Rajib Bhattacharyya, Ananya Ghosh Dastidar and Soumyen Sikdar (eds): The COVID-19 Pandemic, India and the World: Economic and Social Policy Perspectives

Routledge India, 2022; ISBN: 978-1-032-23353-6 (bbk); ISBN: 978-1-003-22014-5 (ebk)

Biju Paul Abraham¹

Accepted: 15 April 2022 / Published online: 22 May 2022
© The Author(s) under exclusive licence to Editorial Office, Indian Economic Review 2022

JEL Classification  I18 · E02 · F01

Rarely, in human history, does a global event impact people at multiple levels—personal, local, national and global—almost instantaneously. The COVID-19 pandemic has been one such event. It has affected lives and livelihoods, tested the resilience of governments and societies, and radically transformed production and consumption patterns.

It was inevitable that a crisis of this magnitude would encourage both academic research and multi-disciplinary debates on its short-term and long-term consequences. This edited volume makes an important contribution in this regard. It brings together a diverse group of scholars to consider the economic, political, and social impact of the pandemic on India and the world.

In an introductory chapter to the volume, the editors illustrate how the economic impact of a health crisis affected societies and social relations. The chapter also highlights two issues that are a recurring theme of many of the papers that follow—the need for effective government intervention to help societies recover from the pandemic, and the importance of global cooperation to ensure that the world is better prepared to handle health crises that might emerge in future.

The issue of trust in government, and its importance for effective handling of the pandemic has been highlighted in many comparative studies of how different governments have handled the pandemic. The five papers in the first part of this volume discuss the issue of conflict and trust in the context of the pandemic. Rajesh Bhattacharya and Ujjwal Kango, in their paper on the impact of the pandemic on global political economy, point to its political and economic consequences, particularly the

---

¹ Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, Joka, Diamond Harbour Road, Kolkata 700104, India
strengthening of populist leaders and the rise of protectionism worldwide. The freedom that governments had to take tough measures that were needed to deal with the pandemic is an issue that Catherine Bros discusses in her paper on trust in government. Comparing approval ratings of governments in ten countries she concludes that in all but three of them, support for government increased in the early months of the pandemic. She attributes this to a strong desire among people to support their governments in the midst of a crisis. Debraj Ray, S. Subramanian and Lore Vandewalle in their paper on the implementation of the lockdown in India discuss the dangers of imitating public-health interventions popular in developed countries and recommend a more calibrated approach to lockdowns. They argue that a more targeted approach where less-vulnerable age-groups would be allowed to travel for work, while the vulnerable elderly would be cared for by government-funded social-care and health-care initiatives, might be more appropriate in an Indian context. Two chapters in the first part, analyze the impact of the pandemic on regional and religious tensions. Soumyanetra Munshi’s paper contends that the pandemic has had a calming influence on conflict in some regions (Yemen, the India–China border and Afghanistan) with opposing sides seemingly more willing to announce ceasefires and enter into negotiations to reduce tensions. In an interesting paper, Anirban Mitra and Arnab Mukherji’s paper compares historical data from different districts in India on levels of Hindu–Muslim violence with indicators of their COVID-19 outcomes. They find that COVID-19 infections and deaths were lower in districts with a history of higher levels of Hindu–Muslim conflict. They suggest that this could be related to higher levels of social capital and mutual dependence that had developed within each of these communities to counter threats from the other.

The second part of the book focuses on the macroeconomic and environmental impact of the pandemic. Shankha Chakraborty and Mausumi Das in their paper present an endogenous growth model that looks at adult mortality risks and consequent risk-mitigation behavior. They examine the impact of epidemic induced mortality and morbidity rates on different economies, both developed and developing and argue that impact of the pandemic on growth rates in many developing economies is less severe because of mortality-risk-induced pre-pandemic investment in physical capital, as opposed to human capital. This makes them less vulnerable to pandemic-induced disruptions. They warn, however, that dependence on such insurance mechanisms inhibit innovation in developing countries and could impact their quality of growth. Ajitava Raychaudhuri’s paper on the macroeconomic impact on India argues that in the absence of measures to ease supply-side bottlenecks, fiscal and monetary-policy interventions can have only a limited impact. Hiranya Lahiri’s paper on policy interventions by the Indian government also concludes that they are unlikely to have the desired impact. Parikshit Ghosh’s paper emphasizes the importance of taxation and income transfers to help the vulnerable to cope with a pandemic. He discusses the idea of a temporary ‘pandemic tax’ based on changes in income during the pandemic and the possibilities it offers for providing resources to those most affected by the outbreak. Ranajoy Bhattacharyya, Anupriya Gangopadhyay and Abhilasha Pandey in their paper on de-globalization argues that at least in India, the emphasis on self-reliance has not led to an increase in tariff protection for domestic industry. They suggest that India’s weak bargaining position in trade
negotiations, and the fear of having to back down later, has constrained government options with regard to use of higher tariffs to protect domestic industry. Runa Sarkar in her paper on post-COVID environmental challenges emphasizes the importance of using government support measures as an opportunity for India to move towards a clean energy economy.

The impact of the pandemic on specific sectors of the economy is discussed in six papers in the third part of the volume. Arnab Mukerji and Arjun Shatrunjay analyze changes in income distribution and household expenditure. Debattata Saha's paper on ‘firm fragility’ emphasizes the importance of providing support for firms in the MSME sector if they are to recover from pandemic-induced shocks. Partha Chatterjee and Shweta Jain in their paper on the manufacturing sector analyze data on the import intensity of different sectors and conclude that sectors with higher import intensity were most severely affected by the pandemic. Dipayan Pal, Arpita Ghose and Chandrima Chakraborty in their paper on the agricultural sector see some evidence of loss of efficiency in the sector as a consequence of the influx of migrant labor from the urban informal sector. They emphasize the importance restoring efficiency in the agricultural sector through policy measures to support the informal and unorganized sector. The importance of much stronger government support for the informal sector is also the theme of the paper by Anirban Kundu, Manojit Bhattacharjee, Pratip Kumar Datta, Kasturi Sadhu and Saumya Chakrabarti. The final paper in this part by Sutirtha Bandypadhyay and Bipasha Maity emphasizes the importance of targeted intervention to help widowed and elderly women who are vulnerable in times of a pandemic because of much poorer access to consumption resources.

The fourth and final part of the volume focuses on healthcare, education and labor. Arjita Dutta and Montu Bose point to pre-pandemic policy failures which constrained government action once the pandemic began. They discuss the major challenge that governments in developing countries like India face—improving health surveillance and emphasizing preventive health-care interventions at a time when the burden of non-communicable diseases is increasing. The impact of online teaching and learning on the Indian higher education sector is discussed in a paper by Saumen Chattopadhyay. The inclusion of MOOCs courses into mainstream university curricula, he believes, has the potential to significantly disrupt existing models of higher education and could have far-reaching implications for universities in India. Zakir Husain and Richa Kothari analyze the spatial distribution of COVID-19 cases in India in the initial months of the pandemic and argue that a delayed and better-planned lockdown policy that allowed migrant workers to be properly screened before being allowed to travel back to their home-states could have reduced the spread of the disease. Srobonti Chattopadhyay’s paper discusses international migrant workers and highlights the need for multi-lateral efforts to deal with problems of cross-border movement of temporary workers during an international health crisis. Two other papers in the volume also discuss the impact of the pandemic on labor. Lopamudra Banerjee and Snehashish Bhattacharya examine the issue of precarity of labor and greater vulnerability of ‘new-economy’ workers to sudden disruptions in the labor market. Mélika Ben Salem examines labor segmentation in a post-COVID environment, particularly the impact on labor of automation and the
shift to working from home. She too raises concerns about the increase in numbers of low-paid, self-employed workers and argues that government support for such workers could be the key to economic recovery from pandemic.

The twenty-four papers in this volume comprehensively address the economic, social, and political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on India. Some of the papers examine the Indian experience in comparative perspective and highlight important differences in the way the country handled the pandemic when compared to other countries. The findings of many of the papers are counter-intuitive and these should encourage further debate. It is never easy to examine an ongoing health crisis, especially one that has impacted economies and societies to the extent that COVID-19 has. The authors of various papers in the volume have examined the available evidence and made useful suggestions that would be helpful to policymakers as they prepare to respond to future crises.

**Funding** The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

**Declarations**

**Competing interests** The author has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.