From Democracy to Dystopia: Highlighting the Covid Pandemic in India.

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Abstract

With the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, the inadequacies of several governments lay forth in front of our very own eyes. This annotation outlines the evolution of the slow, yet steady demise of democracy and how the advent of a global pandemic might as well be the last nail in the coffin of an age-old system. The composition also highlights the failures and shortcomings of several large democracies around the world during the pandemic, with special reference to India and how the current government failed to establish proper healthcare facilities which in turn created pandemonium, wreaked havoc and left behind a lasting impression in the hearts and minds of the citizens. Special references have been provided to delineate how the pandemic has created a further rift between the rich and the poor. Thus, rendering the connotation 'equalizer' null and void. The paper will try to highlight how the measures taken by the Indian Government in the garb of dealing with the pandemic walked the dubious path of turning the largest democracy into a dystopia. The method will be qualitative, especially focusing on discourse analysis.

Keywords: Democracy, Dystopia, Government, Pandemic, rich, poor, 'equalizer'.

Introduction

In the wake of 2020, when the first COVID cases were detected in India, the evening of 24 March was indeed an evocation etched in our minds as Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared on National television announcing an immediate nationwide lockdown leaving millions of people hopeless, hapless and stranded. As time progressed, it was evident by the scenes that India had plunged into what was one of the most major humanitarian crises since the Partition in 1947 (Nilsen, 2021). The abandonment of its poor and marginalised, while vehemently censuring others for its rapid spread and the overall influx of racial discrimination felt across the subcontinent were trademarks of ill-governance and the ill-- effects of the pandemic on the nation as a whole. It was evident that while some lives were to be protected, others were indeed dispensable (Mander, 2021).

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." (Lincoln, 1863). However, the concept of democracy in modern times remains misinterpreted and misused by dictators, single-party regimes and military coup leaders who assert their dominance over the people after being bestowed the crown of democracy (US Embassy Seoul, 2017).

India is the world's largest democracy (Maharashtra Right to Information Act, 2002), though it did not come to be so from the very beginning. India was under the iron fist of her colonisers from 1858 till she finally gained her freedom in 1947. Thereafter, the citizens of India were given the right to vote and elect their leaders irrespective of their caste, creed, religion or gender.

However, with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis of democracy has ignited across the

globe. Since its outbreak, the plight of democracy and human rights has been sealed and has dwindled in 80 countries across the globe (Repucci and Spilowitz, 2020).

Governments have tackled this battle head-first by imposing lockdowns, silencing their critics, abusing their powers and also undermining the healthcare system and washing their hands off of accountability. As the years progressed and COVID-19 evolved with time, we saw that a major focus of management shifted towards exploring the biological cure for the virus and the social effects got largely side-lined. If history is a testament to anything, then it can be noticed that as often as such pandemics have taken place, the psychological aspect of the disease more often than not has been largely neglected. Mass hysteria and agitation among individuals co-existing in society lead to discrimination based on social class, religion and ethnicity. The following have been the effects of the pandemic, a) lead to societal stigma and certain minority populations being targeted; b) prejudice towards members from outside a certain social group; c) Outbreaks such as COVID-19 have proven to alter certain human behaviours and increase illogicality and induce irrational or aggressive behaviour and the trend of victim blaming became rampant; d) In any democracy, the freedom of the press plays a very important role and when this right is curtailed, misinformation and misinterpretation of news takes place which can spread hatred like wild fire. The Coronavirus, more than once has been labelled as "Kung Flu" and "Chinese Virus" thus sparking off worldwide tension and blame; e) Every nation has tackled COVID in its own way, and India being a socio-culturally and densely populated country has created certain "outgroups" (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021) and has successfully demarcated and established "the other".

Democracy to Dystopia, understanding the Covid situation in India and the creation of "the other".
The "state of exception" is an eminent concept in the philosophy of law put forward by German philosopher Carl Schmitt and later used in a modern context by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. It defines a special condition in which a juridical order is suspended due to an emergency or a crisis which has the potential to threaten the state. When such a situation may arise, the sovereign, that is the executive power prevails over the others and may devise and enforce laws that may be oppressive and discriminatory in nature. The point of notability here is that the "state of exception" does not impact all citizens equally, more often than not, it targets certain groups of people in the process creating several outgroups (Philosophy Tube, 2016). The war against COVID-19 in India was a primary façade to wreak havoc against the Muslims, the North-eastern people and the migrant labourers. Hinduism and Islam are the two most prevalent religions in the subcontinent of India and have a complex yet co-existing relationship marred by periodic clashes such as the clash during the Partition of 1947, the Kashmir violence in 1984 and the 2002 Gujrat riots to name a few.

The enemies in the war against Covid-19 evolved in a manner as did the virus. The first enemy was a direct product of Islamophobia which was further stirred up by the current government in power and the news houses which broadcasted that the Muslims were the "super-spreaders" of the virus and brought nothing but harm to the table. Connotations such as "Corona Jihad" and "Muslim means terrorist" were being thrown around on Twitter (FPJ Web Desk, 2020). The root cause of the unrest was when the people who had attended a large gathering of Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary movement in New Delhi tested positive for the coronavirus. The Tablighi Jamaat was blamed for organising an event of such a magnitude in the middle of March, ignoring the threats of the spread of the virus. The matter gained a more global outlook when one of India's most reputable newspaper houses, the Times of India went to the extent of linking the Tablighi Jamaat with terrorism (The Times of India, 2020). Saugato Datta, a

behavioural and developmental scientist rightfully hinted towards a sampling bias by stating that since people from one cluster have been tested at such high rates, the overall testing is lower and that it is hardly surprising that a large portion of the country's positivity rate is attributed to this cluster. Rumours were framed and spread through social media platforms branding Muslims as "coronavirus terrorists" (The Guardian, 2020) and blaming them for spitting into foods served at restaurants and coughing into the faces of other people all to spread the virus faster across the nation. A virtual battleground was created with the circulation of Hashtags such as #CoronaJihad, #BioJihad and #TablighiJamaatVirus (Biswas, 2020). It is worth noting the fact that while Muslims were being blamed for their gatherings at the Tablighi Jamaat, nearly 1.5 million people were allowed to enter the country without proper screening between January and March (Apoorvanand, 2020). A blind eye was turned toward the mass gatherings by other communities and individuals. The Indian Parliament was in session throughout this period and continued till as late as 18th March when the President was seen hosting a lavish breakfast with several prominent Members of Parliament and other personalities of eminence were spotted where most of them failed to maintain proper COVID protocols (Dasgupta, 2020). This event begs us to raise the question, "Does COVID-19 not affect the rich and affluent?".

Several other religious, political and social calls were also fulfilled at this point which somehow conveniently failed to catch the eyes of the media houses, such as the gathering of 3,755 Sikh pilgrims in Nanded, Maharashtra which was followed by a sharp spike in the number of cases as the pilgrims returned in-situ (Siddique, 2020). Among others, there were rampant chants of 'Jai Sri Ram' as hundreds of devotees flocked temples in various parts of West Bengal on the occasion of Ram Navami on the 2nd of April, while in the process violated every COVID protocol in the book (Jahnavi, 2021). Yet again on 16th April, several people joined the Siddhalingeswara temple chariot festival at Chitapur village, Karnataka (The Times of India, 2020). The Jamaat meeting at the inception of the deadly second wave in India was without question injudicious and irresponsible on the part of the organisers and indeed could have been avoided, but none the less the obstinance and incompetence of the Indian government to perceive the seriousness of the matter and ramp up their medical facilities while declaring a medical emergency left the world in awe. The actions and narratives set forth by the ruling party and prevalent media houses across the country were an entrapment for consolidating the enemy and in the process demarcating the existence of "the other".

With the advancement in technology, news spreads fast and rumours spread even faster. A surge in racial discrimination was felt across the world when former US President Donald J. Trump refused to call the virus by its designated name, instead chose a vile and racial outlook by connoting the term "China Virus" (Kurtzman, 2021) or "Wuhan Virus". A butterfly effect to this action was felt 7,500 miles away in India when the second "other" was finally identified and this time the hate spread completely based on racial discrimination. As China battled the global abuse and Sinophobia over the origins of COVID-19, north-eastern people residing in India had to endure extreme harassment and violence over their physical appearances. According to Subhas Chakma, the RRAG Director (2020) these incidents were the tip of the iceberg as India's Mongoloid looking people had been facing discrimination daily and this fails to break the news (Dixit, 2020). Terms like "corona", "Chinese" and "chinki" were concocted and thrown towards them. They were spat on and forcibly quarantined even when they failed to show any symptoms. They were blatantly denied access to housing complexes and other places of social gathering. On March 16th, 2020 Rizin Dorjee (74) and his daughter Tsering Yangzom were denied access to a Mulund Society in Mumbai as they were racially stereotyped and the residents there thought that they were Chinese. He was

unlawfully detained by the security guard who thought that he might be infected with Corona (Dixit, 2020).

The effects of the sudden lockdown on March 24th, 2020 left deep gashes in the Indian economic and social scenario with special ill effects on India's poor and downtrodden who from the very beginning have been severely oppressed. Without the proper food, shelter or health care facilities India's poor were left to fend for themselves as an exodus starred into their eyes. The lack of proper transportation forced many of them to undertake an arduous journey entirely by foot. Several among them died of starvation, dehydration, heatstroke, andas many as 8733 workers died on the railway tracks between January 2020 and December 2020 (Scroll, 2021) and 198 desolate migrant workers fell victim to the rampant road accidents between March 25th 2020 and May 31st 2020 while returning home during whatproved to be one of the strictest lockdowns imposed across the world (Banerji, 2020).

However, the prosperous strata of the society seemed to not only have survived but thrive in these conditions. While the poor migrant workers toiled to secure a seat on a train, the privileged diaspora was returning home by government-arranged aeroplanes and many too chartered their flights. The fortunate among the migrant workers who were able to secure a seat for themselves on a train faced several other issues. Several trains lacked properfood and water arrangements, the lavatories were unusable and the trains very conveniently would either reach their destination hours or even sometimes days later or inexplicably lose their way or end up somewhere else altogether (News 18, 2020). With some luck and a lot of effort when these workers finally reached the borders of their respective states, they were stopped and tagged as "super-spreaders" and denied access to their land. And thus, India had finally marked and labelled her last "other".

The binding factor among "the other" is that they were all at some point labelled as "superspreaders" which created an influx of hatred across the country, be it in the form of Islamophobia, racism or downright apathy towards migrant workers, every last one groupwas bound by the crucible negligence of the Indian Government. And thus, an enemy wascreated at every stage of the pandemic which in turn might as well have transformed the world's largest democracy into a modern-day bureaucratic dystopia.

The soaring bridge between India's rich and poor

The average privileged Indian grew exceedingly comfortable with the situation that prevailedin India throughout the tenure of what was indeed one of the strictest lockdowns imposed across the world (Hindustan Times, 2022). The very first measures adopted by the

The government frequently washed and sanitised hands and maintained a minimum of six feet distance at any given point in time. At first glance, this policy seemed extremely simple and quite harmless but as soon as this was theory put into practice, it took a drastic turn. In a subcontinent where 68.8% of the people live in abstract poverty (SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE, n.d.) these measures were tailored only for those whose incomes could justify this expenditure and not for the ones who could barely afford one square meal, leaving their lives unprotected and dispensable. And then, without any prior notice Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared on national television and declared a countrywide lockdown leaving everyone awestruck and gave a billion people merely four hours to preparebefore enforcing the closure on a magnitude that no one had seen prior and this ordeal wouldultimately continue till the 31st of May only after which scattered unlocking took place. This policy entirely abandoned the poor and played in favour of the high-income strata of society. Daily waged workers or "din mojuris" such as rag-pickers, rickshaw pullers and street vendors were reduced to surviving on alms. Rakesh Kumar, a migrant electrician in

Bengaluru spoke up out of utter defeat and despair when the lockdown had turned him into a beggar. He describes standing in long queues for food every day and then calls out the government for not providing the poor with any meals and says that "the food we got was from charities." He further proceeds to say that the locals get the first preference and "Being a migrant becomes a curse" (Srivastava and Nagaraj, 2020). Anecdotes of death filled the columns of newspapers but that which projected the most were those of child migrant workers. An eye-opener was the death of Jamlo Madkam, a 12-year-old Adivasi girl from Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh who worked in the chilli fields of Telangana. On the 15th of April, she along with 11 other labourers undertook a hundred-kilometre journey through the forest on the third day when she complained of stomach pain and headache shortly after which just an hour away from her village she collapsed and died (Thakur and Painkra, 2020).

The death of Madkam simultaneously sparked another debate, the issue of child labour which is extremely prevalent in India. The United Nations International Labour Organisation(UNILO) estimates that there are nearly 10 million child workers aged between 5 to 14. The Indian labour law bans the employment of anyone under the age of 15 (Government of India,n.d.) but allows children to support their families financially in their business outside the stipulated school hours. This provision is exploited by employers and if fallen into the wronghands, by child traffickers. This had left millions of people without a messiah and further kindled by the lack of support from the government, they began drawing out loans at high interests to survive while in turn falling deeper into debt and becoming soft victims to bonded labour's most prevalent form of labour (Nagaraj, 2020).

Even the darkest clouds have a silver lining and among all these cruelties acts of individual sympathy tend to shine bright. One such story is that of a migrant worker who was stranded in Bharatpur, Rajasthan with his differently-abled son and was desperate to return to his home town Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh undertaking a journey of 250 kilometres on a stolen bicycle from outside the home of Sahab Singh. Later that morning Singh found a note on his porch which read, "Main aapki cycle lekar jaa raha hoon. Ho sake toh mujhe maaf kar dena ji, kyunki mere paas koi saadhan nahi tha. Mera ek bachcha hai uske liye aisa karna pada kyunkiwoh viklang hai, chal nahi sakta. Humein Bareilly tak jaana hai." And was signed, "Aap ka kasoorwar, ek yatra, majboor ek mazdoor, Mohammed Iqbal Khan," (Mander, 2020, p.52) which translates to a plea for forgiveness for stealing the cycle as Khan had no other option because his son was differently abled and he was desperate to return to his home town. He even signs the letter and addresses himself as 'Your culprit, a traveller, a desperate labourer'. Singh refrains from filing an official complaint with the police.

However, not everyone suffered from this pandemic. The rich simply got richer. India added40 more billionaires to its pre-existing 142 in 2020 (Chaudhary, 2022) itself as the Second wave of the pandemic tore its way through the country, engulfing the entire healthcare system, establishing a mockery of the economy and creating a surfeit of dead bodies at every crematorium across the country. Public education is the bedrock of any democracy. It has thepower to make or break a nation. To put our nation's billionaires' wealth into perspectiveOxfam had conducted a survey, on educational inequality. The study states that One per cent taxation on the wealth of 98 billionaires in India can fund the entire annual expenditure of theDepartment of School Education under the Ministry of Education while a four per cent taxationrate on their wealth could take care of the Mid-day meal scheme of the entire country for seventeen years (The Economic Times, 2022). The health-care system in India too was washed away by the tides. Hospitals were overflowing with Covid patients and the stagnationreached its zenith when new admissions were restricted. Every last inch of the mortuaries andcrematoriums were piled with dead bodies. Several

hospitals had to dedicate themselves entirely to the sole purpose of fighting COVID-19 as an influx to which, patients with life-threatening diseases were denied admission. "My son Arun Kumar was 18 and was suffering from epilepsy since he was 10. He was sick and denied admission by a private hospital when he suffered a seizure," (Sharma, 2021). These were the words of a desolate 54-year-old fatherwho had to bury his son on the banks of the Ganges instead of cremating him. Thus, through this entire nightmare, connotations such as 'the great equalizer' were thrown around by celebrities (Owoseje, 2020) when in reality several incidents within the Indian subcontinent and outside stand as a living testament to this connotation being the farthest from the truth.

Conclusion

It is not only in India that the marginalized communities were victims of severe brutality. Theabuse of power during the "state of exception" had found light in several other countries such as Bulgaria where lockdown measures were openly discriminatory. Romany neighbourhoods were placed under severe restrictions and were even militarized with the motive of portraying Roma as a health threat (Matache and Bhabha, 2022). In the United Kingdom media reports show that people of colour and Asian descent were detained at higher rates and faced significantly more brutality than white residents (Busby and Gidda, 2020). With a plight similar to that of the Indian Muslims, in Sri Lanka, they were treated as "super-spreaders". The members of the government pinned the entire ordeal on Muslims and accused them of being the reason that the inhabitants of the land were unable to celebrate Sinhala and Tamil New Year. The World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 24th of March, 2020 produced a report of Interim guidance stating that it is safe to bury the body of the deceased infected withby virus by stipulating certain rules of guidance to be followed post the inevitable (World Health Organisation, 2020). Despite this, the Sri Lankan Muslims were ordered to cremate the bodies of those who died after contracting the virus (Shehadi, 2020)

Democracy at this point is a sinking ship, it is merely public demand that has kept it afloat. The demise of democracy had begun way before the advent of the pandemic and is likely to continue the same after the health crisis recedes as it would be difficult to make the paradigmtransition from the "new normal" back to the "old normal". If viewed through the lens of Agamben, it would be clear to notice that the world is transforming into a gigantic concentration camp and it would not be much of a surprise if the "state of exception" intensifies in the post-Covid world (Ghosh, 2021, p.96). And with the backdrop of Covid in India, given the current circumstantial evidence and pre-existing situations at hand, it can be concluded that we are slowly yet steadily, inching towards a mindless modern bureaucratic dystopia with chaos at the helm of all affairs.

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