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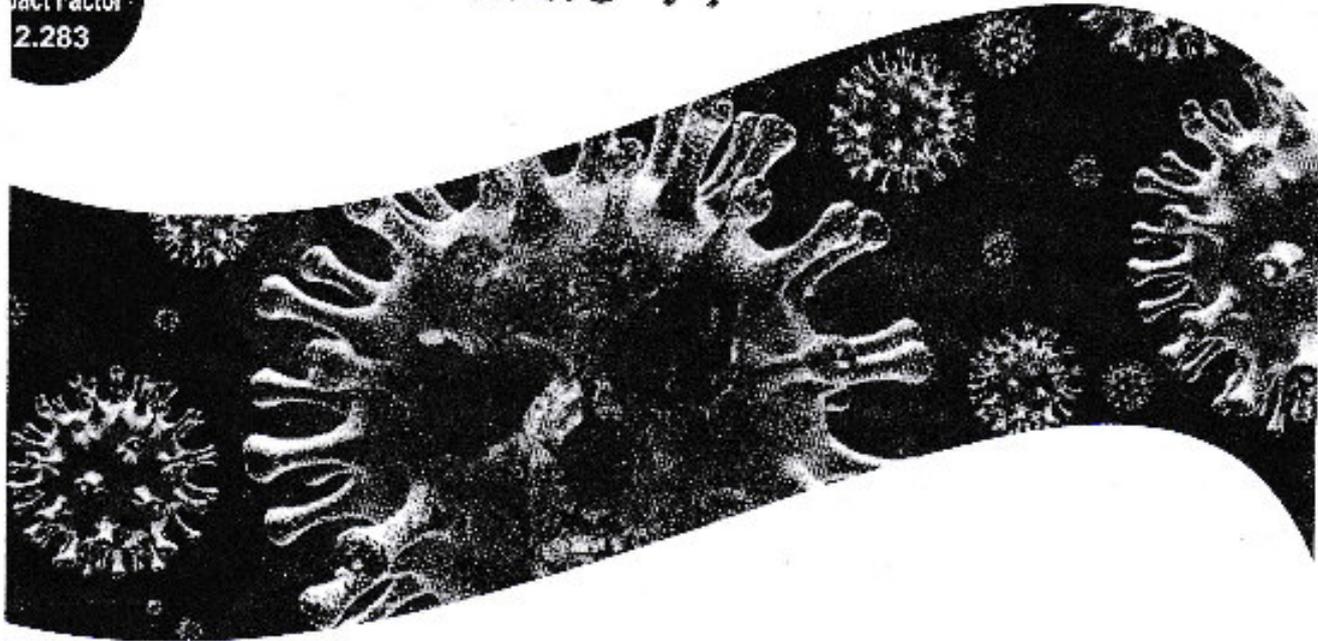
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महाराष्ट्र राज्यशास्त्र व लोकप्रशासन परिषदेची संशोधन पत्रिका

विचार मंथन

- संपादक -

प्राचार्य डॉ. प्रमोद पवार

प्राचार्य डॉ. मनोहर पाटील

प्राचार्य डॉ. बाळ कांबळे

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मार्गदर्शक - प्राचार्य डॉ. पी. डी. देवरे





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The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Indian Politics

Dr. R.G Suralkar

Department of Political Science,
Smt. Sindhutai Jadhav Arts and Science Mahavidyalaya, Mehkar.

Introduction -

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered the world's largest lockdown on its population of 1.3 billion. The stern measures were commended by some for their success in slowing the outbreak of coronavirus but faced criticism for the lack of warning which led millions of migrant workers to return home without provisions and support. Recently the government has instigated to lift restrictions in an attempt to resuscitate the economy. The government of India has sought scientific & technological solutions to contain the pandemic and these have raised concerns around privacy, surveillance, equity and mass use.

Furthermore, some low-income workers are forced to accept these solutions if they are to return to work, leaving them with little choice. India must rethink and restructure its strategy to find solutions in post COVID era. Is it possible to develop technologies that can effectively limit the spread of the coronavirus and ensure privacy? One, never in the history of Indian politics has public health been this significant. From testing capacity to providing personal protective equipment for health care workers, from increasing the number of beds across public and private hospitals to health services for patients with other medical conditions, public health and infrastructure has become central for the first time.

What has changed is that all citizens across regions, castes, communities and classes today experience, simultaneously, the urgency of health care. Such a large collective experience cannot but have an impact on politics. Governments and parties will be judged on whether they were able to cope with the crisis; there will be louder demands for better health

care; and India will need not just more doctors, but nurses, paramedical staff, and Accredited Social Health Activists (Asha workers). Whether this translates into a longer-term shift, where public services and quality of governance is the central issue in electoral debates and political discourse, is to be seen. Two, never in Indian history and politics have migrant workers been as central to public consciousness as they are today. When workers first began walking back to their villages and towns, soon after the lockdown was imposed on March 25, it was as if an invisible India appeared. In the absence of income and food, and given the deep yearning for emotional security of families and communities, tens of thousands of workers kept walking, as all public transportation had been stopped during the lockdown. The government, after 36 days of the lockdown, finally allowed their movement by buses, and then trains. This, however, was accompanied with a different set of controversies — from payment for their fares to lack of coordination between the Centre and states. The Supreme Court eventually stepped in, but its intervention was seen as coming rather late.

The image of the migrant family returning back home will be the significant moment of this crisis and is a stark reflection of how the Indian State sometimes treats its poorest citizens. The dispersed nature of migrant workers and their own heterogeneity made them politically weaker than usual. The weakening of trade union movements and the limited bargaining power of labour, especially in the unorganised sector, left them vulnerable.

For the government, the challenge now is in providing opportunities to migrants who now want to stay home. For the opposition, the crisis



presents an opportunity to channel the discontent of migrant workers. For the Indian political economy in general, the reverse migration could lead to a shift in the way labour markets operate. How migrant workers will act — will their economic identity become more important than other identity markers; will they stay home or return to the cities; will they be angry at the government or see it as a function of the pandemic — will determine political trends.

Three, never in recent history has the country seen the kind of economic contraction that now seems inevitable. With the lockdown imposed to curb the spread of the pandemic, factories and businesses shut down, supply chains got disrupted, company revenues went down and unemployment soared. There is a real possibility that millions of people may be pushed back to poverty. The government first announced a relief package of ₹ 1.7 lakh crore for the marginalised, and followed it up a month and a half later, with a cumulative ₹ 20 lakh crore stimulus. But the package has come under criticism for lacking a strong enough fiscal component. Economists believe that while the structural reforms announced are important, they may not solve the crisis at hand.

There is a conglomerate relation between the state of the economy and politics. If distress grows, businesses continue to shut down and millions find themselves underprivileged of basic incomes, there is a real possibility of social turbulence. But if governments use this as an opportunity to rethink the nature of growth, provide immediate relief through a possible universal basic income, upgrade the welfare planning, provide a buffer through a larger fiscal stimulus, and succeed in attracting investment, the future could be different. India's political economy is at a crossroads.

Four, never have political parties had to innovate on such a scale to continue their internal functioning as well retain their connect with people. To adhere to the norms of social distancing, large gatherings have been

prohibited; even face-to-face meetings have declined. Political parties have turned to technology. The most visible symbols of this include the digital rallies that the Bharatiya Janata Party is organising across the country and the digital conversations Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is having with Indian and global thought leaders.

This trend will accelerate, especially for elections. Parties will rely even more on the mobile phone to reach out to voters. Data will become even more powerful in the micro targeting of voters. Large rallies will have to give way to either virtual gatherings or very limited, localised small meetings. Normal political activity and the value of direct human interface can never be substituted. But the form of both political outreach and political communication will change.

And five, never has Indian federalism been put to test as now. To be sure, India has always had a division of powers but rarely have states and the Centre had to work on a single issue, for weeks at end, together. This was most clearly reflected in the five meetings held between the PM and chief ministers (a sixth is scheduled this week). While this coordination began on a promising note, there have also been increasing differences between the Centre and Opposition-ruled states — especially on the duration of the lockdown, financial support, health protocols, and movement of migrant workers.

What is clear is that the power balance that forms the basis of Indian federal arrangements will change. Some states which have performed credibly will manage to enhance their political capital; other states which have struggled will see an erosion of their power and greater central intervention. But fundamentally, this can open up a conversation on the division of powers (in terms of Union, state and concurrent lists) especially in a crisis.

One, leadership will continue to be a critical component in parties and a key basis on



which voters judge parties. And on this metric, Narendra Modi still ranks above others. The structure of power between the BJP and the non-BJP parties remains tilted towards the former in substantial ways.

Two, inter-community relations will remain fragile — as witnessed during the Tablighi Jamaat controversy, which was used by a section to introduce a communal element to the Covid-19 crisis. There is a clear possibility that the pandemic may reinforce existing cleavages in society and push people back to narrow, parochial identity grouping.

Three, India's security challenges will persist. As we can see with the Chinese aggression in eastern Ladakh, Pakistan's continued efforts to create terror in Jammu and Kashmir, and now, Nepal's decision to pass a map which incorporates territory claimed and controlled by India, the neighbourhood will remain difficult.

And four, Indian institutions will remain under scrutiny. It took months for the judiciary to address the migrant crisis; the nature of investigation and arrests over the Delhi riots in February points to politics colouring independent probes; the fact that major legislations have been pushed through the ordinance route without parliamentary scrutiny speaks of the weakness of the legislature.

The dialectic between the ruptures and continuities will determine India's future.

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