



[Home](#) / [Opinion](#)

## Finished by fatalism



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Assembly elections in four states (especially West Bengal) once again tripped the wires of India's fault-lines. The BJP's Bengal endeavour was perhaps unmatched in Assembly poll history.

So was the role of the Election Commission of India, widely seen wilting and bending under pressure. One counsel on the ECI's legal panel resigned, saying that his values were "not in consonance with the functioning of the commission." The political rallies turned into coronavirus 'super-spreader' events. The prime minister and home minister helmed many of them. Throughout, the campaign was communalised, and gendered barbs issued from the nation's prime minister's lips. Of course, so much of this was a repeat of what we've seen over many years.

A while earlier, Uttarakhand conducted the Maha Kumbh and later cancelled it. Its government ran ads with its then chief minister, the prime minister and the Uttar Pradesh CM beckoning all to grace it. Dr Ashish K Jha, dean of the public health department at Brown University, said it was the pandemic's "worst super-spreader event." Last year, some Hindu and Hindutva voices castigated the Tablighi Jamaat's markaz at Nizamuddin in Delhi. Now, those voices are quiet or on edge. This week, Swami Avdheshanand Giri of the Juna Akhara said associating the Kumbh with the Covid surge was an "attack on our culture"; Baba Ramdev said it was a "conspiracy against Hinduism." But the Maha Kumbh transpired notwithstanding doctors' and scientists' warnings to the Centre since late 2020 to mind a possible second wave and scale up efforts to counter it. If now we bleed, burn and gasp, Modi is responsible. But that would miss the point. We've been this way – or surely, large parts of our country have been – for long.

When India or Pakistan face a crisis, they usually respond with their worst instincts. Large parts of these countries are genuinely retrogressive, anti-rational, anti-health and hygiene. Some parts of the orthodox Islamic world, for instance, rejected the polio vaccine on religious grounds. Manipulating the Hindu almanac, the Centre and the Uttarakhand government advanced the Kumbh (which fills up the state treasury and keeps the government popular). One wonders how the mahants and babas acquiesced in such jugglery.

Lately, public discourse has bristled over ventilators, dwindling oxygen supply and ICU beds. The Allahabad High Court regarded the second wave deaths as "not less than genocidal." Point. Yet, public health disasters have been long in the making and they are regular. Recall the encephalitis deaths of children in Bihar or the Kolkata AMRI hospital deaths or the deaths due to lack of oxygen in Gorakhpur? We don't remember them, for how much pain can a country process? They bespeak of a nation forever inclined to be on its deathbed. Karma, anybody?

responsibility for where we are today: recently, people in Gujarat applied cow dung on their bodies as a cure for coronavirus. Where does such behaviour come from? At some level, the religious faithful ought to be able to distinguish faith from reason. But who is to educate them?

As Indians, we are often told, 'our population is our strength', 'we are a young country', etc. If those who mouth these lines understood their import, we'd see concrete action. Each Indian would be granted dignity, with quality and affordable healthcare, education, housing. But our everyday truth is hurtful; we are so removed from our fantasy aspirations. Our ongoing second wave deaths are so crushing due to their sheer predictability, given the default attitudes. A country that doesn't accord money for health and education ends up paying for it every day. And common Indians justify it by invoking karma. Last year, when migrants walked back to villages, they said they were doing so bhagwan bharose. Now, we're plummeting in the second wave. Our fatalism is finishing us.

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