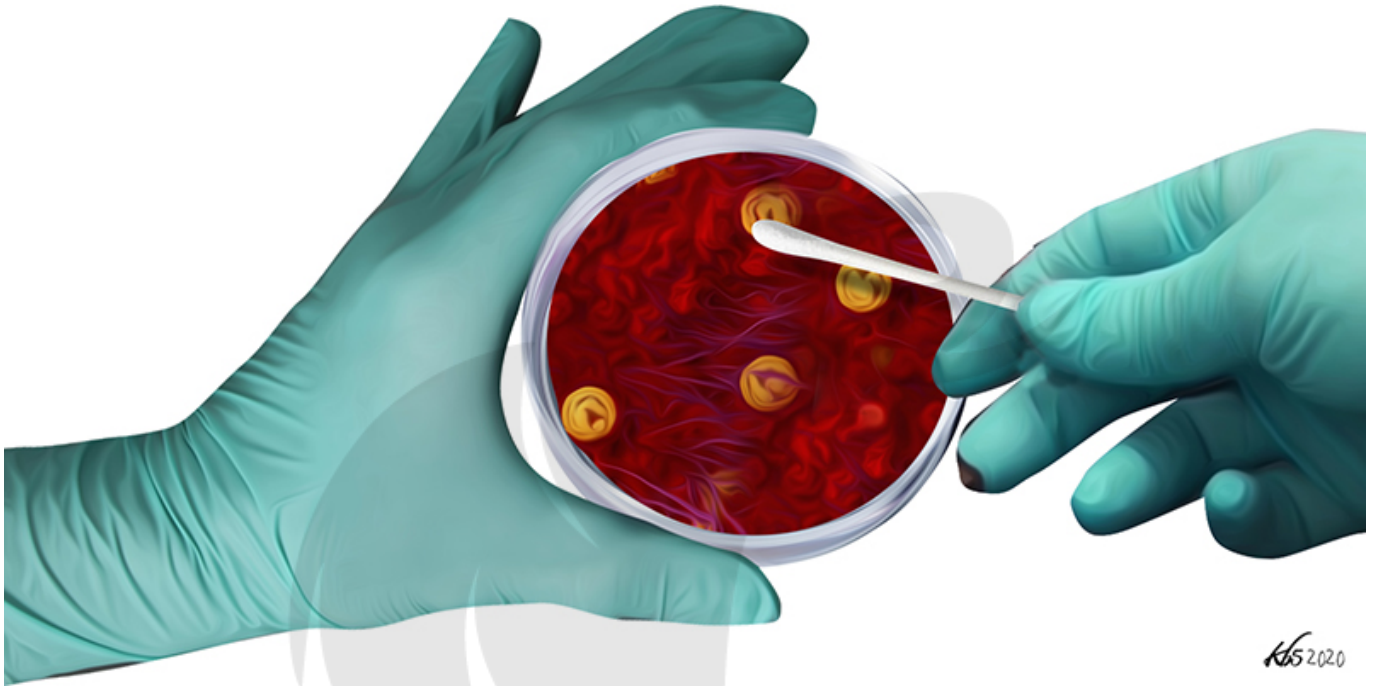




We Are Our History: COVID-19 in India

By Zarina Patel



Writers have run out of adjectives to describe the coronavirus situation in India - Horrific! Apocalyptic! Inhuman! Unbelievable! Disastrous! Tragic! . . . and many, many, more. Indians are dying in hospital corridors, on the streets and in their homes as they try to get a hospital bed. Parks and car parks have been turned into cremation grounds and piles of wood are being fought over to burn the dead. Exhausted doctors, frontline workers and cremators are at breaking point. And now COVID-19 is exploding in rural India as migrants return home carrying the virus from the cities, desperate to escape a repeat of the heartless lockdown imposed in December 2020 with only a four-hour notice. Many died on the way as their government abandoned them to their fate, leaving them to walk hundreds of kilometres to their homes.

Harrowing scenes of people gasping for air and helpless carers at their wits end, bloated corpses floating in the sacred Ganges River. . . Here in Kenya we feel the pain of our fellow human beings.

There are of course many theories as to what has caused this calamity; the superspreader events such as the *Kumbh Mela* and the election campaign rallies in Bengal, the failure of India's vaccine producers - one of the largest in the world - to execute its mandate, the apparent collapse of the public health system, the newly mutated Indian variant. Arundhati Roy asserts that since the massive privatisation of healthcare there has not been any public health system to speak of in India. The silencing of all patriotic and progressive media, print and electronic, has resulted in the Indian population being completely kept in the dark, unaware of the extent of the tragedy and what they

could or should be doing to help themselves. We in Kenya are probably better informed of the COVID-19 situation in India than its own citizens are, and Twitter is helping Modi out by [deactivating accounts](#) critical of his government.

And then, rubbing salt into this raw wound is India's obscenely wealthy class which is flaunting its US dollars to get preferential treatment and the best of everything there is. It is their right, they insist, in the India that they have created. The black market for oxygen cylinders and other medical supplies is booming, and desperate families are being fleeced by ruthless doctors, ambulance drivers and cremation supervisors. Just last year Modi was boasting that India had contained the virus. "Too good to be true", tweeted a politically correct journalist, Shekhar Gupta. Too full of themselves they did not hear the scientists' warnings: "There will be a second wave!"

What is now beyond dispute is that Prime Minister Modi's government has failed miserably. But believe it or not, there is not a word of regret, a visit to a hospital, a gesture of sympathy, or even recognition that the suffering has escalated. My question is, should we be surprised?

I learnt an important lesson while watching the recent vetting process to select the next chief justice of Kenya. Judge David Majanja asked Senior Counsel Philip Murgor whether he had any regrets for his actions as Chief Prosecutor during the Mwakenya trials. (For those who may not be aware of this particular dark part of our history, the Judge was referring to the kangaroo courts which were held in 1985-88, always after sunset, and where Kenyans who were demanding their basic human rights were consigned to the Nyayo torture chambers, prison and detention. Some died, and those who survived were scarred for life.) Mr Murgor replied that he had acted professionally and had done his best. Well, needless to say, Mr Murgor was not selected for the post - his history had caught up with him.

You must be wondering why I have digressed from the subject of India. It is because the truth struck me then that "we are our history", and that we cannot escape it. More importantly, we should never ignore it. Should Indians and the world have expected anything different from Mr Modi and his BJP Party? Let us take a quick look at their histories, starting with Mr Modi.

In order to escape the ignominy of being labelled OBC (Other Backward Classes in India) Modi referred to himself as the "son of a *chai wallah*" (tea seller). In 2002, as chief minister of Gujarat, he oversaw the brutal massacre of Muslims in his state and presented himself as the saviour of Hindu India. The Gujarat Pogrom was ostensibly a reaction to the deaths of Hindu pilgrims when the railway coach they were travelling in caught fire in Godhra. This tragedy was blamed on Muslim terrorism; not only did Modi not try to quell the furious, rampaging mobs, but he is widely believed to have encouraged them. What is certain is that thousands of Muslims were literally butchered and burnt alive; they received neither police protection nor humanitarian aid. This calamity was Modi's vehicle to the premiership. Horrified, the US and UK governments barred Modi from entering their countries, but the bans were soon lifted as Modi opened his "beloved" country to imperialist exploitation and went on to embrace Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu.

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Interestingly, the Modi phenomenon was preceded by a very similar saga in Kenya just a year earlier. In March 2013, newspaper headlines around the globe informed their readers that Kenya had elected as their top leaders, two suspects who were being tried by the International Criminal Court for "crimes against humanity". The charges against Uhuru Kenyatta (now President) and William Ruto (now Deputy President) were in connection with their alleged role in the 2007-8 post-

election [chaos](#) in Kenya that left more than 1,200 people dead and many others raped and wounded, and forced about 600,000 to flee their homes.

The cases were suspended for lack of evidence, with the chief judge, Chile Eboe-Osuji of Nigeria, declaring a mistrial “due to a troubling incidence of witness interference and intolerable political meddling.” “The government was blocking most avenues of investigation and witnesses were threatened and bribed,” the prosecution said. To date, neither of the suspects has been acquitted by the court.

Many Kenyans watched the subsequent celebrations in utter disbelief and dismay, hoping against hope that international censure would bring back sanity. “Choices have consequences,” Western leaders warned, distancing themselves and choosing to restrict diplomatic relations to “essential contact”. But soon, too soon, Western economic and security interests superseded their moral concerns, driving them to resume business as usual.

As Uhuru Kenyatta approaches the end of his presidential term, the country is not only extremely polarised but the economy is in the ICU and corruption is at its worst ever. Civil society has been silenced, the media compromised, parliament is a rubber stamp for the executive and the judiciary is under constant threat. Poverty, injustice and gross inequality are the order of the day.

A similar scenario has unfolded in India. Modi’s demonetisation policy has broken the back of India’s small business sector and his attempt to corporatise agriculture has been met with the largest farmers’ demonstration ever. His renegeing on the United Nation Security Council Resolution 47 for Kashmir, and the passing of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2020, all blatantly discriminate against Muslims, rendering stateless the second largest population of Muslims in the world after Indonesia. Forcing back home the few thousand Rohingyas who had sought refuge from the murderous Myanmar regime – and so much else – points to an authoritarian, fascist leader whose satanic character COVID-19 has now exposed further.

Am I being melodramatic? Extremist? Biased? Is this history not evidence enough? I ask because there is much else that is far more sinister and ominous. The roots of Modi and his BJP Party run deep and are firmly embedded in an organisation known as the RSS ([Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh](#)).

The RSS was formed in 1925 in colonial India to achieve freedom, not by driving out the British, please note, but by “defending religion and culture”. Hinduism is not a doctrinaire religion; it does not have a definitive scripture or value system, nor does it have laid down laws and rituals that must be observed, and its followers even have a wide choice of deities to choose from. But there has always been a section of Hindus who have felt the need to “get organised” and have a well-defined identity. Adopting certain dress codes and vegetarian diets, promoting the Hindi language and endorsing Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi are just a few of the strategies towards these objectives.

The spectre of “conversion to other faiths” has been of increasing concern, and probably goes back to when the Mughals ruled India. In the last century, Christian missionaries from the USA had made inroads into the *Adivasi* or hill tribes of India but have since been expelled. In order to escape their “pre-destined” sub-human condition, some Dalits or Untouchables, have converted to Islam or Christianity. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of India’s Independence Constitution and a Dalit himself, became a Buddhist and advised his people to do the same. To these realities have been added totally unsubstantiated fears of a portended demographic shift which would reduce the Hindus to a minority in their own homeland.

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While in their time Gandhi, Nehru and others unequivocally espoused a democratic, socialist and secular India, today there are no significant and sustained counter-narratives to the rising tide of Hindu chauvinism and RSS ideology.

Although the RSS was against the caste system, it did not support its abolition. Drawn from upper caste Brahmins, the RSS leaders were focussed on a Hindu renaissance and were enthused by Hitler's efforts to create a supreme Aryan race and eliminate minorities. It was, and still is, a highly organised paramilitary outfit with its own militias; in 2016 it had between five and six million members and 56,859 branches throughout India.

In a letter to the heads of provincial governments in December 1947, the year of India's independence from British rule, Prime Minister Nehru wrote, "we have a great deal of evidence to show that RSS is an organisation which is in the nature of a private army and which is definitely proceeding on the strictest Nazi lines, even following the techniques of the organisation." It was an RSS adherent, Nathuram Godse, who shot and killed Mahatma Gandhi. It was also the RSS which engineered the destruction of [Babri Masjid](#) (it was claimed, in spite of archaeological evidence to the contrary, that the mosque was built over a Hindu temple) and which is fuelling the fires against Muslims, Christians and Dalits, and radically altering the status of Kashmir.

In 1980, former Jana Sangh Party members belonging to the RSS formed a new party, the [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) or BJP. After several attempts, the BJP achieved its most desired goal in 2014: the Prime Ministership of India in the person of Narendra Modi and ministerial positions for his closest allies. The RSS could now actualise its fascist Hindutva pogrom in defiance of the late former Prime Minister Nehru's democratic, secular and socialist ideals. What is happening in India today is the product of that history of decades past. The egoism, the hatred, the repression, the inhumanity and the idiocy continue.

And like all fundamentalist movements, the RSS gauges its success by how far it can spread its toxic presence; in today's global village there are no borders. The RSS has branches in Europe, Canada and the US. In Africa it has a presence in Kenya and possibly elsewhere too. In the presence of global insecurity and yawning economic divides, people are seeking protection within their ethnic, religious or racial enclaves. The rise of right-wing politics, embodied most significantly by Trump, Bolsanaro and Modi, serves the objectives of the dividers rather than those of the unifiers, the dictators rather than the democrats. White Supremacy in the US bears the same imprint as the RSS. Of course, outside India the RSS relinquishes its militaristic role and operates under the guise of teaching Hindu culture and language. In the public sphere, it promotes yoga for all and in times of crisis and need, it is at the forefront in providing the highly organised and very efficient and incorruptible social and welfare services it has developed.

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The RSS's *raison d'être* abroad is to secure the loyalty and ties of Hindu minorities to their motherland India, to lead them to embrace the ideology of Hindutva and maintain the purity of their race and religion. Citizenship in their adopted country then becomes a mere paper transaction and the issue of nationhood is not even on the horizon.

This is not to say that all Hindus in Kenya or India are affiliated to the RSS, or even approve of it. Far from it. But if the huge crowd of very animated Kenyan Indians who turned up at Kasarani Stadium to welcome Mr Modi on 10 July 2016 is anything to go by, the RSS is well entrenched in Kenya - a fascist fundamentalism among several others - all of which deflect us from achieving the democratic, equitable, just and humanitarian Kenya that most of us long for, and many of us work towards. Kenyans need to be vigilant against the dangerous currents circulating among us and be fully aware of the hurdles we have to overcome. COVID-19 has much to teach us, and lest we forget, we are our history.

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