



Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Covid-19 in India: Cracking open the social and political fault lines?
- Description:** India has been making the headlines with the world's biggest nationwide lockdown to stem the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Epidemiology aside, what is the pandemic revealing about the social, political and economic fault lines already existing in India? Health policy specialist Dr Azad Bali and political scientist Dr Pradeep Taneja join host Ali Moore to examine the impact of the coronavirus crisis on India. An Asia Institute podcast.
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.
- Pradeep Taneja:** There is debate in India where people are looking at the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis on the poor, and there is concern that more people may end up dying of poverty, and the economic consequences of the crisis than actually directly as a result of the coronavirus.
- Azad Bali:** In many parts of India, the economy's come to a grinding halt. People are laid off -- they don't have access to jobs; shops are closed; life's been upended by this crisis. It's only once the economy begins to open up and we see some signs of revival will we be able to understand what the true impact has been. But it doesn't look pleasant from where we're sitting right now.
- Ali Moore:** In this episode, COVID-19 shining a harsh light on India's social and political fault lines. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute. The Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne. In India, as in much of the world right now, the fight is on against the spread of SARS-CoV-2, more commonly known as Coronavirus. While reported numbers of infections remain comparatively low, as this podcast is recorded, India is making headlines for imposing the world's biggest nationwide lockdown to try to stem the spread of the virus within its densely populated borders. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers forced to walk back to their villages are just one piece of the pandemic's impact in India, with so many informal workers who have no economic safety net, a public health system under strain, even at the best of times, extensive misinformation and scapegoating along religious lines, India faces enormous challenges in the time of coronavirus.
- So what is the pandemic revealing about the social, political and economic fault lines already apparent in India? How is India responding? And are there lessons from the crisis? And if, as we often hear, the world will not look the same when the pandemic is over, what does that mean for India? Joining me



to discuss these questions and many more, our Ear to Asia regular guest, political scientists, Dr. Pradeep Taneja of the University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Sciences, and health policy researcher, Dr. Azad Bali of the School of Politics & International Relations and the Crawford School of Public Policy at Australia National University. Welcome Bali and welcome back Pradeep.

Pradeep Taneja: Thank you Ali.

Azad Bali: Hi Ali.

Ali Moore: Let's start with a state of play question, if you like. We're certainly not epidemiologists but Pradeep, can you give us a general sense of how India is being affected by coronavirus?

Pradeep Taneja: In relative terms or per capita terms, India is not as badly affected as many other countries, particularly Italy or Spain or the United States. But it is something which is very concerning because India has a very large population with a lot of very poor people living in conditions which are far from sort of ideal. So the worry in India is that, if this pandemic spreads more rapidly, then it could become very difficult to control it. So for example, in Bombay, the largest slum in Asia in Dharavi, already there are 100 cases there. Both the state and the central government in India are very concerned that if this continues to spread at that rate, then this could become a very serious problem. So at the moment in India, for example at the end of the third week in April, there are only about 16,000 cases, which is not as bad as many of the European countries or the United States. But it has the potential to become much worse.

Ali Moore: Bali, are you surprised by the low numbers to date?

Azad Bali: To some extent, yes. Because when I initially thought of this pandemic hitting India, I was really apprehensive that this might really blow out of proportion, and there will be widespread transmission. But as Pradeep says, we have just about 16,000 cases and the death rate, or fatality rate is much lower. We have about 500 deaths. Even more surprising is that the average growth rate of the disease is around 5.5%. What that means is that, the total infections double every 11 days or so. So the impact is not as severe as it is in other parts of the world.

Ali Moore: Can we trust the numbers, Bali?

Azad Bali: Don't see any reason to mistrust the data. There are discrepancies in the data being reported through all sources. If you look at the numbers that are put out by the world health organisation, by John Hopkins University, there are slight variations in all country data.



- Ali Moore: Pradeep, do we have any sense of the timeline of the virus in India? How much do we know about how it's spread so far?
- Pradeep Taneja: Well, initially the virus in India spread relatively slowly. So for example, the first case of coronavirus, COVID-19 as it is now known, was detected at the end of January, on the 30th of January, in the State of Kerala. Where you had an Indian student, there are about 20,000 Indian students studying in China, and this a student from Kerala, he returned to Kerala from Wuhan, which is not surprising that it was the holidays there. And when he returned he tested positive to coronavirus. And then throughout February, it actually did not spread very much because in the first week of March there were only about 10 cases of coronavirus. So over a month we had from zero to only about 10. But in March, it seems to have ratcheted up a bit, and we've seen a higher rate of infection the first week of March.
- Ali Moore: Notwithstanding that high rate of infection in more recent times, Bali, why do you think that India is doing better than you might've expected?
- Azad Bali: I think there are a few reasons for this. First, India has a relatively young demographic profile. Around 28% of its population is under the age of 14, and about 67% of the population is above the age of 65. India therefore has a very young population which may have helped cushion the severity of the illness in India. Second, India is also under a lockdown, which was enforced at a very early stage in March. However, prior to the nationwide lockdown, many state governments had already introduced similar quarantine measures on a smaller scale in certain districts within their state. This was layered on with the suspension of visitors, tourists from known hotspots such as China and Iran, very early on, and a ban of all tourists coming in to India in mid-March.
- Ali Moore: And you, Bali, at the onset you did say that you were surprised, you feared when you first heard of this virus about what impact it could have in India. Tell us a little about the healthcare system, which is such a vital backdrop to this.
- Azad Bali: Sure. Any government in India's health system must recognise a large variation across states in access to healthcare, the conditions of hospitals and health outcomes. This is largely because palliative healthcare is a state responsibility. So if you take the examples of the Southern States, for example, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have a greater proportion of the elderly population, they have fatality rates of about 1.8. But you contrast that with the Northern States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, their fatality rates are 3.1, 3.2. So there's a large variation in epidemiological profiles, demographic profiles, and access to healthcare across India. Having said that, historically India has not prioritised its health system. On conventional health indicators such as mortality rates, life expectancy, India doesn't do



very well, especially when you adjust it for its levels of economic development.

The health system is largely privately organised, and by privately organised I mean that most healthcare, about two thirds of healthcare, is delivered at private hospitals and paid for by individuals themselves without access to insurance, largely through their own savings. There are public hospitals, these are free of costs and anybody can access them, but these are largely overcrowded and can't cope with the sheer demand that exists in India. In terms of what India spends on healthcare, the total spending is about 4% of GDP, that's public and private put together, but public spending is relatively small. Public spending on healthcare is about 1% of GDP, and the private sector accounts for the remaining 3%.

Ali Moore: So Pradeep, Can I ask you, if you're poor in India, do you have access to healthcare?

Pradeep Taneja: Technically you do. And particularly recently, and Bali can probably talk more about it later on about a new insurance scheme, a health insurance scheme called Ayushman, which the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has introduced recently, and that promises or shows the people of India, particularly the poor, that they are guaranteed up to about 500,000 rupees, which is about 10,000 Australian dollars of health cover in a year. And that also means that patients who belong to this category, in other words people who are living below poverty line, that they can get treatment in both public and private hospitals supported by this insurance scheme. In practise, I'm not sure how it's actually being implemented, because on paper in India there are lots of schemes that are supposed to benefit the poor, but in practise often implementation is lacking behind the intentions of the government.

So, although the government has introduced this scheme, which is commendable, in practise we will see how this is implemented, particularly with the private hospital system. Because as Bali said, the healthcare system in India is dominated by private hospitals and private healthcare providers. And this new insurance scheme that the Indian government has introduced, does say that patients can go to private hospitals. But in reality, when a poor person turns up at a private hospital in India, they're not as easily welcomed by the hospital staff as somebody who's dressed nicely, who speaks English, particularly in big cities. So the challenge is going to be ensuring that the poor who go to these hospitals and they have the proper registration as a beneficiary under the scheme, that they are actually treated properly by the private sector hospitals.

Although the public healthcare system is not very strong, particularly outside the big cities of Delhi, Bombay, or some other cities like Chandigarh, which is not as big but has a better public healthcare system, outside these



cities the public healthcare system is not that great. But Kerala, which is one of the smallest States in India, but has one of the best healthcare systems, not in terms of availability of medical technology or in terms of the grandness of the buildings of these hospitals, but in terms of the basic elementary level healthcare that Kerala has been able to provide. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India. It also has a reasonably good and efficient basic healthcare system. And this is why, although Kerala was the state where the first case of coronavirus in India was detected, as I said at the beginning, Kerala has been able to control this pandemic much better than most other states in India. And that's largely because of the more people centric, more grassroots oriented healthcare system.

Azad Bali: If I can add to what Pradeep mentioned about Kerala, what is particularly unique in Kerala's response has been the use of technology in managing the crisis, including for example, the telehealth apps, geospatial monitoring to enforce quarantines, and even the use of drones along the peripheries of containment zones in Kerala.

Ali Moore: And indeed Kerala is now being held up as a role model for India, isn't it?

Pradeep Taneja: It certainly is. I mean, and not only the Indian government and the Indian media, even the Western media is acknowledging Kerala's success in dealing with this crisis.

Ali Moore: Bali, let me ask you about that health insurance programme that's being rolled out as the country faces this epidemic. How far into the rollout is the government? How many people will benefit from that?

Azad Bali: Sure. The programme as per the mentioned is called Ayushman Bharat, and it was announced in 2018. It's a very ambitious health care programme. It envisions to be the world's largest health insurance programme covering 500 million individuals, or about 40 to 50% of India's population. Currently as of mid April, the programme has covered 110 million members. So about one fifth of what its total goal is, and this represents a significant investment in strengthening the capacity of the public health system to respond to the pandemic. In terms of the utilisation, Pradeep is exactly right. The utilisation of this programme has been more in private hospitals than in public hospitals across India.

Ali Moore: So what does that mean if this pandemic isn't able to be contained in India? If we see the sorts of rates of infections in the population that we're seeing in the United States, for example.

Azad Bali: That essentially means that individuals that didn't have access to healthcare before now have access to go into a private hospital and receive treatment, which otherwise in the past they wouldn't have been able to afford, in simple terms.



Ali Moore: Pradeep, as I said at the outset, one of the reasons India is making headlines because of this extraordinary nationwide lockdown that has now been extended, can you give us a bit of an idea of how extensive this lockdown is?

Pradeep Taneja: Okay. It was good that the Prime Minister Modi decided first to give the people of India a taste for what to expect when a lockdown is formally announced. So on the 22nd of March, there was what the prime minister called a people's curfew, Janata curfew. And that was just a one day event which started in the midnight and ended around sunset. And at the time people were wondering what the government actually is trying to do, what this one day lockdown is going to do, but as it turns out, it was designed to give people a sense of what to expect. And then two days later on the 24th of March, Prime Minister Modi went on television in his address to the nation, declared that there was going to be a three week lockdown, and he said this is going to be a total lockdown and most non-essential businesses and government offices will be closed. Private sector companies will also shut down.

So what has happened since then is that, although there was only a four hour notice given to the people, so Prime Minister Modi addressed the nation on the 24th of March at about 8:00 PM, and the lockdown came into effect at midnight. So there was very little time given to the people. And the next day of course the train stopped, the buses stopped. And if you understand the kind of volume of people that Indian public transport systems carry, whether it's the Indian railways or the road transport companies in every state in India, millions of people travel everyday by trains and buses. And all that suddenly came to a standstill and people were told to stay in their homes and don't go out unless you have to, unless for example, you have to go and see a doctor or buy medicine.

So the chemist shops are apparently open, the pharmacies are open, many of the grocery stores are open, not all day, but they're open for a few hours apparently. So people are able to go and buy their groceries. In India of course, people have always been able to buy their vegetables and fruits from vendors who come door to door. And that is still going on, although the number of vendors who are able to go and sell their fruits and vegetables door to door is rather limited at the moment. So overall in terms of the supply of food, whether it's fresh produce or bread and butter, for the middle-class it doesn't seem to be a big problem. The challenge of course has been for the poor, the poor who live in slums or who're renting accommodation in the so-called urban villages, for example in Delhi. Urban villages is a phenomenon where city has grown around villages.

And these traditional villages are now surrounded by an urban population, but they continue to live in a... There's no farming in these villages, but there is a lot of poor people particularly that are migrant workers who come from all over India. They end up finding accommodation in these villages. So



conditions in those places where a lot of migrant workers and poor people live, aren't as great. And for them, access to food, et cetera, is not as smooth as it is for the middle-class. So middle-class generally, I think by and large, is doing okay under the lockdown. But it's the poor and the itinerant workers who come from states like Bihar and UP to work in cities like Delhi or Bombay. They are the ones who are fairing rather poorly in this.

Ali Moore: And indeed we saw those extraordinary and often very distressing pictures of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers literally walking home to their villages. Bali, how could that not have been anticipated when they shut everything down? How would they not have known that was going to happen?

Azad Bali: And that's extremely puzzling. If you actually look at the volume of migrant workers, I was looking at the 2011 census, the last available census in which it was reported that India has 400 million individuals that live in a part of India that they did not grow up in. That's a relatively large number. That's around 45% of the population. But if you put that in context of what share of those have actually migrated for employment, that number is much smaller. That number's about 15 million. That's a stock of people that migrate for employment opportunities. But layered on that annually, there is a flow of about five to 10 million people that move across India in search of employment. And this includes the migrant people that Pradeep has just talked about. It's extremely puzzling that that wasn't thought through.

In the initial response, the government said, we want everybody to stay put where they are, and it really expected state governments to enforce this lockdown. Some state governments did a better job than others including Kerala and Rajasthan, but in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Delhi, this was completely not thought through.

Ali Moore: But I guess many of these itinerant workers don't have a place to stay. They stay where they work often.

Azad Bali: Yes, that's right. And with these factories shutting down, they had no other option but to head back to their villages. And after a lot of negative criticism there has been transport that is now been organised from the cities back into these villages, but you still see a large share of migrant workers stranded outside the villages and not being allowed to enter.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute. And just a note to listeners, that Asia Institute has launched a new online publication on Asia and it's societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at www.melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and many others. Plus you can catch recent



episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find it at www.melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm with health policy expert, Dr. Azad Bali of ANU, and political scientists, Dr. Pradeep Taneja of the University of Melbourne. We're talking about the COVID-19 crisis in India and how the social, political and economic fault lines there are coming under even greater pressure. We were talking about the impact on informal workers, such a key part of the workforce in India, more broadly, Bali, how big an impact do you think this pandemic is going to have on India's economy? Clearly it will depend how long it goes, but from where we sit today.

Azad Bali: The impact is estimated to be significantly large. They're multiple estimates that are out there. The most severe estimates are put out by Barclays Bank and they estimate that the current GDP growth would be 0%, and India wouldn't grow. IMF has a more optimistic estimate that economic growth would be about 1.4% or so, before picking up in the next year. But we really haven't understood the impact of the crisis across both the rural sectors as well as the urban. Because in many parts of India, the economy has come to a grinding halt. People are laid off, they don't have access to jobs. Shops are closed, lives are being upended by this crisis. It's only once the economy begins to open up and we see some signs of revival, will we be able to understand what the true impact has been. But it doesn't look pleasant from where we're sitting right now.

Ali Moore: And Pradeep, what are your thoughts? And particularly against the backdrop of an economy that was already seeing slower growth rates before this crisis, wasn't it?

Pradeep Taneja: Well, exactly. I mean, that I think is going to be the biggest challenge. Because after a period of rapid economic growth, Indian economy has actually slowed over the last few years, and that was a matter of concern for the government and of course for the business community in India. And even large business owners in India who are supposed to have close connections with the current government, even they have been saying that things need to improve, the government needed to do more. And that's before the coronavirus. Now the latest, in some of the interviews I've watched with the Indian business tycoons, they are now saying that government does need to do something to make sure that when this crisis is over, then the economy can take off easily. And therefore the conditions need to be created now, and government needs to develop a strategy to deal with the economy post the coronavirus crisis.

But at the moment, I think the problem is that Indian economy overall is a relatively small economy. For a country of 1.3 billion people, India's economy's less than \$3 trillion. Even though it grew rapidly over a period of about 10 years or so. Overall the economy is relatively small, and that

means that government revenue is also very limited. Although government has widened the tax net, so there are more people paying taxes plus the Modi government has also introduced the goods and services tax or GST, and GST has also contributed to raising government revenue. But still it's fairly limited. So the financial capacity of the Indian government to actually offer some sort of major stimulus package is very limited. And what the business community India wants is for the government to actually do make some significant investments.

Government also worries about incurring huge fiscal deficits because large fiscal deficits have a habit of creating inflation, and inflation in India has always been a major political problem for governments. And therefore I think the Modi government doesn't want to extend the fiscal deficit beyond its original targets of 3.5%, but I think it is likely to go higher because government really would have to do something about the economy. And therefore, I imagine there's going to be some more spending by the government. But the capacity of the government to actually increase government spending is relatively limited. It's very different from China, for example, where the Chinese government has been in the past able to spend a lot of money on building new railways and roads, et cetera, and therefore create new economic growth and create employment

Ali Moore: And Bali, how much firepower do you think that the Indian government has?

Azad Bali: I'm a bit more optimistic than what Pradeep mentions of India's capacity to respond to this crisis. In economic terms, the puzzling part is that India has not announced an economic support package or economic package to stimulate economic growth, apart from increasing liquidity in the market and the Central Bank cutting down interest rates. But if you look at India's overall economic numbers, the fiscal deficit is relatively under control. It's around 3.4% of GDP. And India's total debt to GDP ratio is about 65%. Again, largely considered extremely sustainable. So India does have that capacity, it now depends on the willingness of the government to come up with an innovative stimulus package which the economy needs at this stage.

The other thing that we must recognise is the current government has always been fiscally conservative. Even in this previous regime with the National Democratic Alliance in the late 1990s, they introduced reforms that would reduce government expenditure. That legacy still pervades how it responds to current crisis. But hopefully with the pressure that's placed, as Pradeep mentioned, by the business community and by the media and in feedback from citizens, that we hope to see a more stronger stimulus package.

Ali Moore: Pradeep, if Bali is right and there is the capacity, why do you think so far there's been no appetite?



- Pradeep Taneja: I think the capacity that Bali is talking about is in terms of increasing the fiscal deficit. So it's not that the government has the resources at its disposal, but it could spend, it could print more money, it could increase fiscal deficit, but that of course would lead to higher inflation. Inflation can become a major issue in elections in India, and particularly because it affects the poor the most.
- Ali Moore: And Bali, against that backdrop and against the issue that every country faces, which is the longer it goes, the harder it is. To what extent is there a debate in India today about lives versus livelihood?
- Azad Bali: You're right. I think the debate represents a very real fear of the longterm economic impact of the lockdown. Shutting down the economy is an extremely difficult and expensive decision particularly in an informal economy like India. In the extension of the lockdown however, the prime minister announced that the government would reassess how districts in India were performing, and if they were tracking well, the government would gradually reduce all those restrictions that were being imposed. And this is happening across in different parts of India. For example, Punjab has widened the list of essential services and is allowing sand mining and construction activities to take place. But it has decentralised the decision making to the deputy commissioners across the state. And that's a decision that they'll have to take in consultation with the chief minister of Punjab. And similarly, Kerala has announced that it would in the coming week allow local businesses such as restaurants and barber shops to open.
- Ali Moore: So we've touched on the economic and the social fault lines. What about religion? If we look at the fact, and I know that Pradeep was talking earlier about the first case in Kerala coming from returning students, they've obviously been one factor in the spread of this virus, but religious gatherings have been another. If we take for example, the meeting of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, how has the virus heightened the religious fault lines that have, I guess, long been present in Indian society? Bali, if I can put that to you first.
- Azad Bali: Yeah, sure. Thanks. I think you're right. Religion has always been a flashpoint in Indian politics and politicians of all stripes have been guilty of exploiting religious sensitivities. But we have to acknowledge that religious meetings have been vectors of the virus. 16,000 cases, a third of them are attributed to the meeting in New Delhi of the Tablighi Jamaat. But there've been other vectors as well, including in Madhya Pradesh, and in Punjab. But the scale of these have been much smaller. But I think part of the problem is that there's been limited, if any, immediate contrition or even public acknowledgment amongst leaders of these religious organisations that, yes we've messed up and we're encouraging our members of our communities to go to these public health centres and report that they're infected. But they've just haven't demonstrated that sense of public leadership at this stage.



Ali Moore: Pradeep, how do you see these religious fault lines?

Pradeep Taneja: I think what's happened in India in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, is that some of the old fault lines in Indian society have come into sharper relief. So for example, ever since the BJP came to power in 2014, we've seen a sharper division between Hindus and Muslims, for example. Muslims have felt increasingly under pressure, increasingly felt marginalised. And the coronavirus crisis, and particularly that event hosted by this Muslim missionary organisation, Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, which is an annual event apparently, it takes place once a year, attracts thousands of people from India and abroad. And this year's event took place, it started I think on the 3rd of March, 2020, and it came to an end really when this health crisis became much worse. Now the Indian government has said that the Tablighi Jamaat Organisation was given a couple of warnings and they did not end this event.

So obviously this was a long event, started on the 3rd of March. But the organisers have said that, when the prime minister announced that people's curfew, that I mentioned earlier, on the 22nd of March, that they told the participants who had come from all over the world to this event to go back, that the event had ended. But because two days later, the lockdown, the total lockdown, came into effect on the 25th of March that many of these people were not able to travel and therefore they got stuck. Many of them stayed back in Delhi, stayed back in the accommodation provided by Tablighi Jamaat and therefore they were not able to contain the spread of this virus. So either way I think the Tablighi Jamaat Organisation clearly is responsible for contributing to a large number of cases. The Indian government, the ministry of health has said that 30% of all the cases, the coronavirus cases in India, are as a result of participation in this event that, the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi.

In states like UP, Uttar Pradesh, which has now nearly a thousand coronavirus cases according to the Indian health ministry, about 60% of the cases may be related to the Tablighi Jamaat event. So clearly the organisers of this event, they could have done a much better job. But the fact is that this could have happened to any religious group really. I mean, Hindu organisations also have many major events. So in a country like India where religion plays a very important part in the social life of the country, religious organisations do tend to organise really mega events, very big events. So it could have happened to any religious group. And the fact is that this time it is a Muslim organisation, which is largely responsible for a large number of these cases, but this has meant that on social media, in electronic media in India, this has been turned into some sort of anti-Muslim thing.

That this is Muslims, it's the behaviour of the Muslims. In many cases some of the trolls have been saying that they have deliberately been infecting people, that they have created this situation knowingly. And when you



connect it, when you link it up with the kind of anti-Muslim sentiment which has been growing in India over the last six years, then you can see that these fault lines really have been sharpened much more as a result of this crisis.

Ali Moore: Indeed, one commentator put it that the virus is just another staging post on the route to the marginalisation of Muslim India. And Pradeep, you talk about social media and the anti-Muslim sentiment. The government does not counter that, does it?

Pradeep Taneja: Well, it's interesting because Hindu Muslim tensions is nothing new. I mean, in India, Muslims in India that lived reasonably amicably for centuries. But there have always been tensions from time to time between Hindus and Muslims. But generally at the community level people tend to manage them. And generally the governments, particularly the prime ministers of today would come out and ask people to not exaggerate these differences. In the current case, the Prime Minister Modi has been relatively slow in coming up with calling upon people. So for example, yesterday, the 19th of April, Prime Minister Modi did make a statement calling for unity and brotherhood, that the virus doesn't see differences between races and colour and religion, and therefore we should be focusing on dealing with the crisis rather than targeting people.

So he's come out and said something now, but that's always the case. Prime Minister Modi has a habit of waiting for a long time before he would make such a statement. I would expect him to actually be more proactive in dealing with these, particularly marginalisation of minority community, in a much more rapid fashion than he generally does.

Ali Moore: Bali, how do you see this issue of anti-Muslim sentiment, but also, I guess, the broader issue of false narratives around coronavirus?

Azad Bali: A couple of responses to that. The first is, I think it's speaks to the polarisation in union politics that no political leader has come out and condemned this categorization that Pradeep just talked about, of the minority communities in response to this Corona virus. That's including, if you look at the major opposition party, the Congress Party or the Ahmedbhai Party, the leaders haven't taken to the stage to tell people that, no, this is not how you should respond in the first instance. The second part, there have been large instances of fake news or false information that has been circulated and that has caused a lot of this harm.

But the most telling of that was recently where you saw thousands of migrant workers gather at a train station in Mumbai in Bandra because they received messages forwarded on WhatsApp that there are trains that have been made available to take them back home. And this turned out to be untrue later on. Equally, telling in Gujarat, they've been reporting including picked up by the BBC, that hospitals are segregating patients based on their



religion, something that brought the government and the ministry of external affairs put out statements that that is untrue. So there have been many instances like this which have caused significant harm in response to this crisis.

Ali Moore: Bali, how do you see this effecting Modi? Is it a make or break for him as prime minister? Or is it something that he has sufficient political capital that it won't affect his standing in the community?

Azad Bali: So Mr. Modi is a man that elicits extremely strong emotions in equal measure, be that either admiration and respect for large section of the society, and in equal measure contempt and disillusionment by the smaller section in the society. But he still has a strong connect with the average Indian citizen and sort of unparalleled political capacity. If you look at the last few reforms that were introduced that caused significant hardship, whether that'd be the demonetization or the GST reform, for instance, his popularity didn't take a beating. The average citizens still connects with him, still listens to him, and still believes in him and his leadership. So I'm not entirely sure if this will diminish his image as a leader.

Ali Moore: Pradeep, what do you think?

Pradeep Taneja: I agree with Bali. I think Prime Minister Modi, he's been very clever in managing this coronavirus crisis, particularly the discourse surrounding it. He has appeared several times on television, although he doesn't give press conferences. So unlike the leaders of all other democracies that are dealing with the coronavirus crisis, whose leaders come out and everyday address the media and take questions, Prime Minister Modi doesn't do that. But he does give these monologues, these addresses to the nation, where he projects himself as the leader in control, and he is the one who is leading this charge against the Coronavirus. There are news, stories, where the prime minister is holding meetings with the chief ministers and government officials from all over India on the internet using a Zoom like platform. And therefore he projects himself as the person who is actually very much in control of this whole narrative. So I think the coronavirus crisis is unlikely to have any major impact, or make a major dent on the popularity of the prime minister.

Azad Bali: And I think another reason why Mr. Modi's popularity is likely to be undiminished is that, if you look at the larger discourse around this crisis, the politicisation has not been that stark. The tone, the tenure of the political discourse is it's been extremely soft, accommodating and gentle. All political leaders, including those in opposition, support the government's efforts. And that image which Pradeep was talking about of Mr. Modi on a Zoom call with chief ministers across India, and all of them, the chief ministers, making statements after that meeting in support of the



government's initiatives, could strengthen his capacity and credibility as a leader.

Ali Moore: So if we step back and we look more broadly, as I said in the introduction to this, there is a sense from many that the world post COVID-19 will not look the same. What do you think it will mean for India? Do you see any long term changes to Indian society?

Azad Bali: I think going forward we would see investment in public healthcare, successive governments in India have willfully and systematically ignored investments in public health. Investments in building social safety nets, especially ensuring benefits for migrant workers. So I think we'll see that being strengthened. Another thing to look forward to is a new class of political leaders and entrepreneurs who've been working at the grassroots levels and responding to this crisis, acquiring some prominence. I'm not too sure what that might mean at the national stage, but you've seen responses to the crisis, whether that be in Kerala or in Andhra or Rajasthan or in Chhattisgarh, you've seen these pockets of excellence where you've seen local counsellors being extremely innovative, being extremely entrepreneurial, and ensuring that citizens have access to these services. So hopefully that will galvanise some attention and interest in politics, and seeing how these leaders, these youth leaders, have a chance to step up.

Ali Moore: Pradeep, what about you? Do you see long term changes to Indian society?

Pradeep Taneja: I agree with Bali that what this crisis has done, it has brought into sharper relief the weaknesses of India's healthcare system and social safety net system. And clearly there are going to be calls for the government to do more in these areas, particularly with public health. I mean, 1% of GDP on health is actually very small for a country which has such a large population and so many problems. But I think the capacity of the Indian government to deliver on that, even if the government does take on board all the good suggestions which are put forward by well meaning people in India, the problem is going to be the economic capacity of the Indian government to do much about it. So for example, the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis is going to be quite severe I believe. And that would mean that the government revenue and the government resources would further decline over the next few years.

And therefore, I can't expect the Indian government to actually take some lessons out of this crisis and go beyond the past track record in terms of spending on public health. In terms of the what India is going to look like in the wake of the post coronavirus crisis, as Bali said, the polarisation, the marginalisation of the minorities and particularly the Muslim minority, I think that trend is unlikely to be reversed. If anything, I think that's likely to get worse. In terms of the welfare of the poor, particularly migrant workers, I think for the first time in India's history, the migrant workers plight has



been highlighted by the coronavirus crisis, because this is a segment of the population which historically hasn't attracted much attention. And I think what the coronavirus crisis has done, it has brought that also into sharper relief. So we are going to see much more discussion, much more debate about the migrant workers, and we probably will see some sort of accounting of migrant workers as part of the census.

And internationally in terms of foreign policy, of course India's capacity to influence international development would be limited by India's economic capacity. If the Indian economy slows, if India's GDP growth slows to what it was before the coronavirus crisis and is not picked up fairly quickly, then ultimately it will also affect India's growth internationally.

Ali Moore: Pradeep, I always like to try and finish on an optimistic as opposed to a pessimistic note. Can we take the recognition of the need for more healthcare spending, if not necessarily immediately the capacity and the recognition for the first time of the plight of migrant workers, but at least once you recognise you can start to change.

Pradeep Taneja: I think you do. I mean, after all India is a democracy, and in a democracy governments have to, political parties have to listen to the people. And migrant workers in India, they may be displaced from their native places, native villages, but they do vote. So even if they move to a city like Delhi or Bombay, they actually do register to vote. So they can vote and they can make a difference in many of the important constituencies. Even in Delhi, for example, there are some constituencies where the migrant workers play a very important part in elections. So hopefully the democratic process would mean that both the major political parties, the BJP, the current ruling party, and the Congress Party and other political parties in India, would begin to pay more attention to the plight of the poor, such as the rural poor but also the urban poor in India.

Ali Moore: But of course, we hope very much that India can continue to do relatively well in tackling this terrible virus. And we do very much appreciate your time and your insights, both of you. Thank you very much Bali, and thank you very much Pradeep.

Pradeep Taneja: Thank you Ali.

Azad Bali: Thank you very much Ali.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been political scientists, Dr. Pradeep Taneja of the University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Sciences, and health policy researcher, Dr. Azad Bali of the School of Politics & International Relations and the Crawford School of Public Policy at Australia National University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find out more information about this and all



our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. You can keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. And if you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 20th of April, 2020. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons. Copyright 2020, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.