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## Abstract

**Essays from The India Forum (Ed.), *India and the Pandemic: The First Year*. Orient Blackswan, 2021, 335 pp., ₹695 (paperback). ISBN: 978-93-5442-009-2.**

The volume under review, consisting of eight sections with twenty-four chapters, is a selection of revised essays published earlier by an online journal magazine, *The India Forum*, during the first year of the pandemic. It covers articles published primarily between April and July 2020. According to the editors, it is the 'evolution of our understanding of a new phenomenon as it spread and intensified across the country' (p. 14). In these terms, the volume is a bold compilation of perspectives and commentaries on an unfolding event. Leading experts and scholars explore the subject when the contagion is 'novel', unknown in its working, and had no medical protocol to tackle it. They puzzle over the impact of an unknown entity on the state and society.

Methodologically, evaluating a collection of essays on an unfolding event is challenging. It is a demanding process since the pandemic is creating new challenges as it emerges through waves of transmissions. The readers, unlike the contributors, have the advantage of introspecting the pandemic in its second year, at the second wave. Grappling with an unknown entity permeating various dimensions of our everyday existence can throw up different aspects of introspection and analysis. For instance, the strategy in the first year was to contain the pandemic through a nationwide lockdown. This governmental initiative redrew the matrix of socio-economic, cultural and political interactions, whereas, in the second year, the focus has been to vaccinate the public. Vaccine nationalism, pricing strategies, inclusivity and delivery of vaccines are the critical registers on which state-society-market interactions are playing out. Given this complexity, a delicate and contextual appraisal of this volume in terms of the coverage and scope of the themes unravelled when conceiving the volume should be the register to gauge the book under review.

The volume, as a general audience book, provides neither a sociology of health perspective nor a sociology of an extreme event. However, the volume offers perspectives and data from the first year or the first wave of COVID-19 for further sociological analysis. The readers will find the following themes in the volume under review lively and provocative—a history of the pandemics in India (Section II), the initial impact (Section III), the impact on the economy and state (Sections VI and VII) and the future (Section VIII). The editors state that they are not exhaustive regarding the coverage of topics and list topics like domestic violence and problems faced by children. Nevertheless, it records and discusses the state's outlook towards the pandemic, the migrant issue, labelled as the Great Trudge Home, challenges of online education, the economic impact of the national lockdown and the history of pandemics clearly and briefly. The pathways of exploration are well-tread—the capacity of public healthcare infrastructure, the structural inequalities that determine the magnitude of suffering, and the policy impact of central–state relations. Therefore, the volume records and discusses fundamental issues that anchor the pandemic.

Among the contributions, Chapter 22, *Extreme Events in Nature: An Ecological History of the Present*, is a valuable discussion transcending the moment of its writing. It discusses infectious diseases, ecology and capital development.

Contemporary neoliberal society necessitates further questions on man-nature interaction due to the increased frequency of zoonotic origin of infectious diseases. In fact, before COVID-19, HIV/AIDS was the previous zoonotic disease to reach epidemic proportions. In this context, this chapter stands out in the volume for its significant contribution to historicising and framing the existential threat posed by COVID-19. The final chapter, *Seven Lessons for the Future*, raises important questions to reflect on the pandemic and is an invaluable addition to the volume.

The problems faced by the vulnerable population due to the national lockdown and the dilemma of choice between public health and the economy have been well-covered by the contributors. Various contributors used the migration of the labourers to reflect on the state of the economy and polity. They have flagged the structural issues that underpin this migration. Furthermore, the discussion on the gig economy and the hostility faced by northeasterners whets the readers' appetite for more such commentaries. Even as the volume provides a real-time window into the pandemic, it would have been richer if it had discussed issues like the bureaucratisation of crisis management due to the abdication of the political class. Mapping vulnerable geographies and social classes, albeit tersely, would have justified the promise of understanding the evolving pandemic. To be fair on the volume, follow-up volumes on the pandemic and the associated implications will be good references for the future.

So, sociologically speaking, can we draw a sociology of pandemics from this volume? Definitely yes. The data and its interpretation, the history of diseases and their frameworks and the flagging of various issues provide a fertile ground to re-construct the spread and impact of COVID-19 in India, with all the limitations mentioned so far. At the same time, it is not a comprehensive volume, a fact mentioned by the editors of the volume.