

EXPLAINING POST-PANDEMIC INDIAN CITIES: SOME REFLECTIONS ON NEW DELHI

SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN
Jamia Millia Central University (India)
srehman@jmi.ac.in

Abstract: This essay explores the multiple implications of the pandemic in the lives of people and the multi-dimensional challenges they face in New Delhi, India. Key themes that the essay examines are: migration, Hindu-Muslim relations, the labour market, and the public health system in general. The paper further comments on some general issues that affect the city, particularly the politics of the Central Vista project, in order to offer a comprehensive portrait of the pandemic's impact on the city and its people. In many ways, the city was reborn after pandemic. It has also reignited debate regarding migrations, the labour market, and Hindu-Muslim relations, though the latter has worsened due to the rise of the Hindu Right in Indian politics with the consolidation of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). This paper presents insights to each of these issues. While the pandemic has fundamentally transformed city life, there is yet to be any clear pattern emerging out of these transformations, given that no one has clear idea in which direction the pandemic might move in future. Despite new knowledge and the production of vaccines, the future of coronavirus (Covid-19) remains a big unknown.

Keywords: pandemic, coronavirus, migration, Hindu-Muslim riot, labour.

INTRODUCTION

The continued uncertainty about the post-pandemic era and the transformation of cities has clearly provoked new thinking about changes in urban life. I reflect on New Delhi, an old city that was the seat of power for many dynasties as well as colonial powers replete with numerous forms of conflict, power struggle and violence. Rajmohan Gandhi's book, *Revenge and Reconciliation* (2000) vividly documents these power struggles and its violence. At this juncture, New Delhi suffers from acute air pollution. It is further seen as world's most polluted capital. The urgency of this issue has been barely addressed by Prime

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Minister Narendra Modi and the Chief Minister of New Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal. The Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC) conducted a study between 2018 and 2020, surveying thousands of households across varying socio-economic backgrounds in Delhi. The study concluded that rich and poor households were affected in an equal manner according to a news report on this published in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on 9 December 2021.

The coronavirus (Covid-19) epidemic and the subsequent lockdown brought unprecedented transformations to the life in this capital city. According to the 2011 Census conducted by the Government of India (GOI), New Delhi has a population of roughly 11 million. It is a city with many privileges but also numerous challenges. Most of these challenges are man-made owing to the manner New Delhi has been allowed to expand undermining urban planning. Like all cities, it is a city that inspires hopes and aspirations. Like a magnet, it attracts people of varied social classes and diverse ethnic communities from different parts of India, but never celebrated as a melting pot. Like cities all over the world, New Delhi has confronted enormous challenges owing to the pandemic. It is now limping back to normalcy, but with deep fear and overwhelming anxieties (Singh 2021).

According to official estimates, 31 per cent of India's population is urban. Around 25 to 30 people migrate every minute to Indian cities from rural areas. As the intensity of urban spaces rises, the cost of living in cities also increases. Most big cities in India have a wide economic disparity, with a large urban poor and vast swathes of slums. When the pandemic began, there was panic in the Indian government's response. The thoughtless measures that government undertook to address the emergency arising out of pandemic were neither people-friendly nor poor-friendly. During an abrupt lockdown with no end to sight, there were long lines of people who lost their livelihood and were desperate to return to their native towns and villages but were denied the means of transport by the government. They walked thousands of kilometres to reach their villages or native places. Many heart-breaking stories appeared in the media showing the underbelly of Indian society, its deep



connection with urban poor and migrant workers. As the British daily “The Guardian” reported in the following words,

with no way to earn money and feed their families for at least three weeks, millions decided last week to head back to their villages in order to survive. With trains and most buses suspended and taxis unaffordable, walking was the only option for many, and the sides of the highways were soon lined with people, bags slung over their shoulders, and many with nothing but flip-flops on their feet (Peterson, Chaurasia 2020).

NEW DELHI MIGRANTS AND THEIR CHALLENGES

According to a report recently submitted to the parliamentary panel of India’s Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), somewhere close to 517,073 migrants left for their native places from New Delhi during the second wave of Covid-19. This is mentioned in a news report in “The Hindustan Times” (July 2, 2021) by Deeksha Bharadwaj. It further states that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) held at least eight meetings with state governments to ensure food security, health safety, and transport facilities. It further reported that ₹ 1,034 crore had been disbursed by states to five million building and construction workers in the second wave of the pandemic as compared to ₹ 5,618 crore transferred to 18.3 million workers during the first wave. Additionally, there were 20 control centres in different parts of the countries to address distress calls.

From April 21 to June 23, 2021; 1,311 complaints were received by the ministry, of which 861 relating to the states and 450 to the centre. The calls were mainly about issues such as termination, medical assistance, travel assistance and rations. Of these, 830 grievances were reported to be resolved and 49 others are still in the process of being addressed (Bhardwaj 2021).

According to New Delhi’s Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, nearly 800,000 migrants used buses to leave the capital between mid-April and mid-May 2020 during the first wave period. The report pointed out that unlike the migrant crisis seen in April and May 2020, when people tried to reach home without any transport, the exodus remained smooth during the second

wave. This demonstrated an improvement in the support services provided by the New Delhi government and could be attributed to the lessons learnt by officials as well as better general knowledge of the virus.

However, the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet expressed her deep distress over the plight of affected migrant workers. Without a doubt, this sudden migration not only created enormous problems for the lives of migrants, but it also hugely impacted industry of all kinds and the economy. According to a study by Anoop Khanna (2021: 181-191), these migrations owing to pandemic impacted mainly low-income households, who may have found it hard to cope with earning losses. According to his study, lockdowns and social distancing were drying up incomes and employment opportunities, and furthermore, it was disrupting supply chains, transportation systems, agricultural productions, etc.

THE PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON HINDU-MUSLIM RELATIONS

New Delhi has been a multi-religious city for a long time. A considerable number of Muslim populations have lived in this city since the days of the Moghul empire. Prior to the lockdown, the city witnessed a massive Hindu-Muslim riot, widely known as Northeast Delhi riot of February 2020. New Delhi had not seen such violence since the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992. Nearly 53 people were killed and more than 400 were injured in the riot. While there were victims in both communities, a disproportionately high number of Muslims were victims, lost family members, and suffered property damage in this riot. The following description of the riot gives a bird's eye view of the implications of the Delhi riot:

sitting inside his house near Auliya Masjid, Nizamuddin had tears in his eyes thinking about the time. Over 5,000 men were walking and running amok on the streets destroying everything and everyone, he said: "we got so scared that we returned home only after a month from our village". For Vineeta Kumar, 28, the most traumatic

memory is the six days spent frantically looking for her 10-year-old daughter Radhika, who got lost in the middle of everyone scampering for cover when the houses were being burnt. “I looked for her everywhere for six days, shared her pictures on WhatsApp and even told the police but they didn’t help. Finally, a few boys known to my husband spotted my daughter in Loni at the house of a young girl who had found her and taken her to safety”, she recalled, adding that the e-rickshaw her husband bought two months before the riots was burnt by the mob (Bhandari 2020).

The arrival of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown disrupted relief efforts for the victims of the riot. There were several camps meant to serve people who had lost their property, but owing to the lockdown, those relief camps were shut down rather abruptly with no alternative arrangements. Victims were left to fend for themselves. According to a report titled *How the Riots and Pandemic tore apart the lives of children of Northeast Delhi*, in “The Hindustan Times” (Dec. 12, 2021); it was reported that teachers were struggling to encourage parents to send their children back to school. Here is the description according to this news report:

for the riot-hit children, the Covid-enforced lockdown was another bolt from the blue. Anjum, whose Khajuri Khas house was burned down by a mob, said: “we were left with nothing; not even a piece of cloth. We also lost the only smartphone we had and there was no way for any of us – myself or my siblings – to attend online classes. We could only resume studies in October after a person donated us a mobile phone. Neetu Chaudhary, an official at the Arun Modern School in Brijpuri, one of the four schools that were attacked and damaged in the violence, said their student strength reduced by nearly 40 per cent, post the riots and the Covid-enforced lockdown”.

This riot occurred towards the final part of President Trump’s visit to New Delhi. Given the presence of the American President, there were headlines about this riot linking it to the President’s visit as a provocation of those who were against President Trump in the first place (Peterson 2020). Covid-19 gave a new twist to the story of Hindu-Muslim tensions in India, which has been the subject of investigation among scholars for

many years. Paul Brass's *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (2005) is considered the most important book on this, and yet it could not foresee this new situation in a riot that arose due to a pandemic. What has added to the tragedy is the prejudice of the Modi-led Hindu Right regime, which has no interest in looking at Muslims or their welfare issues as Indian citizens. This particular aspect becomes apparent in the following episode at Nizamuddin Markaz.

Another disturbing development that had impacted community relations, particularly between Muslims and the rest of the population is what is called, the Tablighi Jamaat controversy. It took a communal tone, mainly because everything in India has taken a Hindu vs. Muslim tone since 2014, with the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) as a ruling party (Rehman 2018). On March 26, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a national lockdown. Owing to a religious gathering of Tablighi Jamaat on March 13-15, there were several cases of Covid-19 (Bisht, Naqvi 2021). But, on March 22, authorities shut down the Markaz with about 2,500 worshippers still inside.

By the time this report from Al Jazeera was published in 2020, of roughly 4,400 Covid-19 positive cases in India, nearly a third were attributed to the gathering at the Markaz. According to government sources in early March 2020, more than 8,000 people (including foreigners) were reported to have visited the Markaz. Meanwhile, state governments began a massive search to identify all those who had visited the Markaz.

At the time of this reporting, most of the infected, including more than 1,000 foreigners, had travelled to the Markaz. In Tamil Nadu, of the total 610 Covid-19 cases, at least 570 were linked to the Markaz. In Telangana, all 11 deaths were linked to the Markaz congregation. In Andhra Pradesh, out of 260 cases, 243 were attributed with the Jamaat congregation. Jamaat has remained an apolitical organisation since its founding in 1926 and works to encourage Muslims to practise Islam the way it is believed to have been practised at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Set up in northern Haryana's Mewat area by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi, it is now headed by his great grandson Maulana Saad. The group was vilified by the



media, and India's 200 million Muslims were targeted for spreading Covid-19. Based on the analysis of media coverage from March 20 to April 27, using Media Cloud1 created by the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, there was fake content produced by the media and there was also evidence of negative connotations in these stories. 1.5-10 per cent of content included words such as "violating", "crime", "spitting", "terrorist", and "*jihad*". These stories led to Islamophobic fake news and hate speech. In a nutshell, the pandemic has redefined the communal relations and presented a new twist to the debate over Hindu-Muslim relations in modern India.

PANDEMIC EFFECT ON LABOUR MARKET

The Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2019-20 presents a portrait of the varied impact on Hindus and Muslims in India. The Survey shows the changes in employment structure and earnings of workers in rural and urban areas of different communities. This covers the period from April-June 2020 (pandemic quarter) compared to the preceding quarter, Jan-March 2020 (pre-pandemic quarter) or the corresponding quarter in the previous year (April-June 2019). According to Amitabh Kundu (2021),

the differential impact of the pandemic on the labour market, captured through changes in the first two quarters of 2020, has not been inconsequential. The deficits in the pandemic quarter compared to the corresponding quarter in the preceding year across communities shows a similar pattern...The self-employed had to bear the brunt of the onslaught of the pandemic. The percentage of people who did not work (reporting no work during the reference week) went up from 6.1 per cent in rural and 7.6 per cent in urban areas in the pre-pandemic quarter to 15.6 per cent and 29.9 per cent, respectively, in the pandemic quarter. The rise was extremely uneven across communities and gender.

Thus, the author argues that the pandemic may not have a class or community bias, but its economic fallout certainly

seems to have it. Based on this analysis, there are interesting observations regarding changes due to the pandemic in rural and urban areas regarding Hindus, Muslims and among various castes of Hindus such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) or the former untouchables and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The percentage of persons with no employment among the self-employed in the Scheduled Castes (SCs)/ Scheduled Tribes (STs) population, Muslims and others (non-SC/ST and non-Muslim) increased from 6.9 per cent, 8.6 per cent and 5.5 per cent, respectively, to 15.1 per cent, 27.5 per cent and 13.7 per cent, respectively in rural areas. Muslim community was badly affected and is followed by the SCs/STs. In urban areas, the story is not any different. People with no work formed 7.7 per cent, 11 per cent and 7.1 per cent of SCs/STs, Muslims and others, respectively, and the figures went up to 39.2 per cent, 42.6 per cent and 39.3 per cent, respectively. The highest rate of unemployment was among Muslims.

The facts regarding the fall in average earnings follows a pattern very similar to what we noticed in the previous analysis. In rural areas, monthly earnings during the Covid quarter were 9 per cent less than the average for the year 2019-20. In urban areas, the deficit, however, was 21 per cent. Muslims, in rural areas, recorded the highest decline of 13 per cent, and it was close to the average for others. Among the caste groups, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) / Scheduled Tribes (STs) suffered the least damage, possibly due to the indispensable nature of their services.

In urban areas, the fall in earnings was very high during the pandemic quarter. The Scheduled Castes (SCs)/Scheduled Tribes (STs) suffered a 27 per cent loss. For Muslims and the others, the corresponding figure was 20 per cent. The earning loss for Muslims was less than their employment loss indicating job losses at the lower levels. For the Scheduled Castes (SCs) / Scheduled Tribes (STs), earning losses were recorded across the board, resulting in higher earning deficits than the Muslims (Kundu 2021).

GENERAL ISSUES OF INDIAN CITIES

Important organizations have studied the impact of Covid-19 on Indian cities. For instance, a report was published by the World Economic Forum in collaboration with IDFC Institute titled, *Indian Cities in the post-Pandemic World (2021)*. According to this report, significant changes have taken place in some sectors such as the construction and housing sector. According to this survey, the outflow of migrant workers from cities and lockdown restrictions on on-site activities impacted the construction sector and housing markets. As a result, the Real Estate Regulation Authorities (RERA) had to re-examine the processes due to delays in areas such as delivery and payments. The experts who wrote this report shared their insights on how to not only address the post-pandemic requirements but how to formulate long-term responses to such situations in India such as housing, public health, transport, environment, etc.

With regards to housing, the experts suggest revamping the sector by raising the supply of formal affordable housing. Land tenure, they suggest, should not be a precondition to providing adequate infrastructure, for which need arises to revise repressive regulations to make housing markets responsive to demand. One big issue in Delhi where there are considerable discussions is the construction of what is called, Central Vista Project. According to a senior journalist, Alpana Kishore (2021),

it is perhaps apt that Delhi's descent over the last few weeks into a medieval hell managed to bring out its very own Nero in a sudden, irreversible reveal. It sets off the unravelling of a myth, now mere narcissistic delusion, its unmasked heartlessness exposed to all. In this ancient city that has seen endless empires rise and fall and understands power shifts instinctively, there can be no going back to that weird, alternate-reality world of peacocks, kindergarten-style alphabet acronyms and sage-philosopher beards – or believing once again, that it is real.

There was a Supreme Court judgement to ban this during the pandemic, but the government justified it as a matter of great national importance to continue the work (Rajagopal

2021). Concerning transport, the Report has some significant suggestions to make. It is not easy to evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on urban transport. Hence, it is essential that city officials walk the streets and understand how the demand for different kinds of transport is changing. By doing so, they can reduce the repercussions of Covid-19 on mass transportation and mobility and provide viable travel options and policies. Their recommendations include: *a*) monitor trends in cities to provide feasible and viable transport options aligned with the changing demand for mobility; *b*) enact long-lasting changes and discourage excessive personal car use by offering viable alternatives with equivalent commuting times; *c*) adapt the current supply of multimodal transport by offering the possibility to integrate IPT with rail and buses; improve the management of urban road use via improved traffic management and road capacity; *d*) streamline the taxation of transport services so that it is paid for by all city dwellers; *e*) ensure the compatibility of regulations followed by individual mobility providers to improve management and coordination (The World Economic Forum and the IDFC Institution 2021).

The most unfortunate effect of the pandemic has been the near collapse of Indian cities' public health systems. During the second wave there was a massive oxygen crisis in New Delhi. "The New York Times" published a report on May 5, 2021, with the following title, *India Scrambles to Supply Oxygen as Covid-19 Patients Gasp for Breath*. Besides the needs of Covid-19 infected patients not being addressed, patients with other diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) were not receiving care because outpatient departments being shut down, medical staff were unprepared for Covid-19 response and travel restrictions were enforced in cities. The recommendations are: *a*) increase fiscal and political federalism via increased power to city governments and local authorities to both raise and spend their own revenue; *b*) reduce information asymmetries; collect and collate real-time data to bridge gaps between the demand and supply of healthcare services; *c*) bolster health capacity in cities by increasing the number of trained healthcare personnel; ensure that infrastructure has adequate functional capacity, aligned with current and future demands.

One important area of concern is environment. Here are some recommendations by the experts associated with this report : *a)* identify different contributors to air pollution and categorize according to whether they are manageable by policy at local levels or require support from higher levels of government; *b)* provide greater impetus on changing the roots of pollution rather than banning it at the “end of the exhaust pipe”; *c)* devise a comprehensive public-space strategy at the city level to create open spaces strategically and maintain them more aggressively; *d)* invest in hard infrastructure for increased disaster preparedness; create major arterial networks and roads to allow rapid movement of people and goods in and out of the city in a relatively short time period; *e)* encourage collaboration between cities, towns and villages that form single economic geographies for disaster management and response (The World Economic Forum and the IDFC Institution 2021).

Finally, well-planned, and reasonably well-governed cities can be dynamic centres for innovation. They can drive economic progress which, in turn, could present citizens with a higher quality of life. Covid-19 could be an opportunity to address urban challenges in rebuilding cities after the pandemic. To plan them well, we need to have the following: *a)* restructure urban planning and reform the training of city planners to make land use effective; *b)* allow for more floor space within cities and change regulations that do not make optimal use of available land, and reducing overcrowding in buildings and on trains; *c)* improve the management of urban expansion and plan for future horizontal spread; *d)* reform the governance structure of cities; and make city-level bodies more autonomous (The World Economic Forum and the IDFC Institution 2021).

To conclude, India’s capital city, New Delhi, has experienced tremendous transformations. In this moment of never-ending pandemic, there are perhaps further issues to address or fresh ways to grapple with them in a new working environment. In Indian history with its long practice of un-touchability, Covid-19 has made everyone untouchable: a mask-wearing, vulnerable people. But the issue of migration and human suffering has taught some valuable lessons. One lesson is that the world cannot move forward purely by following the conventional

ways of public health measures. A balance between global and local is now needed to do justice to resources and to the lives of people. In this paper, I have reflected upon a few key issues such as Hindu-Muslim relations, the labour market, the public health system, and migration. In each domain, there is seminal transformation that has occurred due to the pandemic and there are valuable lessons to be learnt. As Chinmay Tumbe argues, the present age of globalization is also going to be known as age of pandemic as was the case with the age of industrial revolution and colonialism (Chinmay 2020). But in my view, the way that globalization has deepened the interconnectedness through the devastation caused by pandemic in the current phase is far more compelling compared to what was witnessed during the industrial revolution and imperialism

NOTES

¹ The five-week period was chosen based on the volume of reporting on the Tablighi Jamaat. Media Cloud's topic mapper tool was used to collate the news reporting on English and regional language media platforms. The database has significantly better coverage of English language websites. There were 11,074 stories published from 271 media sources with the term "Tablighi Jamaat" during the period, of which 94 per cent were English stories that appeared in the print media. On April 2, Media Cloud tracked as many as 1,451 news articles covering the Tablighi Jamaat case. The "Times of India", with 1,863 stories in the five-week period, which were shared on Facebook 3, 19, 874 times.

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