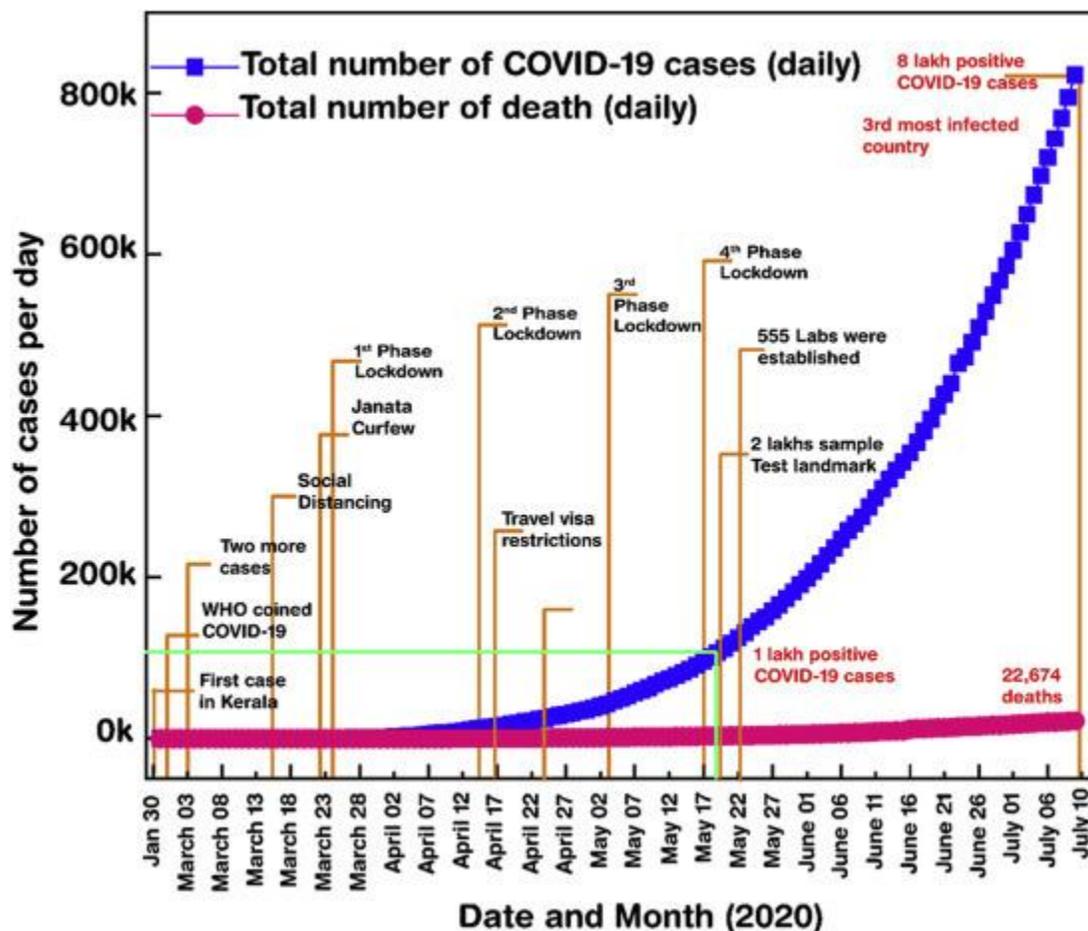


Fig.1. Cumulative total COVID-19 cases in India till 11th July 2020

India is currently giving jabs of two vaccines - one developed by AstraZeneca with Oxford University (Covishield) and one by Indian firm Bharat Biotech (Covaxin). Both were approved in January ahead of the vaccine rollout.

In April, a third vaccine - Russia's Sputnik V - was approved for use. Several other candidates are at different stages of trials.

India placed a temporary hold on all exports of AstraZeneca to meet domestic demand but the vaccine's maker, Serum Institute of India (SII) recently said its production capacity was "very stressed" and that it was "still short of being able to supply to every Indian".

Vaccination is voluntary. State-run clinics and hospitals are offering free jabs, but people can also pay 250 rupees (\$3.4; £2.4) a dose at private facilities.

From 11 April, the government allowed people to get paid jabs at private and state-run workplaces.

The government is spending around \$5bn to provide free doses at state-run clinics, public health centres and hospitals.[6]



Fig.2. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gets his first dose of Covid-19 vaccine at AIIMS, New Delhi, on March 1, 2021. (ANI)

Politics remains driven as much by real or perceived identity-related grievances. There remains a powerful Centre, led by a dominant Bharatiya Janata Party, which has, for most part, so far, been able to politically overcome the disruption caused by the pandemic. There remains a weak national Opposition, which has neither been able to present an alternative model of how they would have dealt with the pandemic and associated challenges or leverage the discontent the pandemic produced among citizens. There remains an even greater economic challenge of generating jobs at a time when inequality has only become more stark and more starkly visible. There remains both cooperation and discord in India's federal structure, with differences between the Centre and states ruled by non-BJP forces. There remains the everyday staple of political rhetoric, as can be seen in states going for polls over the next eight weeks. And there remain questions about the health of India's institutions and whether democracy can navigate the dominance of one party while ensuring checks on it.[7,8]

III.CONCLUSION

The pandemic has affected both social and economic structures. And if this is the case, politics and governance cannot be divorced from the underlying changes. It is still too soon — India is still confronting the pandemic — to accurately gauge the nature and scale of changes. It is also tempting to underplay the continuities and overplay the disruption. But what is clear is that the pandemic presented, arguably, one of the most difficult challenges the Indian State has confronted. When it emerges from it, scarred but also healed, the State — just like citizens — will not be the same. It will be better, in some ways, and it may be worse, in other ways. "We are in the end game of the COVID-19 pandemic in India" and to succeed at this stage, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan on Sunday said, politics should be kept out the COVID-19 vaccination drive.

He said people should trust the science behind vaccines and ensure that their near and dear ones get vaccinated on time.[9] Speaking at the Delhi Medical Association's (DMA's) 62nd Annual Delhi State Medical Conference (MEDICON 2021) in collaboration with Dharamshila Narayana Hospital on Sunday, Vardhan said over 2 crore COVID-19 vaccine shots have been administered so far and the vaccination rate has been increased to 15 lakhs per day.

"Unlike most other countries, we have a steady supply of COVID-19 vaccines that are safe with proven immunogenicity and efficacy. Based on the initial results, these Made in India vaccines have shown some of the lowest adverse events following immunization (AEFI) anywhere in the world," he said.



Vardhan asserted that today children in the entire world need to be vaccinated against poliomyelitis only because Pakistan and Afghanistan failed to eradicate this disease from their respective countries, the statement said.[10]

"Similarly, India cannot be safe from coronavirus and COVID19 if rest of the world continues to be unsafe, which is why it is essential to curb COVID-19 vaccine nationalism.

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