

How Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Inequalities?

During the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated countries and populations around the world, whether through the direct impacts of the virus' death toll and health consequences, or indirectly through social isolation and economic disaster. Unfortunately, although the virus has been contained in many countries, people are still dealing with the long-term effects. This has made it very difficult for countries to recover and has created various inequalities that are leading to barriers in various social groups. India is no exception. During the pandemic, India suffered greatly from the virus. Due to its heavily-populated areas and the government's difficulties with enforcing social distancing and masks, the spread of the virus was rather quick. Now, after the virus has been somewhat contained in India, the country is facing serious social and economic inequalities. The following essay aims to explore and analyze these inequalities to learn about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic on India. Then, these results will be compared with various inequalities that have emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom, both of which handled the pandemic differently.

According to journalist Rohini Mohan, "The Covid-19 pandemic has thrust India's income inequality to its painful peak." In general, India has been suffering from income inequality for many years as the upper class continues to acquire wealth and the lower class continues to suffer greatly due to lack of resources and risk of poverty. Mohan attributes this to the booming tech industry during the pandemic when millions of people were working from home and innovating on projects to acquire more wealth. For example, she writes that "billionaires got 35 percent richer." Indian tech companies were able to sign deals with many American tech companies to expand their businesses, which also increased the number of billionaires in the country. However, the economy as a whole did not experience an incline due

to the struggles of the pandemic. On the contrary, people who were already struggling were now more likely to drop out of Indian universities, have had trouble getting adequate amounts of food, and have gone into major debt. Moreover, levels of poverty increased in India, placing even more stress on the economy about how to get food to these people. Something interesting to note is that, during the past few decades, the incomes of rich people in India have experienced a steady increase and grown much faster than people who are in the lower classes (Mohan). This is potentially attributed to the fact that it is easier for people who already have money to create more wealth, whereas it is difficult for those with lower income to find ways to make more money. When people were locked down in their homes and millions lost their jobs, many people had to use their savings, which put additional stress on households.

The pandemic hit India much harder than in other countries. Researchers Acharya et al. reported that India has the “second highest number of reported cases and the third highest number of deaths in the world.” The economy itself had a 7% correction, which also resulted in millions of people losing jobs. Their specific study, however, focused on food shortages and how this negatively impacted Indian families across the country. In April and May of 2020, certain areas of India experienced food shortages due to people panicking and various food services having to shut down. This also adversely affected the ability to import food to India from external sources, and India could not export food in return. The Indian government tried to provide free food for families in need, but this was difficult to arrange because of the lockdowns and other crises that were occurring. Additionally, the services distributing the food had to adhere to various rules and were trying not to risk spreading the virus when carrying out various activities. Acharya et al. reported that these food shortages were more likely to affect Indian women than men. They attributed these findings to the fact that Indian culture is structured in

favor of the men, which means that the women often work in order to provide for the men and make sure that they get the food they need first. However, there were also many pregnant women and children who were impacted by these shortages, which led to lack of nutrition and caused other health issues. This suggests that there was not only a gap between the rich and the poor classes in India, but various inequalities between men and women. The government tried to give food to anyone who needed it, but this cultural family structure then made it more difficult to ensure that everyone got the food that they needed. When people were lacking nutrition and food sources, they became more vulnerable to catching COVID-19 and other illnesses. This is perhaps another reason why the cases were high in India.

Researchers Jha and Lahoti expanded on the economic impacts India had to deal with, suggesting that the income inequalities per individual and per household further impacted social inequalities. As was the case in many other countries that instituted strict lockdowns, people could not carry out the activities they normally would. This meant that people were stuck in their homes with their family members for most of the time. Those who could afford to travel were able to more easily carry out the activities that were required to make their lives easier. Once again, Indian families living in poverty or in the lower classes had difficulties engaging in social activities. One reason for this is because they had other problems to deal with, such as being able to find adequate food sources to feed their families, or dealing with no longer having jobs. When people in any country or culture are unable to provide for themselves and their families, social activities will be placed on the backburner. Unfortunately, there are other consequences to this, such as mental health issues from feeling isolated and not being able to interact with people in normal settings. This has been one of the long-lasting effects of the pandemic in India, but has also largely affected other countries.

In the United States, for example, inequalities have been building for a long time. Consequently, it only required a specific event to increase these inequalities. Writer Adamczyk reports that the pandemic “ripped open” these inequalities and made things very bad for the United States. Millions of Americans have lost their jobs since lockdowns were first instituted in March of 2020. This has been the case for all racial and gender groups, so it is evident that people suffered economic consequences, regardless of their backgrounds. However, as Adamczyk notes, certain communities were faced with greater difficulties after lockdowns were lightened and the virus was better under control after vaccination rates increased. There were already many minority communities in the United States, some of which include Hispanics, blacks, millennials, and women. This also impacted people working in various industries, such as service workers. It is important to note that economic effects will never impact the same groups in the same way, although many people are still struggling in the United States from the aftermath of COVID-19. Any time the economy suffers, it is likely that it will take a long time for people to recover. For example, there are still many Americans who have not fully recovered from the Great Depression, which has made many lives very difficult. With the added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who no longer have jobs and are struggling to find them will have a difficult time recovering.

What happened in the United States is similar to what happened in India, although different groups were affected due to different structures and social activities. It seems that the minority groups were hit the worst, such as the people living in poverty in India or the women who have to find ways to provide for their families. The United States, however, was able to institute stricter lockdowns which helped in more densely-populated areas, such as cities. India unfortunately had a harder time doing this, which is perhaps why the country is having a

proportionately more difficult time recovering. In the United Kingdom, it seems as if the effects of the pandemic are very similar, once again, for the same reasons.

Reporter Leigh Ann Green wrote a piece focusing on the negative social impacts of the virus all over the country. Similar to the United States, the U.K. instituted strict lockdowns in March of 2020. A study done at Oxford aimed to determine whether people's social activities and their overall well-being were negatively impacted by these lockdowns. They found that things changed during different stages of the pandemic, in relation to how the government was reacting and what people were free to do. Green explains that the study found that the first lockdown negatively impacted minorities and women, specifically parents who had to take care of their children at home. Many of this was attributed to the fact that people were not prepared to lose their jobs, which made the transition into the home more difficult. As time went on, people were able to adjust, but those who had lost their jobs continued to struggle. The later lockdowns seemed to have negatively impacted mental health due to stress of catching the virus, concerns about breaking rules instituted by the government, and the burden of having to support households without normal levels of income and activities.

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted India, the United States, and the U.K. India in particular has had to deal with serious long-term consequences, due to the fact that it is a heavily-populated country and there were many people already living in poverty. The economy had also been declining for several years. All of these factors unfortunately widened gaps between various groups. The first was that the rich class in India became even richer, whereas the poor continued to struggle. Women also faced various inequalities in comparison to men, and social inequalities ensued. Unfortunately, given that India is still

struggling with the pandemic, it may take a long time before people are able to recover from these inequalities, if it will ever go back to normal in the near future.

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