



## **ECONOMICS OF COVID PERIOD: AN INDIAN LENS ON MEDIA, POLITICS AND SOCIETY**

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### **Introduction**

In analysing COVID period snapshots of experience from across the world on society, media and politics are constantly hitting our mind and heart and forcing us to think beyond the given narratives in a multidisciplinary framework. In probing deep into such meta-experiences the single country case studies with unique features are the most sought after explanatory tools in the present time. In that direction the present paper deals with the Indian experience of engagement with COVID and its effect in different sectors. However moving a bit ahead of simple engagement, the effort here is to offer a panoramic view of sectoral experiences which includes the black and white episodic communicative nodes of experiences and hence it is termed as a lensical approach to Indian experiences. As all approaches are grounded on a base so is this lensical approach which taking cue from Marxist ontology accepts economics as the basis of the linearity of enchantment and disenchantment with media, society and politics in COVID India. India has always been a fascinating and unique case to study whenever a mixed model of anything is analysed from economy to politics to development to media. In COVID period the call of Prime Minister Modi for self reliance in the form of *atmanirbhar Bharat* is a call for solidarity to bolster the economic condition of the country. In India media is playing a much positive and collaborative role to the extent of being criticised as being on “deputation to government” with editors being “faceless technicians” (Sahay, 2020). Nevertheless it must be said the COVID situation has dawned upon both the government and media that the two sectors have to work in compliment with each other and government must socialise and energise the countrymen through proper communication through media by giving more freedom and space to media not to polarise news but to inform, educate and unite the country in the present effort of *atmanirbhar bharat* building where cultural affinity is to be made the basis of national integrity for economic and cultural regeneration. In four sections the paper respectively deals with theoretical framework, media experiences, political commotion and social learning in COVID India and concludes by



arguing that new realities needs new understanding based on new economics by each and every sector to maintain a humane, democratic, argumentative and pluralist communicative order in post-COVID India.

### **The Lensical Approach: New Panorama of Communication**

Talking about an Indian lens onto the experience in media, politics and society where economics rules the roost, the focus is on a panorama or broken parts of truths and threading them together into a big narrative. In other words the approach is to catch the broad contour of experiences through a lens or a small window of observation. But it is not simply a generalisation based on a particularity of experience but a generalization based on generalized particularity of experiences. In simple words it means that a general information like the number of COVID deaths per day is presented in a general manner but with different hue in media, politics, and society for different particular zones, This communication pattern is very new and different from the old pattern where message-design for general information are coded with simple words and decoded to receive the intended communicable message, In the emerging period message-design of general information are coded with simple words but decoded with new idioms and vowels so as to create ‘excitement-out-of-nothing’ syndrome in daily information channels so that intended communication at the source becomes meaningless and deciphered communication at the receiver end becomes meaningfully. In style of reading a text, Jacques Derrida the French philosopher once said that ‘author is dead’ as it is upto the reader to extract meaning out of what author has written irrespective of what the author actually wanted to convey. Thinking in that line today we can say ‘communication is dead’ as communication has become a sanitizable element and everyone extracts only that part of communication what is suited to oneself and treats itself as a whole communication. Hence lensical approach to communication gives us a broad contour of how a general communication for general information ends up as a personlaised, politicized, mediatised and sociatised communication depending upon the profitability (in economic sense) of the decoded message. This lensical approach also brings to the fore unique experience attached to every sectoral analysis as it serves dual purpose simultaneously – it collates the unique experiences together and it creates a general pattern of experience out of that collage. For example as this paper will show in following sections the economic leitmotif as the general framework of experiences from media, politics and society during COVID period can be unearthed by such an approach. An intriguing question would be why such an approach is



floated as suitable for COVID and post COVID communication pattern understanding. The answer lies in the generalised temporality attached with the period. In simple terms we all know that the COVID period is temporary but then no one has a clue how long this ‘temporality’ will continue! So the general pattern of communication as seen in these the three sectors in Indian case also things that this type of commotional communication (method-in-madness or meaning-in-haphazard) is due to the pandemic but then it may and as this paper argues will surely become a trend in communication order in days to come not only in India but also in the world at large. One important element of this lensical approach is the geoeconomics of communication that it highlights. For example the general communicable information (number of deaths per day in COVID) is presented in different regions in different countries with high degree of localised media, political and societal bias depending on the degree of profitability (to remain on safe side or to be politically correct) in the regional ecology. So in a way the lensical approach also reflects the geographical orientation of news presentation across the globe by exchanging the unique experiences in every country through the virtual system of communicable network. In this conceptual framework let us turn our attention to how this approach locates the black and white narrations in each case typed sector in India and how it links both the black and white singularities of narration with economic rationale.

### **Media in COVID India: To Be or Not to Be?**

Indian democracy as it is seen is been mediatised or mediated democracy given the hyper-presence of media in the country from newspapers to radio channels, from tv channels to all forms of social media. So any form of communication of ideas across the country must have the positive cooperation of media and India’s present self reliant drive has received a positive attention from its media houses. A technology-driven “Atmanirbhar Bharat” relies heavily on digitizing India, with an emphasis on health and education technologies. As a part of this scheme, the government aims to implement the National Digital Health Blueprint under the National Digital Health Mission. India’s increased use of digital health technology is captured in a recent report titled “Digital Health in the Aftermath of COVID-19” by Invest India. The report highlights the use of digital health technologies in India, including the use of the Aarogya Setu app and the e-Sanjeevani app, and the development of digital frameworks such as National Health Stack (NHS) framework and the National e-Health Authority (NeHA) framework. It further notes the importance of big data in relation to “citizens’ movement, disease transmission patterns and health monitoring, which could be



used to aid prevention measures.” Digitization, especially in sensitive sectors such as health, raises concerns regarding the safety and security of data. Health data is particularly sensitive as it allows governments and corporations to access an individual’s private sphere. It thus becomes necessary for countries to limit offshore data storage and implement strong data localization laws. Committing to disciplines at the WTO that require the free flow of data would limit India’s ability to regulate its citizens’ data. The existing digital divide and asymmetry in digital technology would result in a unilateral flow of data from India to the advanced economies and make such countries the repositories of global data. In the absence of data localization requirements, infant digital platforms and industries would be denied support, resulting in an increase in existing inequalities. Data localization requirements would thus play an increasingly important role in securing India’s technology-driven economy and claiming an equal stake in the benefits of a digitized world.

Much like the rest of the world, COVID-19 seems to have ushered a greater emphasis on domestic capacity building in Modi’s India. However, its economic ambition to become a global manufacturing hub sits awkwardly with protectionist trade practices and supplementary emphasis on data localization described here. The Indian government looks to attract foreign investors by leveraging the availability of cheap labor and access to domestic and international markets, while simultaneously trying to protect nascent domestic industries from crushing international competition. Thus, Modi’s ambition to achieve a self-reliant but globalized India rests on his administration’s ability to dexterously navigate this seemingly contradictory terrain. (Singh and Tembey, 2020) A targeted audience and well-defined circulation area will give them the right domain to rule. Some attempts of this sort have been made in the name of neighborhood newspapers. But these have been NGO efforts by non-professionals and, therefore, could not succeed. What is needed is hard news journalism and not an NGO media literacy campaign. Only thing is that we must understand the concept of decentralization of news and implement it. With total commitment and a little hard work and dedication, we can bring about a much-needed print media revolution in the country and restore the glory of this hallowed profession. The U-tube channels and websites are already showing us the way. (Mathur, 2020) Having an in-house social media involves huge investment in technology, talents and customer acquisition cost. However returns could be huge given that India is the second largest online market after China with digital ad spends of about \$210 billion. Unfortunately, India may well have missed the bus in many of these technologies in which the U.S., Europe and China have established perhaps insurmountable



leads. India's meagre public expenditure on education needs to be substantially ramped up (as against current trends of privatisation which would only shrink access), including in skill development. No country has achieved self-reliance without mass quality public education. And no country has developed without a much stronger public health system than what we have in India(Raghunandan, 2020).

In times of crisis, democratic governments may take a dangerous autocratic turn. In such a situation, journalism has a great role to play in a democracy, as it has been ideally visualised as a platform for objective information and critical-rational discourse. Thus, the health of journalism in a country can be examined in the times of a crisis. However, corporate control over most media bodies also means that they become an instrument of the ideological apparatus of the state. There are many concerns associated with the COVID-19 crisis: ill-equipped public health systems, policies to combat the pandemic, and the lack of planning and support to the vulnerable sections. These issues demand serious examination, but the mainstream media, barring some courageous exceptions, seems to be forgetting its democratic role. Just before the announcement of the nationwide lockdown till 14th April 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reportedly called upon print and electronic media owners and editors of the country and asked them to support government efforts to combat the pandemic and also advised them to present "positive news" related to COVID-19. Plainly put, these were the owners and editors who control most of the Indian media at the national and regional levels who were advised to abide by the official narrative and present information was provided to them by the government about COVID-19. It seems most media organisations were compelled to cover the labourers' plight because of its sensational value, but this coverage was inadequate. However, the media outrage that followed was clearly an extension of the already prejudiced and polarised coverage, as the Tablighi Jamaat was blamed for violating lockdown rules and for "corona jihad," "Islamic insurrection," and "corona terrorism." This is clearly an example of fake news propagated by the mainstream media to further the predominant agenda. Muslims were also attacked in various parts of the country. The government seems rather unwilling to let critical voices have their say about the way in which the crisis is being dealt with. There is an explicit expectation that the media's coverage should be "positive" and follow the official line. While much of the media, corporate-owned as it is, has surrendered, a small section is courageously following journalistic ethics(Singh, 2020).



The COVID period has shown how meticulously central health ministry communicated in depth informative daily status of COVID situation in the country for months together. But such data were then scrutinised by private corporate owned media houses in their own ways which becomes politically charged and meaningful giving a false imagery of politics in public mindset which is that politics is a self-interested economic business but not selfless public service which ought to be the image in public mind. Herein the paper argues that Modi government can put into frame all information available for communication dissemination across the society and also analyses the information from formal, academic and policy perspective and not political perspective. However this strategy must be official as well as democratic. The dilemma therefore before the media is whether to be on its pre COVID pattern of neo-liberal market economy agenda setting role or to take up a more promising and democratic agenda-altering role. This dilemma can only find an answer in the economic TRP related data that will come shortly in more detailed research and then this dilemma can be fully addressed.

### **Politics in COVID India: Centering Migration Decentering Citizen**

In Indian democracy the basic political structure is federation which inter-alia means sharing of power between centre and federal units where people's interest runs supreme variant of governance. During COVID pandemic issue migrant labour issue has created a parallel pandemic in policy level for the central and state government. The media coverage of labourers trying to come to their respective home state by walking or by cycling has indeed presented a sordid picture of governance failure on Indian democracy across the world. In this paper it is argued that migrant labour issue have been not properly managed by state governments rather than by central government, It was the duty of the respective state government that housed a large proportion of migrant labour force to provide basic amenities to them during lockdown Failing to do that state governments put the blame squarely on the centre which in turn rolled the issue back to the state governments' court which calls for a new paradigm emerging in centre-state relations – blame politics in place of bargaining politics. This blame politics is a way to shrug of additional responsibilities of governance in times of crisis. Apolitically savvy approach would have been for the Centre to give broad guidelines for the management of the epidemic and the lockdown, arrange for finances to tackle the health and economic emergencies overwhelming the country, and keep the inter-state supply chain functional so that there are no shortages and economic activity doesn't die completely. The states would have been happy, the Centre could have distributed



responsibility for tackling the grave challenges ahead, and recent tensions would have subsided. Without a paradigm shift in politics, Centre-state relations will only become more fractious, and federalism the victim.

While the Centre found fault with the state government for the spread of the virus and migrant crisis, West Bengal accused the Centre of failing to inform it in time about the lockdown measures that triggered the migrant crisis in the first place and later not giving enough time to states to make preparations to receive migrants when the train services were resumed. Besides, the return of the migrants also triggered blame game among state governments. States like Maharashtra accused the BJP governments in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka of adopting an uncooperative approach in taking back migrant workers hailing from these two states. Some other states have clearance to few trains. The MHA is the coordinating ministry handling centre - state relations. While it is trying to give time to state governments to make preparations to deal with the influx of migrants under the latest lockdown guidelines, sources in the government said that once the states draft their own procedures to handle the influx, the ministries of home and railways need to work in close coordination to be able to run train services in an effective manner. “It has to be a two way communication and coordination,” said an official. The MHA has drafted new standard operating procedures (SOP) for states on Tuesday which say that these SOPs override the earlier ones and that the Ministry of Railways (MoR) would permit movement of Shramik Special trains in consultation with MHA. The MHA has asked all States and UTs to designate nodal authorities and make necessary arrangements for receiving and sending such stranded persons. “Based on the requirements of States/UTs, the train schedule, including stoppages and destination would be finalised by MoR.,” said the MHA communication to states. These schedules would be communicated by Ministry of railways to the States/UTs for making suitable arrangements for sending and receiving such stranded workers. The MHA also said that publicity of train schedule, protocols for entry and movement of passengers, services to be provided in coaches, and arrangements with States/UTs for booking of tickets would be done by Railway ministry so that there is no confusion and the migrant workers can easily access this information (Ahuja, 2020). It was not a welcome picture for Indian democracy that migrant labours were seen stranded across roads in the country trying to come back to their respective states. It must have been the duty of the state where migrant labours were working to provide them with basic necessities. But as none of the states were prepared structurally to combat the pandemic so the surplus population in the form of migrant labours were seen as



problematic by the host state. The same was the case of home state where they belonged but due to ethical ground they were duty bound to accept their return. So the issue was one of normative in nature but it was made empirical in nature by reducing migrant labours to mere numbers. So this is a very complex period in Indian federalism where responsibility and duty confronts reality before the central and state governments.

The issue of migrant labour in COVID times has created an added dimension of friction in centre-state relations in India. The basic approach has been to see migrant labourers not as a citizen of the country but as someone having the capacity to spread coronavirus in the entire country, Therefore neither the host state where the migrant labourers were working nor the home state where the migrant workers belong were prepared to accept the responsibility of the labourers. In this tug-of-war of responsibility the central government passed the buck to the communication among state administrations. This created a new paradigm in centre state relations which is of blame politics than the bargaining politics of coalition era. The communication as made by the media reflected the sordid state of affairs in which the migrant labours were put in. The effort in the coming days should be to create a kind of migrant labour bank with all data stored nationally by the central government, This pool of data will supplement the drive towards One Nation One Ration Card which is being propagated by the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This is a very positive approach to tackle the issue of migrant labours in any coming pandemic situation and hence migration comes to the centre-stage of policy decision rather than that of citizen in political level in India during this COVID pandemic.

#### **From Mediated Society to Political Society in COVID India:**

Indian society for the last two decades since the end of 1990s has been engulfed by realities being reported, represented and interpreted by media to such an extent that analysts started talking about emergence of mediated society. However the COVID pandemic have been tackled in such a political manner in India, like the declaration of lockdown, the centre-state debates on implementation of ration / fair price distribution issue, the management of migrant labour issue, the declaration of national education policy suddenly and then its opposition have all been done categorically to engage the society in issues other than the real issue of tackling the pandemic. All the political forces have been a party to this development and even the media joined hand as in any debate entitled as management of COVID in any regional and national channels the number of politicians outnumbered the health experts! Therefore





politics have played a major role in transforming Indian society from a mediated one to a political one during the pandemic. All the events unfolding in this situation have been reported, represented and interpreted in a political manner to an extent that management of COVID will be an electoral issue in coming elections which actually is a temporary matter for the entire management of societal issues for the full term of a government in Indian federal units and even in the centre. Particular mention must be made of foreign relational politics of India. The foreign relations with other countries have been talked again in a way so as to arouse nationalist jingoism in Indian society resultant effect of which is the sudden announcement of Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. The implicit threat from US President to cut off economic relationship on non-transfer of HCQ medicines, the aggression of Chinese military forces in Galwan, the reported attacks by Pakistani terrorist infiltrates in Kashmir valley, have all been presented in a manner to instil a sense of 'attacked' in Indian social psyche and arousal of a 'militant' approach of responses to these countries. However at the diplomatic level the negotiations were usual negotiations of dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation. Even India opened up medical diplomacy with Pakistan on request of the latter in this pandemic situation. So the fact remains that at social level there is arousal of a certain sentiment and at official level there is a play of another sentiment. This is nothing but the creation of a political society whereby actual task of managing COVID is being diluted through these 'cover-up' communications. With the new normal of following state directives of lockdown and phase wise unlocking in policy domain, communication aspect between government and citizen and among citizen have been thronged by new normal of factual and counterfactual information flows. Hence the infotainment of pre-COVID times was replaced by bipolar information disorder in COVID times where government information about COVID affected and death are seen as shallow, half-truth and false and private news media information are seen as 'critical mass' to interrogate the government information. The Indian context of interaction between state and corporate media houses in times of COVID has been one of bargaining and not cooperation. While the state wants to have control on the informative communication dissemination sphere of the corporate media houses the latter in turn wants some financial cushioning. As a result the orientation of both forms of media in India is economic rather than communicative in the true sense of the term mass communication. In this situation the paper floats the idea of refashioning the state owned media which has its own centralised disadvantages as the situation in China shows. Prime Minister Modi is always upto something special, out of the box and adventurous. So at one extreme Modi led Indian State can step out to control not



only corporate own media houses regarding their information flowcharts but can also extract individual information through what is called ‘surveillance capitalism’ of data societies in which situations can be so suffocating that the call may be “we don’t need laws alone. We need public commissions that talk about truth. We need truth commissions.” (Gupta and Banerjee, 2020). But at other extreme Modi government led Indian State can also do the unthinkable and which is the thrust of this paper – rebuild and refashion state owned media riding on a nationalist spire to give a tough competition in the ‘information game’ of Indian democracy. The COVID period has shown how meticulously central health ministry communicated in depth informative daily status of COVID situation in the country for months together. But such data were then scrutinised by private corporate owned media houses in their own ways which becomes politically charged and meaningful giving a false imagery of politics in public mindset which is that politics is a self-interested economic business but not selfless public service which ought to be the image in public mind. Herein the paper argues that Modi government can put into frame all information available for communication dissemination across the society and also analyses the information from formal, academic and policy perspective and not political perspective. However this strategy must be official as well as democratic.

### **Conclusion**

The entire purpose of this paper is to highlight the play of profitability of different sectors that matters most in everyday life of citizen like media, politics and society. This is being seen in the foregoing sections. The COVID pandemic created such a situation that the task on board for all sectors was to discuss threadbare the issues related to pandemic – the virus, the measures to combat, the health standards and infrastructure, the exact information of medical facilities availability and involvement of NGOs(Nongovernmental Organisations) and CBOs (Civil-society Based Organisations). For media sector what was seen was again a battle between factual and counterfactuals in communication dissemination to create a sense of attract to citizen to be lured to television in these lockdown stretch of time which ultimately increases its TRP and profitability. The task of politics was to selfless apolitical service to people to take care of all concerned with a humanitarian face but again there was politics-as-usual to add on to support base by showing one’s efficacy and opponent’s inefficacy in tackling management and this is again nothing but profitability of political sector to think of one’s own political leverage. For society the task was to raise its level of self-consciousness to create a coordinated social milieu to deal with pandemic but again there was self-centered



consciousness to protect oneself or not to protect oneself (a dare devil casual revolutionary approach of disregarding state directives) with total indifference to health of others. This again shows self-centered profitability approach and in these crisis times even staying freely and staying safe is a profit so to say. Therefore the entire backbone of such attitude have been the neo-liberal market based global integrated economic model and that has to be done away with. To start with alternative we have the 'poor economics' model of recent Nobel laureate duo- Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo who in their celebrated work of 2011 talks about a middle ground between 'grand developmental plans' of State and 'market based solutions to economic problems' and rests their faith in discussion and seeking solutions from the affected itself or the poor themselves. Therein lies the possibility of new economics of 'citizen' rather than old economics of 'market' and further old Keynesian economics of 'State'. The Indian lens of experience has alerted us that State-citizen complex will be the new normal of economic approach in politics, media and society in coming days and 'service' rather than 'management' will be at the centre of communication pathway locally, nationally and globally.

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