

Statement on the Current Covid-19 Crisis in India: Criminal Negligence, Criminal Intent

Saturday 4 April 2020, by [Radical Socialist \(India\)](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2020).

The current Modi Government has shown both criminal neglect and criminal intent in how it has dealt with this pandemic. Let the facts speak for themselves as we simply lay down the time sequence of what the Government did do as well as what it did not or refused to do.

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The Medical Response

Take first the fact that we have extremely inadequate stocks of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), ventilators, sanitizers, and testing kits. These are our first necessities to protect our doctors, nurses and other health workers and to treat patients.

Jan.30, 2020 - first Covid-19 case in India.

Jan.31 - Ban on export of all domestic-made PPE; raw materials for PPE manufacture can still be exported.

Feb.8 - Previous order amended to permit export of surgical masks and gloves.

Feb.25 - Eight more PPE items are added to the permissible export list.

Mar.19 - Export of PPE and raw materials for their manufacture are finally banned.

Mar.24 - Exports of ventilators and sanitizers banned.

Mar.28 - 35 lakh sterile surgical gloves cleared for export to Serbia (Source: Cochin Customs).

The General Response

Now let us look at the more general course of events and Government behaviour.

Mar.10 - 50 known Covid-19 cases emerge from 11 states/Union Territories.

Mar.13 - Central Government officially declares that there is not a health emergency.

Mar.18 - Modi says the Parliament Budget Session will carry on till April 3.

Mar.19 - Modi makes his first national address declaring a one day "Janata Curfew" from 9am to 9pm on Sunday Mar.22. He makes a point to ask for participation in a social ritual - collective clapping or banging of pans to show appreciation for health workers. There is no call for 'social distancing'. Nor have all the required export curbs on PPE and medical equipment, to enable health workers to carry out their job safely, been imposed. [Why did Modi not enforce a lockdown on Mar.20 or Mar.21? The most plausible explanation is because the MP state assembly had to meet so as to allow for the BJP to show its majority on the floor and replace the Congress as the ruling party.]

Mar.23 - Parliament closed because of the health crisis.[This act shows how unplanned and reactive the government is to the ongoing situation and contradicts his statement on Mar.18—See entry above.]

Mar.24 - Modi calls a full 21 days lockdown till April 14. He calls for all to stay at home and when going out for essential services to maintain social distancing. [Between Mar.13 and 24, Modi's Government realises that indeed this is a health emergency calling for proper measures and he resorts to this massive lockdown and social distancing which only the upper/middle classes could hope to carry out. No concrete mitigating or preventive or welfare enhancing measures are announced. No consideration is given to the reality that hundreds of millions, especially in towns and cities, live in densely packed slums and highly congested locales where necessary municipal services (water, electricity, garbage collection, sewage, etc.) are either non-existent or over-stressed. In short, this shows his the Government's contempt and unconcern for the poor and the overwhelming majority (93%) labouring in the informal sector.]

Mar.26 - Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman finally announces a Government relief package of 1.7 lakh crore. [The scale is inadequate and the details are missing. Nothing is spelt out about how material benefits will be delivered in timely fashion to the targeted population. In fact, most of it is a repackaging of existing schemes. Worst of all it offers very little to those most in need, namely migrant workers, daily wagers, marginal farmers.]

Mar.28 - The Yogi Adityanath state government announces that 1200 buses will be provided to help transport migrants to their homes in UP. [From the previous three days a massive internal migration has been underway - the largest mass migration in India since Partition. There is massive overcrowding at bus depots where tens of thousands of the poor are put at risk and forced to ignore physical-distancing guidelines. Most migrants, however, cannot even board buses and start walking to their homes, women and children in tow, even hundreds of kilometres away.]

Mar.29 - The UP announcement is reversed and all state borders are sealed to prevent inter-state migration. [*Migrants are now rounded up, and in the name of being quarantined, are incarcerated in stadiums, empty buildings and other make-shift structures in ways that make a mockery of any possibility of maintaining 'safe' social distancing.*]

April 3 - Modi makes another national address telling the listening public that on Sunday April 5 to shut for 9 minutes their electricity at 9pm and instead light a candle, lamp or use a flashlight.

This pattern of action in the last few weeks is disastrous enough without taking into consideration the longer term reality that India under different Governments has followed a neoliberal economic path that by its very nature rejects the building of a public health system that provides free and quality health care for all. Instead over 80% of health needs are met by the private sector and the miserable overall situation is that Government health expenditure is around 1.25% and availability of

hospital beds is 0.7 per 1000 people. This is a long standing structural problem that has severely weakened Indian capacity to deal with the current Covid-19 pandemic.

What to Make of This Dismal Record

The Modi Government's criminal negligence is obvious. What about its criminal intent? This comes across in the following ways:

1. How it responded to the predictable mass migration. After a completely hands-off approach, an iron fist is being used. Priority now is not being given to help migrants reach their homes or to address their food, shelter and health needs, but to ruthlessly and rapidly contain them. In one case a large group of migrants suffered direct chemical sprays to 'sanitize' them. The aim seems to be to prevent area-wise spread even if chances of infection among migrant workers is increased as a result of such containment. Clearly the already poor are expendable!

2. Economic Policy bias towards capitalists. At a time when all sources of funding should be tapped and directed to bailing out the poor and indigent, that is, prioritising fiscal policy measures like raising taxes on the rich, penalising big business payroll cuts, cutting the military budget---on Mar.19 this Government shamelessly signed a deal with Israel to buy Rs. 880 crores worth of Light Machine Guns---and diverting funds thereby released to health and welfare, this Government has done the reverse. It has pursued monetary policies to infuse greater liquidity into the share market and reassure big businesses by cutting interest rates throughout the economy through lowering the repo rate or the rate of interest paid by commercial banks for their borrowings from the RBI. The financial health of the rich is more important than the material well-being of the poor.

3. Using the current health crisis to somehow advance the Hindutva political agenda.

(a) *Communalising the Tablighi Jamaat Markaz affair:* 4000 Muslims from all parts of India, and from countries abroad, had gathered at the Markaz premises in New Delhi for a residential religious programme from Mar.13 to 15.As a result a large number of persons were infected and some died. Moreover, as many then dispersed to their home states the infection spread. This programme should have been called off well beforehand.

Recall that on March 13, the BJP Central Government did say there was no health emergency. But the Markaz certainly violated the AAP Government of Delhi's ruling on that very date when it announced that there should be no on gatherings of more than 200 people. Apart from this, given the scale of the pandemic worldwide even before the beginning of March, going ahead with the programme was wrong and condemnable.

It does not excuse the Tablighi Jamaat Markaz to point out that other religious bodies also engaged in wrong and condemnable actions: e.g., some 40,000 visitors thronged to the Tirupati Temple in South India on Mar.17 and 18 before the Temple was closed on Mar.19.These were also reprehensible lapses. The Modi Government has deliberately sought to dramatise and highlight the Tablighi Jamaat affair as if it was, or is, the single most important reason for the spread of the Corona virus in the country. The Sangh Parivar is here actively pushing the message that Muslims are once again the main threat, thereby diverting attention away from the Government's own criminal failures. This is criminal intent.

(b) *J&K Domicile:* At a time when everybody's attention is focused on this health crisis, the Central Government has quietly introduced new laws on domicility in J&K. The principal effect of this new law is to help change the general demographic pattern, whereby Muslim overall are in a majority in

the region. Some sections of the public (primarily non-Muslims) residing in J&K will now, because of these changes in law, be able over time to become permanent domiciles.

(c) *Promoting the cult of Modi as the country's "Supreme Saviour"*: Just his record on the COVID-19 crisis reveals a PM utterly bereft of the capacity to think deeply and seriously about practical policies. Prominently on display, however, is his authoritarian mind-set that works only along the narrowest political lines. His concern is to project the Modi image everywhere, have one-sided media monologues with the Indian public, engage in theatrics and promote spectacles of mass involvement through direct appeals i.e. establishing a direct, if one way relationship between himself as India's 'Chief Executive' and the public. He believes---not without merit--- that this does enhance support for him irrespective of the ups and downs of his own party. Furthermore, these direct appeals also serve as cover ups for his policy absences, failures and iniquities. It is an obscenity that 'Modi' promotion is happening even in the midst of this emergency. The call for public money contributions for the current crisis will go to the newly established Government Fund called--you won't be surprised to know---"PMCare" which was set up to push public money into private hands and it seems to facilitate hawala transactions. Indian ambassadors following Modi dictates have urged donors to contribute to this fund and not to the longstanding PM's National Relief Fund because that body continues to have the President of the Congress Party on its managing committee. Also, food packets distributed by the BJP have on their side labels (printed no less!) marked "Modi Tiffin". Spectacles of empty social solidarity - banging pots and pans or lighting candles - are being offered instead of plans to get PPE to health workers, medical equipment for the sick, transport for migrants trying to get home, and food for the poor across the country.

Some Necessary Steps

Among the things that this Government has not done but needs to do immediately are the following:

- Provide cereals, pulses, edible oils, soap, hand wash, spices for all through the PDS.
- Ensure availability of drinking water for all.
- All private hospitals to provide tests and treatment for Covid patients free of charge.
- Free all under trials, those on low term sentences or soon-to-be-completed sentences, as well as all political prisoners.
- Army to use its massive network of motor vehicles of all kinds to help transport migrants to their homes safely.

When this crisis finally recedes, you can be sure that the forces of Hindutva will shamelessly, dishonestly and yes, criminally seek to take credit for a successfully negotiated emergency. They must never be allowed to get away with this. Now and later they must be exposed for what they are. Hence this statement by our organisation, Radical Socialist, to let the facts speak for themselves!

April 4, 2020

Radical Socialist

