

THE VILIFICATION OF THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT

Dr. Ambreen Agha

- Sahil Philip

Q- In your recent article on The Hindu, you had interestingly written that the Tablighi Jamaat group was “apolitical” in nature. Could you bring more context into this?

I believe that there is nothing apolitical per say. Everything is very, very political. There is a special meaning to the ‘apolitical’, defined by single quotes that I mentioned in the article that you are referring to. Even Tabligh has its own politics. There exists a politics of silence and distancing over critical issues of politics. Tabligh may not take various stance on politics which concern Muslims, but it has its politics and that can be seen in its gender ideology and cultural separatism that they practice. But they claim to be apolitical – distancing themselves from issues that are directly political or that have direct political implications. What happened with the Tabligh group needs to be seen in the larger spectrum of communal politics happening in India today. This has been the framework of governance of India today; or rather the misgovernance practiced by the right-wing. So communal politics acts as the framework of governance today. This poison of communal polarization has been gradually and systematically injected into society. In fact, the second victory of Modi in 2019, can be seen as a consolidation of Hindu votes. This very movement of politics in India, the way I see it, is Hindu revivalism. We see it today coming in the social and political landscape of India and the Tablighi Jamaat incident fits into the larger politics of communal vilification of a community.

Q- You mentioned the cropping up of our current prime minister as a “consolidation of Hindu votes.” Can we say that prior to 2014 there was an existing prejudice against the Muslim community but that was limited to the confines of one’s private sphere?

Yes, I agree with you. This is not something new. There have been undercurrents; subtle indications of Muslims being the “other”, being the “outsider”. If you go to middle-class households, you see Muslims being discussed as the “other” subject. Here the class factor comes to play. So you have the elite Muslims who are part of the rhetoric; how they have been patronized by the elite sensibilities of Hindu upper class or the elites. Thus it’s the lower or middle class Muslims who usually tend to bear the brunt of this communal politics. And now there has been a deliberate political design. If you scratch the surface, you can see this festering wound. It was easy for Mr. Modi. So can we actually blame him for this? It was always there in the nature of our society and Modi knew the Indian sensibilities more than the liberals in Congress. And I think that is where

the liberal politics failed in India. Modi knew the pulse of the nation. What is happening today is a well calculated political move; to diminish the Muslim subject and have a renewed idea of India. Even if hate existed before 2014, it was never there on your face, it was confined to your homes. But the treatment meted out today by the government and the foot soldiers are largely about making the Muslims feel like second class citizens. Today we see that Muslims live in fear across classes. The fear of persecution is palpable and runs across classes.

The 2015 lynching of Mohommad Akhlaq on the suspicion of eating beef was the first template that was designed by the Hindutva government. And this was the first incident where a Muslim was lynched in his own neighbourhood. Today we see an outpour of voices of resistance in context to the discriminatory citizenship act, the CAA, which I see as important. But what I want to say is we, and by we, I mean the liberals, we left leaning socially conscious citizens of India, are late in voicing our resistance. Had we protested then and put our lives on hold then, we could have actually acted as a deterrent to what we saw culminating into the Delhi Pogroms. It took citizenship to be at stake for us to come out of our houses. It did not matter; Akhlaq’s life didn’t matter. There is, of course, criticism for the government but now it is late. Well, better late than never.

Q- You spoke of a political design being carried out by the state post 2014. Do you think that the government has acted on a sense of impunity being granted to itself?

Yes definitely! There is full impunity. Usually, majoritarian governments function on this culture of impunity. Akhlaq’s lynching was in 2015 and ever since we have seen this circle of hate politics being close to completion. This completion we can see through a culmination of state supported pogrom in the national capital. The police, which is the state’s repressive arm, has been wreaking havoc on the lives of Muslims. You see in UP, where there have been targeted attacks by the police on the lives of Muslims and their property. But we have to think about how does this hate continues to operate on the ground? Your question basically would serve as the answer. It is this culture of impunity that has been deeply entrenched in our system of justice and I think the judiciary is in complete paralysis. There is a complete loss of independence on the part of the judiciary. Kashmir and Ayodhya were the very first cases to come up since Modi’s victory in 2019 and I am mentioning this only to point out that under an authoritarian government, freedom, be it of any kind – individual or institutional – is a myth, it is a mirage.



Source- jsia.edu.in

Q- On the same note, how much culture of impunity is being spread over social media and the TV? Because I see a lot of explicit anti-Muslim sentiment being spewed over social media acting on a layer of impunity.

What we're seeing on social media is an actual reflection of what is happening on ground. So when the Delhi pogroms happened, I went to Shiv Vihar and Mustafabad and saw something very appalling. Specifically, the residents of Shiv Vihar had drawn a Lakshman Rekha with a heap of garbage dump and this was done to demarcate the Hindu Muslim neighbourhood. This is a neighbourhood that has lived and resided with each other for generations and today, after the pogrom there was no remorse. The majoritarian group is acting out against the minority and we have reached this point through the spread of fake news, via social media. This culture of misinformation and disinformation that the Indian masses are thriving upon is being consumed on a daily basis. The WhatsApp forwards have started to poison family groups and which is later discussed in family tables. There is no sense of inquiry to know the source of information. I feel all of this is happening with the state's complicity. These forces spreading fake news are helping the government and serving their political ends and thus it becomes a mutual relationship. In the end, it's the government who is benefiting from this sense of polarization and that's why it's not even interested in addressing the poison being spewed on social media. This is a calculated move.

Q- Could one argue that the Tablighi incident was deliberate targeting of the Muslims? Because there were many religious festivals that were held after the lockdown was initiated across various states such as UP, Madhya Pradesh. Yet they don't make much of the news headlines. Could there be a sense of selective testing?

Yes it has a lot to do with the targeting of the community. And that is what is called systemic and systematic persecution. There is a cycle to be observed since 2014-2015 and we discussed this in the course of our conversation. We started with the lynching,

then came vilification, dressing, and then we had the CAA, the Delhi Pogroms, and now finally the Tablighi incident. So I see that there is a mix of things happening but the motive and pattern is the same; which is the vilification of one particular community.

Q- How does this new form of Islamophobia that originated in the middle of the pandemic affect India's relations with the Gulf nations?

Recently, there has been a sort of reaction from the Gulf nations with regards to 'Indian Islamophobia'. I feel this would have a price to pay. Our Prime Minister came out when the UAE Princess Al Qassimi expressed her dissatisfaction meted out against the Muslims of India and she recalled how she missed the "peaceful India". It is only then that the Ministry of External Affairs took notice because we have a lot at stake there. I see Qassimi's statement as a warning sign; it could mean the undoing of all the gains he has made with the Gulf nations over the past 5 years. The reaction by the West Asian countries must be taken seriously. It is ironic that countries that have had the worst human rights record are telling India to reign in their forces of terror. Today, India stands to have an abysmal human rights record of its own. I think the important thing is that the Gulf has noticed and this is a region where more than about 6 million Indians are working and sending back remittances which amount to more than \$25 billion. So, if you see the UAE particularly, around 3 million Indian diaspora live there and they send back around \$13 billion in remittances. There are a lot of things at stake for us. The challenge now lies in how to control the dogs of terror that have been unleashed or India risks hurting its own interest in the Muslim world.

Q- Do you see any silver lining between the Muslims and the "hyphenated" Hindus happening anytime soon?

Yes, I do. I hope after the incidents that happened in the country which is the police brutality in Jamia and the police wreaking havoc in JNU, one could see the liberals coming in support of JNU but there was somewhat complete silence when it came to Jamia. Because it is seen as a Muslim majority University. So I feel, liberal sensibilities hurt when the attack is closer to them; when it hurts their own image. I am not sure if they care about the Muslims in the lowest social hierarchy being beaten up. But when JNU, the heart of democratic and secular ethos of the country, was attacked, they came together. The same response was missing when the attack happened in Jamia. My faith and hope now runs with the youth that is being well educated and trained in questioning. Sadly, JNU is half dead but it is still resisting. And more liberal universities such as Jindal and Ashoka where critical thinking is fostered, that's where I see a silver lining. The protests organized in Jindal against the Delhi pogroms were unprecedented. Another important avenue could be revolutionizing inter-community interaction that must extend to everyday living and social relations. That's where my hope lies!

The Rise of China and the Scope of Indian Progress

- Samarth Gupta

In the past two decades China has expanded its economic and military footprint in the Indian subcontinent by coveting India's neighbors. The expansion of Chinese presence in the region has also been enthusiastically received by these nations. Chinese aid has been in line with their own aspirations for development and has also enabled them to have a more strategic autonomy as they can conveniently balance both India and China for their maximum benefit. This is because of less cordial relations between both these powers and the discourse that views geo-politics within South-Asia as a zero sum game between India and China.

This approach has led to the emergence of a unique puzzle for India as any economic aid coming from India is bound to be significantly smaller than the Chinese one due to the relative size of the Indian economy. Moreover, with other South Asian nations like Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh keen on FDI and infrastructural projects, the options for India to counter the increasing Chinese influence are getting limited. To solve this strategic conundrum, India will have to re-prioritize some of its strategic tenants and position itself appropriately within the region while taking into account the interests of China and its mutual neighbors.

Chinese interest in South Asia is guided by the primary interest of securing the sea route of their energy imports, improving access for Chinese products in South Asian markets and exporting the excess infrastructure building capacity of China to smaller South Asian countries. Chinese aid to small South Asian nations has taken all these interests into account and at the same time has made the package lucrative for the recipient nations.



Source – asia.nikkei.com

Construction of ports like Payra and Hambantota ensures that China can protect its energy imports coming from Straits of Malacca in case of a crisis or potentially even bypass that route. While other projects like Transit projects in Nepal ensure that Nepal is not overly dependent on India for the flow of its goods. All these steps have been accompanied by Chinese agreements with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal for increasing the access to Chinese goods in their markets. China has also significantly increased its share of FDI in these nations. This increased Chinese influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, has been perceived by India with great skepticism and is marred by either the rhetoric of 'encircling India' or 'debt trap'. While such an approach promotes the necessary caution within the security establishment of India, it also disregards key interests of Chinese and other South Asian nations of the region.

“By the virtue of its economic size India cannot hope to compete with the Chinese economic aid to maintain itself as the lucrative partner for these nations.”

While Sino-Indian relations have been guided by the legacy of Indian distrust after the defeat in 1962 Indo-China War, it has to shift towards greater cooperation with China as India should not engage in a strategic rivalry with China amidst such stark power differential. While Sino-Indian relations cannot be normalised unless border dispute and until Tibet issue is resolved; the other areas of cooperation like pharmaceuticals (which will form a major part of post-Covid investments), infrastructure development and academic exchange. Rapprochement with China should also be accompanied by robust alliance with other powers who are wary of China and its growing influence. This includes Japan, the United States and Australia who are particularly critical of China's aggressive stance in the South China Sea.

While the United States under President Trump has been urging India to take up a greater role in countering China and increasing its military power, it cannot happen without the aid from the US itself. Trump's erratic leadership and his frequent clashes with the NATO allies does not prompt confidence in any informal or formal alliance that India might make with the United States in case of a future Trump presidency. On the other hand Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been keen on partnering with India, and India can capitalise on these opportunities and should engage Japan in trilateral projects within various regions of South Asia.

While Indian public discourse has been centered around viewing the evolving geo-political landscape in South-Asia as a zero sum game with China, the need is to factor in the aspirations and interests of all the nations involved. Unless India develops the economic might that is comparable to China's, it must approach the emerging reality with caution or be pushed into a competition with a it's much more influential neighbor.

Sundarbans against Cyclones

-Vanshika Mittal

The strongest storm ever recorded on the Bay of Bengal was caused by Cyclone Amphan in May 2020. It left a trail of destruction with at least 96 people dead, flattened homes, uprooted trees, submerged villages and millions stuck at the storm helpless. The most adversely affected areas of West Bengal include Purba Medinipur and North 24 Parganas district. The areas also include the Sundarbans which is a 10,000 square kilometers patch of mangroves that spreads over both India and Bangladesh.

While South Asia is no stranger to cyclones, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic added onto the challenge. This made it difficult to evacuate people and bring everyone together to the shelter houses. Shelter houses were only half filled due to the concerns of social distancing. In fact, many have even been reported to refuse transfer to these houses in the fear of contamination of the virus.



Source – foriegnpolicy.com

Amidst all of these external factors that make the cyclone highly fatal especially in current times, the Sundarbans in the delta region can act as a buffer and help reduce the intensity of the impact. Mangroves act as cushions and limit the impact of sea related externalities. Coastal zones are mainly low lying areas that are uncovered in regards to such intrusions. In such cases mangrove roots and branches form a barricade and help cut the wind size and speed of the sea water. This is possible since mangroves are the only species of tropical forests that can survive in saline water. The same was seen when they acted as a defense wall against Cyclone Bulbul in 2019. The mangroves absorb the impact and reduce the wind speed of the cyclone. Studies conducted post sea related incidents in coastal regions in India indicated that without mangroves, villages within ten km off the coast would have suffered an average of 1.72 additional deaths.

This allows them to protect both the hotspot regions of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Moreover, it does so at its own expense. These forests are known for their biodiversity. They are also home to 96 protected tigers but due to the lack of monitoring of the wildlife here, the impact cannot be determined and they are bound to suffer the most. Along with this, people dependent on the Sundarbans for their livelihood have been affected too. All tourist activities have been suspended owing to the lockdown and now even the fishermen and honey collectors cannot enter.

“Despite all this, the mangrove ecosystems of the country are undervalued. They are often seen replaceable and face absolutely no resistance in orders meant to clear them up for ‘development activities’. These include construction of airports and promoting industrialization and tourism, the very elements that make areas more vulnerable to destruction during cyclones and storms.”

Even though a report by the Forest Survey of India claims for the mangrove cover to have increased by 181 square km between 2013 and 2017, it is a misleading number. This count includes nascent plantations that will take very long to grow and perform the ecological functions. This nascent plantation however compensates for the felling of huge spaces of the mangrove trees which then becomes a problematic sequence. Furthermore, plantations are only possible for monoculture species and lack the diversity of a multi species natural forest. The second caution of this reported number is the fact that the new covers are open and sparse and will once again fail to function like naturally dense covers. In addition to this, the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change has exempted oil and gas firms from seeking an environmental clearance if they propose to drill on shore or offshore coastal regions. This will not only negatively impact the fish count, water quality and exaggerate the risk of oil spills but also put the Sundarbans at a huge risk. Along with this, the government has also proposed a new thermal project jointly with Bangladesh that is a concern to the forest’s biodiversity and breeding environment. According to the IEE (Initial Environmental Examination) report, this project will result in loss of agriculture and homestead land and air pollution.

There have been many debates surrounding environment conservation and development. Many believe that the two do not stand together and one must be compromised in order to achieve the other. This is not hard to deny for it is even reflective in our policies. With advancements in development and technology, the environment as a notion has become replaceable. The same was executed for the Sundarbans when artificial embankments were planned to be built around coastal regions to safeguard them from such storms. However, such artificial sea defenses are not only expensive to build and repair but also ineffective in many cases. This is where we as a society become short sighted and compensate for sustainability.

“Poverty Porn”

- Prerna Vij

The coronavirus outbreak has brought with it many crises in several forms, but the migrant crisis that has gripped the nation has grabbed eyeballs. The migrant crisis is one that stems from the implementation of a nationwide lockdown that was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 25th March 2020. The government gave everyone a mere 4 hours to prepare for what was supposed to be the world’s largest and longest lockdown ever. The world’s biggest democracy was shut down with scores of people left to fend for themselves in the middle of a pandemic. It left 40 million internal migrants with no way to reach their hometowns and no money to feed themselves. However, there was immense amounts of reportage that stem out of this crisis. As migrants began to walk home with their families, reporters gathered to collect stories that ranged from touting these migrants as fools to be travelling back home and others that made them as the heroes for what were supposedly ‘human interest’ stories. You could see stories of women being glorified as they carried their children on their backs and men being lauded as they carried their families back to their homes. However, there are some important questions that need to be asked when there is reportage of this sort.

“When the subject of interest is someone who has been forced into the circumstances, how do things such as bravery and grit then compare in the larger scheme of things.”

The idea is this – there is often a lot of celebration and a collective praise of sorts whenever someone achieves something that is often imagined to be beyond human capacity. However, this often becomes a method for the government to hide behind a lack of action. The fact that there was something ‘praiseworthy’ in the way the migrants were travelling distances and making ends meet is in itself a very problematic way to approach a crisis where the migrants are going home against their own wishes. They are going home because the way the government approached the crisis was haphazard and they were left with no other choice.

This lack of choice needs to be accounted for. The fact that their ‘bravery’ is merely a shroud for the ineffective state mechanisms need to be accounted for. The fact that the populace revels in stories of pain shows how privilege works and control narratives needs to be accounted for. The constant need to romanticize poverty where is nothing but an efficient exercise in preserving status quo. The migrants are supposedly ‘brave’, ‘heroic’, ‘loyal’, they are never victims of the system or products of faulty governance. The ‘human interest’ stories are nothing but poverty porn. Where the entire system rigs the poor to make them seem as the epitome of moral consciousness of society without so much as trying to make their lives easier. The questions that should have been asked is what conditions prompted this act? Why did the government refuse to ease the journey? Why was the documentation and reportage simply coverage and not actual tangible help? All of these have been missing from the frontline narratives that have managed to become the popular points in discourse. The Republic went so far as to make the migrants the bearers of some Islamic agenda, however that remains to be another discussion.

← Tweet



Ivanka Trump
@IvankaTrump

15 yr old Jyoti Kumari, carried her wounded father to their home village on the back of her bicycle covering +1,200 km over 7 days.

This beautiful feat of endurance & love has captured the imagination of the Indian people and the cycling federation! 🇮🇳



Ivanka Trump tweeted this.

There are several things that are wrong with this tweet beginning with the tone-deaf way that the information has been conveyed. However, there is something far deeper that needs to be excavated and understood here. Ivanka is a product of immense financial security and capital. The idea of cycling to her is something that is ‘adventure’. Take for example the idea of camping. It is romantic and adventurous but for a homeless person it is life and hardships. This is where the reportage that converts the pain of migrants that makes them seem like super humans who have managed to accomplish never before heard of feats and not simply people who had no resources to go back to their own homes.

Poverty porn is something that is a tool to preserve the status quo of those that already have the resources to live their lives. It allows for tone deafness that creates the impetus to remain oblivious to the actual structural problems that persist.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Self-Isolation and COVID-19

- Advaita Singh

“Without being melodramatic, Covid-19 is like the last nail in the coffin of globalisation,” Carmen Reinhart, a professor of international finance at the Harvard Kennedy School, told Bloomberg. The outbreak of COVID-19 has been a hurdle in the global supply chain and international trade, to say the least. As MNCs suffer the issues caused by over-reliance on a couple of countries and countries rethink their trade policies, a trend of de-globalisation seems to be occurring. Distrust and fear of spreading contagion have brewed liking for a state of isolation. However, Economists have raised concerns that the policy of self-isolation will lead to the end of globalisation.

Under normal circumstances, the global economy works in a model of codependency. Many countries specialise in certain goods and services to exploit their competitive advantages. By producing on a large scale, they sell the excess to other countries that demand the product and use the revenue to buy goods that their citizens demand but the country does not produce. In doing so, every country is dependent on another to be the buyer of its products and the seller of its demands. COVID-19 changed consumer patterns and needs which heavily disturbed this model. There was a demand surge of medical kits, masks and medical equipment. Due to supply-side shocks in agriculture, food security became a massive issue. To prevent shortages at home, many countries like Russia, Vietnam and Kazakhstan imposed export barriers on foodstuffs like wheat. By restricting international free trade this way, the model of codependency was put in jeopardy. Import-dependent countries like Bangladesh faced a crisis.



Source- tomorrowmakers.com

“Considering this dependency as a source of concern and national vulnerability, governments explored the policy of self-reliance and self-isolation.”

The shock of COVID-19 was experienced by countries and firms that were either in extreme surplus or dangerous shortages. This acted as a wake-up call for many governments as they realized just how dependent they were on other nations. This marks a change of priority — from producing at the lowest cost to resilience. Under this policy, the government will seek to become more independent and self-reliant such that the economy and public are cushioned in case of any global shocks. To do so, industries at home will be encouraged to produce locally. The government will also have to initiate policies that encourage new businesses and industries to set up. In order to make sure that these strategic and infant industries survive, some amount of protectionism will be expected. Since, globalisation exists under the purview of international trade, protectionist policies are a threat to globalisation.

While many economists predict this pandemic to be the downfall of the globalised world, some economists are saying that it need not be true. While increasing self-reliance is one of the options to soften the blow in case of global shocks, there are other alternatives. Particularly for MNCs that faced supply chain issues by being overly dependent on one country, for example, mobile phone producers like Apple and Vivo, diversification may be a good option. By spreading production over more countries and moving away from the just-in-time system, the risk of over dependence can be significantly reduced. Combining the strategy of diversification with good preventive measures like back-up inventory at home countries, a good balance can be struck between efficiency and safety.

Diversification is a solution that operates within the framework of globalisation. It allows countries to use comparative and absolute advantages. It is a better alternative for many reasons, primarily because complete self-isolation is not possible or feasible. Countries simply lack the resources to produce everything their citizens need at home at reasonable prices and good enough quantities. At no level, international trade can come to a stop, but protectionist measures will certainly slow down and hamper it to a great extent. Developed countries will pay the price because of lost export revenue, high level of subsidization required for domestic production and ultimately higher prices.

It is clear that self-isolation will not yield economic outcomes as expected. Even if countries do not actively indulge in its practice, some level of targeted isolation will prevail. Trade will take a hit simply because unlike the pre- COVID times, it matters exactly where the good was produced. For more than just health reasons, the location of production also matters because of the growing xenophobia. People will be more skeptical of goods made in China and countries badly hit with the virus. This mindset is unlikely to change anytime soon and it will take its toll on the trade patterns post-COVID. Historically, anything that affected the world at this scale — be it the 2008 crash or Brexit — caused a slump in international trade. Coronavirus will also do the same, at least in the short run. Its long term implications will be clearer as countries decide on what policy and course of action they choose to take. These decisions will affect the income distribution and inequality between countries. Many will gain and many will lose, but in these times, international cooperation and trust might be in the best interest of all countries.

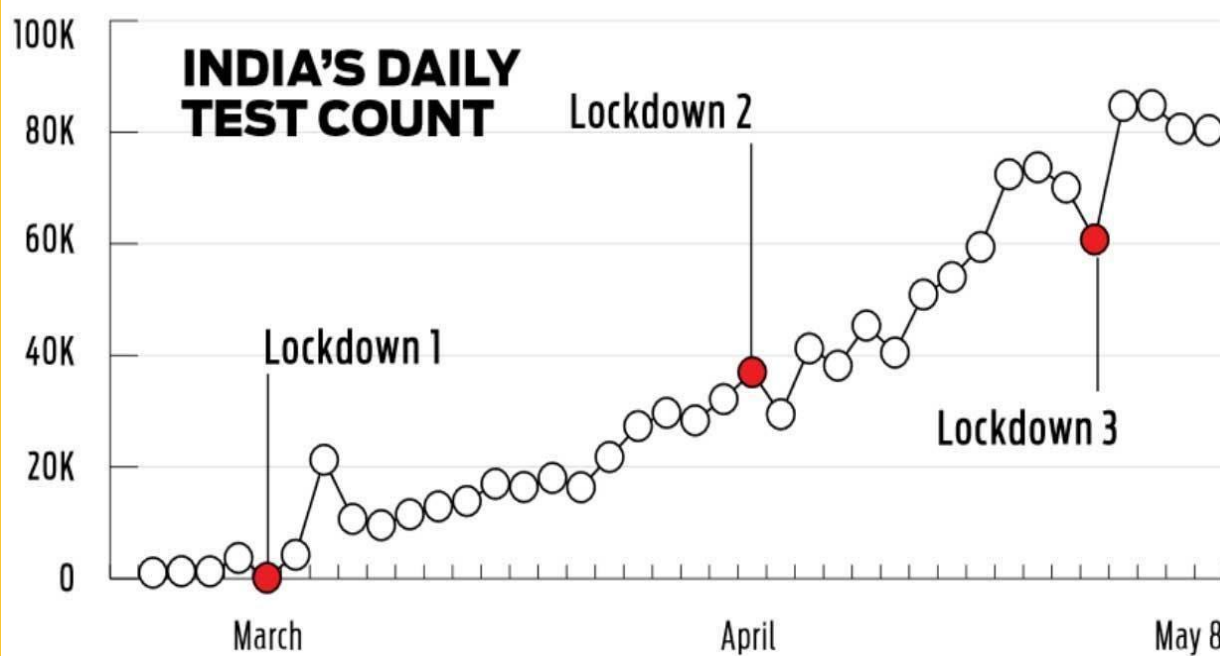
Weighing India's Economic Policies under Lockdown

-Snehal Sreedhar

In an interview with the Former Chief Economist at the World Bank, Mr. Kaushik Basu explained concerns regarding India becoming a “controlled economy”. Here he expressed concerns about the prolonged lockdown in India leading to India's position in the global market as one that is restricted and hence “controlled”, which could later render it uncompetitive with regard to the rest of the world, especially as they begin to reopen their economy. With this and the growing misery of the poor in mind, India transcends into Lockdown 4.0 with an aim to further its progress in reviving the economy while also keeping coronavirus cases to its minimum possible value.

Owing to the ineffectiveness of the previous relief package of \$22 billion dollars that comprised only 0.85% of the GDP, the Government took note of what many renowned economists had to say about India's fiscal space and the capacity to borrow. Mr. Basu also pointed out this optimistic figure, regarding the debt to GDP ratio, which stands at 68% and is lower than what it reflects in most countries. With this ratio in mind, India can actually stretch up to 75-80% in fiscal borrowing. Thus, in support of the popular opinion of providing direct cash transfers to help the current economic situation, the India Government announced a \$265 billion dollar relief package which accounts for about 10% of the GDP. This was one of the first steps taken by the Government that requires quite a laudatory response by the general public.

Under the nationwide lockdown, India has found enough time to resuscitate its health capabilities to meet the requirements at the medical front of this global battle. There were concerns initially that the daily testing numbers averaged at about 5000 tests daily as opposed to the 20,000 tests conducted daily in South Korea with one-twentieth of the population size compared to India's. This was primarily because of the shortage of the personal protective equipment (PPE) body coveralls that helps the frontline health workers protect themselves from catching the virus. India now becomes the second largest producer of PPE coveralls, which has also helped the testing numbers escalate to 40,000 tests by the end of April.



Source: ICMR, Our World in Data. Figures unavailable for some days

Coming to their subsequent strategy of division of the country into red, orange and green zones, the government implemented suitable economic policies exclusive to these zones as the second step toward reviving the economy, after the package. Red zones being the most affected, orange zones being the ones with fewer cases and green zones reflecting no new cases within a 21-day time period, made it easier for the government to release restrictions. This was done under Lockdown 2.0 with the restrictions being more eased as the country entered Lockdown 3.0. Currently under Lockdown 4.0 India has reopened most of the essential services rendered especially by the unorganized sector.

Buses, auto-rickshaws and cab service can operate. All shops except those in malls and containment zones can open. Barbershops and salons can open. Delivery of essential and non-essential items is allowed through online shopping platforms. Restaurants can function, but only for take-away. Cap on 33% strength in offices is done away with. Night curfew from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. for non-essential services is still to remain in force and schools, colleges and malls continue to remain shut.

The government of India has indeed done a great job in curbing the virus as is evident from a fatality rate of just 4% in the second largest population in the world, with a population density that is far greater than most of the worst affected countries in the world. Besides this, the unprecedented announcement of the nationwide lockdown also proves to be beneficial instead if it were to be a planned one, since most people would have made travel arrangements increasing the rate of spread of the virus at the first stage itself. Although commendable, it has also been highly criticized keeping the interests of migrants at heart, who are now walking miles to enjoy being at home rather than being stuck in cities that no longer have roofs to shelter them. However, many of these laborers are trapped in industrial compounds, ill fed and ill treated, with no hope of returning back to their homes let alone of any upcoming job prospects.

The unorganized sector is now under direct responsibility of state governments for basic amenities, also highlighting the failures of the public distribution systems (PDS) that estimate around 8 crores of households without ration cards. All the efforts of the unorganized sector, most of which is migrant in nature, have seemed to go down the drain along with their hopes of a better life that they had sought to establish upon leaving their homes. Such is the irony imposed on them by the Indian Economy for which they serve as a backbone and yet remain beyond the reach of service.

India and its foreign trade post-COVID

Mr. Apurva Marda

- Vanshika Shah

Mr. Apurva Marda is a Director at Vivid Visions Trexim a pioneer in the trading of Exim Scrips and Consultants on the Foreign Trade Policies of India for over five decades. He has traveled to more than 60 countries over the last two and half decades exploring opportunities for Businesses and helping connect People to Potential. He is a graduate from Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai. He is also a member and advisor to various Business Organisations, and Trade Promotion Bodies. In this interview, Mr. Marda shares his views on the impact in the Indian foreign trade post-COVID.

Q1) a) With our PM advocating Swadeshi goods and made in India products, do you think this pandemic will push that initiative and encourage the consumption of homemade objects?

Putting it in the right perspective, I would say that our leader has made a fantastic strategy. This is that moment where he is asking the country not to indulge in non-necessary imported goods. He is asking the country to give preference to local manufactures and try to eliminate the purchase of non-essential imported goods. In this interim period, we are going to be testing domestic manufacturing and trying to match them up with world-class standards. With his 'Vocal for local' campaign he is providing us with a two-point program. He is talking about encouraging local produce which will then also be exported globally. So, I think there will be a good amount of push for domestic products, homemade products, and products manufactured from companies in India.

b) The income of every individual has decreased substantially. Homemade products are comparatively more costly. In that case, is it feasible to advocate Swadeshi goods?

The situation in India is different than that of the other countries in the world. India does have production capabilities. It has the capacity, and now we will be using those capacities. The situation right now is a war-like situation. Typically what is going to happen globally is that there will be an increase in the amount of social support provided. The government will start funding people. There has been an announcement of 20 lakh crores, which will be distributed amongst various sectors but primarily this money is going to go to the most vulnerable.

When the government will be financing like this, it will naturally increase taxes in the near future as the government eventually makes money through taxes. According to my predictions, globally the governments will start to increase taxes. India as a country cannot go on like this forever and it would be imperative for the government to increase taxes and raise funds from the people. This will lead to higher import prices. If imports are the only option, inflation will be terribly high. Right now there is no inflation but when the markets will open up and demand will rise, that is what is going to

happen. Our PM is preparing us which is not a bad move at all. The situation is not about being choosy but it is about being conservative. Non-essential items will be the ones to be taxed. Domestic products will get the boost and simultaneously imports will start coming down.

Q2) It is not only India advocating to go 'vocal on local'. Other countries are also looking at cutting their imports and being self-dependent.

a) This will lead to a decrease in India's exports as well. So what would be the net effect? What would be the impact of the result?

Yes, every country will try to consider being self-sufficient. It is the responsibility of every global leader to revive their economy, so they would try to maximize local production and there is nothing wrong with it. This scenario is going to be coming ahead.

India is a strong service exporter, and in the last two decades India's service exports have blossomed really well. India has used its English speaking population to their own advantage and is regarded as a good knowledge partner worldwide. On the other hand, China has done tremendously well in manufacturing leaving India far behind.

Service exports are driven by knowledge. Do you think that countries like Europe and America can compete with India overnight? I'm not so sure. Hence, they will see a reliable partner in India. The sentiment right now is that people want to shift their base outside China. There is a negative sentiment floating against China but they still see India as a natural choice. The emergence of the current governance swiping the majority of votes is a sign of stability making the environment conducive for foreign investment.

Now, there will be a push to produce locally. Companies abroad will collaborate and manufacture goods, take them back to their respective countries. That goes with regards to the product sector. With respect to knowledge, India will continue to do good in this space. It is difficult to compete with Indian service providers which include services such as software. These services are a support to the local manufactures in the home country and therefore there should not be much of an uproar about outsourcing knowledge partners, in fact in the long run it may do

better.

b) How will it affect the international trade systems in both import and export? How long will it take to re-establish the worldwide network?

It all depends on the time COVID lasts. The trade business amounted to about 18 trillion dollars in 2019. In an interesting discussion recently, they predicted that if the economy revives in the coming three months then in 2021 itself the trade will stabilize. If the world markets take more than six months then the trade figures will reach 18 trillion dollars by 2024. However, if the situation extends for 12 months and beyond, then it might take more than 10 years to reestablish trade as it was in 2019.

As of now you and I can just make wild guesses.

Q3) As the estimated outcome, there would be a major job cut worldwide. Especially, the laborers that work abroad have lost their jobs. Considering unemployment, there would be a decrease in remittances as well. Is this also an important aspect of the trade business? How?

Undoubtedly, the community of physical work laborers



Source – vibrantworldevents.com

will be hit. Especially in middle eastern countries the effect may be larger because of the oil price crisis which led to a decrease in spending.

For sure in India we have a lot of people working as laborers, but talking about the last 20 years, India has lost its position in the international labor market to countries like Nepal, Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Opportunities have arisen in India because of the growth in the industrial sector making Indian laborers more expensive. However, we have used the knowledge sector to our advantage. We are talking about doctors, engineers, analysts, and a large chunk that is captured by IT. We have caught a lot of movement in the US and Europe in the knowledge sector. This segment will also be affected but they were also saving and therefore I don't think they will lose their jobs immediately. In fact, many people right now are willing to let go of their salary for a couple of months and they have started to ask for more equity. When things come back to normalcy, they will take a share of profit instead.

This crisis could give birth to a newer segment of people. For instance, we are seeing entrepreneurs emerging out in this crisis.

So, yes the inflow will be affected for the time being. But having said that, India is a developed economy so we don't rely on foreign remittances completely. There will be an effect but it is not going to be so grave.

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