

Environment and Politics in India

Project - Term paper

'As a student of environment and politics, how would you look at the novel coronavirus pandemic? What does it tell you about the nature of human-nature relationships?'

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THE OUTBREAK It was in the end of December, 2019 when the World Health Organisation's (WHO) China office heard the first reports of a virus behind a number of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, a city in Eastern China. The lab results confirmed that the source was a novel coronavirus strain that shared traits with the 2003 SARS and the 2012 MERS. The symptoms of the disease range from dry cough and fever to more serious respiratory tract illness including pneumonia and bronchitis - particularly dangerous in older patients, or people who have existing health conditions. In mid-february, China saw the peak of the outbreak, registering more than 5,000 cases in a single day. Since March, however, the country has seen a remarkable slowdown. At the same time, the outbreak started picking up in the rest of the world - starting from Italy, Iran and the USA. As of April 27, the USA has seen the highest number of cases in the world.

THE CHINESE VIRUS The virus was referred to as the "Wuhan Virus" or "Chinese Coronavirus" for weeks by the US conservative politicians and news services. In a transparent effort to scapegoat and distract from their own catastrophic mismanagement of the worst public health crisis in recent American history - Donald Trump and Republican allies vow to 'make China pay' for coronavirus.

Making Wuhan internationally infamous than ever, the virus is claimed to have originated from a Wuhan seafood market where wild animals, including marmots, birds, rabbits, bats and snakes, are traded illegally. However, the specific origins of the coronavirus within wuhan remain unclear. Many suspect the pangolin - which is trafficked mainly for its scales, which are believed to treat a variety of health conditions in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and as a luxury food in China - as an intermediary host between bats and humans, which again is just a hypothesis, but if true as Andrew Liu¹ asks -

¹ "Chinese Virus," World Market

"Was the consumption of pangolin a residue of unchanging, primitive Chinese custom? Could it be blamed on local culture? If so, would we have to concede that the novel coronavirus is indeed a peculiarly Chinese disease?"

INDIA EMBRACING ISLAMOPHOBIA Coronavirus is proving to be another excuse to marginalise India's Muslims. After India's health ministry repeatedly blamed an Islamic seminary for spreading the coronavirus - and governing party authorities spoke of "human bombs" and "corona jihad" - a spree of anti-Muslim attacks has broken out across the country. Messages are being spread broadcasting not to buy - milk, fruits and vegetables from Muslim farmers/vendors because they are spitting on food and sneezing in unison to spread coronavirus. Videos with Muslims claiming that Coronavirus can't do any harm to them as they regularly pray to their God and another one in which a Bengali Maulvi is demanding a virus from Allah that kills 50 crore people in India in one go - are circulating on social media.

The situation exacerbated as an element of truth was found in these claims - Indian authorities estimated that more than a third of the country's cases were associated with the group, Tablighi Jamaat, which held a huge gathering of preachers in India in March. Similar gatherings in Malaysia and Pakistan also led to outbreaks. The Indian government has been dashing to find track of anyone from the seminary and quarantine congregants.

On March 16, the Delhi government banned gatherings of more than 50 people. But instead of splitting up after the Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown, more than 1,000 people stayed put at the center. During a sermon, a Tablighi Jamaat leader told followers that coronavirus was "God's punishment" and not to fear it. Later, health inspectors found around 1,300 people still staying at the center without any other protective gear. However by that point, hundreds of congregants had already left and made their way across India, spreading the coronavirus to more than half of India's states. Since then, more than 25 thousand people who had come in contact with the congregants have been quarantined.

Some nurses have complained that Tablighi members put in isolation wards were acting full of disgust - a Muslim man who tested positive for coronavirus had slit his throat in a central Indian hospital, which increased the backlash against Muslims further. After sensing the same India's health ministry has stopped blaming Tablighi Jamaat at public briefings -

"Certain communities and areas are being labeled purely based on false reports. There is an urgent need to counter such prejudices."

THE ELITE Economic need has forced service workers to remain constantly exposed to the virus, for the well-off, it is their wealth that protects them. Actor Tom Hanks wrote on social media that he and his wife had tested positive while traveling in Australia. Kanika Kapoor was trolled as 'Corona ki Khalnayak' as she - after coming from England - went around the country - partying in huge crowds - despite showing symptoms, after which she announced she had the virus. The virus in India is also being used against the elite in/for a number of reasons. It is being talked about that India did not shut the international air traffic early because of the elite - and since the virus was brought in the country from outside; the elite have become the reason for the initiation of the spread of the virus in the minds of the middle class Indians.

There are many stories playing out in the news, on social media, and in group chats of suburban parents fiercely raiding grocery stores for home supplies, emptying shelves and stockpiling weeks of food in basement freezers. In Australia, hoarding has gotten so bad that one coffee shop began to accept payments in toilet paper.

ECONOMIC CRISIS Worries are mounting that prolonged quarantines, supply chain disruptions and a sharp reduction in tourism and business travel could weaken the global economy or even cause a recession. The virus has throttled international stock markets and distressed its transnational supply chains, cutting off China's ability to produce for the rest of the world. China is the world's top importer of crude oil, shipping in the equivalent of ten million barrels daily, but as Chinese activity and then global travel slowed, oil stocks have piled higher and higher.

However, after the improvements in the conditions in their country, Chinese Central Bank bought 1.75 crore shares or 1.01 percent of the shareholding in one of the largest housing finance lenders, HDFC Ltd, according to exchange data. The share purchase is likely to have happened between January and March. The timing of the share purchase is significant given that HDFC shares have been sliding in recent weeks. There have been growing concerns of China using the coronavirus-induced economic crisis to go on a buying spree, hence, many countries like Australia, Germany and India have either tightened their foreign direct investment policies in recent weeks or are exploring similar options.

CORONA LETS EARTH BREATHE? The pandemic has given insight into the mess humans are and have been making of the planet. The measures taken to ward off the

threat of COVID-19 are virtually identical to the measures that climate activists have been demanding for decades: less travel, less work and less environmental expropriation. To bring global heating to a standstill, they argued, we need to focus on **degrowth** – and that means working less and dismantling the global supply chains.

Air quality levels in the world's major cities improved dramatically in March and April. Air quality improved largely because of a reduction in factory and road traffic emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and related ozone (O₃) formation, and particulate matter (PM). During the same period, global air traffic dropped by 60%. Stars seem more visible at night. Cleaner air has been most noticeable in India and China. On April 3, residents of Jalandhar, a city in north India's Punjab, woke up to a view not seen for decades: snow-capped Himalayan peaks more than 100 miles away. Smog stopped choking New Delhi, one of the most polluted cities in the world, and India's getting views of sights not visible in decades. Since the greenhouse gases that trap heat and cause



climate change stay in the atmosphere for 100 years or more, the pandemic shutdown is unlikely to affect global warming.

In Venice, the water in the canals cleared and experienced greater water flow and visibility of fish. The Venice mayor's office clarified that the increase in water clarity was due to the settling of sediment that is disturbed by boat traffic and mentioned the decrease in air pollution along the waterways. Even the Ganga river, flowing through Varanasi and Haridwar, has seen a significant improvement in water quality during the coronavirus lockdown. Scientists have claimed after observation that the water quality has seen a remarkable improvement and is even fit for drinking.

People are also noticing animals in places and at times they don't usually. From New Delhi, India to Buenos Aires, Argentina, groups of animals including deer and lemurs have started to come out to explore – in search of food or just to play. Peacocks have

been seen perched on top of parked cars, displaying their spectacular trains. In Australia, police shared a video of a kangaroo hopping around a mostly empty downtown, and a pack of jackals occupied an urban park in Israel.

But not all the environmental consequences of the crisis have been positive. Volumes of non recyclable waste have risen; severe cuts in agricultural and fishery export levels have led to the generation of large quantities of organic waste; maintenance and monitoring of natural ecosystems have been temporarily halted. Food retailers have resumed using plastic bags at checkout points. In addition, due to stay-at-home policies, many consumers have increased their consumption of take-away food delivered with single-use packaging. Local waste problems have emerged as many municipalities have suspended their recycling activities over fears of virus propagation in recycling centres. Because this waste is left to decay, levels of methane (CH₄) emissions, a greenhouse gas, from decaying produce are expected to rise sharply in the crisis and immediate post-crisis months.

The lockdown has also been deadly for some animals. Four horses normally employed for tourist carriage rides near Kolkata's landmark Victoria Memorial have died from starvation. The owners of the carriages say they have no money for the horses after being ordered off the streets. *"We are finding it difficult to feed our family. How can we feed our horses?"* Moreover, stray dogs that usually rely on scraps are going hungry during the coronavirus lockdown.

So long as the coronavirus crisis keeps economic activities reduced, emissions will remain relatively low. However, it would be short sighted to conclude this is a durable environmental improvement as emissions will most likely rise to previous levels when economic activity picks up as the crisis resolves. Overall, the crisis may thus have no permanent environmental effects.

THE HUMAN-NATURE INTERACTION As the cycles of production and consumption move, we move out of our houses, goods travel from one country to another and we are locked in this process which is threatening the environment. How? Whatever future threats we're going to face already exist; they are currently circulating in wildlife. As the production-consumption goes on, the demand increases - the demand for more land, the demand for new luxury foods etc - this demand drives deforestation and development leading to disease emergence and thus by intervening in the ecological sphere to quench this demand - we are getting in closer contact with millennia-old ecosystems that were previously closed off from interaction with humans - just as we had never once imagined the idea of this virus inhabiting a bat, but now that virus has

caused bedlam across the globe - “*many of those new pathogens previously held in check by long-evolved forest ecologies are being sprung free, threatening the whole world*”. This pandemic is not just a natural disaster but a social one as well.

Bram Leven and Jan Overwijk urge the world to start thinking differently about the relationship between society and the ecosystem to be able to escape neoliberal containment. They talk about the good old lesson of how we can no longer afford to see that ecosystem as a pure ‘outside’ that stands over and against society; an ‘elsewhere’ that we can endlessly exploit, expropriate and exhaust. Today we can clearly see that the coronavirus has very much become a part of our society, this proves that the way we organize our communal life and the way we work affects the ecosystem. Culture and nature are not opposed to each other, but irrevocably intertwined.

CAPITALISM, POLITICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT The political system itself has played a major role in producing this new ecological actor. Every government is looking at this pandemic, framing it and conceptualizing it as an *outsider*, an *intruder* or even an *invader* that threatens the modern society from which it is essentially distinct - religiously adhering to this politics of othering - yet no one is accepting that the political order itself has created it - because the virus is part of the ecosystem that we have co-constructed. The virus is neither an aberration nor a monster: it merely reveals to us the monstrosity of *business-as-usual* in eco-colonial capitalism.

PROFITS AGAINST HUMAN LIFE The initial focus of preventive measures was on the economic fallout, on potential stock market losses - and hardly ever on the fallout the damage will bring about including public health risks. It is not that they did not realize the potential health impacts, but that they understood how sickness would prevent people from spending money and going to work. In the first stage, there was the completely non-committal and individualized appeal: wash your hands and continue working and consuming. In a second stage, governments throughout the world gradually took more extensive measures, **although without placing too much of a burden on the global supply chains, or production and consumption.**

The collective self-isolation and social distancing that are the prime solutions in the eyes of experts, cut off one of the major roots of our economy - the streamlined 9 to 5 working day. Because now we can take back some control over our own time and our waking hours - which the capitalist mindset despises. All governments are trying their hardest to lift the lockdowns for big businesses and to allow them to continue their *business-as-usual* to “save” their countries from facing an economic crisis any further - completely overlooking the people, their lives and the environment they are living in. But

what is really required is no bail-outs for big business, but a bail-out for the people and the planet.

WHAT'S COMING? The coronavirus crisis will get worse before it gets better. But it's not just this pandemic getting worse, as many philosophers, environmentalists and experts across the globe predict, the world is crumbling and worse things are coming our way. Bruno Latour in his 'Is this a dress rehearsal?' points out that intervention of the virus could serve as a dress rehearsal for the next crisis. Experts have predicted millions of people will be killed each year by 2050. Something like cancer, as WHO has stated, killed 9.6 million people in the year 2018. The risk is so urgent that a recent UN report claimed that even the common diseases are becoming untreatable and the situation has been described as the biggest threat to global health. The risk is antibiotic resistance - when bacteria adapt gradually causing antibiotics to become less effective. How? Firstly, because we are consuming a lot of antibiotics even when they aren't absolutely necessary. But the more widespread problem goes back to what has been discussed in one of the previous sections and is related to the food we eat - and its production. 80% of the antibiotics sold are used on animal farms not to cure illnesses but to increase their produce. In the end it all leads to industrial agriculture, capitalist society and the greed of humans. The need to rethink the human-nature interaction has become crucial.

Bruno Latour calls this pandemic a health crisis wherein it is the brave people who must relearn to wash their hands and cough into their elbows as they did in primary school and in the case of the ecological mutation, it is the state that finds itself in a learning situation. He says that it is a war we have to fight, not against the virus but those humans who make war on us without declaring war on us. For this war, the national state is as ill-prepared, as badly calibrated, as badly designed as possible because the battle fronts are multiple and cross each one of us. It is in this sense that the "general mobilization" against the virus does not prove in any way that we will be ready for the next one.