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Covid-19 in India:
A Modi-made Disaster?

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(Imtiyaz Khan - Anadolu Agency)

By April 2021, India had become the global epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. Experts claim that India may have been able to avert the Covid-19 disaster had Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government prepared effectively for a second wave. The social, economic and political consequences are predicted to be far-reaching. Many Indians have lost loved ones. Moreover, the level of devastation wrought by the second wave of Covid-19 to the Indian economy is expected to make a rapid recovery unlikely. Though recent state election results evidence that Indian politics is still coloured by the identity politics and Hindu nationalism that first brought Narendra Modi to power, whether that alone saves him in the next General Election remains to be seen.

For much of April and May 2021, India had the highest number of daily Covid-19 cases in the world. Scenes of suffering coming out of the country have left much of the international community in dismay. India is particularly vulnerable to a full-blown Covid-19 outbreak given the fact that many Indians live in close proximity to their families and neighbours, limiting their ability to practice social distancing. Moreover, India's healthcare system has limited capacity.

Nevertheless, India was considered to have a few significant advantages in the fight against the novel coronavirus, such as having a young population, allegedly higher general immunity of the population and being able to learn from countries that had experienced severe Covid-19 outbreaks before India did. These were also considered the reasons why India largely escaped an unmanageable first wave of Covid-19 infections in the country.

However, governmental mismanagement led India to not be able to take full advantage to prevent a full-blown Covid-19 outbreak and by April 2021, India became the global epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. Experts claim that India may have been able to avert the Covid-19 disaster had Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government prepared effectively for a potential second wave.

India's vulnerability

South Asia is one of the most densely populated regions in the world with [380 people per km2](#) in 2018. India's total population was documented to be more than 1.36 billion people in 2019. With the advent of the novel coronavirus pandemic in early March 2020, experts feared a full-blown outbreak in India would be difficult to manage and hence called for strong preventative measures.

Their concerns included the fact that many Indians live in close proximity to their families and neighbours, sharing facilities including toilets with the rest of their community, thereby limiting their ability to practice social distancing. Unfortunately, India's healthcare system has limited capacity. For example, it has one doctor per 2000 people as compared to the WHO recommendation of a doctor-patient ratio of 1:1000 and has [historically underspent](#) on healthcare. Quarantine arrangements have been lacking severely. A lack of access to clean water and disinfectants is common, and air pollution has reached [alarming levels](#) in recent years. Moreover, immunocompromised people are documented to be more likely to experience the more severe forms of Covid-19, and with more than a [third of Indians](#) being hypertensive and 10 per cent diabetic, along with rampant malnutrition, the Indian government was potentially neglectful by delaying banning all incoming international travel during the earlier phases of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, India was considered to have a few advantages in the fight against the novel coronavirus. Firstly, the median age across the country is [28.7 years](#). As the novel coronavirus is believed to be deadlier for the elderly, who are also more likely to be hospitalised and thus overwhelm health systems, such a young population was said to be one of the reasons behind India escaping an unmanageable first wave of Covid-19 infections in the country. Some even believed South Asians had [higher immunity](#) to the Covid-19 virus. Another reason suggested was that India was able to employ preventative measures as it was '[behind the curve](#)' and could apply lessons learned effectively to '[flatten the curve](#)'. Evidently, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led Indian government was quick to undertake [preventative measures](#) such as airport screenings and flight restrictions as early as late January as the novel coronavirus spread [in China](#).

Early missteps

The country, however, did not ban incoming international travel until mid-March 2020, and that led more than [80,000 arrivals](#) from the Gulf States and elsewhere to pour into India every day. This led India to enter 'phase three' from 'phase two' of the Covid-19 spread, with local community transmission gaining traction over cases being traced to arrivals from foreign countries. On 25th March 2020, PM Narendra Modi announced a national lockdown for 21 days. Key experts or government departments were reportedly [not consulted](#) prior to the lockdown being implemented. Data from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) shows that India has an informal employment rate of 81%. As per the ILO, informal employment is [defined](#) as 'all remunerative work (i.e. both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. Informal workers do not have secure employment contracts, workers' benefits, social protection or workers' representation.

Implementing a 21-day lockdown with no measures such as government food or cash transfer programmes, as the Indian government, did leave more than 8 out of 10 Indians in a critical position when it came to income. Many daily wage earners and labourers believed the lockdown amounted to an '[order to starve](#)', particularly when backed up by the threat of [police violence](#). The lockdown led to the sharpest contraction in India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ever of 23 per cent. It was particularly painful considering India only had 519 reported cases at the time.

Moreover, the BJP led by PM Narendra Modi encouraged the utilisation of unscientific measures for both prevention and cure for Covid-19. BJP leaders threw multiple parties where cow urine was touted as prevention and cure. At such events, local BJP leaders [drank cow urine](#) to spread

A Covid-19 patient inside a Covid-19 Care centre being operated by 'Khalsa Help International' inside an educational institute in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh on the outskirts of New Delhi, India on May 26, 2021.
(Amarjeet Kumar Singh - Anadolu Agency)

the message of its usefulness to combat Covid-19. Along with cow urine, yoga has also been touted as a cure. After a prominent guru extolled the benefits of yoga and other traditional methods, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, recommended it for several diseases including Covid-19. Indian ministries issued advisories recommending traditional medicines and remedies for Covid-19 on 29th January 2020. During the lockdown in March 2020, PM Narendra Modi had asked Indians to bang kitchen utensils, clap their hands and light candles after turning all lights off as an effective way to fight Covid-19 in the country. Given the massive popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party in India, such actions carry grave danger when it comes to disinformation and misinformation. Underreporting of Covid-19 cases was highlighted when The New York Times spoke to a group of scientists who believed that India's number of cases was actually more than 21,000, as compared to the 649 confirmed cases reported by the BJP government on March 26th 2020. In a developing country such as India with high Internet connectivity and low levels of literacy, where effective health communication is a difficult task at the best of times, irresponsible statements from the ruling government as well as attempting to mask realities can have disastrous consequences.
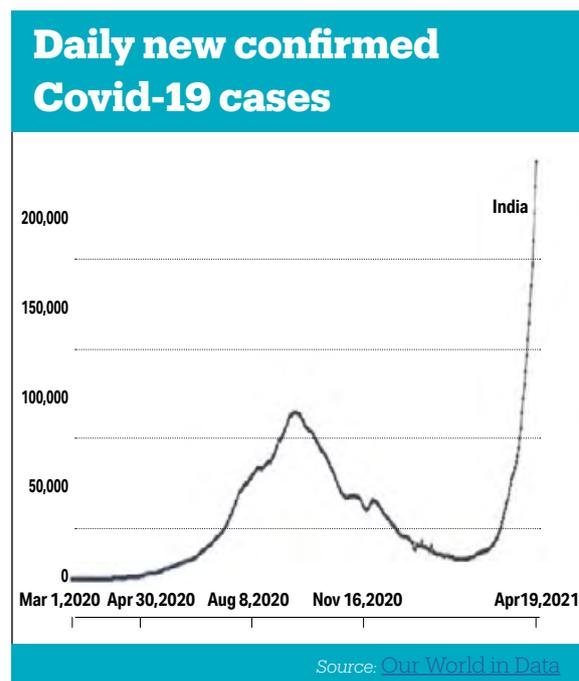
Indian Administered Kashmir had been under lockdown since August 5th 2019, following the Indian government's decision to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that had given special rights to Jammu and Kashmir. A lockdown and communications blackout followed immediately after as Kashmiris were expected to protest against what many of them saw as an attempt to alter the demographics of their region. While some somewhat jadedly offered consolation to Kashmiris as India went through the aforementioned national lockdown that they had significant experience with lockdowns so it may not be as

hard for them, the impact of the lockdown was particularly bad for them because access to high-speed internet was blocked (and continued to remain so until February 2021). This resulted in a consequent lack of access to information on preventive measures and access to services. Kashmiri children did not have access to online education, while the rest of India did, resulting in significant learning losses. Kashmir's economy was devastated due to blocked internet access, adding to the economic troubles faced by Kashmiris as a result of the pandemic.

Additionally, thousands of young Kashmiri boys and men were jailed and allegedly tortured as a result of the crackdown after August 2019. Given that many countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan being regional examples) released prisoners from overcrowded jails to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission, the BJP took no such step when it comes to Kashmiris, despite calls to do so. The lack of scientific decision making and compassion on behalf of the government led to the eventual rise of a massive second wave - a 700 per cent rise in the number of cases within the month of April 2021 alone, taking the number to more than 20,000 - of Covid-19 infections in Indian Administered Kashmir.

A false victory

Indian Administered Kashmir, though having faced oppression unlike anywhere else in India as the Covid-19 snaked its way across the country, was similar to other regions in terms of skyrocketing rates of Covid-19 infections. By September 2020, after having reached more than 100,000 cases a day, Covid-19 cases started to drop. By February 2021, the daily number of covid infections had come down to 8600, only to rise again in March 2021.

Daily new confirmed Covid-19 cases

Source: Our World in Data

When the cases declined previously, "there was a public narrative that India had conquered COVID-19". In fact, on Jan. 28, PM Narendra Modi declared victory against COVID-19 while addressing a virtual summit of the World Economic Forum when he sought applause for saving "humanity from a big disaster by containing the coronavirus effectively." Around the same time, India launched the Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative which was supposed to be a "major diplomatic effort to gift and supply made-in-India vaccines to low-income and developing countries globally".

After his speech in Davos, his government's administration parroted the view, even to the extent that the BJP government passed a resolution in February 2021 praising his "leadership for introducing India to the world as a proud and victorious nation in the fight against COVID-19". This may have been due to the fact that some models had falsely shown 50 per cent of some areas in some of India's cities to have Covid-19 antibodies, which is an indicator of past infection. However, in January 2021, a serosurvey by the Indian Council of Medical Research suggested that only 21 per cent of the Indian population of more than 1.4 billion had antibodies against Covid-19. While it is significantly below the threshold of 70 per cent required for herd immunity, it encouraged complacency even as researchers continued to warn of a much more lethal second wave. Despite warnings by parliamentary committees and researchers to prepare for a second wave, by March 2021, India had supplied more than 60 million vaccine doses to 76 countries through various modalities including grants in aid and gifts.

Premature normalcy

The government, as noted above, reflected optimism as the country's health minister announced that India was "in the endgame" of the pandemic in early March 2021. PM Narendra Modi's government allowed for large-scale religious gatherings and cricket matches with stadiums full of unmasked cricket fans. One of the religious festivals, the Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela that usually convenes every 12 years, was brought forward by a year because it was deemed auspicious to do so by Hindu priests. That led to more than 3 million mostly unmasked pilgrims taking a communal dip in the Ganges river on April 12 2021. The Indian Premier League (IPL), a professional cricket tournament attracting millions of dollars in investment due to a large viewership, was also allowed to start on April 9 2021, to be played across five cities, even as many of them were under curfews. A senior Board of Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) insisted that IPL would not be cancelled because it was "providing important solace and entertainment to many people during hard times" and that IPL players were "playing for humanity" as international players voiced their concerns.

In terms of political activities, the Election Commission of India also started the process of notification of assembly elections in 5 Indian states including Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in early March 2021. Election campaigning picked up steam in these states, despite surging cases in the country. Unmasked people gathered, tightly packed together and thus without maintaining social distance, in very large numbers every day - the numbers were so large that PM Narendra Modi himself exclaimed that "he had never seen such crowds at a rally" while speaking to a charged crowd in West Bengal. Critics had started to connect the sharp increase in Covid-19 cases across the country to the government's seemingly lackadaisical attitude towards the pandemic, even if the government did not seem to.
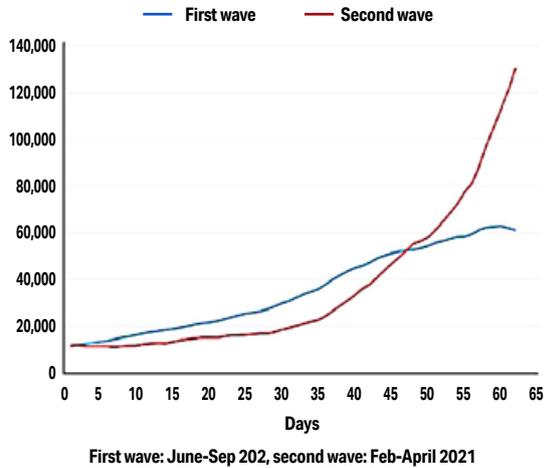
Denial's consequences

Five days after the Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela, India's daily infection rates were past 230,000. Linked to that, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whom PM Narendra Modi was to host at a summit in the country, abruptly cancelled his tour. March 2021 witnessed a rapid spread of Covid-19 daily infections in India, leading many Indian states to impose restrictions to contain the virus, including its newly detected double mutant strains and variants of concerns. Despite PM Narendra Modi claiming India had built a "COVID-specific infrastructure" back in January 2021, the country's frail healthcare system began to reveal its vulnerabilities.

By April 2021, India became the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic in the world. Many Indians were standing in long lines waiting for a hospital bed or an oxygen canister for their loved ones, which was becoming increasingly difficult to find. Many hospitals - both state and private - were running out of oxygen and were scrambling to arrange oxygen for their patients. Some hospitals had to turn patients away due to either a dwindling oxygen supply or a lack of beds. Healthcare workers appeared exhausted, with some having to report to work despite recovering from Covid-19 themselves. A black market for oxygen emerged. Crematoriums were operating round the clock, reporting to have run out of room and wood. Even in rural areas that are not as crowded as India's cities, people were reportedly "dropping like flies". Indian Twitter and other social media platforms were full of people desperately seeking help, often tagging Indian authorities to no avail. Countrymen bemoaned the fact that "a nation acclaimed in 2015 by the International Monetary Fund as an economic powerhouse poised to overtake China is now lobbying for emergency foreign aid".

Alarmingly, a new variant of Covid-19 was identified in India that has become dominant in multiple Indian states, known as B.1.617. This "double mutant" variant contains two mutations that have been linked to "increased transmissibility and an ability to evade immune protection". The Covid-19 Indian variant has now been detected in at least 20 other countries.

Cases have risen faster in the second wave

Rollling seven-day averages

First wave — Second wave

140,000
120,000
100,000
80,000
60,000
40,000
20,000
0

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65

Days

First wave: June-Sep 202, second wave: Feb-April 2021

Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Even though there were [calls to cancel](#) the aforementioned big-budget IPL amid the surge in Covid-19 cases, the BCCI was reluctant to do so. However, it had to be cancelled after several international players tested positive despite assurances that they would be safe in the "[bio bubble](#)". Unfortunately, many of the IPL's international players [could not return home](#) to their countries due to travel restrictions from India and had to be accommodated in the neighbouring Maldives. In another example of Indian authorities not willing to face the reality of Covid-19 in their country were the [allowance of physical presence and consequent detection of Covid-19](#) in multiple Indian delegation members that were part of a G-7 meeting in the United Kingdom after being invited as guests to attend the summit.
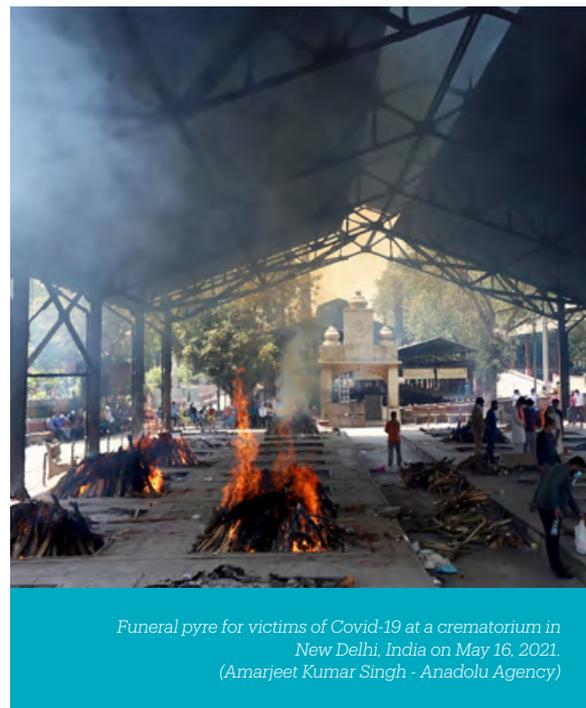
Denial appeared to have gripped the BJP-led Indian government that did not consider controlling the spread: Lockdowns in cities ravaged by the coronavirus were still not imposed despite calls to do so, even though PM Narendra Modi had been quick to impose the "world's strictest lockdown" when Covid-19 infections were less than 1000 a year ago. Perhaps the government was afraid of political backlash considering the March 2020 lockdown led to the sharpest contraction in India's GDP of 23 per cent, causing widespread financial pain. Political considerations may have also been in play when a "yoga tycoon", who had helped Narendra Modi [get elected](#) in 2014, recommended his own company's "ultimate cure" for Covid-19 after rubbishing allopathic medication on national television, which the BJP government later allowed to be used as an "[immunity booster](#)" and for management of the disease.

The Indian government's denial of both the Covid-19 tragedy transpiring in India as well as freedoms of speech and expression was fully on display when it asked Twit-

ter to remove posts (to which Twitter complied) that were critical of how the Indian government was handling the pandemic, amid a "[widening political and public health crisis](#)". Modelling suggested falsely that India had reached herd immunity, encouraging complacency and insufficient preparation, but a serosurvey by the Indian Council of Medical Research in January suggested that only 21% of the population had antibodies against SARS-CoV-2. At times, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Government has seemed more intent on removing criticism on Twitter than trying to control the pandemic.

Borders were still not closed, allowing travel both into as well as out of the country. This led to a [1200 per cent increase](#) in Covid-19 cases in countries like Nepal that has a very porous border with India. Sri Lanka, another neighbouring country that allowed travel to and from India, also reported a [record rise](#) in Covid-19 in May 2021 and had to finally [close its borders](#). The Maldives, after having to host IPL players unable to fly back home and becoming the [destination of choice](#) for India's elite looking to escape the Covid-19 related horrors unfolding at home, also experienced a "[meteoric rise](#)" in Covid-19 infections before having to suspend the arrival of Indian tourists.

However, it may be too late given the fast spread of Covid-19 in Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Such delayed-action from neighbouring countries may be attributed to either the BJP-led Indian government's denial lulling the neighbouring countries' governments into a false sense of security or perhaps fearing the political ramifications of closing borders with a neighbour with aspirations of becoming a [regional hegemon](#). In any case, this has now resulted in India and its neighbouring countries being banned from travel to many countries.
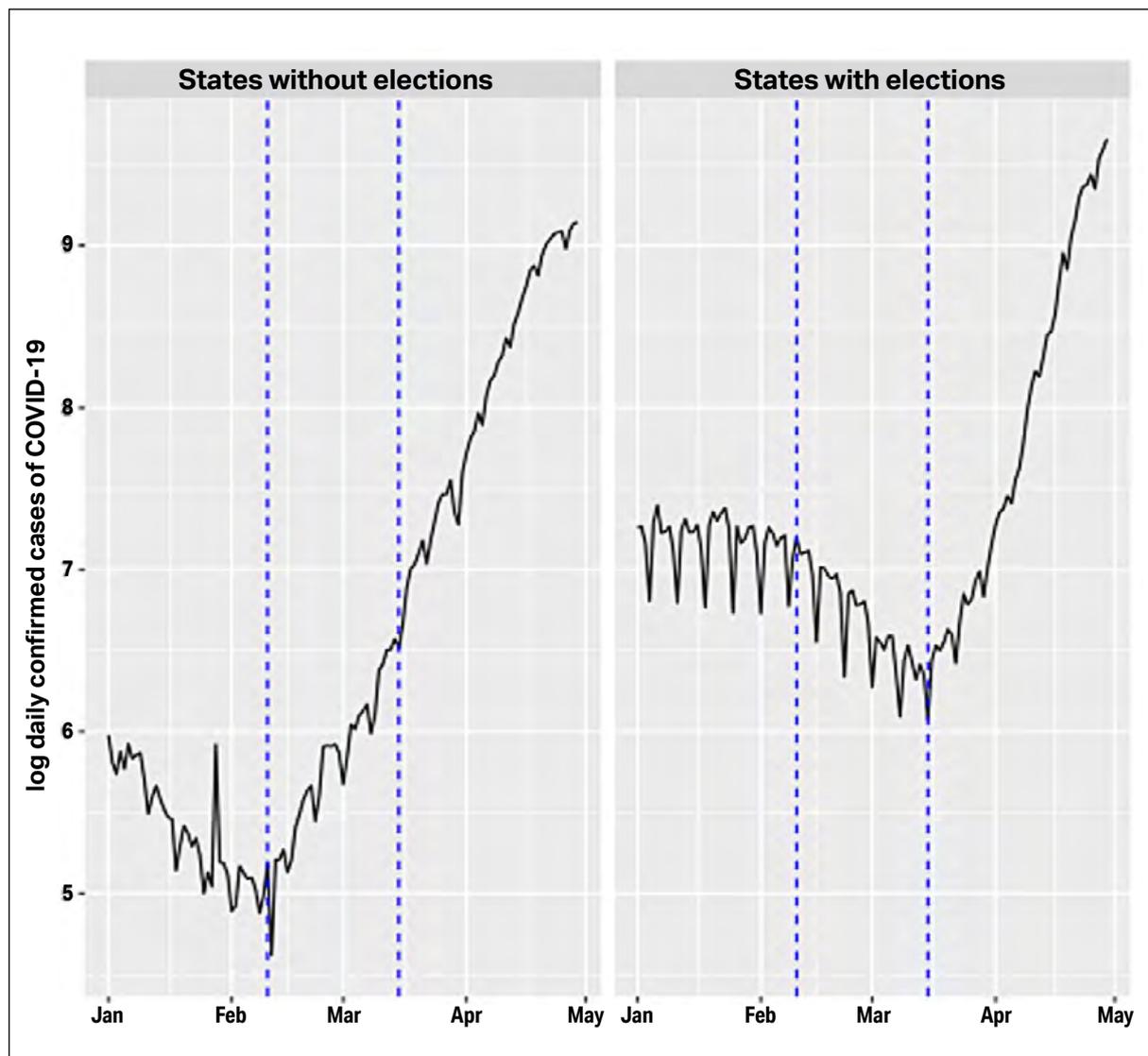
Funeral pyre for victims of Covid-19 at a crematorium in New Delhi, India on May 16, 2021. (Amarjeet Kumar Singh - Anadolu Agency)

A "Modi-Made Disaster"

Experts claim that India may have been able to avert the Covid-19 disaster had PM Narendra Modi's government prepared effectively for a potential second wave, rather than denying it. As per The Lancet, the "impression from the government was that India had beaten COVID-19 after several months of low case counts, despite repeated warnings of the dangers of a second wave and the emergence of new strains".

A parliamentary committee had even warned the government of a second wave in November 2020, recommending that oxygen supplies should be strengthened. This could have been implemented using funds from PM CARES, a fund set up by PM Narendra Modi in March 2020 that sought tax-free donations to help the government manage the country's response to the pandemic. Critics claim that money - more than at least a billion dollars - has not been utilized well and cannot be accounted for even given the nature of the trust being structured as a private one.

Instead of rushing towards normalcy and throwing caution to the wind and allowing religious events and political rallies that have been evidenced to cause a surge in the states they were held in, PM Narendra Modi could have remained vigilant. Figure 1 below shows that the average number of Covid-19 daily cases was declining in both states holding elections (Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) as well non-election states in early 2021. From mid-February to mid-March (the period is depicted by the blue vertical lines), differences emerged in the numbers of Covid-19 cases in the two groups of states: the non-election states started to witness an increase in infections (potentially due to the new India Covid-19 variant) while the downward trajectory of daily Covid-19 cases continued in the states that did have elections. As the election-eering and political rallies picked up steam in mid-March, a rapid rise in cases was also witnessed in the states with elections that previously had been witnessing a downward trend.

PM Narendra Modi did not appear to be concerned with the more immediate threat of a second wave despite being warned of it, and preferred to be rather fixated on how vaccine diplomacy may pay off in an elusive future, sending millions of Covid-19 vaccine doses abroad as aid: India's vaccine diplomacy was considered to be an effective instrument for Indian influence as the country aimed for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) by 2023. However, critics say that the interests of the common man have "been overlooked by successive (Indian) governments pursuing a delusional quest for international status and global recognition as a great power". The Indian government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly its botched vaccination programming and the resulting disease and death, is a testament to that. Moreover, tragically, since PM Narendra Modi has come to power, he has appeared to have castrated state institutions that may have held him accountable to power including the judiciary and the media. Thus, there is very little internal dissent or even questioning of his government's mismanagement of the pandemic in what is supposed to be the world's largest democracy.

The beginning of the end of Modi?

As India's second wave of Covid-19 rages amidst the BJP government's gross mismanagement, some believe that Narendra Modi may now face electoral defeat. However, recent election results do not seem to foretell an entirely unforgiving electorate. Even though the BJP lost in the 2021 West Bengal state election, it gained 74 seats in the state assembly, dislodging much of the opposition. Moreover, the Hindu nationalist party formed an alliance in Puducherry, won 4 seats in Tamil Nadu and even retained Assam. Assam is the state where the Citizenship Amendment bill - the new 'anti-Muslim' law - was introduced, amending the 64-year-old Indian Citizenship law, which currently prohibits all illegal migrants from becoming Indian citizens, to make an exception for all minority religions - Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians - except Muslims. It can be deduced that Indian politics is still coloured by identity politics and Hindu nationalism, despite the non-discriminative nature of Covid-19 as a disease and the collectivistic actions and responses it engenders, as well as the chaos and destruction Covid-19 has caused in India.

Conclusion

The rapid rise of Covid-19 cases in India appears to have taken many in India and abroad by surprise. However, as noted above, experts and researchers had been warning of a second wave in the country. The Indian government was not able to fully utilize the time afforded to them, courtesy of having experienced a relatively manageable first wave and being 'behind the curve', thus being able to learn from the experience of other countries to sufficiently prepare for a second wave. Instead, there was a public narrative that India had conquered Covid-19. Consequently, the BJP led Indian government prematurely allowed for relaxation of social distancing rules and other preventative protocols. This led to India becoming the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic in the world, with more than 400,000 cases officially recorded per day at its peak. The actual number is expected to be higher.

The social, economic and political consequences of the BJP government's mismanagement of Covid-19 in India are predicted to be far-reaching. The devastation wrought by the second wave of Covid-19 to the Indian economy can even be observed from space, making rapid economic recovery unlikely. Many Indians have lost loved ones and their livelihoods. Though recent election results evidence that Indian politics is still coloured by the identity politics and Hindu nationalism that first brought Narendra Modi to power, whether that alone saves him in the next General Election remains to be seen.