India: A Spectacle of Mismanagement

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The first COVID-19 case in India was reported on January 30, in the southern state of Kerala. Though the state's response was admirably swift, it was not long before the pandemic spread in other parts of the nation. As of September, India has 4.2 million infections, more than 71,500 deaths, and is the second most-affected nation in the world—this, despite its government imposing the harshest lockdown in the world. This chapter scrutinises the timeline of India's national response and its crisis communication. Not only did the government misjudge the threat level, it failed to utilise the time it bought by placing its 1.3 billion people under severe restrictions. Its communicative responses were delayed, and, while manifestly in line with the CERC principles, largely aimed at framing the government's ad hoc approach to lockdown and exit as effective crisis management that has "saved lakhs of lives".

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Political context

The largest democracy and second most-populous country in the world, India casts a dominant shadow on all its South Asian neighbours bar China (Tellis 2020). Its population, topping 1.35 billion, is expected to overtake China's 1.4 billion by 2024. Its economy, which recorded $2.94 trillion in 2019, is the fifth-largest in the world in terms of nominal GDP, having overtaken that of UK and France (World Population Review 2019). Geopolitically, it is an economic powerhouse with nuclear armament, persistently courted by leaders of the West. These achievements notwithstanding, India is a nation riddled with developmental challenges: income disparity is on the rise, there is persistent gender inequality, and India is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change and disasters.

Presiding over all this is the polarising politics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Considered by many to be responsible for the spread of Hindu nationalism that has divided the country, Modi first came to power in 2014, and in 2019, though many of his campaign promises had not been met (BBC 2019), he returned with an even better majority—a feat made possible largely by his exceptionally well-organised election machinery that saturated India's news and social media networks with the image of Modi as 'the protector of the nation' (Verniers 2019). His successive tenures have done much harm to India's secular fabric, stoking religious intolerance and undermining democratic institutions (Komireddi 2019). Since 2018, India's economic growth has slowed down, and unemployment rate is at a 45-year high. There is a "stark mood of despair", particularly among the poorest in the economic ladder (Basu 2020).

Chronology

The first COVID-19 case in India was reported on January 30. By February 3, the number of infections rose to three. All were students who had returned from Wuhan, and all were in the south Indian state of Kerala, ruled by the Communist government of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, and known for its high literacy rate and investment in public health.

Kerala's response to the virus was admirably swift; it began 10 days *before* its first patient tested positive. K. K. Shailaja, its health minister, started preparing Kerala for an epidemic soon after she learnt about the virus. Hence by January 27, the state had already adopted the World Health Organisation's test, trace, isolate and support protocol, and set up a Rapid Response Team (Spinney 2020). On February 3, with confirmation of its third positive case, Kerala declared a state calamity, placing more than 2,239 travellers from affected countries in quarantine.

In the first week of March, around the time the index patients in Kerala had all ended their quarantine, cases were identified in other Indian states. On March 3, the New Delhi-based Hindustan Times led with the headline 'Corona reaches Capital'. The same day, PM Modi, known for his sophisticated social media team and significant reach on @narendramodi, tweeted out an image, 'Basic Protective Measure For All', together with a reassuring message to his millions of followers: "There is no need to panic. We need to work together, take small yet important measures to ensure self protection." This was Modi's first direct communication on the virus. India also suspended visas issued to nationals of Italy, Iran, South Korea, and Japan

on March 3. By March 10, two days after the World Health Organisation announced 100,000

infections across 100 countries, India was beginning to see an increase in new cases. The

nationwide total stood at 50, across 10 states and the national capital region (Kumar 2020).

On March 12, a day after WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, India reported its first death

from the virus, in Karnataka (Wire 2020a). The Government of India suspended tourist and

student visas, as well as visa-free entry for persons of Indian origin, for a month beginning

March 13. It also advised states and Union Territories to invoke the Epidemic Disease Act, 1897,

to enable them to enforce such measures as banning public gatherings, closure of schools, and

work-from-home. While there was some criticism in the news media about the invocation of a

colonial-era law to battle a modern-day pandemic (Kapur 2020), analysts were quick to concede

that, as Nanisetti wrote in The Hindu (2020), the Act served an immediate purpose in the

absence of any new legislation. In any case, the government advice received little resistance

from regional governments, with the states of Karnataka, Haryana and Goa, and the National

Capital Territory of New Delhi invoking the act in quick succession to declare coronavirus an

epidemic (Kapur 2020).

By March 15, the total number of cases in India had reached 110. The death toll stood at two.

The majority of cases were from Maharashtra in the west (32), followed by 22 in Kerala (south),

12 in Uttar Pradesh (north), and seven in the New Delhi region (north). Soon after, the

Government of India issued an advisory to all states, urging social distancing measures till

March 31. On March 21, in his first televised public address about the pandemic, Modi

announced the formation of a task force to draw up measures to combat the economic effects of the pandemic. He also called for a 'Janta (People's) Curfew', to be observed on March 22 between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. (Economic Times 2020). The curfew will be "a litmus test for us," Modi said. "This is also the time to see how prepared India is to fight off a global pandemic like the coronavirus."

The call for the curfew was Modi's attempt at social mobilisation, to co-opt citizens into being responsible for their own well-being (Ninan 2020). Containment was critical to India, it was clear by now; given its large population, highly crowded urban spaces, and inadequate medical infrastructure, the country could easily be overrun if the virus reached epidemic scales. Perhaps it was this awareness that brought the call the support it received, cutting across political affiliations. The Indian National Congress, Modi's main opposition in the parliament, extended its support to the call. So did many of the state governments usually critical of Modi's leadership, including the Communist leadership in Kerala. The response to the curfew, hence, was overwhelming; millions stayed indoors on March 22, emerging at 5pm briefly to show gratitude to health workers and essential service providers.

Parts of the nation, meanwhile, were beginning to submerge into complete or contained lockdowns. By the time the Janta Curfew ended, 82 districts in 23 of India's 29 states—among them, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir—were under lockdown (Times of India 2020).

Tuesday, March 24, was particularly crucial in India's response to the pandemic. At 5:34 a.m., Modi's official Twitter account published a short tweet in Hindi and English: "Will address the nation at 8 p.m. today, 24th March 2020, on vital aspects relating to the menace of COVID-19." After a day of suspense, including speculations that the country might be headed for a state of emergency, Modi announced a three-week nationwide lockdown beginning at midnight—four hours after his address—and would be applicable to "every state, union territory, village and district" (Firstpost 2020). Drawing on powers under the National Disaster Management Act, 2005, Modi said: "If the situation is not controlled in 21 days, India could go 21 years behind" (Economic Times 2020). Modi's televised speech acknowledged this would an exceptionally difficult time for the poor in the nation, but stressed a nationwide lockdown was the only way to quell transmission.

The extreme measure—the "most severe step taken anywhere" to stop coronavirus, (Gettleman and Schlutz, 2020) saw the world's largest—and harshest—pandemic measures implemented. Not unexpectedly, it attracted a great deal of criticism. The rationale for the decision came under limited scrutiny, but the hastiness of the announcement, the lack of details on how essential goods would be made available, and the way the lockdown was implemented emerged as significant concerns to the Indian public. Across the nation, there was confusion, with the police adopting harsh measures to enforce the lockdown, including on essential service workers, doctors and journalists. In New Delhi, for instance, police were "raining sticks" on pharmacists who tried to work (Gettleman and Schlutz 2020).

But the most visible—and perhaps cruellest—impact was on India's poor, many of them migrant workers in distant cities. Suddenly jobless, millions of workers are believed to have moved back to their villages in a "historic reverse-migration" to "some of the poorest, least prepared places" (Roy and Agarwal 2020). With limited resources and the public transport system shut down, tens of thousands of people left Indian cities to walk hundreds of miles— some more than 500 miles—in the immediate days after Modi's announcement. Nearly 200 migrants died on the road (Wallen 2020). Though India announced a $22.5-billion stimulus package for the poor on March 26, this was too little to provide "free staple grains for about 800 million" low-income citizens (Roy and Bellman 2020).

By April 14, as the initial lockdown came to an end, the number of confirmed infections had climbed to 10,363 (Roy Chowdhuri 2020), from the pre-lockdown figure of 500. And while the death toll, at 336, was significantly low compared to those seen in Europe, the twin vulnerabilities of a high population density and weak healthcare system meant the nation was far from safe. India's test rate, too, was exceedingly low—barely 4,000 per day in early April. Against this background, Modi extended the lockdown to May 3. But the number of infections continued to rise over the next weeks, each day recording more than a 1,000 new cases.

This trend was to continue into the next months. In May, Modi extended the lockdown twice, placing the nation under restrictions till May 31. By May 16, India recorded 85,940 cases, overtaking China. Three days later, it crossed 100,000 infections. By June 1, India was the 7th most-infected country in the world, with 194,504 cases.

The June-September period is particularly noteworthy in India's COVID-19 response timeline. Uniquely, when infections were rising in record numbers, India began to reopen. Thus, on June 8, when India registered 9,983 cases in a single day to become the fifth most-affected nation in the world, the government initiated 'Unlock 1.0' (Singh 2020). On June 11, India overtook the UK, with 298,283 cases, to become the fourth most-affected country. But Modi's address to the nation on June 30 framed this situation as "better position compared to many countries", and that the government's decisions have saved "lakhs of lives" (Hindustan Times 2020c). The next day, with infections exceeding 600,000 and the death toll at 17,495 and climbing, India entered 'Unlock 2.0'. On July 6, India overtook Russia to be the world's third most-affected nation, with 697,413 cases and 19,693 deaths. The government, however, continued with the third phase of reopening from August 1, arguably seeing this as an economic necessity—as figures were to soon reveal, India's GDP had fallen by a spectacular 24% (Nahata 2020), the worst in decades. On September 7, as the nation began 'Unlock 4.0', India recorded 90,000 cases overnight, 4.2 million infections, and 71,642 deaths. It was now the second-most affected nation in the world.

Analysis

India awoke to the COVID-19 crisis late. In this, it followed the pattern of most nations, misjudging the threat level and misspending the lead time that news of the Wuhan outbreak offered. While Kerala, which recorded India's first case, was impressively proactive with its preparation, there was little evidence of crisis planning or communication at the national level.

This oversight, to a significant extent, is attributable to the political events that preoccupied the Modi government—indeed most national politicians—in the pre-crisis and initial phases of the outbreak. The election to the prestigious Delhi Assembly, the legislative body that governs the national capital region, was scheduled for February 8. The fallout of that election—which Modi's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party lost—was "the worst religious conflict that engulfed the Indian capital in decades" (Ellis-Petersen and Rahman 2020a), when Hindu mobs attacked Muslims with tacit and explicit support from the Delhi Police (Gettlemen et al. 2020). This was followed by US President Donald Trump's visit in the last week of February; and a political crisis in the state of Madhya Pradesh, which saw the BJP gaining control of the state government (Noronha 2020). All of this commanded significant political attention, particularly from the prime minister.

It is unsurprising, then, that Modi's first tweet about coronavirus came on March 3, more than a month after India recorded its first case. Modi was not alone in this belatedness. An analysis of 23,115 tweets posted by 20 Indian politicians between January 30 and May 30 shows that there was very little discourse—barely an acknowledgement of the threat, in fact—on social media: just 1% of the coronavirus-related tweets of the politicians in that five-month period came in February (Live Mint 2020). This included a tweet from Congress politician Rahul Gandhi on February 12, which said "the government is not taking this threat seriously". In all, of the 20 politicians, 14 were silent about the virus all through January and February (Live Mint 2020).

It was only in March, after the infection reached New Delhi, that COVID-19 entered political discourses in a significant way. Till then, the virus was largely seen as a regional problem that concerned Kerala, and the world outside—but of limited consequence to the Indian state. Once the national capital recorded its first case, this narrative began to change, albeit slowly. Into mid- and late-March, communications about the virus began to dominate public discourses, both on traditional and social media. This trend continued into April as lockdown was extended, with politicians devoting 45% of their tweets to COVID-19 (Live Mint 2020).

An exceptionally powerful social media influencer[1] who routinely make key announcements on Twitter, Modi's tweets in Hindi and English formed the basis of India's national crisis communication. Many of his social media communication struck the 'right' note and are categorisable as 'good' crisis communication. His tweets in March, for instance, advocated for calm and disseminated preventive measures—adhering to the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication principles (Reynolds and Seeger 2005). There were also efforts to involve 1% society, with tweets calling for solidarity against the virus, framing the crisis as an 'us' versus 'it' situation. On March 22, going into the Janta Curfew, he tweeted: "The people of India have decided—we are in this together. We will fight the menace of COVID-19 together." After the surprise lockdown, Modi devoted an entire episode of Mann Ki Baat, a monthly radio programme he hosts, to COVID-19, entreating his listeners to respect the lockdown, and apologising to all his "countrymen", particularly his "underprivileged brothers and sisters" for the hardships placed on them (PMIndia 2020).

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[1] Modi has 62.2 million Twitter followers, as of September 12, 2020.

Though manifestly in line with CERC principles, a closer look reveals several deep-seated issues with Modi's public messaging. The government was, as noted earlier, belated in its initial responsiveness, mis-utilising much of the pre-crisis phase for other matters. In the initial phase, while Modi's tweets appear to show empathy and providing emergency courses of action, there was inadequate state support to enable civil society to implement the measures in any meaningful or timely manner. His communication, it would appear, was aimed at signalling the government was actively putting in place a coordinated national strategy. But there was little evidence of a crisis plan, or of coordination with states, when India entered its surprise lockdown, putting millions of her poorest into extreme hardship. The lockdown, arguably, was needed. However, the ill-planned response, particularly its suddenness, appears to have been designed more to bolster Modi's image as 'protector of the nation'. It created a media spectacle—as Roy (2020) put it, "the mother of all spectacles".

As lockdown was extended, Modi's popularity soared (Gettleman and Yasir 2020b). Criticism was largely muted (Live Mint 2000). While that in itself is not surprising—national crises often effect rallies around the flag (Chatagnier 2012)—it is pertinent to note that Modi's public messaging did little to alleviate the framing of coronavirus as a 'Muslim disease' by Hindu nationalists (Ellis-Petersen and Rahman 2020b). Nor was there an attempt to combat the xenophobia and social media trolling that emerged in India against Chinese citizens. Kohli and Dhawan (2020), who view this as a deliberate political strategy to shore up Hindu nationalist

support during the crisis, warn of catastrophic danger to the Indian society if "left unrestrained".

A corollary of this strategy that prioritised words over action, perhaps, was the fact that the government misspend the time it bought by the lockdown. The lockdown would have been "effective had this period been used for improving the healthcare infrastructure or at least boosting the public health budget" (Harikrishnan and Chakraborty 2020). But India's COVID-19 stimulus package has been identified at approximately 1% of the GDP, falling too short of what is required. There is little evidence, too, of an intergovernmental framework, crucial for policy coordination and fiscal transfers to deal with a pandemic (Harikrishnan and Chakraborty 2020), particularly in a nation of India's complexity. Nor was there evidence of a strategy to alleviate the humanitarian crisis triggered by the surprise lockdown. And as India began to open up, paradoxically with her death toll mounting and infection rate surging, COVID-19 dropped further down India's public communication agenda. Modi's twitter feed, for instance, has added little substance—or reassurance—to COVID-19 communication in July and August. The consequences of his ad hoc approach to the crisis, however, are starkly evident: India's GDP has contracted a spectacular 24% and her surging infection rate is second only to the United States.

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