



# How the Coronavirus Lockdown Impacts the Impoverished in India

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## Abstract

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, several countries have imposed curfews, quarantines, and lockdowns to restrict the spread of the infection among people. India had initiated a nationwide lockdown to combat the pandemic starting from the last week of March until the end of May 2020. But, the lockdown had continued subsequently in several red zones across parts of the country for few months. However, scientists have criticized the government's abrupt lockdown since it prevented people from preparing for the worst aftermath. Besides, the curfews have blocked millions of impoverished migrant workers from leaving cities to return to their homes in distant rural villages. As a result, the destitute workers have endured enormous hardship and outright discrimination desolately leading to their added physical and mental distress, pain, suffering, and death. Most of the victims of the lockdown have belonged to the economically distressed lower social classes of the Indian caste hierarchy. This article outlines their sufferings triggered by the long drawn-out lockdown episode.

**Keywords** Coronavirus · Lockdown · India · Poverty · Prejudice

## Introduction

The historical records have shown evidence for the emergence of various infectious diseases over centuries affecting the human society. The effect of globalization and the impact of frequent movement of people across continents have catalyzed the dispersal of deadly pathogens in recent decades. The novel coronavirus is a recent example of a fatal infectious pandemic that continues to create fear and economic distress worldwide. As a consequence of the fearful atmosphere, an increase in the frequencies of racial discriminations targeting the most vulnerable communities across cultures and countries has been observed by scientists. Scientific reports have highlighted incidences of racial prejudice targeting the Asian community in the USA and Europe during the

pandemic period recently [1, 2]. Actually, such discriminations are not restricted to developed countries, and developing countries have also witnessed cases of prejudice targeting the socioeconomically weakest in society [3]. In this paper, we have highlighted some specifics on how the coronavirus-induced total lockdown prejudicially impacted the socioeconomically disadvantaged people across the Indian landscape.

When the novel coronavirus outbreak began in China at the end of 2019, the Chinese government initiated a lockdown of Wuhan City, the location of the epidemic outburst, from 23 January to 15 March 2020. But, the entire nation of China did not undergo total lockdown, and therefore, travelers have moved across the globe creating an instant chain reaction of the viral spread across continents. Interestingly, the island nation of Taiwan (area 36,000 km<sup>2</sup>), located 130 km off the coast of China, has managed to escape from the health disaster without a need for lockdown. As soon as the coronavirus infection started to spread in China, Taiwan had enforced strict monitoring of all arriving passengers by air and sea for the viral symptoms, starting late January 2020 [4]. The early precautionary actions using big data, artificial intelligence, rapid screening, and constant monitoring have facilitated Taiwan to keep the pandemic away with only seven deaths and few hundred infected cases so far [4]. But,

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several countries namely Bangladesh, East Timor, India, Iran, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and New Zealand have enforced total lockdown measures starting from few days to few months, while many other countries have imposed only localized lockdown in the most affected areas.

On 24 March 2020, India has imposed the lockdown that continued for over 2 months ending on 31 May [5]. Afterward, the lockdown had continued for few months in several red zones of some states where more infections were reported. It abruptly stopped the movement of over 1.3 billion people and kept them primarily in home confinement for the first time in history. It also led to some unwarranted discriminatory consequences directed at the socioeconomically fragile communities. As soon as the government announced the lockdown, millions of underprivileged migrant workers based in major cities were forced to the streets in a frantic quest to return home for safety. They were generally overwhelmed by fear, stress, anxiety, and paranoia caused by both the deadly pandemic and the potent lockdown. It was evident from the desperate scenes portrayed in the news media on how panicked workers were crowding the streets, highways, and bus terminals of cosmopolitan cities such as Delhi and Mumbai [6]. The government had stopped all non-essential transportation services so there was no way out for them to escape from the chaos. As a result, many of them were forced to walk hundreds of miles, and the long march of the migrant workers had started in the midst of lockdown [7].

The mass gatherings of the poor on the streets have alarmed the upper- and middle-class citizens as they watched the unraveling mayhem from their homes [7]. Sociologists have wondered how could the government implement the grueling rule of confinement evenly and suddenly to be adhered by the haves and the have nots in the second most populated country on earth? If India has an egalitarian system, it would have been possible. But, the society has been intensely divided by the extreme rich on one side and the poverty-stricken on the other, and thus, the dogmatic decree was bound to be broken from the beginning.

Majority of the victims of the lockdown have belonged to the lower social classes that include the “tribal” or indigenous people and “Dalits” or the socially oppressed lower caste people. Any form of discrimination targeting the caste is illegal in India as per the Untouchability Offenses Act of 1955 (later refined as the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976). But, the intolerance targeting the socioeconomically vulnerable lower caste people continues to persist to some extent in the contemporary Indian society despite the guarantees drawn-out by the legislation and constitution. So, one may wonder, what is the magnitude of the prejudice endured by the oppressed during the lockdown? A closer look at the lockdown as such may yield some answers.

## India’s Wealth and Communal Divide

When it comes to the question of people and wealth, India has no shortage of both, and about 10% of the super-rich tend to retain nearly 75% of the nation’s total wealth. Statistics also show that in 2017, over 70% of the wealth increase went largely to the richest 1%, while over 60 million poor people have gained only 1% wealth increase [8]. Also, the billionaires’ wealth has increased by over 10 times during the last decade that exceeds the country’s current annual budget. These scenarios have undoubtedly portrays the uneven distribution of fortune fostering unpleasant socioeconomic divide. So, the lockdown did not create many difficulties to the affluent upper- and middle-class populations as they have maintained social distancing and also adhered to self-isolation at their comfortable homes. They have regularly used facemasks, frequently sanitized hands, approached hospitals when symptoms arose, obeyed the rules enforced by officials and upheld the model citizen eminence. But, what about the millions of impoverished struck at the bottom of the socially irked caste stratum?

The Indian caste system is the world’s oldest and persistent social stratification, where professions became hereditary patterns leading to somewhat fixed status hierarchies that often restrict the freedom of the suppressed people [9]. The ancient Hindu religious scripture *Rigveda* (1500–1000 BC) distinguishes four discrete social classes based on occupation, and they include the *Brahmanas* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (kings, administrators, and warriors), *Vaishyas* (merchants, traders, and landlords), and *Shudras* (laborers to serve other classes). Those who fall outside these four distinct castes are the tribals and Dalits, also known as “untouchables” in the past. But, this contentious term was outlawed after independence, and the national father, MK Gandhi, hesitated to use it. Instead, he had coined a new word *Harijan* in 1933 that originated from the Sanskrit word *Harijana*, meaning “people dedicated to Lord Vishnu” or plainly “God’s children.” But, the Sanskrit word *Dalit*, meaning “broken or scattered,” has been widely accepted and used by the community in general. In fact, the *Dalit* expression was used in the colonial records of 1935 to denote the socially repressed lower classes.

Over 100 million people belonged to 645 distinct tribes have been scattered across the forests and drylands. They are often isolated from the upper caste residences. Besides, over 200 million Dalits have been living in close proximity to the upper caste residences. These two communities combined may reach about one-quarter of India’s total population. A recent study has shown that the tribal and Dalit women are more likely to face social discrimination [10]. Furthermore, the tribal and Dalit people were prohibited from entering the Hindu temples, public places, and homes occupied by the upper caste in the past with an assumption of retaining spiritual purity as they have been the traditional custodians of

sacred scriptures. Reports however show the reoccurrence of such prejudicial practice in some extent in remote villages, irrespective of bigotry based on caste, color and religion remains illegal [11].

The Dalits and tribals also make up a significant part of the unorganized workforce, and they often suffer from malnutrition, low literacy, and high mortality. They are the major workforce in the sanitation sector that involves the handling and disposal of the human feces. They clean sewers without proper protective gears. People from the upper castes have not taken up these menial jobs historically. Although India has legally banned the recruitment of manual scavengers in 2013, the government admits that it has over 54,000 active duty scavengers as contract workers in 2019 [12]. This shows the persistent spillovers of the caste prejudice.

### India's Instant Lockdown

When the Prime Minister announced the lockdown measures on national television, he gave only 4-h notice to the public to prepare for the confinement when most of them were not prepared [13]. Even during war time, the frontline forces are given more than 4 h to prepare for combat. Was the short warning enough for anyone to reach from a major city to a faraway village and that too in the world's largest democracy? In fact, each Indian state can be compared to a country elsewhere, and traveling within a state is a time-consuming affair. For example, the Uttar Pradesh State and the UK are similar in size (area 243,000 km<sup>2</sup>), but the former has a population of 200 million while the later with only 60 million.

Leaders of democratic nations are asserted to follow honest rules to ensure that their citizens are guided by knowledge so that they do not become victims of hasty policy decisions. Critiques however argue that if the government would have given even 4 days to prepare, the workers struck inside cities would have safely reunited with their families. India's leading epidemiologists have strongly criticized the government's instant lockdown as thoughtless, unscientific, and draconian [14]. Nevertheless, the World Health Organization has duly appreciated the vigorous lockdown measures as timely and comprehensive.

When sociologists questioned the government's failure to provide timely transport to millions of workers, the charismatic Prime Minister apologized on television for their desolation. Scholars of leadership studies state that what leaders require is character and not charisma as it is a critical measure of excellence in governance [15]. Besides, leaders have to evaluate challenging social distresses timely with conscience to assess whether or not an intended policy would destabilize the weakest in society. Likewise, when the demonetization policy was announced on 8 November 2016, the government gave only 4-h notice before canceling the 500 and 1000

denominations at midnight Indian Standard Time (IST). With deficient planning, the country was poorly prepared to deal the brutal ramifications when people stood in long lines outside banks for weeks to exchange the condemned currencies [16]. The Prime Minister apologized at that time as well.

Sadly, those who had suffered the most during these two policy misfortunes were the poverty-stricken and socially stigmatized people. Comprehending the glitches linked to popular decisions made by political leaders, the social reformer Ambedkar wrote seven decades ago, "However good a constitution may be, if those who are implementing it are not good, it will prove to be bad" [17]. Ambedkar, by the way, was a Dalit, and he had witnessed the distress faced by the socially suppressed long ago. Sadly, the anguish still stands to some degree. Whether or not the government realizes the actuality of poverty among the socially subjugated, the World Bank has recently warned India that millions of people will soon face extreme poverty as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic [18]. India incidentally holds the 94th rank among 107 nations in the global hunger index of 2020.

### Distress Faced by Millions of Migrant Workers

Most of the migrants tend to periodically move hundreds of miles from their villages to cities in search of jobs each year where they serve as temporary contract workers. They rely on meager daily wages to sustain lives in harsh working conditions leading to occupational exposure to various hazards [19]. They predominantly belong to the Dalits and tribal communities. They were also the most affected in cities without food and work during the lockdown where they became the most stigmatized in the pandemic saga.

According to the census records of 2011, over 450 million internally displaced migrant workers exist of which 30% fall below the age of 30. Among them, over 100 million belong to the poorest category, and they largely work as footloose laborers. They are often the main breadwinners in their families, and they transfer part of their salaries to support relatives. Although the government has allocated funds during the pandemic, many of the workers who lived in unauthorized city slums had no identity proofs so they could not avail the subsidies. Sadly, their dilemma has not been realized by authorities as they do not deal people without identification.

With no work, food, and transport, many of them had to walk for miles to reach home, and they suffered along the way [20]. Unable to tolerate the abuse, accidents, and suicides that followed the lockdown, the Supreme Court has directed the government on 9 June 2020 to finish transporting all workers back to their destinations within 15 days. During the long walk, many workers were arrested for violating the curfews. After reviewing the ground situation, the Supreme Court has instructed the central and state governments to release all the

workers from jail and also told to withdraw cases against them as they were simply walking on the road to reach home [21]. This clearly shows that the government has somehow failed to foresee the drastic consequences destabilizing the lives of millions of impoverished workers while triggering the threat of viral spreading from urban to rural areas [6]. As of 15 October 2020, India has recorded 7.3 million infected cases with 111,000 deaths, and the cases continue to rise.

## Pain, Prejudice, and Demise

The coronavirus-induced lockdown has also affected the mental health of people worldwide. Studies have shown an increase in the cases of depression, anxiety, stress, and other mental health problems in various countries [22–24]. Due to instant job loss, India's migrant workers have faced displacement, hunger, accident, malnutrition, suicide, and unbearable mental stress. Although the government has admitted that 29,415 people have died in road accidents during the lockdown, it lacked details on the number of migrant workers' demise. Nevertheless, news reports have recorded over 200 deaths due to road accidents when migrant workers walked along the highways during the lockdown, from 24 March to 17 May 2020 [25]. The actual death toll could be high since not all mortality cases are officially registered in government records.

Some migrant workers were also crushed by trains. For example, on 8 May 2020, a group of workers belonged to the tribal communities were walking home, and along the way, they sat on the railway tracks to rest. They were not expecting trains to run as the government had already stopped them. When they were asleep on the tracks, 16 of them were crushed by a moving cargo train that came in early hours. One of them called up his wife the night before and said, "Please send us some money. We don't have anything left. Even the contractor is refusing to pay us. What should we do; we will die of hunger and thirst" [26]. These were the last words of K Singh, as narrated by his wife when he walked with friends hoping to reach home about 800 km away. When people die in plane crash, the media displays their names and talk about their deeds. When the poor migrant workers were run over by a train, they became the fast forgotten fatalities of the lockdown chronicle.

When the Prime Minister appealed to the masses to turn off the lights in homes across the nation on 5 April 2020 at 9 pm IST for 9 min, they adhered to his request as a sign of unity during the pandemic crisis. The sacred lamp lighting is a routine Hindu religious ritual. But, the lighting adventure had led to direct misery for a poor Dalit family in Haryana State. A family of eight was attacked by armed upper caste assailants for not following up the leader's call to put off their house

lights that led to serious injuries [27]. Furthermore, a child died in Bihar State due to hunger since the parents lost jobs and left with no money [28]. Also, in the Prime Minister's constituency of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh State, several Dalit children were forced to eat grass during the lockdown. When a journalist exposed the incident, the local government has issued a legal notice, and the official responsible for the act responded by saying that he too ate it. Without admitting the fault, the officer went on record to justify the irrational act [29].

Some victims were also pushed toward suicide due to extreme physical and mental agony. A Dalit youth from Uttar Pradesh State, for example, was a contract worker in Delhi. He had no money after he lost the job so started to walk home. After reaching his village, he was put in quarantine by officials. In an audio message shared with his friends, he said that he was beaten badly by a policeman belonged to upper caste. He wrote, "Friends, if someone doesn't believe, then take off my clothes and see. You will not find anything but blood-clot all over my back. I'm going to commit suicide after this as I do not want to live. My hand has been broken. What will I do now in my life? Despite this, nobody came forward to help, that is why I'm taking this extreme step" [30]. Similarly, an elderly tribal man in Madhya Pradesh State went to purchase grocery. Eyewitnesses have stated that he was beaten to death by a policeman for violating the curfew. In fact, he was not violating, and he went to buy the grocery in the preassigned time by the government [31]. Several such occurrences of abuses were reported in news media targeting the marginalized during the national lockdown [32, 33]. Besides, police personnel were seen attacking migrant workers with sticks and forced them to crawl on the ground as shown in the video taken by a photo journalist [34]. These events have portrayed the grim reality of the negative lockdown consequences faced by the impoverished.

People in general had difficulties to access healthcare during the lockdown to treat various other diseases since health professionals were preoccupied with the coronavirus control duties. Other than the emergency and antenatal services, nothing was working smoothly, and people have struggled to access doctors. To aggravate the crisis, over four million homeless people with various types of mental illnesses were left out abruptly, and they have endured enormous sufferings inflicted by the widespread lockdown. To make matters worse, India's healthcare spending is one of the lowest in the world. It also spends only one US dollar for a mentally ill person on average yearly [35]. In this dark reality, India has no choice except to allocate more funds to boost the healthcare spending as soon as possible.

## Conclusion

Whether or not the lockdown has led to the control of the coronavirus pandemic, it apparently has no effect on the longstanding social epidemic of prejudice against the oppressed. The pandemic control measures have taught everyone some unforgettable lesson. Leaders who hold administrative powers have to introspect deeply on the evolving disaster management policies by constantly keeping the compassionate civil liberty component as a top priority while making crucial policy decisions. If India would have enforced the localized quarantines and strict health monitoring of all major airports and seaports at the earliest to track the arriving passengers for possible exposure to the viral infection, it would have avoided the negative consequences. Moreover, the Indian government and the society at large must educate the children to culture compassion, love, and tolerance toward the diverse social divisions. Caring for the elderly in the marginalized communities is also crucial while dealing with the epidemic control strategies. It is also time for the government, corporate, and non-government sectors to face the ground reality that India has a long way to go to build a true egalitarian society.

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**Data Availability** Authors will share data when requested.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethics Approval** No human or animal studies performed.

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