

What could have been India's Covid-19 Story?

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It is unambiguous that we messed up! We had our act together and we gave it away dancing merrily to the dhol-tashas played in election rallies, washing our sins in the Kumbh Mela, standing in lines on poll-booths rather than vaccination centers, flocking to markets and mandis and the list goes on. In short, a nation of 1.34 billion people, and the world at large, has been put through a dangerous path of sickness and scarcity because some things could not be cancelled, postponed, or 'symbolic' as they later became.

In mid-June, we seemed to have 'bent the curve'. In the meantime, I spent the past two months watching the disaster unfold in India from outside. Every night that I slept, I uttered a prayer for all the people of my beloved country. Every morning that I woke, I dreaded logging onto WhatsApp fearing the worst for an acquaintance, friend or family member. Twitter and Facebook feeds were flooded with requests for oxygen cylinders, hospital beds, ambulances and then came the worst picture that shook me to the core. The picture of endless pyres burning in crematoriums sent a chill down my spine. Of course, my tensions and worries can, in no way, be compared to those who saw the pandemic take a precarious turn up close and personal. From doctors and caregivers known to me, I have heard tales of horror and human stupidity frolic hand in hand, only prolonging the struggle of our medical practitioners, health and sanitation workers, policemen and policewomen and so many front-line personnel, who after 15 months of non-stop duties are exhausted and exasperated.

Today, when the worst seems to be behind us, I often wonder: What could have been? What could have been our state had we not declared victory too soon. Could we have eased into a mild second wave considering we had the learnings from the December 2020 Europe and US second wave? Could we have emerged as the poster

boy of developing nations that beat the virus despite its large population and flailing health infrastructure?

Albeit, as economists, we are often told to not try our hand at forecasting or predicting. Why? Forecasting can be riddled with bad data, modelling errors, randomness, and to top it all bad luck. However, I took the risk and did a forecasting exercise on 27 March 2021. Why did I chose this date? It seemed auspicious as two high-stake elections were taking place on the same day. However, before I present the analysis, I draw your attention to the current state of affairs.

Figure 1: Progression of new COVID 19 cases (per million of population) in India.

Source: Author's representation using data from Our World in Data COVID-19 dataset, India country profile.

Figure 1 informs us about the trend of new cases per million in India since 30 Jan 2020 – the day WHO declared that the COVID 19 outbreak, first detected in China, constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). We use this as a background to understand what figure 2a does. Here, we can see the actual rise of the new cases (part a) and new deaths (part b) per million (in red). Against that are plotted two lines which are estimated based on two different criteria. The blue line tells us what the progression of new cases would have been if we follow the trend that was seen during the first wave that reached its peak in the third week of September 2020 (See figure 1 again). To underline the numbers, on 6 May 2021, India touched the grim milestone of over 400 K new cases (300 cases per million). Beginning with the corresponding number on 27 March 2021 (which, in itself, was a high number of 62K i.e. 45 new cases per million), had we followed the trend that was seen during the first wave, an estimated new cases of 200 K (151 per million) would have been observed i.e. half of what actually transpired. Moreover, this number would be only 8 new cases per million (and continue falling steadily) if we start with the actual numbers recorded in end March 2021 and follow the trend that was observed for 45 days after the largest vaccination campaign in the world began in India.

strategy for forecasting, as explained above and stand on 27 March, looking toward April and May 2021, we'd see the death tally come down by 94%. This would amount to only 0.2 deaths per million in the optimistic case (January 2021) and 0.4 deaths per million in the pessimistic case (using trends of the first wave in August-September 2020). In absolute terms this means, instead of witnessing the 2500 - 3000 deaths that we have seen in April-May of 2021, we'd be looking at a number of less than 200 deaths per day.

Looking at them now, these low numbers are quite mind-boggling. Of course, from the point of view of an econometric exercise, there are several limits to this analysis. The foremost being that it is impossible to include every possible variable that might explain the COVID 19 cases or deaths. From what we have seen above, it could be said that had some economist embarked on a forecasting exercise in March 2021, based on past data, to predict the prevalence of COVID 19 in India for the months of April and May, she would have been horribly wrong! And this would be due to all the forecasting related problems listed earlier. However, in the aftermath of what we saw in India, I would like to add two more problems to the list - myopic politicians and a gullible people.

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Figure 2: Progression of new COVID 19 cases and new deaths (per million of population) in India (27th March 2021 to 10th May 2021, 45 days).

Source: Author's representation using data from Our World in Data COVID-19 dataset, India country profile.

When we look at the numbers pertaining to daily new deaths recorded, we can see that the maximum deaths were recorded on 16 May 2021 at 4,529 i.e. 3 deaths per million. If we use the same