

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part 2]

## Governance in India During Pandemic-Part II

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the foundations of governance in India as in many parts of the world. The lessons emerging from the pandemic reveal that a capable, accountable, inclusive, and participatory state is essential for effectively addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic that will have long-lasting ramifications. Since the end of January, when India identified its first COVID-19 case, 28,212,727 cases of infections and 332,644 deaths have been recorded. A total of 25,994,295 persons have recovered (as of June 01, 2021). India witnessed the second wave of contractions in the middle of February when the daily cases continued to surge until the first week of May 2021 when it reached over 400,000 cases. In the past two weeks, the daily count of infections has reduced but the death count still remains alarmingly high. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the lives and livelihood of millions of people in India. The curfews and lockdowns add to unprecedented misery and suffering of the poor, vulnerable, and informal workers including migrant workers. The economy which was already on a weak footing even before the pandemic continues to suffer. The weak and unprepared health system in the country proved to be grossly inadequate to handle a pandemic of this magnitude. The pandemic provided a pretext to the ruling dispensation to restrict dissents and civic engagement.

### Pandemic and Indian Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic hit India at a time when the Indian economy was going through one of its worst phases with growth in the gross domestic product (GDP). The GDP fell to an 11-year low of 4.2 percent from 2019 to 2020. The economy grew by 3.1 percent in the January-March quarter of 2019-2020, against 5.7 percent at the same time frame the year prior, marking the slowest growth in at least eight years (Sahoo, 2020).

Jobless growth in India was already a major concern among many economists who had repeatedly questioned why employment was not growing as fast as the country's GDP. They warned that the rate of jobless growth could severely impact India's economy which depends heavily on the middle-class population that is primarily employed in salaried jobs and entrepreneurship (Das, 2020). The demonetization imposed by the previous National Democratic Alliance (NDA)<sup>1</sup> government in November 2016 slowed down the economy resulting in unemployment all over the country, a trend that the government emphatically denied.

The concern over unemployment was reinforced by the findings of a National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) study. The survey was the first of its kind on employment by a government agency since demonetization. The government delayed the publication but the report was purportedly leaked in the media.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Democratic Alliance is a coalition of political parties led by the Bhartiya Janata Party which rules the central government in India.

The government eventually published NSSO's annual report (July 2017-June 2018) of the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) which reported the All India unemployment rate was at 6.1 percent in the given year. This unemployment figure was a 45-year high (Patel, 2019). Facing vociferous critic from the opposition political parties and prominent economists, the government issued a statement that the comparison of the recent and past employment data was faulty as the study had used a new design methodology for the survey. In other words, the government maintains the virus slowed down the economy all around the world and there was nothing particularly unique or alarming about India's recession (Scroll, 2020).

### **Government Response to Public Health Governance**

Public healthcare infrastructure in India has long suffered from neglect and has a chronic lack of funding. Between 2009 and 2019, India invested less than 2 percent of its GDP in public health. This percentage has continued to drop, with barely 1.1 percent of the GDP going towards public health in 2019 (PRS, 2020). This lack of investment has come home to roost, with India unable to cope effectively with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the surge of the second wave since April 2021.

According to the National Health Profile in 2019, there were a total of 713,986 government hospital beds available in India, amounting to 0.55 beds per 1000 population. This is an abysmally low amount that could lead to complications during a pandemic like COVID-19. According to Singh et al. (2020), many states lied below the national level figure.

It is estimated that 5-10 percent of total patients require critical care in the form of ventilator support. Although no official figures on the number of ventilators available in the public sector are available, the same analysis by Singh et al. estimated that India possesses 17,850 to 25,556 ventilators. Even in the best-case scenario where all ICU beds were equipped with ventilators, India had a maximum of 57,000 ventilators to cater to the rapidly growing number of COVID-19 patients. During the second wave of the pandemic the daily demand for liquid medical oxygen shot up for more than 10,000 Metric Tons (MT) to normal daily demand of 3,000 MT. Many hospitals ran out of oxygen, causing the loss of precious lives. The shortage of trained medical professionals added to the woes, as India possesses one government doctor for every 10,000 patients, against WHO's recommendation of one doctor for every 1,000 patients.

In the wake of the pandemic, the Government of India sanctioned Rs.15,000 crore<sup>2</sup> for India COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness Package, as a response to fund facilities dedicated to treatments, increase the number of testing facilities, and procuring personal protective equipment (PPE), isolation beds, ICU beds, ventilators, and other essential equipment for [treating] COVID-19. India designated specific public health facilities for COVID-19 case management. According to the Union Health Minister (Economic Times, 2020), as of December 2020, there were 15,359 facilities across the country. In total there were 15,00,000 isolation beds, 270,000 oxygen-supported beds, 80,727 ICU beds and 40,575 ventilators. For contact tracing, the government of India launched the 'Aarogya Setu' app to enable people to assess themselves for contamination based on their social interaction. COVID-19 testing is free for all at government public facilities, and since April 4, both testing and treatment have been made available free of charge under India's Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), a publicly funded health insurance program that benefits the poorest households in India.

India began vaccinating on January 16, 2021. Since then, according to data available on Our World in Data, 3.1 percent of India's population have got both doses of vaccination while 11.4 percent received a single dose as of May 26, 2021. Vaccination in India has slowed at present because there is a limited supply of vaccines. The country has gone from a daily average of 3.65 million doses being administered from April 1 to April 10 to an average of 1.8 million doses a day in the month of May (Joseph, 2021). This was an area of

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<sup>2</sup> 1 crore is equivalent to 10 million

concern as India had a head-start in vaccine production even over even many developed nations. India is among the world's largest manufacturers of vaccines, and early human trials of COVID-19 vaccines, and as it also developed a vaccine in the country, it had shown great promise.

The speed of vaccination remained painfully slow, despite India's deployment of its two vaccines – Covishield of Serum Institute of India (SII) and Covaxin of Bharat Biotech. The country as a whole did not have the capacity to produce, supply, and vaccinate all its people, and therefore a plan was put in place for vaccination in phases, and rules were framed. This plan, by design, was made to slow down the pace of vaccination program so that the country's healthcare system, production, and supply logistics could be handled most efficiently. The central government should have realistically assessed the capacity of the two institutions shortlisted to manufacture the vaccines. Together, these two were capable of manufacturing 110 million doses a month. With each patient requiring two doses, India would need close to 2 billion units to protect its adult population. This fact should have prompted the government to book a larger quantity of vaccines in advance, just as the US, UK, and other countries had done with other manufacturers. Also knowing that these two firms would find it practically impossible to meet all the demand, tie-ups should have actively explored with other companies.

The central government smugly continued its lackadaisical policy, until the second wave hit the country in March. Then, in quick succession, the union government first announced that those above 45 years of age would be eligible for vaccinations. In May anyone above 18 years old was told to join the queue. Almost overnight, 750 million people were waiting for vaccination, even though both Indian firms said they would be able to boost production only by July 2021. The decision to begin the third phase of the vaccine strategy seems to have been made to increase vaccination numbers. However, this has tripled the demand for doses, thereby, further contributing to the vaccine shortfall.

In April 2021, the union government announced that the states would be responsible for procuring vaccines for the 18-45 year age group and that the procurement prices would be pre-declared by the vaccine manufacturers themselves. The union government's decision to decentralize vaccine procurement and liberalize pricing was extremely controversial, especially in the face of a supply crunch leading the Supreme Court to advise price rationalization. In addition to making the states responsible for procuring the vaccines, states will have to pay almost double prices than the central government. According to Business Standard (2021), India's most socioeconomically backward states may have to spend as much as 30 percent of their health budgets to procure COVID-19 vaccines for their populations. Moreover, the central government has used only 8.5 percent of the Rs 35,000 crore budgetary allocation for COVID-19 vaccination for the financial year 2021-22. The remaining Rs 32,000 crore is more than enough to procure vaccine doses for India's entire adult population, our analysis found. It is only on 7 June when the central government changed the policy and took the responsibility to procure vaccines centrally. The state governments will be responsible for setting the priorities.

In this context, India's "vaccine diplomacy" has drawn significant criticism. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), until April 16, 2021, India had either donated or exported almost 67 million doses of vaccines to 95 countries. Approximately 10.7 million doses have been donated as aid, of which 7.85 million doses were donated to India's neighbors and 200,000 were given to UN Peacekeeping forces (Joseph 2021). According to IndiaSpend, At the current pace of vaccination, India will not be able to meet its target of vaccinating 300 million people by August and may be delayed till October 2021.

### **Pandemic, Lockdown, and Governance Response to Informal Migrant Workers**

According to the 2011 Census, India has over 400 million migrants; a large proportion of which are internal migrants. This includes inter-state migrants as well as intra-state migrants. Some of these migrants move seasonally from one state to another during the agricultural off-season to sustain livelihoods by finding

employment in urban areas. The circular migrants are permanently settled in urban destinations but return to their rural homes during festivals, marriages, and other ceremonies. These two categories of migrants constitute a large portion of the rural migrants, who are highly mobile between the places of origin and destination cities.

COVID-19 has exposed the glaring inequalities that exist in society and unsafe and undignified migration often exacerbates such inequalities. Informal migrant workers in India were the hardest hit group during the pandemic. To arrest the spread of the pandemic the Indian government imposed one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world. The lockdown resulted in a complete shutdown of economic activities throughout the country for almost 10 weeks between the end of March and early June 2020. In India, most of the migrant workers were not paid their wages during the lockdown; they had no access to food or cash to pay for rental accommodation, nor did they have access to social welfare due to the lack of flexibility of welfare services. Many did not have bank accounts or identification documents as they were valid only in their state of origin.

In the wake of the second wave, migrant workers across Indian cities were watching with trepidation the rising COVID-19 cases and increasing restrictions such as lockdowns and night curfews. More than the fear of the virus, it is the dread of economic uncertainty that haunts them as memories of last March are still raw in their minds. This time, many migrants in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, started quickly queuing up at train reservation counters as the first rounds of lockdowns were announced in the respective states.

According to the International Labor Organization, the pandemic could push 400 million informal workers in India into deeper poverty. The migrant crisis has made it clear that no government authority, at the center or in states, has any comprehensive understanding of the scale and type of migrant workers. In response to the multifaceted crises of the migrant workers, the government announced a number of reliefs, welfare, and recovery measures. However, as the most recent GDP figures show a sharp contraction of the economy, there were doubts on whether or not these measures will be implemented at all. The state governments have fewer resources to implement many of these public programs which bring further uncertainty about migrant workers' return to urban locations. With such grave challenges faced by migrants regarding livelihoods, the need for government accountability and urgent migrant welfare interventions have become crucial.

Despite having policies and legislations in place, COVID-19 uncovered the institutional, legal, and socio-cultural cracks in the unorganized labor economy. Migrants faced different sets of problems in source and destination states. In destination states, most of the welfare schemes for migrants remained ineffective during the pandemic due to registration gaps; lack of transferability of benefits, and the absence of infrastructural and informational support provided to the migrants. Migrant workers who live away from their homes do not have access to bank accounts that were opened in their home state. This meant that they could not access any cash benefits transferred to their bank accounts. As they also did not have access to their ration cards, they could not access food benefits from ration shops where they resided. Daily wage earners lost employment overnight and had to turn to neighborhood retail shops that lent them money and food throughout the lockdown. Migrant workers in destination states faced housing and sanitation challenges for decades. These migrants live in "jhuggis," or densely populated informal settlements, controlled by powerful landlords. The landlords started harassing migrants for rent during the lockdown by cutting their electricity and threatening them to either pay or leave. Maintaining hygiene and physical distancing was a distant reality in these informal settlements where houses are tightly packed right next to each other and common toilets and water were used. The message to protect people from COVID-19, namely "Social Distancing" only facilitated stigmatization of migrants. Language, religion, and cultural values played a huge role in enhancing this stigmatization of the workers, especially in urban centers.

Returning migrants faced a different set of barriers. They had families to feed, but no access to food, jobs, health facilities, and education. They also faced stigma by the administration and neighbors in their home states. The government decided to expand the funding for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a scheme guaranteeing hundred days of wage employment in a single fiscal year to rural households whose adult members seek unskilled manual work. There have been over 8.3 million new households who have been issued job cards under the scheme during the first five months of the current fiscal year. The government, however, has yet to provide a permanent solution for skilled and semi-skilled migrants, who are not being employed for jobs that match their skill sets.

In a recent study by ICRIER (Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations) and the ISSRF (Inferential Survey Statistics and Research Foundation), a survey of 2,917 migrants in six states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, who accounted for two-thirds of the reverse migration last year, was used to assess their condition before, during and after the lockdown. The study found that 38.6 percent found no work after returning home, and that household income dropped by 85 percent in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown.

The problems and miseries faced by migrant workers during the lockdown in 2020 have persisted over the past year due to the continued economic distress and now have aggravated on account of fresh restrictions, curfews, and lockdowns being imposed in many states to control the spread of COVID-19.

### **Public Policymaking and Protest Movements During the Pandemic**

The political landscape of India was shaped by instances of popular protests whilst the country was grappling to flatten the COVID-19 curve. The Indian electorate continues to invest their faith in the Hindu majoritarian ruling party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity remains unshaken, except during the recent state assembly elections in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu where BJP and its allies were defeated in handsome margins. The protests and assertion of rights represent a critical juncture in Indian politics. The possibilities and limitations of the Indian government should be analyzed by the following critical events.

#### ***Crackdown on anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) protests***

The year 2020 began with protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). This popular uprising was a beacon of secularism. According to Ghosh (2020), just before the lockdown in March, there were many peaceful protests across the country, against the attempt of a new citizenship law that would effectively give lower status to Muslims. Some of these had been met with violence on the part of police and armed supporters of the ruling party. The central government used the opportunity presented by the lockdown not just to prohibit any kind of public protest but to arrest those who had participated in peaceful protests while protecting supporters of the ruling party. Women peacefully protesting the new citizenship law at the protest site in Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi were forced to move from the site on March 24, 2020, due to the imposition of lockdown measures (Firstpost, 2020).

Amidst the COVID-19 lockdown, the government resorted to the use of draconian laws, divisive media reporting, and jail terms for students, lawyers, human rights activists, journalists, and academics. The Delhi police, controlled by the central government searched homes and offices; confiscating phones and documents; and questioning, detaining, and arresting many people. It was instructive that these arrests were made when the Supreme Court directed governments to decongest jails to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Mander and Verma, 2020). The charges leveled against the arrested were allegedly due to their role in organizing protests against the discriminatory amendments to India's citizenship law, the proposed National Register of Citizens, and the National Population Register. They were further accused of instigating and participating in the violent communal carnage that engulfed working-class settlements in Northeast Delhi in February, the gravest Hindu-Muslim riots in the capital since Partition of 1947. They have been charged under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. This rise in detention and arrests – after a brief respite following the imposition of the lockdown – has reportedly come after the Home Ministry's instructions to the Crime Branch at the end of March (Marnal, 2020). In almost every month in the last year, several activists and academics have been either

arrested or booked under counter-terrorism law, sedition, and other laws, for merely expressing their discontent against the current dispensation.

The purpose of such continued repression during a period of national calamity appears to act as a form of punishment to those who had interrogated the government's intentions and actions and also to intimidate them. Unfortunately, this also meant that the government's own ability to create widespread social consensus and an atmosphere of trust to combat the pandemic correspondingly reduced.

### ***Amendment of labor laws during the Monsoon Session***

The passing of the three crucial labor bills during the Monsoon Session of the parliament in September – that took place in the absence of the opposition who were away protesting against the farm bills – has been called into question by the workers' rights groups. Both the Lok Sabha (lower house) and Rajya Sabha (upper house) have passed the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code of 2020, the Industrial Relations Code of 2020, and the Code on Social Security of 2020, while the opposition was not present (Sharma, 2020).

Analysts have pointed out that the bills are significantly different from earlier ones introduced in 2019, and should thus be again referred to a Standing Committee. The workers' rights groups have claimed that these bills are anti-worker as they paved the way for a "hire and fire" policy and restricted the right to strike and protest. The new norms were said to adversely affect the workers by allowing easy retrenchment and exempting certain categories of companies from adhering to the laws that safeguard their rights. The rights groups and opposition have alleged that under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has resorted to fast-tracking the passage of such bills without any democratic debate in the parliament. Opposition leaders have raised the issue of the limited time given to members of Parliament to consider and debate the provisions of the bills. They sought to have these bills referred to a Standing Committee. It has been pointed out that the bills were introduced on Saturday, September 19, and the Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha allocated three hours for them to be discussed before it was passed in the following week despite these bills having 411 clauses and 13 schedules totaling to 350 pages.

### ***The hurried passage of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill***

The passing of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, in September 2020, in both houses of Parliament, without any real deliberations, poses deeply troubling and ominous messages for civil society and democracy in India. The said bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, on September 20, 2020. No one in the parliament was aware that the bill would be discussed until that afternoon. The bill was passed by the Lok Sabha on the next day and, on September 23, it was passed by the Rajya Sabha. The bill received the President's assent on September 28 and by September 29, in just over a week, it was formulated into a law (ICJ, 2020).

According to Behar (2020), there was a perceived narrative that foreign-funded NGOs and civil society groups 'misused' the funds for development by investing them in religious conversions. However, no data was shared to substantiate this perception. It is crucial to note that, this perception is far from the truth as most foreign funding neither has a church origin nor do an overwhelming majority of the receiving entities have anything to do with religion. This is because their work is completely dedicated to people's issues like education, health, and livelihood. More nuanced discussion, in a select committee, for instance, would have thrown light on their potential hazards to development and democracy. The amendment reflects a deeply flawed understanding of democracy in which it has been reduced to electoral democracy or quest for state power, and any other form of democratic action is seen with suspicion and deemed as illegitimate.

According to Srinath (2020), the timing of the FCRA Bill was bewildering as it was tabled during an unprecedented pandemic, in which civil society has played a stellar role. The civil society reached out and supported millions of poor Indians by providing food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other basic necessities. This praise has come from the highest quarters, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as NITI Aayog, a policy think tank of the Government of India.

### ***Farmer Protests***

The standoff between India's government and its farmers began in September 2020 following the passage of new regulations designed to open up the country's enormous agricultural sector to private investment (a move that would enable farmers to sell directly to companies instead of the government marketplace, which guaranteed a minimum price for certain crops). Although the authorities have framed the reforms as necessary to modernize India's farming industry, which employs more than half of the country's 1.35 billion people, and is rife with mismanagement and waste, many farmers feared that the changes would ultimately drive down crop prices, devastating their livelihoods (Mohan, 2019). The farm bills were thought to disempower the farmers, forcing them to sell at prices that would eventually be dictated by large corporates who buy produce (Parsai, 2020). Farmers will also have to switch to crops that are in demand by the big buyers. In addition, they will have little or no legal recourse in the case of a dispute – a local bureaucrat will instead decide the result of the case (Sainath, 2020). The present system of selling through the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) is flawed, but the so-called reforms were thought to be worse by the farmers.

These fears have prompted tens of thousands of farmers, predominantly from the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, known as India's "food bowl," to set up makeshift barricades of tractors and trailers across roads, railway lines, and highways leading to Delhi. More than 450 farmers' unions and organizations expressed their support in a nationwide strike, and the protests have attracted the backing of the opposition. However, BJP-led governments in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh had tried to prevent the farmers from crossing state boundaries. When the farmers burst through the barricades, they were met with police batons, tear gas, and water cannons (Lalwani, 2020).

By bringing in three highly contentious farm laws without draft bills for discussion, mooting the final bill discreetly during the peak of the pandemic, and then eventually bulldozing the passage of the laws in the Parliament, the central government left no room to gather support from farmers (Mahaprashasta, 2020).

### **Censoring the media to control the narrative around the pandemic**

On 24 April 2021, the government requested social media platforms to take down around 100 posts believed to be fake news to create panic about the COVID-19 situation in India. The majority of the tweets pulled down by Twitter were critical of the government's inability to secure medical supplies, hospital beds, and oxygen.

Following the removal of social media posts during the last week of April 2021, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister directed officials to take action under the National Security Act, and seize the property of individuals who spread "rumors" on social media, claiming that hospitals were struggling to maintain their oxygen supplies. The police in Uttar Pradesh booked and arrested a young man on the basis of spreading a rumor over oxygen shortages "with intent to cause... fear or alarm," after he went on Twitter and made an appeal for an oxygen cylinder for his dying grandfather. The case prompted outrage on social media, with several people calling it an attempt by the state to downplay the severity of the pandemic (Forbes, 2021). Social media platforms have been a critical tool for people seeking hospital beds, medications, and oxygen as severely hit states faced a critical low in supply and infrastructure. The Supreme Court on 30 April 2021, during the *suo moto* hearing, said there should not be any clampdown on information (Indian Express, 2021).

In January and February 2021, Twitter had initially refused to take down certain tweets about farmer protests flagged by the IT Ministry for allegedly "spreading misinformation" and having the potential to "lead to imminent violence affecting public order situation in the country". This led to the IT Ministry threatening to jail Twitter India employees if the platform failed to act accordingly. Twitter India backed down and later stated that it had complied with 95 percent of requests that the Government had made. Delhi Police under the Home Ministry ostensibly raided Twitter India's offices in Delhi and Gurgaon on May 24 in order to understand why the social media platform had chosen to label a controversial tweet by BJP chief spokesperson about a

purported Congress ‘toolkit’ as “manipulated media.” The raid came two days after the government had directed Twitter to remove the label and marked the dramatic escalation in official pressure on the company (WIRE 2021).

Indian media has become polarized over the years, and sometimes coverage critical of the government is painted as an attempt to tarnish India's image. The government has, over the past few years, tried to delegitimize the media as an institution, while at the same time attempting to co-opt a select few media houses to further the agenda of the ruling party. The foreign press corps in India, too, faced not-so-subtle pressures to tone down their coverage of the ongoing COVID-19 surge, which has become headline news around the world (DW, 2021).

In April 2021 Reporters without Borders, listed India under countries considered "bad" for journalism, and among one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. In addition, for the second consecutive year, India was ranked 142 among 180 countries on the 2021 World Press Freedom Index.

## **Policy implications and ways forward**

### ***Social and economic security of the migrant workers***

The dire situation of the migrant workers calls for immediate steps to ensure conducive working conditions for the informal workers and to protect their lives and livelihoods. A renewed approach must be developed to create Inter-State Migration Policies, which encourage greater cooperation and coordination between state governments to promote the welfare of migrants. Strengthening information channels, securing housing and sanitation, financial inclusion through bank linkages, and incentivizing self-employment in peri-urban and urban areas will create a stimulus for the working conditions of migrant workers. Digitalizing registration, recognizing the prior learning (RPL) and upgrading the skills of migrants, promotion of health of workers, legal counseling services dedicated to migrant workers, and heightened coordination in migration corridors between states is imperative for ensuring the protection of migrants.

### ***Massive improvement to the healthcare system***

The single-minded focus on COVID-19 had other adverse implications on the overall health services as other diseases, and their treatment were ignored or given less attention. Adequate investments in strengthening the public health system are needed to deliver universal health coverage (UHC) and ensure system preparedness to withstand any kind of public health emergency. As experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, many government facilities were converted into hospitals dedicated to COVID-19. Therefore a large number of non-COVID-19 related patients were unable to gain access to facilities and medical providers to take care of their needs. A higher level of budget allocation is urgent to increase health infrastructure, equipment, and properly trained human resources.

### ***Enhance democratic spaces***

The democratic spaces for public deliberation and dissent on public policies and independent functioning of democratic institutions must be restored within the constitutional provisions and values. The self-regulation of media and civil society is critical in instilling faith in rule of law and democratic governance. The civic space characterized by freedoms of expression, assembly, and associations need to be nurtured within a secular fabric. The aspiration of “*sabka sath, sabka vikas, and sabka vishwas*” (together with all, development for all, the trust of all – a slogan used by the Prime Minister) cannot be achieved with a parochial majoritarian view of India’s democracy and pro-people governance. ■

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This series of reports was compiled as a part of Asia Democracy Research Network's joint research project on Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia. The research for these reports was conducted entirely by EAI and its partner think tanks in Asia, including Manusher Jonno Foundation, Society for Participatory Research in Asia, Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Japan Center for International Exchange, Academy of Political Education, Samata Foundation, Pakistan Institute for Legislative Development and Transparency, Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance, Centre for Policy Alternatives, and King Prajadhipok's Institute.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

This publication and other ADRN reports can be found on our website, [ADRN Working Papers]. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the East Asia Institute.

"Governance in India During Pandemic-Part II"

979-11-6617-177-2 95340

Date of Issue: 21 June 2021

Typeset by Junghye Suh

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