

# Chronicling the pandemic



## BOOK REVIEW

M S SRIRAM

The India Forum Essays chronicling the pandemic make fascinating reading not only because of when the articles were written, but the meaning they convey to the reader in retrospect. It is quite possible for a particular author to put together her columns into a book that brings out the larger narrative as a set of essays, thereby indicating some sort of an intellectual journey, but this book is an intellectual journey of a collective. These

authors are not talking to each other, but are responding to the pandemic of SARS Cov-2 or Covid-19 as we know it. While the pandemic rages on, the response is scholarly and written at a time when it could be quickly proven wrong by the rapidly unfolding situation. For instance, all the mathematical modelling done before the first lockdown about the extent of infections were proven wrong, and the expectation of the devastation of the second wave were largely conservative. In this context, to read a set of diverse scholarly articles on the pandemic is almost akin to chronicling events that could be easily recalled as well-documented history.

This book is not only insightful, but also a tribute to *The India Forum* — the online journal that has published a range of pieces in the span of one year. To consistently have a set of write-ups,

with established scholars, on the multiple dimensions of the pandemic is no mean feat. The book is divided into eight parts starting with the review of the early stages of the pandemic and looking at the initial impact; drawing lessons from past pandemics; the judicial angle; the experience and the aftermath of the lockdown, its impact on the economy and society and some thoughts for the future. The pictures that are imprinted on our minds — particularly after the lockdown was announced — was the great walk back home. There are papers that talk about this particular aspect, but tucked away in other sections. Would it have helped to look at this aspect as a separate section? That is the editor's take, but that classification looked obvious.

What is fascinating about these set of pieces in the book is that even with the benefit of (limited) hindsight, none of them completely look off the mark. Which is to confirm that the cumulative scholarly wisdom that we have gained from pandemics, its after effects and

application of that abstraction to a given emerging situation seems to be working, the body of knowledge is not out of place or irrelevant. In spite of this, why did the state get the management of the situation horribly wrong? That the state could not get adequate policy inputs in time is hard to believe given that these well thought-out papers were coming in quicktime and similar intellectual inputs should have been available to the state at its call. The metaphor of the book and its insights tell us much more about how we lived

through the pandemic rather than the critique of the collective failure of the state, the judiciary and the markets. What seems to have worked is the civil society and the social networks that came about with the larger concept of sharing, without looking for a return.



**India and the Pandemic: The First Year**  
**Author:** The India Forum  
**Publisher:** Orient BlackSwan  
**Pages:** 335  
**Price:** ₹588 (Kindle)

might have created in the societal divide — at the obvious level the digital divide, but deep down much beyond the digital divide would be the polarisation at the level of economic well-being; the opening up of caste and religious fissures and the long-term impact on the

The importance of the book is not restricted to policy-making and the state, however. It remains relevant because of the continuing scars it is leaving on us. It is also a good time to reflect and see if we need to restore some balance — the ecological balance;

the institutional arrangements to deal with crises; the fault-lines in our welfare delivery architecture; the rebalancing between the urban and rural welfare systems; and, most importantly, the new fissures this

mental state of people at large — having been cooped up in self-detention for long periods of time.

I am deliberately not picking any one or a set of these 24 essays for illustrating the rich content nor am I highlighting the contribution of any of the 36 authors who have contributed to the book. The putting together of the book itself is understated with no attribution to the editors but more credit to the collective effort of the journal. What stands out, much beyond the scholarly papers is the long introductory chapter that puts all these diverse strands in perspective. This is an important read for us, as we meander through the crisis, and equally important read to be filed away and looked at a few years later, possibly in wonderment to see if any of the lessons of this pandemic have had any effect on our policymakers.

*The reviewer is a faculty member with Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. mssriram@pm.me*