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# The Pandemic and Its Discontents in India

## Crucial and Timely Documentation

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The edited collection, *India and the Pandemic: The First Year, Essays from The India Forum*, serves to plug a glaring gap in documentation of the biggest challenge that India has faced in several years. Although, documentation, as also policy interventions, should ideally have been done by the government itself, neither of these have happened in an honest or proactive way. Therefore, a citizen-led documentation of the pandemic as well as the large-scale relief work organised by ordinary people is what has been the saving grace amid the pandemic.

The book looks at different dimensions of the pandemic. This is at once a problem and a good thing. It is a problem because the public health doctor would struggle with the economic technicalities, while the activist may find the banking data too heavy. However, the advantage is that the book offers a ready reference on the multiple dimensions of the pandemic ranging from employment loss, effects on trade and commerce, communalisation, poverty indices, effects on labour, etc. The book helps to give a snapshot of diverse consequences of the pandemic and therefore becomes a historical document for future generations to refer to.

### State, Society and Collectives

In the introduction, Faizi Ahmad, C J Kuncheria and C Rammanohar Reddy say

Looking back, it is not so much India's inability to prevent the large number of infections in 2020 that should be cause for regret as to how the country coped with the pandemic. There was an absence of community and a lack of humanity in how both the state and society responded to COVID-19. (p 5)

While apathy from the governments at the centre and many states was very visible, the role of the volunteers and civil society who rose to the occasion by supplying

### BOOK REVIEWS

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essential drugs, food relief, organising health camps, as well as oxygen cylinders to patients and communities cannot be dismissed. It would be unfair not to acknowledge this in the book.

K Sujatha Rao and Govinda Rao offer a sharp analysis of the fragility of the federal structures and how delegitimising these can have long-term adverse impacts. Prem Chandavarkar suggests a principle of subsidiarity where maximum effort is at the level of local governance and what cannot be handled there is delegated to a higher level. These are some warnings and suggestions that should be seriously taken note of.

One danger is, however, when individuals give recommendations that are outside their domain of expertise. With a pandemic, it is important that there are more wide-ranging consultative processes across a spectrum of groups and communities, especially those most likely to face adverse consequences. The need for this has been particularly demonstrated by the pandemic, but some authors continue to make individual recommendations rather than collective ones. While documenting the consequences around the pandemic has been done effectively by the authors, there is a danger in offering solutions or recommendations that are not more consultative.

### Political Economy and History

Pratik Chakrabarti highlights the historical and colonial legacies that have become evident during the pandemic.

The extraordinary powers assumed by the governments to undertake these twin tasks (isolation and vaccination) raise questions of ethics, human rights and the use of state powers over lives and bodies of its citizens. (p 45)

Chakrabarti also explores how the colonial legacy has legitimised the targeting of different communities during different pandemics, epidemics, and outbreaks, such as the Bombay plague in the 1890s.

Sheetal Chhabria unravels how the lockdown came with its own economic and social consequences, specifically how hunger and malnutrition unfolded in those circumstances. She highlights the role played by Indian aristocrats, landlords, financiers, and industrialists in blocking the public health system where it would cost them. While this gives an understanding about this strong barrier to public health in the past, it also helps one understand that these can continue to be barriers going forward—that the COVID-19 crisis is not so much an incident as an outcome of decades of neglect of the health system and food requirements of people.

Gayatri Nair highlights the often-neglected labour law violations in the gig economy where there is no recognisable employee or employer. However, those workers like food delivery agents, cab drivers, etc, with their “feet on the ground” have faced the brunt of the consequences of the lockdown while remaining in a grey zone created by the gig economy.

### Exposing Marginality

The economic impact of the pandemic and harsh lockdown as well as the impact on the informal sector have been explored in depth in Section vi. This section offers a much needed and honest critique of the data put out by the government. C P Chandrasekhar analyses the global economic crisis brought about by the pandemic, that is, the impact on economic activity, trade, global value chains, market access, supply of raw materials, etc. He also explains why offering relief rather than cash when what people need immediately is not available, could be a more useful option.

The data on women in prisons during the pandemic presented by Pratiksha

Baxi and Navsharan Singh is chilling and exposes the state's sheer callousness towards women in custody, seen to be particularly stark when the woman is menstruating or pregnant.

Women inmates in male defined prisons governed by male rules of incarceration experience specific forms of discrimination, deprivation and violation. (p 132)

Baxi and Singh call for a rethinking of prison systems from the point of view of gender and sexual minorities. However, a discussion on Dalits and Adivasis who are disproportionately incarcerated in prisons and more vulnerable to custodial torture would have greatly added value to the book, but this has not been addressed.

While there have been growing concerns raised about the attacks on the fragile Indian federal system, M Govinda Rao dissects the deleterious effects in a meticulous way. The process of centralisation, while short-changing the states, has become more acceptable in the backdrop of "patriotic zeal" aggravated by the pandemic. The invocation of the Disaster Management Act, 2005 and a rigorous lockdown was more to retract power from the states than to manage the disaster.

Debraj Ray, S Subramanian and Lore Vandewalle lay bare the situation of the country that made the lockdown so disastrous. The informal nature of labour, low savings of the average Indian household and the scanty or non-existent "relief" offered by the state, makes the lockdown draconian. In this context, the judiciary, which could have played a crucial role in enabling ordinary citizens to seek legal recourse for basic rights, located itself on the side of the government. As Harsh Mander writes,

the courts did not pay heed to the additional affidavits by the petitioners about starving families, police brutality towards workers who attempted to leave their homes to access food in the feeding centres, employers' associations writing to the courts about their inability to pay wages; and about landlords evicting their worker-tenants because of their inability to pay rent. (p 151)

Many of the authors highlight the dangers of political and social power abuse by governments, officials, and privileged citizens, leading, in turn, to

targeting of vulnerable communities by the state, the media and communities. Honey Oberoi Vahali, Naorem Pushparani Chanu and Gorky Chakraborty specifically show how the pandemic offered fault lines to target Muslim communities and those from the North East. The use of slurs, discriminatory behaviour, abuses, social boycotts, and physical abuse have aggravated the already existing insecurities of these communities.

The lack of response by the media, and, in fact their aggravation of the issue is something we need to ponder about, particularly in the context of a pandemic. While natural disasters can bring communities together in solidarity, the media can instead fan fears and frustrations, which is unfortunately what happened in India. While it is important to document these racialised or Islamophobic behaviours during the pandemic, it is important that systems to undo this injustice are actively put into place and lessons are learnt to prevent these in future. At every crisis in the country, we cannot afford to scapegoat and target one or the other community, which often becomes

an easy way to turn the spotlight away from government inefficiency.

### Economic Processes

The section on "The Impact on the Economy" is particularly telling because it challenges what is often projected as part of the public relations activity of the government. While R Nagraj tracks how "India has gone from being one of the world's fastest growing, IT outsourcing-led, export-oriented economy to a protection seeking laggard" (p 205), Radhicka Kapoor presents, with data, how the widespread loss of jobs and income due to the pandemic and lockdown has affected different categories of workers differently.

Prem Chandavarkar puts forth some actionable lessons from the pandemic going forward. Mainly, he suggests that the subordination of society to markets, specifically for social goods like health and education leads to "poor accounting of externalised costs such as environmental degradation and inequality" (p 320) as well as problems in allocating social goods. Markets also tend towards efficiency rather than resilience which he

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feels is more important during a crisis such as a pandemic.

Although Chandavarkar touches upon SARS-CoV-2 being a zoonotic virus, which Ramprasad Sengupta also explores, this aspect of human–nature interaction, indiscriminate urban development as a contributor to unveiling hitherto unknown zoonotic diseases, would require further unravelling and analysis. This would be an important lesson for the future. Sengupta also tracks the environmental consequences, biodiversity loss and other ecological shocks that follow human activities.

### Some Limitations

The nutritional and health impact of the pandemic has not been adequately explored. Given that India is already a country with dismal nutritional and health statistics, the pandemic has the country spiralling into a worsening of most, if not all, of these indicators. This crucial discussion is largely missing.

Also missing is a view of the pandemic through the caste lens. While the targeting of the North East community has been explored, the detrimental impact on the Muslim community both in terms of their lives and livelihood, a very adverse consequence of the pandemic remains unexplored with the depth that it deserves. If the objective of book is to analyse the current pandemic and learn lessons for subsequent disasters, then an analysis of the gender, religious, and caste dimension of the pandemic cannot be kept aside.

The gaps in the public health system have also not been adequately unravelled in terms of the rural–urban divide, the inadequate and fragmented nature of the existing health insurance schemes, and the unethical, unregulated, exploitative nature of the private healthcare sector. This pandemic has offered the most realistic understanding of the healthcare system in India, particularly in states,

such as Uttar Pradesh where the political and bureaucratic machinery seem to have more things than people's welfare on its agenda. The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana has been hailed as a milestone, but an analysis of whether this actually served its intended purpose would have been very crucial. It would be good to address these in subsequent editions of the book.

However, overall, the book offers a rigorous documentation of the factors that led up to the COVID-19 crisis as well as the adverse outcomes of the pandemic and lockdown. In the absence of reliable and timely government data, the authors of this book offer invaluable insights into the pandemic.

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