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Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi: Three Horsemen of the Covid Pandemic Apocalypse

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The countries that Trump, Bolsonaro and Modi, respectively, rule, are currently #1, 2, and 3 in the total number of coronavirus infections. Credible projections by some scientists suggest that India is poised to become #1 within a few months. Whether that happens or not, it is more than likely the US, Brazil, and India will continue to remain on the equivalent of the Olympic medal stand with respect to the ranking for the worst performance in controlling the pandemic for the foreseeable future.

Is this a sheer coincidence? Or is there a deeper correlation between the leaders of these countries that accounts for their ranking in the global pandemic?

The short answer is that these leaders, whose authoritarian instincts have been demonstrated on many occasions, are afflicted with a combination of arrogance and ignorance that has proven deadly to the citizens of their countries. This is painfully obvious in the case of Trump, a corrupt businessman, hustler and reality TV star, and Bolsonaro, a low-level con man, who deal with every problem they confront with a mixture of bluster and lies. Although less obvious it is no less true in Modi's case. Before elaborating on this assessment, however, it is useful to consider some links between them at the very start of the pandemic, which began its spread in January 2020.

Bolsonaro was specially invited by Modi as the chief guest in India's Republic Day celebrations of January 26, 2020. Less than a month later, the Namaste Trump show was put on, when the WHO had already sounded the warning for a global pandemic. Trump was greeted by a crowd estimated at over a million lining the streets and packing a cricket stadium in Modi's home town of Ahmedabad before flying to New Delhi and another jamboree at the Taj Mahal in Agra. Neither Trump nor Modi paid any heed to the pandemic, nor did any of their army of cohorts in their anxiety to obey their bosses. Either it did not occur to any of them or they ignored the possibility that the thousands packed into Motera stadium without any protective precautions could trigger a super spreader event. Meanwhile, barely a week or two later, the BJP (as well as the Delhi administration led by AAP) had no hesitation in labeling members of the Tablighi Jamaat, who had gathered for an annual meeting in New Delhi, as virus super spreaders and jailing them.

Trump, whose campaign slogan is Make America Great Again and whose more enthusiastic supporters go around shouting "USA #1" at his rallies, has certainly achieved the goal of becoming #1 in the world as far as the pandemic is concerned. With well over 4 million confirmed cases of covid-19 and 150,000 deaths so far, the US leads all other countries by a wide margin in both categories. A large portion of the responsibility for this disastrous outcome can be laid at Trump's door. His habitual arrogance and his ignorance were on full display in the early phase of the pandemic. He repeatedly denied its seriousness, refused to wear a mask (that caused a lot of his know-nothing followers to imitate him), touted fake and potentially dangerous drugs like hydroxychloroquine as cures for the virus, and threw twitter storm tantrums as is his wont in

response to any criticism. All his efforts have been motivated solely by attempts to manufacture an image of “normality” he believes will help to re-elect him later this year regardless of how it impacts the spread of the virus. In the early days of the pandemic when the virus was mainly hitting the so-called blue (i.e. Democratic Party leaning) states like New York, Trump was blustering on TV or promoting fake cures and generally downplaying the lack of preparation to deal with the virus at the Federal level as well as the virulence of the threat. This ignorant and dismissive attitude coupled with his appeals to reopen businesses have led to the disaster of the rapidly rising infections in the redder (i.e. Republican) states like Florida, Texas and Arizona that are essential to his re-election. Hence his attempt to create chaos in major cities like Portland and Chicago by seizing on the excuse of the widespread Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations to send in armed Federal paramilitary personnel ostensibly to maintain “law and order” in the teeth of opposition from the (mostly Democratic) elected officials of those states.

Bolsonaro was a former junior Army officer with a pronounced nostalgia for the military junta that ruled Brazil for a quarter century from 1964-1989. His ascension to the Brazilian presidency could only be described as fortuitous due to the extensive corruption amongst Brazil’s political elite aided by a compliant judiciary who denied former President Lula a spot on the ballot. Brazil has currently more than 2 million cases of coronavirus and almost 90,000 deaths. Bolsonaro himself, a close friend of Trump, has left no stone unturned to parade his colossal ignorance in public about the virus and the scientific approach to dealing with it as well as the necessity of protective measures. Like Trump, he promoted hydroxychloroquine as a cure, shunned masks and social distancing, dismissed the Covid-19 virus as just a measly cold, and actively sabotaged quarantine measures. Bolsonaro fired two health ministers who disagreed with him and replaced them by a military general. Newspaper reports suggest that the once fairly robust public health system of Brazil is now rapidly fraying in the face of the pandemic and in danger of collapse with an acute shortage of hospital beds and protective equipment like ventilators, masks and gowns. In response to this woeful state of affairs there is a report that “A group of unions and social organizations representing more than 1 million Brazilian medical professionals have filed a complaint to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, accusing Bolsonaro of committing a crime against humanity by reacting to the outbreak with ‘contempt, neglect and denial’ ”. Bolsonaro’s arrogance has manifested itself in his threats of facilitating a fascist military takeover of the country in response to court ordered investigations of corruption that could remove him from office.

Modi was a preacher for India’s leading Hindu fundamentalist organization RSS, whose founders greatly admired European fascism of the 1930s and its leaders Hitler and Mussolini. Before joining politics, he was interviewed by one of India’s leading psychologists and social commentators, Ashish Nandy, in 1996 in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri mosque in December 1992. After the interview, Nandy wrote that “Modi, it gives me no pleasure to tell the readers, met virtually all the criteria that psychiatrists, psycho-analysts and psychologists had set up after years of empirical work on the authoritarian personality.” He described Modi as “a classical, clinical case of a fascist.” Soon after becoming Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, Modi presided over the pogrom of Gujarati Muslims in 2002, an event for which he has never expressed any remorse. Vaulting to the next level of Prime Minister of India in 2014, he has steadily turned a constitutionally secular state into a Hindu majoritarian country where minorities, in particular Muslims, have been frequently beset by lynch mobs, where the only Muslim majority state in the country, J&K, was stripped of its constitutional status last year, and where a citizenship amendment act that threatens to turn Muslims into second class citizens was passed by his regime.

When the pandemic was officially acknowledged in March this year, Modi was praised by some in the western press for ordering a “stringent lockdown.” Undoubtedly, Modi refrained from rising to the foolishness of a Bolsonaro or a Trump who disparaged wearing of masks or adopting social

distancing, but what remained uncommented upon in the western media was that on the evening of March 24 Modi gave the country just four hours to implement the lockdown in full. While this could be readily accommodated by the middle and upper classes of the country with homes and apartments to isolate themselves in, its impact on the millions upon millions of the urban poor, many of them migrants from villages hundreds of miles away from the major cities, was horrendous. With all long-distance transport at a standstill in the lockdown, the migrants began walking to their native villages, some dying along the way from hunger or thirst. When videos of this surfaced over the internet, some government decisions were hastily reversed to avoid bad publicity but the damage had been done. In joint statement on May 31, 2020 when covid infections and deaths were rising quickly, the Indian Public Health Association (IPHA), Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine (IAPSM) and Indian Association of Epidemiologists (IAE) Joint COVID-19 Task Force...stated that the current situation in India with regard to COVID-19 cases could have been avoided had migrant workers been allowed to go home before a lockdown was imposed. The statement asserted that “engagement with experts...in the areas of epidemiology, public health, preventive medicine and social scientists was limited.”

This abrupt lockdown decision, like his sudden demonetization in December 2016, an act from which India’s economy is yet to recover, is basically a reflection of Modi’s arrogance. His further exhortations during the lockdown to urge citizens to bang thalis (metal utensils), light diyas (oil lamps), or sing religious hymns to drive away the virus demonstrate his belief in Vedic science. One may regard it as a ploy to assert his Hindutva to his admirers but he appears to be sincere in his belief. After all, he had asserted during a meeting of the Indian Science Congress a few years ago that advanced plastic surgery was done in ancient India.

What is most revealing about these leaders is their attempt to put a positive spin on the steps (or mis-steps) they have taken to deal with the pandemic. Trump, of course, is the outlier. He recently bragged that America was “the envy of the world” in the way that it handled the pandemic. The sheer lunacy of this remark need not detain us as Trump is prone to lie, on average, over 10 times a day. But a cursory look at travel bans shows that Americans, whose passport once guaranteed entry without a visa into most countries around the world, are barred from all of Europe, except Albania and Kosovo. Bolsonaro’s attitude is a bit cruder. When asked about the large number of deaths from the virus in Brazil, he stated that people die anyway.

But Modi also takes the cake in trying to deny, or at least divert attention from, reality. Two days ago, he claimed that India “is in a better position than other countries” with respect to the coronavirus. Vasudevan Mukunth, science editor of The Wire writing on July 29, 2020, nailed the specious nature of this claim. He pointed out that:

“Modi compares India’s lower infection and mortality rates with those regions where it is higher, conveniently ignoring the fact that many countries are doing better than India. If we were to rank the performance of 213 countries and territories from worst to best on five broad measures, where coming first is to be the worst, this is how India fares:

- Total number of COVID-19 cases: 3
- Total number of COVID-19 deaths: 6 [now 5]
- Total number of active COVID-19 cases: 3
- Total cases per one million population: 99 (i.e. 104 countries do better)
- Total deaths per one million population: 98 (i.e. 105 countries do better, including densely populated ones like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Japan and Vietnam)”

Mukunth goes on to point out: “As for his [Modi’s] boast about having taken the right decisions at the right time, the disastrous effect his poorly planned and executed national lockdown has had on

the lives of millions of people, not to speak of the economy and even public health, has been so well documented by experts as to not require repetition.”

In the midst of a virus that cares nothing for arrogance, bluster, lying or religious ideology, this trio, Trump, Bolsonaro, and Modi, have brought their countries' people to a sorry pass by their combination of wrong actions, inaction, false statements and missteps. It is particularly unfortunate that the heaviest burdens of the pandemic in these countries has fallen on the Black and Latino minorities in the US, on Black Brazilians, and on the poor and marginalized communities in India. Clearly, alternative leadership is sorely needed that can begin to apply rational scientific methods to deal with the pandemic and save their people needless suffering.

Vinod Mubayi

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