

At the Crossroads of Marginalization and Intersectionality: A Phenomenological Account of COVID-19 in South Asia

Shahana

Abstract

After the end of the Cold War, one of the epochal moments in modern history was COVID-19, which killed close to seven million people and infected about seven hundred million. The globalized world came to a standstill. The impact, barring the period during the pandemic, is no longer confined to statistics of infections and mortalities. Research has expanded on what to study and how to study the impact. This article reviews the essays in *Coronasphere: Narratives on COVID-19 from India and its Neighbours*, edited by Chandan Kumar Sharma and Reshmi Banerjee and published by Routledge in 2023.

Author Profile

Shahana is a Doctoral Research Scholar at the School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi.

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, one of the epochal moments in modern history was COVID-19, which killed close to seven million people and infected about seven hundred million. Chandan Kumar Sharma and Reshmi Banerjee begin their edited volume by stating, “COVID-19 has changed the world forever.” Through the 18 essays authored by experts in their relevant fields, the edited book *Coronasphere: Narratives on COVID-19 from India and its Neighbours* (Routledge 2023) unpacks the massive impact that the pandemic had on every aspect of human life. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it captures the South Asian life and death experiences. Divided along thematic sectors such as economy, health, and education the book offers a granular view of the marginalized populations, including women, children, Dalits, older adults, and sexual minorities. It also offers a snapshot of how the pandemic was experienced and managed by countries in India’s neighborhood, namely Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Conversations on these issues have been categorized under four broad subject heads: Impact on the Economy, Unforeseen Transformation, On the Periphery, and Regional Narratives.

No statistical account of the pandemic, however detailed or extensive, has been able to capture the nuances and magnitude of suffering and vulnerability that individuals experienced regardless of economic status, education, caste, community, gender, race, or ethnicity. Yet, various phenomenological accounts, on the other hand, have provided vivid snapshots of the varied impact of the pandemic. For instance, Gita Chadha explains,

Like other social events and phenomena, the pandemic which is not neutral to gender is also not neutral to class, or caste, or sexuality or religion. It is more than clear now that people already marginalised and stigmatised, are the worst hit by the pandemic lockdowns. The hit is marked on several axes —psychological, economic, political, and cultural. Faced by the fact that each section gets affected differently, we realise that all of us are not “sailing in the same boat,” as the early narrative around the pandemic suggested. The boats, if you have one, are different in size, shape and comfort. (Chadha 2021).

The book *Coronasphere: Narratives on COVID-19 from India and its Neighbours* exemplifies some of these conversations and foregrounds the oft-forgotten narratives of why and how there are no shared vulnerabilities and people are not sailing in the same boat.

Impact on Economy

According to the World Bank, “The COVID-19 pandemic sent shock waves through the world economy and triggered the largest global economic crisis in more than a century” (World Bank 2022). Three essays in the book are focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, but more particularly on how the pandemic impacted livelihoods in the agricultural sector and formal and informal labor. All three essays complement their arguments with ample data on how the economy has been impacted at a granular level. Chitrasen Bhue reports that the situation of agriculture was not satisfactory even before the pandemic; it worsened after COVID-19. Agricultural growth declined from 6.8 percent to 3.3 percent in the first quarter of 2020-2021. The author points out, “COVID-19 has unfolded the structural challenges that Indian agriculture faces in marketing and production the last few decades. The inadequate policy response to marketing and production was revealed during the pandemic” (Bhue 2023). The challenges were also compounded by the rural-urban divide in experiencing the pandemic and accessing services that were disrupted by the lockdown. The closure of *mandis* (wholesale markets) had a significant impact on the procurement of crops and farmers’ income.

Due to the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, migrant workers found themselves in a precarious situation. Many faced job losses, uncertainty, and starvation. An Action Aid study found that 8 percent of workers lost their jobs, 48 percent did not receive wages, and about 17 percent partially received wages across sectors. With joblessness, 57 percent fell into debt traps, and 82 percent had insufficient food (World Economic Forum 2023). In the chapter “Migration, informality, and COVID-19 pandemic in India,” Debdulal Saha further explains the impact on women, particularly the already very low female labor participation rate. Expanding on the urban-rural dichotomy introduced in a previous essay in the book, Saha argues, “While the exodus of migrants from the urban economy has become the central point of debate, how will rural economy absorb reverse migrants—which largely suffer from open unemployment and labour surplus—is one of the major concerns in the policy discourse.” He concludes that the migrant crisis is, simply put, a state, policy, and institutional failure.

The third essay in the set of essays on the impact of the economy is Rajdeep Singha’s “Effect of COVID-19 on the economy of North Eastern region of India,” which co-locates the marginalization experienced by the people from the northeast within the historical neglect of the region. Two identifiable common threads with the other two essays are that COVID-19 exacerbated preexisting precarity, and the inequalities were more pronounced along the urban-rural fault lines. In particular, his essay discusses the economic impact on North Eastern India’s agriculture, banking, government finance, and labor market. The author cautions that there is a strong likelihood of labor unrest in the North East, given the poor performance of the labor market in the region, which is further accentuated by the uneven growth between rural and urban areas.

Unforeseen Transformation

Beyond the direct health impacts, the pandemic's economic fallout shattered countless livelihoods as governments adopted restrictive measures to slow or halt its spread. No part of life or livelihood was left unscathed as it transformed and adapted to new realities. Four essays in *Coronasphere* capture the transformations in the health and education sector as it sought to adapt to the pandemic. A hitherto under-discussed role of NGOs during the pandemic is discussed in detail in one of the essays. While the whole world stayed indoors and maintained social distance, healthcare workers worldwide were at the frontline of the fight against the virus, putting their lives at risk to save others. Health workers were glorified as 'corona warriors,' yet most of them struggled to protect their own families through the pandemic. Ramila Bisht, Shaveta Menon, and Balakrishnan Nair reveal the fatigue, burnout, stigma, and violence that were part of the everyday life of the healthcare professionals in their essay, "COVID-19 and health workforce in India—Time for radical change?" In their essay, "COVID-19 and the Indian Health System – A Democratic Deficit," Ritu Priya and Mathew George traverse the "pluralistic health behaviours and perceptions" of a heterogeneous population that, in addition to formal healthcare, relied on non-formal medical practitioners inside homes and communities. Taken together, these two essays provide a vivid picture of the battle against COVID-19 amidst inadequate state response, diverse people's beliefs, and opaque information about the virus. Priya and George call out the digital divide reinforced by the urban-rural disparities, which led to further exclusions. They also highlight the major omissions in pandemic management that ended up being too centralized and also incoherent.

The pandemic was a health crisis that did not impact the healthcare systems alone; it also spurred a long-term impact on the education system. Chandan Kumar Sharma and Angel Habamon Syiem, in their chapter "COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Indian education system," discuss how education and teaching-learning processes completely transformed due to the lockdown and the social distancing rules enforced by the government. The promoted alternative of online learning widened and deepened the 'digital divide' between the privileged and underprivileged. In the nation's remote regions, such as hilly or riverine villages, where power, mobile phones, and internet connectivity are often a luxury, the situation worsened. Further, girls from low-income families faced additional barriers due to either limited access to technology or the prioritization of limited resources in favor of the boys in the family. The essay also offers a glimpse of the difficulties faced by teachers forced to catch up with the technological requirements of online education—something that they were ill-prepared for. Often the discussions on the pandemic's impact remain focused on the lack of educational facilities or the quality of education, but rarely sympathetic to the challenges faced by the teachers who have had to adapt to new professional and personal demands triggered by the lockdown. The girls who lived in hostels enjoyed a certain degree of independence and privacy, which was missing at home and lockdown had an effect on curtailing freedom. In addition, the prevalence of child sexual abuse, forced marriages, and cyberbullying had, according to the analysis in this essay. In relation to online teaching, even

teachers lacked the technical infrastructure at home and were overburdened with excessive expectations about online instruction. The pandemic demonstrated the divide between the digital as well as the potential of the digital in a diverse and expansive country like India. By moving towards or creating possibilities for inclusive digital accessibility, the physical space of the campus of educational institutions and its importance will also transform completely (Sen and Varghese, 2023).

The last essay in the second section of the book focuses on the role played by the NGOs in trying to fill the crucial gap in services rendered impossible during the pandemic. In “NGOs in the times of COVID-19,” Namami Sharma flags how NGOs played an invaluable role in helping migrant laborers make their journey back home. The NGOs also volunteered to provide food, water, masks, and medicine in addition to helping with the contract tracing of 122,000 migrants and distributing rations.

On the Periphery

Most analyses on the pandemic have flagged how its impacts may not have “been experienced equally but rather have been profoundly shaped by and, in turn, further entrenched existing patterns of global inequality” (Gary and Gills 2022). Very few have attempted to unpack the inequality within the unequal and marginalized communities that alienated them from further social protection, accentuating their vulnerability and pandemic fallout. A set of five essays meticulously articulates the intersectionality of marginalization and how that amplified the impact of the pandemic on particular individuals and communities. Rukmini Sen, in her essay “Home, violence, and the pandemic sociological discourses and re-imagination in India,” poignantly describes the fall out of the lockdown on women in abusive environments—she terms it, “stay home; stay (un)safe.” With different advisories during the pandemic ensuring that everyone compulsorily needed to stay inside their homes for safety, the need for safe and affordable housing for those who could not continue to stay in abusive homes was felt in many ways. An additional effect of the pandemic was a rise in the number of child marriages in the country (Sharma and Khaliq 2023). Yet another strong articulation of the suffering of those at the cross sections of multiple marginalization and identities is “The unwanted citizen: Dalit precarity and the pandemic in India” by N. Sukumar and Shailaja Menon. It throws light on the arduous journey of “returning” home for millions of migrant laborers, demonstrating the devaluation of citizenship rights for a substantial population in the country on whose blood and sweat cities are built. The shame of the caste structure cannot be articulated more powerfully than what the authors declare—“the Dalit migrant cannot wish away the curse of caste even in times of extreme precarity.”

Yet another marginalized community that bore the brunt of the pandemic but remained absent in most discourses on the vulnerable during COVID-19 was the LGBTQI population. Foregrounding

the competing realities, Pushpesh Kumar and Vallala Sravya, in their essay “COVID-19 and Queer Community in India: Transgender precarity versus homovivah,” highlight the differences not just in lived realities but also in the dominant narratives on the privileged and the rest within this community. One of the most important discourses that this essay critically questions is the parallel conversation on same-sex marriage petitions led by the elite in the queer community – “when transgender persons are on the verge of starvation and precarity, marriage seems rather frivolous.” The last two essays in this set focus on the impact of the pandemic on the tribal community and older adults. In “Life of the marginalised and the pandemic: The case of tribes in India,” Jagannath Ambagudia and Virginius Xaxa delve into ways in which tribal communities dealt with the pandemic as well as state response to their particular predicament. The essay also flags their vulnerability resulting from decades of state apathy: “They not only suffer disproportionately from the loss of their traditional and customary resource base but also are disproportionately represented among those who are illiterate – with poor health status and facilities. In “Tracing challenges, coping, and resilience among older persons amidst Corona pandemic—A Case of Urban India,” Archana Kaushik describes the effects of the pandemic on older adults in terms of the absence of domestic workers due to lockdowns, irregularity in routine health checkups, or bi-monthly visits to the bank. This essay, while outlining the role of resident welfare associations, neighbors, and security guards in assisting older adults, also acknowledges the resilience of this demography characterized by resoluteness, generativity, acceptance and let-go attitude, social support, and maladaptive coping.

Regional Narratives

Within South Asia, different countries experienced and managed the pandemic differently. At one end of the spectrum was Bhutan, which was recognized for its spectacular and coordinated leadership, and on the other end was India, which had the maximum number of infections and deaths but also displayed its outstanding advancement in the medical field by developing a vaccine. Six essays from *Coronasphere* offer a regional overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected India’s neighbors—Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Quite a few reports from the WHO, World Bank, and IMF have already documented the state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the World Bank has acknowledged that Bhutan has been exemplary in the entire South-Asia Region in its emergency response to COVID-19 (World Bank 2022). In the “Crown and the Corona: A close-up on Bhutan’s successful COVID response led by the king,” Sonam Kinga offers a granular account of the King’s leadership in heralding the COVID-19 response building on the country’s preparedness for SARS-CoV-2. In Bangladesh, the pandemic provided a strong impetus to develop the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, as well as the National Guideline on Infection Prevention and Control for both private and public healthcare facilities. The government’s efforts were complemented by its civil society (Kamal 2020). Bangladesh had a soft and effective lockdown, maintaining an equilibrium in the deployment of the civil administration, the military, and the police. The essay on Bangladesh—

Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and lessons by Shaheen Anam—also highlights the impact caused by the disruption in remittances from migrant Bangladeshi laborers abroad, given that an estimated ten million of them work abroad. A similar situation ensued in Nepal, impacting revenue from foreign remittances and job losses. Madhusudan Subedi and Prativa Subedi focus on the governance of the pandemic in their essay “Social dimension of COVID-19 outbreak in Nepal,” which adds to the overall discussion on how an underfunded and “inadequate” healthcare system still managed to effectively manage the pandemic despite being next door to the country with the third highest rates of infection and mortalities.

In “A neighbour’s anguish: Myanmar’s response to the pandemic,” Reshmi Banerjee underlines the role that religious institutions played during the pandemic in Myanmar—Buddhist monks, churches, and Muslim leaders offered their premises as quarantine centers as civil society organizations had become overburdened. “Risks, livelihoods, and family life: Negotiating the COVID-19 pandemic in urban Pakistan” by Faiza Mushtaq presents a vivid recreation of the coronavirus and its multiple waves “in a context where government spending on the healthcare infrastructure and social services is abysmally low, citizens’ perceptions about the performance and credibility of state institutions are largely negative, and the population is fragmented along bitterly fought ethnic, religious, sectarian, and class divisions.” A common thread between the essays on India and Pakistan is the additional challenge posed by the tussles between the center and the federating units in terms of disease containment as well as mitigation strategies. Anton Piyarathne, in his essay “New normal in Sri Lanka: The impact of local reaction to a global pandemic in shaping everyday lives of the citizens,” offers a phenomenological account of how the common people responded to the pandemic. He further contextualizes the pandemic and its response within the local political milieu and criticizes the use of the military in these operations. He says,

The government’s approach always gave much prominence to the military officials rather than the civil health authorities under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s rule. There were lots of criticism against the militarisation of civil space hiding behind the Coronavirus through ‘contact tracing’, ‘lockdown’, ‘monitoring of people wearing face masks and other guidelines’, ‘imposing laws’, and ‘intelligence reports’.

It is particularly important to register these political discourses, given what followed in Sri Lanka in terms of the *Aragalaya* (Sinhalese for Struggle).

A hundred years after the Spanish Flu, what has remained in popular memory is the phenomenal number of cases and deaths. At the core, it was a health crisis. On the other hand, COVID-19 can hardly be confined to a health crisis label. The globalized world came to a standstill. The impact, barring the period during the pandemic, is no longer confined to statistics of infections and mortalities. Research has expanded on what to study and how to study the pandemic impacts. Most analyses on COVID-19 look at the poly-impact of the virus, from health to economy to education

to employment. Further, the framework of analysis has shifted from simple linear descriptions to a richer, more intense, phenomenological discourse. This enormous shift in how we study offers us a kaleidoscope of perspectives, each rich and unique and deeply educative.

COVID-19 disrupted the world economy to an unimaginable magnitude. While initial discussions focused on the economic impact, subsequent literature on the pandemic has attempted to document the undocumentable—the frailty of human dignity straddling precariously atop a deeply unequal world. The world witnessed in silence as thousands of migrant workers walked home in India with all their belongings on their shoulders following an overnight ill-planned lockdown. Some never made it. Those who reached were “sprayed with disinfectants on arrival in their home states. With no food and cash, they have been pushed to the brink of starvation and extreme human indignity” (Sharma and Banerjee 2023, 3). The health crisis had exorcised the humanness and socio-political context out of the human body, rendering it just a biological body.

Preexisting inequalities exacerbated the impact of COVID-19. However, at the granular level, the effect of inequality was more pronounced among those sharing multiple marginalizations and disprivileged, even among the underprivileged. For instance, even among the stranded laborers, there were two types— “the visible (seen in shelters) and the invisible (sleeping on footpaths or living under flyovers or stuck in slums)” (Sharma and Banerjee 2023, 3). The poor are further intersected by the rural-urban divide. For instance, “51 percent of Dalit workers lost their jobs during the months of the strict lockdown, while at the other end, relatively far fewer upper-caste workers lost their jobs” (Sukumar and Menon 2023, 144). Even among migrant tribal women, while more than 75 percent work as domestic maids in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Orissa, in Madhya Pradesh, they were engaged in wage employment (Sukumar and Menon 2023, 142).

The contradictions and differences among the queer community became more noticeable during the pandemic. For instance, while the media’s attention was on the ongoing legal battle on same-sex marriage, there was a clear disconnect between the privileged and others within the queer community; the former was “silent about transgender existential struggles during the pandemic, while the latter expressed ignorance, indifference, or scepticism to marriage equality and held marriage as a state-recognised patriarchal institution.” (Kumar and Sravya 2023, 157)

Lockdowns across the region created more hardships, as often the solution was considered worse than the problem, with state responses being uneven and even punitive. The communication relating to pandemic information was often opaque. Digitalization necessitated by the lockdowns increased the digital divide. In education, access to digital services varied not just across the haves and the have-nots but equally between rural and urban communities.

In short, unlike the Spanish Flu, COVID-19 will be remembered not just for the number of cases or casualties but also for how humanity and human dignity were held hostage and how, at one end,

developmental status did not guarantee freedom from infection and yet, on the other, inequality determined the very basic access to health services. In regions with poor health infrastructure, such as South Asia, the health sector became a “complex machinery that renders possibilities of life and death of all people at all times as negotiated struggles rather than as processes with assured support systems” (Priya and George 2023, 90). COVID-19 will also be remembered for how the virus originated on foreign shores and was brought into India by those who traveled by air. Paradoxically, the price of living and surviving this disease was paid by the commoners who were struggling to lead a fairly decent life. It will also be remembered how, despite the multitude of advisories, the homeless and sex workers found no space in the government’s thinking. Many of them who escaped abusive homes ended up becoming victims of domestic violence, forcing fresh thinking of understanding domestic violence beyond just women but also sexual minorities.

The pandemic also changed the political landscape in many countries. In South Asia and its neighborhood, governments fell in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Democracy was at stake in many others.

Notwithstanding the wreck the pandemic created in its path, along with enhanced surveillance and stigmatization, it also demonstrated kindness and compassion. The need for a future based on resilient solidarities across nations, communities, and people cannot be emphasized enough.

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