

The message, the messenger, the messiah: COVID communication in Modi's India

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India defies easy generalisations. The world's largest democracy and the most-populous country, its 1.42 billion citizens are spread across a geographical expanse of 1,269,219 square miles, divided into culturally distinct 'disaster communities' ¹(Matthews and Thorsen 2020) within 28 states and 8 federally administered Union Territories. This makes it a political entity of exceptional complexity, one that raises formidable challenges for crisis governance.

India's COVID-19 record – as of December 6 2023², more than 533,000 have died and 45 million infected, making it the second most-affected nation after the US – should be read against this constitutional complexity. Not only are the risk reduction and communicative pressures more varied and demanding in a nation that balances an exceptionally high urban population density with low GDP, its ability to mobilise resources and coordinate responses is limited by the very vulnerabilities that intersect its unique configuration. The national response to the pandemic, for instance, was constrained by its resource-starved health system that has routinely seen one of the lowest public expenditures in the world (Chatterjee 2020). The inequalities this created resulted in a situation where swathes of populations marginalised on the basis of gender, caste, religion, location and economic standing were left particularly vulnerable to the virus and had difficulty accessing healthcare. Such pre-existing vulnerabilities provide a vital context to understand the nation's performance against the virus and its risk communication within a global narrative.

In this chapter, I consider India's pandemic communication against this broader context. The chapter first presents an overview of the public health communications that defined key phases of COVID-19 in India, from 2020 to mid-2022. While the uneven transmission of the virus across state borders and its overlapping waves do not make for easy compartmentalisation of the pandemic into clear-cut phases, the barometer of national-level crisis communication provides several 'markers' – and corresponding pandemic 'stages' – to focus our analysis on. In the last section, employing the risk

¹ I use 'disaster communities' to underline two aspects. Firstly, to acknowledge the need for broadening our conceptualisation of disasters solely based on people physically residing in a geographic area, as such experiences transcend local, national, and international boundaries through social networks (Matthews and Thorsen 2020; see also Kirsschenbaum 2004); and secondly, to signal the ubiquity of disasters in our world today. As the pandemic has proved, *all* global communities, irrespective of status and wealth, hide fault lines and vulnerabilities.

² <https://covid19.int/region/who/searo/country/in>

analysis framework put forward by Warren and Lofstedt (2021), the chapter scrutinises the efficacy of India's crisis messaging.

The world's largest lockdown

India began COVID restrictions in March 2020. One precursor to the restrictions – one of the most severe impositions in the world – was a frontpage news story in The Hindustan Times, which, on March 3, announced: 'Corona reaches Capital.' That same morning, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, known for his influential social media team and significant reach @narendramodi³ on X (then Twitter), tweeted⁴ to his millions of followers that different ministries and states are working together, 'screening people arriving in India' and 'providing prompt medical attention'. A second tweet followed, which contained an image titled 'Basic Protective Measures For All', together with a reassuring message: 'There is no need to panic. We need to work together, take small important measures to ensure self protection.'

Over the next weeks, as infection rates rose in New Delhi and other states, Modi's Twitter feed became a prime point for national-level COVID communication, with news outlets sourcing stories directly based on his tweets. Modi's tweets, for their part, maintained the reassuring tone he had adopted in his initial message. Thus, on 4 March he tweeted he had decided not to participate in any Holi festival programmes as experts have 'advised [sic] to reduce mass gatherings.' On March 12, he assured followers his government was 'fully vigilant of the situation'. On March 15, in a video conference of SAARC leaders, Modi said his government was 'careful not to underestimate the problem,' that India's 'guiding mantra' had been 'prepare but do not panic,' before pledging US \$10 million for a 'Covid response emergency fund' for the region⁵. At this point, confirmed infections in India stood at 110, a relatively minor number compared to that across its border in China (81,048), or in nations such as Italy (21,157), Germany (7,516), United States (3,929) and the UK (2,280). The death toll, too, was low: on March 16, India had two confirmed deaths, compared to 3,218 in China and 1,809 in Italy.

Soon after, the Government of India issued an advisory, urging social distancing. 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,' on March 22 (Economic Times, 2020). The curfew will be 'a litmus test for us,' Modi said. The curfew call, endorsed by opposing politicians and heeded by state governments usually critical of Modi, saw a concerted national response: millions stayed indoors, emerging at 5 pm

³ The prime minister's crisis messages were also disseminated on @PMOIndia, his official account

⁴ India's first national-level communication on Covid-containment was an advisory on January 29 from the Ministry of AYUSH, which put forward the much-criticised message 'Homoeopathy for Prevent of Corona virus infection'.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1239226175508983810>

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.

March 24 was a critical day. It began with a short tweet from Modi⁶: 'Will address the nation at 8 p.m. today, 24th March 2020, on vital aspects relating to the menace of COVID-19.' After hours of suspense, Modi announced a three-week nationwide lockdown beginning at midnight, just four hours after his address.

To say the lockdown caught the nation by surprise is an understatement. As the 'most severe step taken anywhere' (Gettleman & Schultz 2020) approached, there was panic across the country. Modi's tweet immediately after his national address telling citizens 'THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO NEED TO PANIC' and assuring the 'Centre and various state governments will work in close coordination to ensure' essential commodities and medicines are available did little to calm nerves. There was much confusion, with the police 'raining sticks' on even essential service workers, including media professionals, as they attempted to enforce the lockdown (Gettleman & Schultz, 2020). But the most significant impact was on India's migrant workers. Suddenly jobless, millions of workers moved back to their villages in a 'historic reverse-migration' to 'some of the poorest, least prepared places' (Roy & Agarwal, 2020). With the public transport system shut down, tens of thousands left cities to walk hundreds of miles, some more than 500, in the immediate days after Modi's announcement. Many died on the road (Wallen, 2020).

Modi's crisis messaging, meanwhile, focussed on convincing citizens to follow lockdown rules. On March 29, he dedicated an entire episode of *Mann Ki Baat*, a monthly radio programme he hosts, to COVID-19, entreating listeners to respect restrictions (PMIndia, 2020). He also posted on social media several 'moral stories' – in essence, experiences of Indians that underlined the need for lockdown and presenting a united front against the virus. A good example of this was a story culled from the March 29 *Mann Ki Baat* episode, which appeared on his Twitter feed: 'Ram is associated with the IT industry. On his return from overseas he felt feverish and sadly, he was COVID-19 positive. However, Ram followed the guidance of his doctors, stayed at home, protected himself and his family. Here is his story..'

As the first lockdown came to an end on April 14, confirmed infections had climbed to 10,363 (Chowdhury, 2020). And while the death toll, at 336, was significantly low comparatively, the twin vulnerabilities of high population density and a 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. "From the economic angle, we have paid a big price," Modi said in a televised national address. "But the lives of the people of India are far more

⁶ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1242323791436320768>

valuable.” The spread of the virus continued to acquire momentum through April. By May 1, India had 35,043 infections; 39,980⁷ by the time the extended lockdown ended on May 3.

Reopening the nation

The 40-day full lockdown began to ease from May 4. Initially, the nationwide relaxations were contained to zones identified as ‘green’ and ‘orange’, with some concessions allowed even in areas coded ‘red’. This then transformed into a full-on ‘unlock’ initiative from June 1.

The beginning of the ease in restrictions came through an order from the Ministry of Home Affairs on May 1, which, even as it extended the lockdown for a second time to May 17, spelt out ‘new guidelines based on the risk profiling of the districts⁸.’ While interstate travel, functioning of educational institutions, public gatherings and similar ‘high-contact’ activities remained off limits, the order allowed for zone-dependent operation of specific businesses, movement of goods, and plying of public and private transport vehicles, all subject to some restrictions. Even in the red zones, there were relaxations, including allowing construction activities and shop-openings in rural areas.

Infections, meanwhile, continued to rise. On May 7, confirmed cases crossed 50,000, then climbed steadily to 67,152, prompting Modi to ‘hint’ on May 11 at a third extension⁹, with more concessions. The next day, Modi addressed the nation to announce a two-billion-rupees economic stimulus package. This, he said, amounted to ‘10% of India’s GDP’ and would form part of Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, a campaign for self-reliance that his government had been promoting. The government announced more details of the package over the next few days. On May 17, expectedly, the lockdown was extended to May 31 – an announcement that was tempered with further news on the economic package.

As the third extension began, there were further easing of restrictions, which included inter-state traffic and delivery of nonessential items by ecommerce companies. On May 19, India reported 100,000 confirmed cases. Five days later, India restarted domestic air travel, even as it recorded its highest daily total of 6,977 new infections. By now the nation had far surpassed China in terms of infections, and with that overnight spike, which took its total infections to 138,845 and death toll to 4,021, India became the 10th worst-affected nation.

⁷<https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-03-01..latest&facet=none&country=USA~GBR~CAN~DEU~ITA~IND&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&Metric=Confirmed+cases&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=false&Color+by+test+positivity=false>

⁸<https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHA%20Order%20Dt.%201.5.2020%20to%20extend%20Lockdown%20period%20for%202%20weeks%20w.e.f.%204.5.2020%20with%20new%20guidelines.pdf>

⁹<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lockdown-may-be-extended-beyond-may-17-say-sources-pm-asks-states-to-share-plan-for-gradual-easing-of-restrictions-2227132>

On May 30, Modi marked the first anniversary of his second term in office with a letter to all Indians, in which he invoked national pride and strived to present India in a better light in its battle against the virus than Western nations. Referring to India as a 'country besieged with problems amidst a vast population and limited resources' and to 'powers with great economic resources and state-of-the-art healthcare systems,' he wrote: 'Many feared that India will become a problem for the world when Corona hits India. But today, through sheer confidence and resilience, you have transformed the way the world looks at us. You have proven that the collective strength and potential of Indians is unparalleled compared even to the powers and prosperous countries of the world.' On May 31, India ended its lockdown. Its confirmed cases had risen to 182,143, and the death toll crossed 5,000 overnight.

From June 1, a series of 'unlock phases' began. The nation saw Unlock 1.0 in June, and 2.0 and 3.0 in July. Lockdowns were now limited to containment zones, which each state could decide on, and each phase brought more ease in restrictions. While such relaxation typically accompanied a corresponding drop in COVID infection rates in other nations, that was not the case in India. Total cases grew exponentially, from 190,535 on June 1 to 566,840 by the end of the month, and continued to do so into July, when India overtook Russia as the world's second-most affected nation. On July 29, the government announced Unlock 3.0, and a month later Unlock 4.0, which extended into September. On September 16, with a record 97,894 cases, India's COVID cases peaked. September 17 was Modi's 70th birthday. He tweeted to the nation¹⁰: 'Since many have asked, what is it that I want for my birthday, here is what I seek right now: Keep wearing a mask and wear it properly. Follow social distancing. Remember "Do Gaj Ki Doori." Avoid crowded spaces. Improve your immunity. Let us make our planet healthy.'

By the time guidelines for Unlock 5.0 were announced on September 30, COVID cases in India stood at 6.23 million, second only to the 7.22 million in the US. On October 3, India crossed another grim milestone: the national death toll surpassed 100,000, to reach 100,848, placing it behind only Brazil (144,680) and the United States (212,373). At this point, as the Hindustan Times reported, India is 'biggest contributor to the global death tally – one in every five fatalities (19%) in the world in the past week has come from India'. By October 15, India's infection count reached 7.31 million, from where it climbed to 7.60 million (October 20), then to 7.86 million (October 25). The government, in response arguably, made no new changes in the fresh unlock guidelines issued for November, but called for an 'urgent need to instil a sense of discipline and ownership amongst citizens' and promotion of 'COVID-19 appropriate behaviour'¹¹. Through November and into the Unlock 7.0 in December, infections and deaths continued to rise. By now, though, this was at a progressively diminishing rate: after the peak in September when the seven-day average of daily cases stood at 92,831, by December 15 it had

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1306671426930225152>

¹¹ https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHADODt_27102020toallChiefSecretaries_27102020.pdf

reduced to 25,403¹². By December 31, this had fallen to 18,943. The total number of COVID cases in India, however, stood at 10.27 million, with a death toll of 148,738.

World's biggest vaccine drive – and the big second wave

The second wave began in India in March 2021, later than it did in Europe, UK, and the US, overlapping with – and impacting – the world's biggest vaccine drive. India's vaccination rollout, which involved more than 200,000 vaccinators and 370,000 team members, sought to fully inoculate '300 million people, almost the equivalent to the population of the US' by August¹³. Preparing the ground for this, Modi tweeted early in January: 'On 16th January, India takes a landmark step forward in fighting COVID-19. Starting that day, India's nation-wide vaccination drive begins. Priority will be given to our brave doctors, healthcare workers, frontline workers including Safai Karamcharis¹⁴.' On January 16, Modi launched the programme with a 35-minute nationally televised video address¹⁵, in which he underlined how remarkable it was that India had not one but two 'Made in India' vaccines: Covishield and Covaxin. He sought to mitigate vaccine hesitancy, particularly the news that Covaxin had not completed clinical trials, by framing it as propaganda people should be aware of. Scientists were absolutely sure of vaccine safety, Modi said, and inoculation will ensure a 'decisive victory' over coronavirus¹⁶.

As the vaccination drive got underway, the outlook in India looked positive. Daily caseload had reduced to 15,000 and deaths to 170. This picture improved further in the next weeks, and the Indian Health Minister Harsh Vardhan declared the country to be 'in the endgame' of the pandemic. India also began exporting vaccine doses 'as part of its much-vaunted "vaccine diplomacy"'¹⁷. By mid-February, India had administered 8 million vaccine doses¹⁸.

But through the second half of February and into March, the situation changed – almost imperceptibly at first, then with a swiftness impossible to ignore. By March 31, the daily caseload had risen to 73,412, deaths to 439; and then to more than 219,155 infections and 1,227 deaths by mid-April. In response, several states and Union Territories – including the national capital of New Delhi, and the state of Maharashtra, which houses India's financial hub of Mumbai – reimposed lockdown measures. The situation in the populous New Delhi, which reported 25,500 fresh cases in a single day, was particularly critical, with no hospital space available and acute shortage of oxygen. As Delhi Chief

¹² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/india>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/16/india-begins-worlds-biggest-covid-vaccination-programme>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1347876066291896322>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/live/BegT5qwlafQ?si=QKm9z3XeguDPZ9no>

¹⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indias-coronavirus-vaccination-drive-based-on-humanitarian-important-principles-pm-modi/articleshow/80298727.cms>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56771766>

¹⁸ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-covid-vaccinations?time=earliest..2021-09-28&country=BRA~RUS~USA~IND~CHN~GBR>

Minister Arvind Kejriwal said, 'Our health systems have reached its limit¹⁹.' A few days later, on April 22, India recorded 314,835 new COVID cases, the highest one-day tally anywhere in the world²⁰. Across the country, and especially in areas critically affected, the vaccination programme slowed down. Several states reported vaccine shortage, and India 'severely curtailed' export of doses, triggering, as the New York Times reported, a 'setback for vaccination drives in many other countries.'²¹

Modi's crisis messaging, meanwhile, presented updates on the measures the government was undertaking to mitigate the second wave, and, like in previous instances, offered an upbeat picture of the battle against the virus. Thus, on April 20, in a national address, he assured the government was working to ensure 'that every needy person gets oxygen in time', and urged state governments to 'save the country' from another lockdown²². Modi also announced that, in view of the second wave, from May 1 all adults aged more than 19 years will be eligible for vaccination.

On May 1, daily new cases crossed 400,000, four times more than the previous peak (Ratna, George and Aliani 2021), and another global record. Deaths, too, rose by 3,523, taking the toll since the pandemic began to 211,853²³. In the next weeks, in no small measure owing to the re-energised attention to COVID-appropriate behaviour, the national caseload began to drop. By May 20, daily new cases had fallen to well below 300,000, and by the month end, to 127,510. By June 21, daily new infections fell to about 60,000, exhibiting waning effects of the second wave, though it would be November before daily infection tally reduced to below 10,000.

Living with the virus

Like everything else with COVID-19, it is challenging to pinpoint when India began its transition into the endemic stage. Echoes of its acceptance of COVID-19 as a disdainful but defeated cohabitant who the nation would have to put up with could be heard quite early in 2020, after India launched its vaccination drive and declared a decisive victory over the virus. Though this euphoria subsided as the second wave engulfed the country, as infections began to drop again, and the combined effect of vaccination and a high recovery rate brought about a level of immunity among the population, it looked like India was approaching a more stable situation. WHO chief scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan suggested as much in late August²⁴, when she said India was moving to a stage where there is 'low level of transmission', unlike the "exponential growth and peaks that we saw a few months ago.'

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/world/india-delhi-lockdown.html>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56826645>

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/world/asia/india-covid-vaccine-astrazeneca.html>

²² <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/pm-narendra-modi-address-to-nation-on-covid19-situation-live-updates-1793170-2021-04-20>

²³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/india-posts-record-daily-rise-covid-19-cases-401993-2021-05-01/>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-58302480>

In contrast to its earlier alacrity to proclaim a win, the Modi government adopted a cautious communicative stance this time around. Not only were the messages from the government more muted, Modi fired Harsh Vardhan – the federal health minister who had said India was in the ‘end game’ of the pandemic on March 7, and then insisted that the ‘situation is under control’ as infections spiked – in a cabinet reshuffle.

Modi’s own communication, during this period, continued to pay tribute to frontline workers and promoted vaccination. In an episode of *Mann Ki Baat*, a radio programme he hosts, Modi addressed vaccine hesitancy, refuting rumours and encouraging citizens to take the vaccine immediately²⁵. In between about the Tokyo Olympics, importance of yoga, and other political communication – by now Modi’s social media feed had moved away from COVID-centredness to general matters – Modi tweeted on June 21: ‘Today’s record-breaking vaccination numbers are gladdening. The vaccine remains our strongest weapon to fight COVID-19. Congratulations to those who got vaccinated and kudos to all the front-line warriors working hard to ensure so many citizens got the vaccine. Well done India!’²⁶ A few days later, when India surpassed the US in the total number of vaccines administered, Modi retweeted an image sent out by the Ministry of Health, which sought to present him as the author of a successful vaccine campaign that had beaten a great world power, with a salutary text: ‘India’s vaccination drive keeps gaining momentum! Congrats to all those who are driving this effort. Our commitment remains vaccines for all, free for all’²⁷.

The beginning of the ‘living with the virus phase’, thus, had a focus on rejuvenating the vaccine drive hampered by the second wave. On August 7, with infections below 40,000, India had administered 500 million doses²⁸. The vaccine drive received a further boost a month later, when, using the occasion of Modi’s birthday for a special effort, India administered a record 25 million shots²⁹.

The next months saw further easing of the second-wave curbs in key cities, with public transport, including in the heavily affected national capital, returning to a new normal. On October 21, the cumulative vaccine doses administered in India crossed 1 billion, surpassed only by China. India had also reopened to foreign tourists. Over the next two months a sense of new normalcy settled across the nation, and India celebrated three major festivals without succumbing to a third wave. In November, when the Omicron variant emerged, federal and state authorities were quick to respond with contained curbs.

²⁵ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mann-ki-baat-key-points-from-pm-narendra-modi-address-1819916-2021-06-27>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1406979870026985480>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1409388524948758532>

²⁸ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-indias-journey-to-1-billion-covid-19-shots-see-timeline-2582719>

²⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/asia/india-covid-vaccine-modi-birthday.html>

The new year saw another wave of infections, a fivefold increase in the first week of January³⁰, owing to Omicron. As Al Jazeera noted, 'haunted by the memories of the second wave', authorities were quick to bring in – and execute – restrictions. In New Delhi, for instance, an overnight curfew was imposed, with weekend movement restrictions following. As a result, infections began to decline nationally by the third week of January – from a peak of more than 300,000 new cases around January 21, it dropped to less than 5,000 by early March. Modi's COVID communication, during this wave, had settled into a predictable pattern: messages that paid tribute to health workers, underlined the need for continued COVID research, and stressed the importance of COVID-appropriate behaviour such as vaccination and masks.

By July 18, India had administered 2 billion inoculation doses³¹, the second country to do so after China. Though the vaccination drive had missed its first deadline of universal adult vaccination by 31 December 2021, this was indeed a laudable global landmark, particularly given the challenges to accessibility in several states. At this point, according to the health ministry, 98 per cent of adults had received at least one dose and 90 per cent had been fully vaccinated. The comparatively low levels of transmission witnessed over months was also an indication that India now had the mechanisms to live with the virus.

Analysis and conclusion

A rich body of evidence in the intertwined scholarship on risk, disaster, and public health crisis attests to the centrality of effective crisis communication in mitigating national and global emergencies (see Hyland-Wood et al 2021, Fakhrudin et al 2020, Siergrist and Zingg 2014, Matthews and Thorsen 2020, among others). Warren and Lofstedt (2021), who builds on this idea specifically around the pandemic, underlines *messenger attributes* (who communicates, and the trust and legitimacy they have among the audiences), *consistency and clarity* of the messages (the extent to which the government succeeded in ensuring the public knew what was required of them, and why), *the communication method* (whether it is a one-way communication or a dialogic approach), and *message attributes* (how the messages are framed, including emotive content such as guilt, fear, and humour) as critical elements in ensuring the communicative efficacy. These elements work together, they argue, to promote public confidence in the approaches taken by the government, and, by extension, compliance to COVID measures.

In terms of political legitimacy, Modi had a decisive advantage over other world leaders. Since his election in 2014, he has emerged as a 'presidential-style prime minister', dominating Indian democracy with a brand of muscular personality politics. His popularity had stood at 63% approval in

³⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/7/india-another-covid-catastrophe-cases-hit-7-month-high>

³¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56345591>

2017³². By January 2020, as the pandemic began, it had reached 76%³³. This high rating continued through all phases of the pandemic under analysis, soaring to 83% in April 2020, dipping in the phase of easing restrictions corresponding to the second wave, but never falling below the 60% mark³⁴, to end – or rather retain – the highest approval rating of 76% among *all* world leaders in the Morning Consult's global survey (December 2023). To some extent this high popularity, particularly its sharp rise as India locked down, could be explained as the 'crisis effect': the tendency of citizenry to 'rally around the flag' during extreme situations (Enria et al 2021, Chatagnier 2021). In practical terms, this allowed the government to approach the pandemic with considerable crisis communication capital. Not only had Modi by now emerged as 'the Superman' (Guha 2022), a 'Hindu strongman' who would do whatever was necessary to protect the nation, he had cultivated a political environment – and the corresponding communicative machinery – that would sustain his political and public trust advantages. His governance style, which exhibits 'extraordinary displays of public narcissism' (Guha 2022), also meant that though there were various federal agencies involved in the crisis communication across different phases, Modi arguably continued as the prime messenger, the ultimate source of all high-level pandemic messages to most of the citizenry.

What can one say about the *clarity and consistency* of the government's messaging? As evidenced earlier, a cursory look at Modi's pandemic messages presents a mode of crisis communication that often hits the 'right' notes: calm, in control, a leader speaking to his people with empathy and consideration, providing updates, applauding frontline workers, and promoting COVID-appropriate behaviours. This was particularly true in the initial phase, when fears of the new 'disease' was at the maximum. While there is good evidence that Modi's consistent 'nudges' on lockdown, mask-wearing and social distancing created a herd effect', promoting pandemic good practices (Debnath & Bardhan 2020), and his persistent promotion of vaccines played a critical role in India's high inoculation figures, contradictions begin to emerge as one takes a deeper, contextualised look at the timeline. As argued elsewhere (Sreedharan 2021), the Modi government's attention was on electoral firefighting in the early days, and initial responses seemed largely to signal the government was in control of the situation and working hard with states to coordinate a national approach. Its communication, particularly relating to the imposition of the lockdown, left severe gaps (Mehra 2020, Baru 2020, Nankani 2021), and there was little evidence of coordination or consultations in real terms. The financial provisions made by the federal government – presented as '10% of GDP' in May 2020 – proved to be inaccurate and grossly inadequate. Furthermore, no intergovernmental framework emerged, critical for policy coordination and fiscal transfers to deal with a pandemic (Harikrishnan & Chakraborty, 2020). In other words, the language of empathy and consideration that coated Modi's

³²<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-today-mood-of-the-nation-poll-10-big-takeaways-1030121-2017-08-17>

³³<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-29/modi-s-soaring-popularity-lets-him-forget-pre-virus-india-woes?leadSource=uverify%20wall>

³⁴<https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/pm-narendra-modi-approval-rating-coronavirus-morning-consult-cvoter#read-more>

crisis messages to his 'underprivileged brothers and sisters' failed to translate into tangible programmes for their wellbeing.

The gulf between governmental 'walk' and 'talk' widened further as the first wave of the pandemic subsided and India's vaccination drive began. If, in the first phase of the pandemic, Modi could be seen 'modelling' COVID-appropriate behaviours (for instance, his message on March 4 2020 he would not participate in Holi festival programmes), such sensibilities swiftly suffocated under a rising tide of political hubris that began to emerge when it looked like India had 'beaten' the virus. Thus, with affiliate ministerial accounts praising his wise leadership for delivering the nation from the hands of COVID-19 (Jain et al 2021), Modi embarked on a mission to project India's 'success' to the world. One illustration of this was at the World Economic Forum in January 2021 when Modi offered 'a long, gloating boast about India's infrastructure and Covid-preparedness' (Roy 2021). More blatant dissonance emerged in the months after. Throughout February and March, despite warnings from scientists of a looming second wave, Modi addressed, mask-less and with scant respect for social distancing, large political rallies (Ellis-Petersen & Harding, 2021). And in April, he was accused of being a 'super spreader' after he allowed mass gatherings to go ahead at a major Hindu festival, at a time when daily cases were surging towards 200,000 (The Wire 2021).

This dissonance also speaks to the Modi government's *communication method*. As alluded to earlier, Modi had normalised a style of autocratic governance in the world's largest democracy. It is hardly surprising, then, that the decisions on the pandemic continued in that same style. The 'world's strictest lockdown' in March 2020, true to this spirit³⁵, emanated from the prime minister, who did not consult 'key ministries and states' or 'key experts or government departments' (BBC 2021). This centralised style of functioning could be further seen behind his controversial and now-much-criticised decisions in the run-up to the second wave (Alluri 2021). As Guha (2022) concludes after an analysis of the prime minister, 'Modi does not consult cabinet ministers about important government decisions and makes sure that all credit for state welfare schemes accrues entirely to him. The government is run largely, if not entirely, from the Prime Minister's Office, which is staffed by unelected officials personally loyal to Modi, several from his home state of Gujarat.'

This brings us to *message attributes*. Here, as previously mentioned, we find Modi adopting a reassuring tone ('prepare but not panic'), stressing the need for solidarity against the virus and 'framing the crisis as an "us" versus "it" situation'. While federal ministries and departments under him disseminated public service videos, regulations and COVID policies through multiple channels and languages to address the nation's information needs (Purohit & Mehta, 2020), Modi's personal social media channels amplified these communications, often with a personal message. In the beginning, his messages sought to balance urgency with calm; later, as the pandemic lost its initial burden of uncertainty, it settled into a pattern of updates of government's COVID-actions, pep talk, tributes, and

³⁵ Here, it must be mentioned this was not the first time the Modi government had used sudden announcements to keep the nation off-guard and steamroll critical decisions over his opposition.

positivity about successes against the virus. A particularly gifted orator and savvy social media user with access to considerable technological resources, Modi utilised tweets, radio, and televised addresses to reach his audiences. He struck empathetic and emotional notes and told 'moral stories' to drive home his message of COVID-appropriate behaviours. Modi also invoked national pride frequently, throughout all phases of the pandemic, even as his own ministers heaped praise on him for his wise leadership (Jain et al, 2021). While this arguably helped propagate favourable health behaviours, it could also be seen as a continuing political tactic – an illustration of his 'public narcissism' (Guha 2022) – at personal and national reputation management.

As we have seen, the Modi government leveraged his popularity to help instil public confidence in the pandemic measures his government put forth. This was particularly true of the initial phase when restrictions were imposed. However, the dissonance between rhetoric and action, stemming from an autocratic style of governance that prioritised politics over people, hindered the overall effectiveness of his response. It is true that among world leaders, Modi arguably had more of a challenging task, given the complexities and vulnerabilities of India. It is true, too, that he had advantages they did not have: not only was Modi the most experienced politician among his counterparts, he enjoyed considerable communicative capital throughout the pandemic phases. That notwithstanding, Modi's political hubris and posturing marred critical decision-making moments, leading to gaps in risk reduction and COVID compliance, reducing what could truly have been a world-leading case study to a dubious profile on the WHO dashboard, curiously captioned, as it were, by the personal epithet of being the world's most popular leader.

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