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# COVID-19 UNMASKS PLAGUE OF INEQUALITY IN INDIA

UZLA REPORTS

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As part of an ongoing inquiry into the effects of the COVID-19 that has left countries around the world devastated, I have followed news reporting of the virus in India over a ten week period. As active consumers of knowledge in the age of information, it is important to consider the questions: what is being reported, or better yet, what is not being reported? Why does it matter? How can a national emergency put global disparities in the spotlight?

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## THE EFFECTS OF COLONIAL RULE

At the start of my inquiry, I discovered two articles, both comparing India's response to the influenza outbreak of 1918-1919 to the response to COVID-19. It's important to note that the source of one of the articles was BBC<sup>1</sup>, while the other is The Economic Times. Can the effects of British colonial rule leave an aftertaste in the reporting of an outbreak that occurred during British rule almost a century later? In light of this question, I paid ample attention to how BBC recalls the treatment of colonized Indians. The article provided little to no historical context of India's class system at the time of the influenza outbreak, and how it played a major role in the reason why India had the most fatalities compared to the rest of the world. Therefore, it is no surprise that the article left out some key data which is found in my second source. This data being that, "over 61 lower caste Hindus died per 1,000 in the community while merely 18.9 caste Hindus (sic) per 1,000 from the community lost their lives. The same figure for Europeans living in India at the time stood at 8.3."<sup>2</sup> One can't help but notice what is being unsaid by the BBC. Interestingly, both articles pointed out that the way India tackled the epidemic of 1918 was not through government help, but through the help of grassroots organizations coming together to assist in the greater good.

## THE REALITIES OF A VIRUS THAT IS NOT CLASS-BLIND

Over the next few weeks, I followed the way the citizens in India have responded to the pandemic, including their thoughts, and subsequent action taken. In a BBC article, the writer compares the results of the pandemic lockdown regulations to a "human tragedy,"<sup>3</sup> as millions of workers trek from urban cities back to their villages, because all transportation has been halted. The lockdown of transportation ensues detrimental results for the lower/working class, and further highlights the way lower class people suffer more

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<sup>1</sup> Soutik Biswas, "Coronavirus: What India Can Learn from the Deadly 1918 Flu," BBC News (BBC, March 18, 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-51904019>

<sup>2</sup> Et Contributors, "An Unwanted Shipment: The Indian Experience of the 1918 Spanish Flu," The Economic Times (Economic Times, April 3, 2020), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/an-unwanted-shipment-the-indian-experience-of-the-1918-spanish-flu/articleshow/74963051.cms>

<sup>3</sup> Soutik Biswas, "Coronavirus: India's Pandemic Lockdown Turns into a Human Tragedy," BBC News (BBC, March 30, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274>



devastating blows in wake of the virus outbreak.

In another article by The New York Times, I learn about the ways the people of India have taken it upon themselves to create more safety regulations, in addition to those already set by governmental orders, in order to lessen the spread of

the virus.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question, why do regular citizens feel the need to go beyond these set regulations and create their own precautions? According to the article, people are driven by fear of the novel virus, but one can't help but wonder if their actions are an effect of inadequate regulations set by the government. In the following week, I notice a change in reporting as continuation of this piece of information. Another BBC article reports that although India has reported a decreased mortality rate over the past few days, it may be attributed to the fact that most deaths are not being counted in as they are occurring at home, and that only hospital deaths are being included.<sup>5</sup> The reporter writes that both claims of the reasoning for the lessened mortality rates (hot weather and the greater percentage of young people in India) have no evidence to back them, and that most people are overlooking that fact that inaccurate data may be coming into play.

## THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

In the final weeks of my inquiry, I look to the individual voice as a vision of reality, or even a beacon of hope. The BBC article, titled "The Free Prisoner Who is Unable to Return Home,"<sup>6</sup> tells the tale of recently freed prisoner Arif, who has faced hardship finding home amidst the pandemic. He has also experienced stigmatism as he tries to return to different places of shelter, at one point residing with a fellow prisoner as his home. Arif's story serves as an

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman and Suhasini Raj, "Powered by Fear, Indians Embrace Coronavirus Lockdown," The New York Times (The New York Times, April 19, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html>

<sup>5</sup> Soutik Biswas, "India Coronavirus: The 'Mystery' of Low Covid-19 Death Rates," BBC News (BBC, April 28, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52435463>

<sup>6</sup> Soutik Biswas, "Coronavirus Lockdown: The Freed Prisoner Who Is Unable to Return Home," BBC News (BBC, May 11, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52586098>

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example of many other similar cases across the county, as prisons release inmates with the fear of rapid spread of the virus.

In another BBC article, the writer provides a report on two women who were arrested while protesting the Citizen Amendment Act in India. The CAA has prompted protest and activism in the country, and even beyond its borders, as the act has been seen as heavily discriminatory towards the Muslim people who currently live in India.



According to the article, the arrest of the two women was justified by authorities as a result of the COVID pandemic, although some believe the government is using this excuse as a way to silence their voices. The article even states, "The action against them is a matter of concern, critics say. They add that it appears to be an attempt to stifle the fundamental right to protest in a democracy."<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As an overall take-away, I can confidently say that by following reporting of a topic through a period of time, one can gather information through many different lenses, creating an archive that depicts a cross sectional approach to history. Even a single reporting source, like the BBC, can create a weaving narrative through focus on different aspects of a historical event. I thoroughly enjoyed becoming a more informed member of society by closely following the current events that unfolded over a ten week period.

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<sup>7</sup> "India Activists Held over Citizenship Law Protest," BBC News (BBC, May 25, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52794967>)