

# Covid-19 And India: Bitter Reminder To The Rich They're Not In Control

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May 29, 2021



**On March 18 2020, a friend from the US had written to ask: “While the world panics, India seems to be doing just fine. Yes?”.**

I wrote back that India was indeed doing better than many other countries. But it was still the early days of the pandemic, so I added a postscript... and this is the doomsday scenario, as the numbers inch up, measures like social distancing and lockdowns are unlikely to work in a country where many millions rely on their daily wages to survive. People will flout any restrictions on internal movements, and the virus will spread. We already have a high communicable disease burden in India and COVID-19 cases will not have to increase too much for the public health infrastructure here to crumble. If things get anywhere close to what has happened in New York or Paris recently, the body count will ratchet up very very quickly. Governments will then be forced to impose very stringent controls, say call in the army against its citizens, which might limit virus-related casualties, but there will very likely be a famine!

A year and two months since I wrote that email, all I am left with is a sense of dread and despair.

No amount of vindication can make up for the deep sadness that accompanies losses of this magnitude.

How did it come to this? Do we even understand what it has come to? Are we grieving, angry or in shock? Is 'we' the entire country, or people who dress, talk and eat like me?

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## Inept State

Bihar, a province in eastern India is home to about 110 million. In 2020, 754,000 hectares of agricultural land was destroyed in the state by floods. In 2019, it was 261,000 hectares. The area floods so regularly that 2.24 million hectares of land have been washed by floods between 1947 to 2017. The floods wash away crops, destroy homes, and wreck public infrastructures like schools and hospitals. No public or private investment can survive such a relentless enemy and so the people here have an average per capita income of around \$650. If Bihar was a country, it would be the 14th poorest country in the world.

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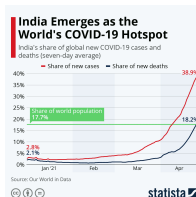
Successive governments since independence have tried to address the problem. But even 4000 km of embankments have not been able to tame the rivers of this area. Maybe the embankments are not of sufficient quality, or maybe India just does not have the resources to

develop the kind of technology required or maybe the state is just too inept to do anything about it. Regardless of the true reasons, the Indian state has not been able to provide any relief to the people of Bihar, despite trying for over 70 years. Is it any surprise then that it failed to prepare adequately for a pandemic that has brought much of the developed world to its knees? One year of preparation was unlikely to ever have been enough.

## Delusions of Control

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That India is a poor country is not news, neither is the fact that it has a weak and largely ineffectual governance structure. Why then does it seem like the ongoing disaster was unexpected by a large number of Indians? Perhaps it has something to do with how relatively affluent Indians like me deal with the uncertainties of life and death. The situation across India is terrible. But people like me are still much better off than the average person in Bihar. Even so, it is very likely that it is people like me who are shocked at this turn of events. To many of my fellow countrymen, this is a slightly worse version of what they see every year.



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Leave Covid-19 aside, an average person in India does not have access to medical care in the best of times. The nearest hospital is likely to be many kilometres away and even if you can get there, it might not have any beds available. A mosquito bite on a random monsoon day could end a person's life. They do not have assured access to drinking water. A glass of water on a hot summer day could be a death sentence. Income and food sources are unreliable. Hunger and malnutrition abound. What do people do when faced with everyday disasters? They do what our ancestors have done for hundreds of generations, make their peace with the uncertainty inherent in existence. They are not devoid of fear, pain, or even complaints if asked. But they go about their lives, trying their best to survive another day.



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The distortion in death data has rendered thousands — maybe even hundreds of thousands — of Indians invisible. India's poor are dying unchronicled, uncounted and unacknowledged. [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/...](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/...)

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Constantly being subjected to the heartless randomness of nature is a difficult life. So most of us who have excess resources beyond the subsistence level spend our time trying to get some degree of control over our lives. We buy water filters, install underground pumps to overcome water shortages. We buy calorie-rich food as and when we want. We build houses with amenities that cater to our needs and wants. But perhaps more important for the exposition here, in normal times we can pay for treatment in private hospitals that we deem up to the mark. Some of us may even know people who can help us jump queues to get into the best government hospitals. Affluence can limit if not outright destroy our ability to deal with anything that is out of (our) control.

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No one is getting a hospital bed. Extra money is no help, neither are the contacts working with the government. Paying patients are dying in private hospitals for the want of oxygen. Medicines are out of stock, and many are waiting for days to get their test results. When the second COVID-19 wave hit India, it broke the illusion of control that people like me had carefully constructed over many years. We are people asking how did it come to this. We are in shock because this was not supposed to happen to us. We are grieving because it did, and many of us lost our loved ones. We are angry because we thought we did not have to make our peace with our lot in life.

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