ASIA 13.04.2020 | Mihir S Sharma

India's lockdown politics

In India, the right-wing establishment uses Covid-19 to further its divisive agenda against minorities and the marginalised

On the evening of 24 March, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a rare televised address. He told the population that, in a few hours, the country was locking itself down for three weeks, only essential services would operate and Indians should not leave their homes at all. The purpose of the lockdown was to control the spread of the novel coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan at the end of last year. This may or may not work. But, because of the way it has been planned and implemented, it has certainly widened pre-existing divisions in Indian society.

Many countries across the world have imposed more or less stringent curfews. But India's attempt was the largest and most audacious. Locking down one-fifth of the world's population is a drastic measure by any standard.

Yet, given the vast implications of the decision, barely any thought seemed to have gone into planning. When a country shuts down, essential services have to keep running, food and other provisions have to be arranged and the most vulnerable need to be taken care of by the state. Yet none of the machinery to do any of that was put into place before the lockdown was announced.

As a consequence, the lockdown itself has strained the fragile social and economic fabric of India far more than it needed to – thanks in part to government blindness, but also on occasion deliberately.

India's informal economy

One vast gulf in India is between those who are part of the state welfare mechanisms and those who are not. The Indian middle and upper class receive various benefits from the state, as do many of those who live in rural areas and are registered for welfare programmes. But there is one big

gap in how India's outdated welfare state operates: it concerns the urban poor, especially migrant workers. And it is them who felt the immediate economic impact of the lockdown.

India's largely informal economy shut down and the millions of people who depended on it for a daily wage were left without any resources at all. Many had no money for rent; others did could not even afford food. Nor could they go back to their villages – the trains were no longer running. So they crowded into bus stations – making a mockery of social distancing rules – or decided to walk home, for hundreds of kilometres along deserted highways. The crisis of a pandemic had caused a colossal humanitarian tragedy even before the pandemic proper took hold, thanks to the callousness of the Indian state.

This, however, is no coincidence. For the Indian state, the informal urban worker has long been invisible. Those who work in large factories, or are part of unions, are protected by law and regulations; those who work the fields and never leave their villages have access to social protections designed for India's villages. But those who leave home to find work in India's cities have few protections, if any at all. And although India is a vibrant democracy, few internal migrants manage to transfer their voting rights to the towns they work in. So urban politicians do not have enough of an incentive to protect them.

India's development model is in some ways built on the promise of these millions of migrants – we call it the 'demographic dividend', the notion that India is a young country with a population bulge that will feed its growth for decades. Yet one of the features of its development model, so brutally laid bare by the pandemic, is that the very people who are supposed to build India's future are receiving nothing from the state in return.

The pandemic is used for the right wing's agenda

It is an open question as to what this implies for India's future, both politically and economically. Tensions between city and countryside, between the richer south and the underdeveloped north, between the globalised and the aspirational, were already high. Migrants were the only bridge between these two disparate groups of Indians. The abandonment of migrants at the time when they most needed help has torn down that bridge.

Yet there will be no accountability. The perverse nature of populist

politics, in India and beyond, is that even if a populist strongman makes a major mistake, he will not be blamed for it by those who voted for him. Instead, other scapegoats will be found.

In India, the traditional scapegoats have been religious minorities. The pandemic and the lockdown hit India at a time when Muslims across India were already being threatened by official and unofficial government policy. The government had changed the citizenship law and promised a major registration drive – policies that, taken together, were designed to render millions of Indian Muslims stateless.

Fake news and rumours were spread, including by the mainstream media, that Muslims were deliberately poisoning others, including police and health workers, by spitting on them.

At the same time, it had begun to build vast detention camps and through its political rhetoric to stigmatise all Muslims as illegal immigrants. Massive non-violent protests against the law were met with targeted violence by organised right-wing groups earlier this year – pogroms, in effect.

Sadly, even the pandemic is being used as an opportunity to further this divisive agenda – which is central not just to the ruling right-wing establishment's ideological programme, but also to its plan for winning future elections. The right wing wins elections by ensuring that elections are fought through the prism of a single identity – in India's case, a uniform Hindu identity. Consolidation and polarisation can best be achieved through reinforcing the idea that Muslims are the other, not to be trusted. Unfortunately, inter-community trust is breaking down in India at the moment.

Muslims attacked across the country

Pandemics can spread through clusters of infections – places, such as ski lodges, cruise ships or hotels, where people are thrown together with an infected individual for a considerable length of time. One such cluster of infection in India was a hostel occupied in early March – before the nationwide lockdown – by conference delegates from the transnational Muslim missionary organisation known as the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ). Those attendees who were infected then fanned out across the country and, as is the case with all such clusters, infected some others. TJ conferences in both Pakistan and Indonesia also caused similar problems.

Naturally, it is the state's duty to quarantine these infected individuals, trace those they have come into contact with and test all of them for

COVID-19. Yet the Indian authorities went further; this particular cluster was highlighted in official briefings as the only reason why the disease was still spreading. Statistical sample bias was used to mislead the Indian people about the significance of the hostel cluster – after all, if you only test these Muslim missionary attendees and those they came into contact with, then the data is apparently on your side when you claim that Muslims are disproportionately responsible for spreading the virus.

As a consequence, Muslims are being further ghettoised and attacked across the country. Fake news and rumours were spread, including by the mainstream media, that Muslims were deliberately poisoning others, including police and health workers, by spitting on them. As has happened in countless earlier pandemics, the 'outsiders' are being blamed for poisoning the commons; there is an obvious parallel with Western Europe's Jewish communities being persecuted during the Black Death.

During a pandemic, acceptance grows for curbs on civil liberties – particularly on freedom of movement. This is natural. Yet there is a very real possibility that right-wing governments will use it to further isolate the minority communities they in any case condemn as 'infections'. Once India lifts its lockdown, it has been provided with an excellent excuse to continue to restrict the freedoms of Muslim areas within towns and villages – the next stage of the ghettoisation that began with targeted violence. We can only hope that the severe threat to social harmony and to law and order will cause those misusing the pandemic to pull back before it is too late.

A world transfixed by the pandemic has very little attention to spare. Yet the danger is that the exclusions and the restrictions created during the pandemic, and targeting the poor, the marginalised, and the different, will live on long after the virus itself is defeated.



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