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Impact Of COVID-19 On Indian Politics

Dr. Shashi Saurav*, Shivangi Kashyap†

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Dr. Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University, India, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow-226017

†Guest Faculty, Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, India, Uttar Pradesh, Prayagraj-211002

Abstract

The scope of Politics has broadened to such an extent that anything and everything happening anywhere and everywhere in any dimension of human life has some political implications either directly or indirectly. This is true also in case of the recent outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The pandemic has affected almost all the dimensions of human life but considering especially its political impact we can broadly divide it into two levels – International and National levels. At the International level, it has changed the nature and scope of interaction among the nations, role of international organizations, especially, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the foreign policies of almost all the countries. At the national level it has affected the whole political system i.e. the electoral process, working of the legislature, the executive and even the judiciary. The main objective of this paper is to study the impact of COVID-19 on Indian politics by focusing mainly on the functioning of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary; expanding role of the administration; the changing dynamics of electoral politics; increasing importance of government; strengthening of the Union; and shedding-off of the party agenda by almost all the major political parties, role of civil society and on the basis of this projecting the future prospects of the changes brought by COVID-19 in the Indian politics.

Keywords: Covid-19, Lockdown, Legislature, Executive, Judiciary, Centre-State Relations, Indian Federalism, General Elections, Digital Politics, E-governance

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges which the world is facing today is the deadly disease namely the coronavirus disease which is commonly known as COVID-19. As far as the meaning of coronavirus is concerned, it is “a kind

of common virus that causes an infection in your nose, sinuses, or upper throat.”¹ Although most of the variant of coronavirus are not deadly but the coronavirus which was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 is very deadly and has been spreading rapidly throughout the world. “On 30 January 2020, the WHO Director-general declared that the current outbreak constituted a public health emergency of international concern, and on 12 March 2020 the COVID-19 the outbreak was declared a pandemic.”² “Globally, as of 9:49 am CET, 19 January 2021, there have been 93,956,883 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 2,029,084 deaths, reported to WHO”³ and the cases are rising day by day. “In India, from Jan 3 to 9:49am CET, 19 January 2021, there have been 10,581,837 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 152,556 deaths.”⁴

The above data is really very disturbing and alarming as well. It is not that only the people or the family having COVID-19 infection are affected by it rather the day by day increasing cases and lockdown imposed in order to check the spread of this infectious disease by different governments in their respective countries have severely affected the mankind throughout the world. All the major dimensions of human life such as psychological, social, economic and political have been affected by this which asks for attention if one really wants to understand the impact of this pandemic on politics or look into its political implications.

The primary impact of any crisis we face in our life can be seen on our psychology. COVID-19 has affected a large number of people in a very short span of time. Its psychological impact can be seen in a “recent data which shows that significantly higher share of people who were sheltering in place (47%) reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to coronavirus.”⁵ It not only affects the infected person but also the family, relatives, friends and community to which the person belongs.

The impact of COVID-19 on the society can be seen not only in terms of increasing poverty, hunger, unemployment and disruptions in work and business but also in terms of almost nil social interactions amongst the members of the society, paused physical, educational, religious and entertainment and other social activities for such long time that it led to the feelings of solitude, fear, depression, anger and anxiety which spoiled the familial and social relations.

Coming to the economic dimension of impact of COVID-19 we can notice that due to the spread of this virus the governments throughout the world were compelled to impose lockdown. Due to this many lost their jobs, salaries were deducted, business, trade and commerce came to halt and complete focus of the economy was to contain the virus both by focusing on the preventive measures and finding a cure. “In a report entitled “COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses” by International Labor Organization, it was explained that the crisis has already transformed into an economic and labor market shock, impacting not only supply (production of goods and services) but also demand (consumption and investment).”⁶

It has also affected the manufacturing and the services sector- hospitality, tours and travels, healthcare, retail, banks, hotels, real estate, education, health, IT, recreation, media and others. However, lockdown and social distancing are the only cost-effective tools available to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁷ We cannot afford to compromise with our lives during this pandemic, therefore, it is quite fair to bear some economic losses.

The political impact of COVID-19 can be seen both from the international and national perspective. From the international perspective we can easily notice that it has changed the nature and scope of interaction among the nations, role of international organizations, especially, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the foreign policies of almost all the countries. From the national perspective a change in the whole political system can be noticed in the form of change in the electoral process, working of the legislature, the executive and even the judiciary.

After having discussed the impact of COVID-19 on different dimensions of our lives we can continue to assess its impact on Indian politics which is the main focus of this paper.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INDIAN POLITICS

On 30 January, India reported its first case of COVID-19 in Kerala⁸ and since then the cases are increasing day by day. India currently has the largest number of cases in Asia⁹ and second highest number of cases in the world.¹⁰ The government imposed a nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of this pandemic in the country which resulted in wide-ranging impact on almost all spheres of human life including the political sphere. As the focus of this paper is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the politics of the country, therefore, here the emphasis will be on the impact of COVID-19 on the working of legislature, executive and the judiciary; expanding role of the administration; the changing dynamics of electoral politics; increasing importance of government; strengthening of the Union; shedding-off of the party agenda by almost all the major political parties; and role of civil society which is discussed below.

Impact on the Working of Legislature

Parliament is the supreme law-making body of the country having the “cardinal functions of legislation, overseeing of administration, passing of the budget, ventilation of public grievances, discussing national policies, etc.”¹¹ Normally, three sessions of Parliament are held in a year: (i) Budget Session (February- May); (ii) Monsoon Session (July- August); and (iii) Winter Session (November- December).¹² But due to the spread of this pandemic, the Budget Session was short-terminated in March after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic similarly “the monsoon session, which was held from September 14 in midst of the pandemic, was cut short by eight days and concluded on September 24.”¹³ Besides this, “several first-time measures such as staggered sitting

of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and the use of both chambers and galleries to accommodate members while following physical distancing norms were implemented during the monsoon session.”¹⁴

Although the formulation of laws is the basic function of the Parliament but in this pandemic, many ordinances were passed. Indian Constitution permits the executive to make laws through Ordinances if the Parliament is not in session and immediate action is required. This provision was made use of in order to make necessary arrangements for containment of the pandemic. On 30 March, the Centre issued Essential Commodities Act, 2020 and “declared masks and hand sanitizers as essential commodities until 30th June”¹⁵.

Impact on the Working of Executive

In this pandemic it was the executive which was over-burdened with various responsibilities towards the people of the country. The very first and most important effort towards containment of this pandemic in the country was the decision of nation-wide lockdown which helped in keeping the COVID-19 infection counts to a much lower level for a long time and also controlling the number of casualties. The lockdown “first came in the form of a janata curfew on 22 March following the request made by the Prime Minister; then the 21-day lockdown announced via his (the PM’s) address to the nation on 24 March, and before the expiry of that lockdown, through another broadcast on 14 April and until 3 May 2020.”¹⁶ The World Health Organization also lauded the move by saying it a “tough and timely actions against the coronavirus spread”¹⁷

The alarming situation created by the spread of virus and the lockdown bestowed the executive with wide discretionary powers to take measures suitable for preventing or controlling the pandemic. Many schemes were launched by the government which added to the already existing responsibilities of the executive.

Impact on the Working of Judiciary

COVID-19 not only changed the working of the legislature and the executive rather it also deeply affected the working of the Judiciary in the country. “The Supreme Court of India issued guidelines for Court functioning such as hearing only urgent cases and mandatory electronic filing, restraining hearing only critical cases and conducting them through video conference.”¹⁸ “Observing that “technology is here to stay”, the top court passed the directions by exercising its plenary power under Article 142 of the Constitution and said that all the measures which shall be taken by the courts to reduce physical presence of stakeholders within its premises “shall be deemed to be lawful”.¹⁹ For the first time “the concept of open court was abandoned as the hearings were conducted in online mode; physical presence of criminals, especially in criminal cases was left to the discretion of the judges, which again was a departure from the established procedure and the judiciary witnessed the digital divide”²⁰ and its consequences which made the poor and people living in the interior regions of the country suffer. This clearly shows the impact of COVID-19 on the working of the judiciary and also the ability of the judiciary to face this situation of crisis.

Expanding Role of Administration

Under the welfare state, the role of government and administration has been expanding continuously and in the times of crisis the expansion becomes more evident. Same is true in case of crisis brought by the spread of COVID-19 in the country. It presented a new challenge before the governments throughout the world and all the burden of tackling the challenge successfully was bestowed upon the shoulders of the administration. All the relief and welfare measures taken by the government were basically undertaken by the administration. It was the administration which was on the one hand delivering the essential services to the people and on the other hand putting a check on the spread of this infection.

But every responsibility carries with it some power because without power one cannot carry out the responsibilities assigned. Thus, the increasing responsibility of administration increased its power as well which brought in the chances of corruption at the level of administration which is evident from the fact that “in April this year (2020), the government set up a separate portal to address any grievances related to Covid-19 and received over 167,000 complaints”²¹ Thus, the expansion of role of administration during this crisis has its own dangers, towards which the government must remain vigilant all the time.

Changing Electoral Politics

The impact of COVID-19 is so deep on the Indian politics that even the electoral politics of the country remained no exception to this. When we talk about the electoral politics then, the basic and foremost stage which comes in our mind is the stage of campaigning by the political parties. At this stage the political parties try to woo the voters in their favor by means of presenting their achievements and future agendas through different means such as rallies, conferences, campaigns, posters, banners, social networking sites, etc. The use of social networking sites for campaigning and such other purposes is not new in India, but the spread of this virus and the lockdown imposed thereupon made the use of social networking sites for campaigning more popular among the political parties. Due to the restriction of social distancing, it was not possible for the political parties to reach out to the public physically; therefore, they adopted the virtual means and ways as an alternative. Recently “Amit Shah addressed his first virtual rally 'Bihar Jansamvad Rally' through video conferencing”²² which was broadcasted over Facebook with a target of reaching “at least one lakh people across the 243 assembly segments in the state”²³

This has positively resulted in trimming the cost of conducting physical rallies and election campaigns. The use of internet and social media for this purpose has not only expanded the reach of the political parties to maximum people in one click of the button, but has also saved the time. Although, the digital divide is still an impediment before the popularization of this mode of campaigning and rallying, but the political parties are moving towards this and this move must be praised and accepted forever.

Increasing Importance of Government

Besides the use of electronic means, one more important aspect which must be focused on is the increased importance and role of government in the life of common masses “to promote the welfare of the population”²⁴. It was the need of the hours that the government should adopt its ‘welfare state avatar’ in order to protect the people from this crisis and providing relief to the common masses. The government has launched many relief measures and welfare schemes to deal with this crisis. These schemes and relief measure no doubt build a confidence in the minds of the people regarding the government, but on the other hand, it asks for a proper monitoring mechanism so as to check the chances of misuse of these schemes at different levels. People of the country are united to support the government in this move to curb this crisis which is good sign for the unity and integrity of the nation.

Strengthening of the Union

The strengthening of the Union is one more dimension of the impact of COVID-19 over the politics of the country. In normal situations, there is a clear-cut division of subjects between the Centre and the state and there is also a concurrent list over which both the governments can formulate laws. But the “Central Parliament has an extraordinary power of legislation on state subjects in the national interest when authorized by the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Parliament, to do so (Article 249).”²⁵ The same was witnessed during the current crisis. The Union enforced certain measures to check the spread of COVID-19 in the country which were mandatory for the states to follow due to which some of the state governments started blaming the Union government for usurping undue power in its hands. Some states considered the nation-wide lockdown against their autonomy as this led to much financial loss not only to the states but also to the country as a whole. But one thing must be kept in mind that the lives of the people occupy the central position and everything else should be kept at the periphery.

Shedding-off of the Party Agenda

Shedding-off of the party agenda during the COVID-19 crisis is also one of the important dimensions which must be focused upon. The party in power and other political parties shed their party agendas in order to fight the menace. Even the opposition played a very positive role during this crisis by following the guidelines issued by the government and helping the poor and weaker sections of the society out of their party funds. Certainly, there some points of disagreement between the government and the opposition; amongst the state governments; and also, among different political parties regarding the ways of dealing with this crisis and some financial issues regarding crisis management, but all were equally concerned about making the country free from virus infection. This has also depicted the unity of the nation against this situation of crisis.

Role of Civil Society

“Civil society is a project whereby individuals can realize their self through engagement, contestation and affirmation”²⁶ The role of civil society in a democratic state cannot be undermined as it is “seen as the most desirable way to achieve both democracy and democratization in contemporary times”²⁷ and it plays a very important role in almost every sphere of human life. During the COVID-19 its positive role was quite evident as the “Niti Aayog has reached out to over 92,000 non-governmental and civil society organizations (CSOs) to boost cross-sectoral collaboration. From feeding the hungry and providing hygiene kits to supporting district administration for complementing and supplementing public health systems, NGOs are working on various challenges being thrown up by this pandemic.”²⁸ Thus, we can say that the civil society can be relied upon even in the time of crisis.

CONCLUSION

The above study depicted the impact of COVID-19 on Indian politics by focusing on some of the major changes brought by this crisis. The spread of this virus made it necessary and almost mandatory for the government to look for electronic alternatives and electronic means of not only executing and administering, but also legislating and adjudicating and even for the political parties throughout the country for campaigning and rallying. On the one hand, it increased the importance of government in the lives of the people and strengthened the Union, not against the state governments, rather with the help of the state governments and on the other hand it reaffirmed the faith of the common masses on the government of this country and its ability to successfully face this challenging situation. The unity of this country was also clearly evident in the form of shedding-off of the party agenda by almost all the major political parties during this challenging time. The positive role played by the administration and its promptness in dealing with this crisis is also a good sign of responsiveness and people-friendly governance.

The changes introduced by the government at different levels and in its way of functioning during this period of crisis should be continued with a positive attitude of not only fighting this menace but also helping the nation recover and develop with a new confidence. The positive attitude will strengthen the feeling of nationality in every citizen of the country. The political parties should continue this spirit of cooperation and coordination in fighting all the other challenges in the interest of the nation. The role of the civil society in a democratic country like ours was quite evident during COVID-19. It extended helping hands towards the poor and marginalized sections of the society and in turn helped the government to face this challenge more efficiently and effectively. This crisis teaches us to remain united in every circumstance and make this democracy not only ‘of’ and ‘by’ the people, but also ‘for’ the people.

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