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## **Pandemic Politics Through Social Media: A Study of India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper discusses the use of social media by the ruling party BJP and its opposition, especially Congress, during the pandemic in India. The party at the centre has used social media, especially for two reasons; firstly, the BJP leveraged social media to promote the image of India as a “responsible sovereign” at the global level during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Indian government, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, has exported drugs and medicines to different countries during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The party has extensively used social media platforms, especially Twitter, to engage with global leaders during the pandemic. Secondly, the party and its right-wing supporters have used social media to highlight the achievements of Modi’s government at the domestic level. The ruling party has used a “free vaccination campaign” for its political gains, and Narendra Modi was portrayed as the “savior” of the Indian people during the pandemic. The BJP and its supporters have also employed social media to target Muslim minorities during the pandemic. This paper also discusses the opposition parties’ use of social media, especially Congress, during the pandemic phase in India. The opposition parties have mainly used social media to target and expose the weaknesses of Modi’s government in handling the pandemic in India. This paper analyses the different themes, such as the ruling party’s use of social media to promote its image both at the global and at domestic level, targeting of Muslims for spreading coronavirus, role of opposition parties, internal disputes, international status-seeking, and vaccine diplomacy. To fulfill the requirements of this study, both primary and secondary data collection methods were used.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic, Natural Resources, Terrorism, Xinjiang, Belt and Road Initiative*

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### **Introduction**

Coronavirus is one of the most serious viral diseases caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). In December 2019, Wuhan, China, reported the first case. Since that day, the virus had disseminated all around the globe, which had led to an ongoing outbreak. COVID-19 was first reported in India on January 30, 2020, in three cities of Kerala. These cases included three Indian medical students who had returned from Wuhan, the pandemic's epicentre

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(Correspondent,2020). According to official sources, India had the second highest number of COVID-positive cases after the US and third, in largest number of fatalities caused by Covid-19 after Brazil and the US ((#IndiaFightsCorona COVID-19, 2022). On the March 25, India responded to the pandemic abruptly by imposing lockdowns across the country. This pandemic affected everyone physically, mentally, socially and economically. However, the migrant workers in India were worst hit by the first wave due to the abrupt imposition of nationwide lockdown announced by the government of India (Suresh et al., 2020).

Initially, the Indian government did not show any worries about the pandemic other than issuing an advisory to warn its citizens not to visit Wuhan, China in January, 2020. The Indian government evacuated its students from Wuhan but it did not ban flights from China. W.H.O had warned the countries regarding the pandemic as a public health emergency, but India only took action in March when it abruptly imposed a lockdown across the country. The reasons behind taking action lately were political. On acting lately, opposition parties, notably Congress, have utilized social media platforms to criticize the ruling party. During the first wave of covid 19, Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary organization, was blamed for spreading the pandemic in India. Social media was flooded with the hashtags of #CoronaJihad, which supporters of the right-wing party mainly created and shared (Purushothaman & Moolakkattu, 2021). Mainstream media was not lagging; news channels were also blaming Muslims for spreading the coronavirus in India (BBC News, 2020). When in early, 2021, the covid cases in India started declining, the government perceived that the worst had come to an end. People started ignoring standard operating procedures (SOPs), election rallies were allowed, and many other gatherings such as Kumb Mela were allowed, which gave rise to the second wave in India.

In the first wave, India saw an opportunity to boost its claim to be a global pharmaceutical leader and to improve its soft power credentials by distributing and selling vaccines, medicines, and medical equipment to nations throughout the globe (Sibal, 2021). Prime Minister Modi was thanked on Twitter by the leaders of nations that received medical supplies from India, including the United States and Bangladesh. On January 9 Modi tweets, "On January 16, India takes a landmark step forward in fighting covid-19. Starting that day, India's nationwide vaccination drive begins. Priority will be given to our brave doctors, healthcare workers, frontline workers including Safai Karamcharis". As the free vaccination started in India BJP supporters turned to social media by portraying Modi as the saviour of the Indians. At the same time, the opposition alleged that BJP was using the vaccination drive for political gains. This study deals with the different themes related to pandemic politics which emerged in India with the onset of Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Methodology**

This research paper is based on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data includes the tweets, posts, and pictures collected from different social media accounts. The tweets, posts, and pictures were collected from the official social media accounts of politicians and political parties by using a purposive sampling method. The author only collected the tweets, posts, and pictures which were specific to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of India. The tweets and posts of foreign political leaders were also purposively collected. Since the study in this area is a recent phenomenon, fewer research papers were available. The author

relied on national and international newspapers to collect data. Some national newspapers, such as Hindustan Times and The Wire, and international newspapers, such as BBC News, and The Guardian, were selected for this study. Besides, governmental websites were also used for collecting the related data. The author selected these newspapers based on their reliability and impartiality. By following this method, the author analyzed the available content and tried to build the arguments specific to this study.

### Findings

#### **Narendra Modi used social media for health, vaccine/drug and summit diplomacy**

In the first wave, India saw an opportunity to enhance its claims to be a leader while boosting its soft power credentials by providing and selling vaccines, medicines, and medical equipment to governments worldwide. India under Modi attempted to strengthen its image as a responsible partner contributing to global governance by using its pharmaceutical industry (Sibal, 2021). In April 2020, India partially lifted the ban on the export of hydroxychloroquine, a drug used for treating covid 19, in several countries, including the US. The Indian government demonstrated goodwill by selling HCQ drugs to the US and many other countries at a critical time. American president Donald Trump thanked Modi and praised his leadership on Twitter for supplying US hydroxychloroquine drugs. Modi appreciated Trump on Twitter and responded that such difficult situations bring friends together and Modi reiterated to assist humanity during this pandemic. The Tweet of Modi became viral and it received 1 lakh 63 thousand likes and around 5900 comments were made over his tweet. Modi's decision for lifting the ban on HCQ was also shared on Facebook and YouTube. India had delivered HCQ drugs to around 13 countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brazil, Germany, Spain, Nepal, Seychelles and others. All the leaders of these states have praised and thanked Modi for assisting them in such a crucial time. Whenever a consignment of HCQ drugs was delivered to other countries, it was made public by the government on social media. When Afghanistan received a consignment of HCQ and paracetamol drugs from India president Ashraf Ghani Tweeted

“Thank you my friend Prime Minister @narendramodi, and thank you India for providing 500K tablets of hydroxychloroquine, 100K tablets of paracetamol, and 75,000 metric tons of wheat that the first consignment of it (5,000) will reach AFG in a day or so, for the Afghan people<sup>1</sup>,”

Prime Minister Narendra Modi responded to Ghani's tweet by saying India and Afghanistan share a “special friendship” and would combat the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) “with solidarity and shared resolve”, just as they have fought terrorism. India tried to act as a leader and saviour among the South Asian countries. In addition, India contributed to global leadership by exporting life-saving drugs to several American and European countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Available online

<https://twitter.com/ashrafghani/status/1252203477016678400?lang=en>



Fig. 1. Screenshots are taken from Twitter

In order to tackle the coronavirus, India started making its indigenous vaccines. The Indian scientists were able to produce an indigenous vaccine within a year. Prime minister Narendra Modi applauded scientists for producing a vaccine to save the lives of humanity. Modi addressed a meeting of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) Society via video conferencing on his official Twitter account, where he praised Indian scientists for their success in developing a vaccine. This video conferencing was widely shared on different social media platforms. It received more than 1 lakh 60 thousand views, 4,466 retweets and 22 thousand likes on Twitter. The Indian vaccine manufacturing companies have produced millions of vaccine doses, and India was in a position to export and gift them to other countries. India gifted vaccines to several neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives. India also donated vaccines to several south-east Asian nations and the countries in the global south and Middle east. The leaders of these countries turned to their official social media accounts to thank India and Narendra Modi for helping them in that crucial time. The hashtags such as #Covid19 vaccination, #India #Sri Lanka, #Vaccine Maitri etc, were trending on Twitter. When Sri Lank received vaccines from India, president Gotabaya Rajapaksa Tweeted

“My heartiest congratulations to Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi on the successful roll-out of the #COVID19 vaccine & his generosity towards friendly neighbouring countries<sup>2</sup>”.

Similarly, when Nepal received vaccines from India, its Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli Tweeted

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<sup>2</sup> Visit <https://twitter.com/gotabayar/status/1350823410377519106?lang=en>

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“I thank Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji as well as the Government and people of India for the generous grant of one million doses of COVID vaccine to Nepal at this critical time when India is rolling out vaccination for it's own people”.

Modi responded back

“Thank you PM @kpsharmaoli. India remains committed to assist the people of Nepal in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. The vaccines being made in India will also contribute to the global efforts to contain the pandemic<sup>3</sup>”.

India went forward by taking a leadership role in South Asia when in a tweet, Narendra Modi suggested that the SAARC countries should have a video conference to come up with a plan to combat the virus. The SAARC Heads of State met via video conference on March 15, 2020. With a pledge of USD 10 million, India had proposed a Coronavirus Emergency Fund for the area, which accounts for more than half of the entire contribution. Except for Pakistan, whose leadership probably did not want India to take the lead, every South Asian leader was there. Pakistan finally decided to donate USD 3 million to the Emergency fund. Bangladesh also pledged to contribute (1.5 million dollars), Nepal (one million dollars), Afghanistan (one million dollars), Sri Lanka (five million dollars), the Maldives (200,000 dollars), and Bhutan (100,000 dollars). Subsequently, on March 26, India held a conference of top health experts, and in April, Pakistan hosted a virtual assembly of SAARC health ministers. In addition to these initial steps, India had taken several concrete measures to combat the pandemic, including creating a "dedicated website developed by SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC-IU) Gandhinagar and promotion of stand-alone networking of health and trade officials for their interaction..." An electronic platform, SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX), was launched for all SAARC states to use.

Thus, India effectively employed health, vaccine, medication, and summit diplomacy during the pandemic. India, under Modi, showed remarkable leadership by providing free vaccines and pharmaceuticals to its neighbouring countries while effectively preventing China's influence in these countries. India took the initiative in organizing SAARC summits and funding. These factors strengthened India's popularity under Modi, nationally and globally (Purushothaman & Moolakkattu,2021). Social media tools, particularly Twitter, acted as an essential communication medium for Modi, allowing him to engage with people and leaders in India and worldwide.

### **Religious Discrimination**

The Tablighi Jamaat's (a transnational Islamic organization) held the international religious conference in Nizamuddin, which is located in New Delhi. This gathering was declared India's first "super-spreader by pro-BJP people." This event, which was attended by Muslims from India and abroad, infuriated the governing party, who used it as an excuse to target Muslims. The event was attended by Muslims from India and overseas. The government deflected public attention away from its failures to limit the pandemic by using these techniques designed to create

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1352277819494080514?lang=en>

distractions. In order to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment, offensive hashtags like "human corona bombs" and "coronajihad" were used to make fun of Muslims on social media. Muslims were used as a convenient scapegoat for the inactivity of the administration. The hashtags of #CoronaJihad, #TablighiJammat, #IslamicCoronaVirus were shared and made on Twitter. The hashtag #CoronJihad was appeared 3 lakh times on Twitter and watched by 165 million users since March 8. One of the users had shared a video tweet that a Tablighi Muslim was coughing on a Hindu deliberately to infect him and this tweet referred to Muslims as "vile-minded people". Later, it became evident that the video was a hoax, having been shot in Thailand rather than India. However, this fake video had been retweeted more than 4,200 times. According to the fact-checking organization AltNews, another video on Twitter and Facebook purporting to show Muslims intentionally sneezing on each other was false.

### **Opposition Parties criticized Modi for Mishandling the Pandemic on Social Media**

During the second devastating wave, the government could not tackle the situation. The Hospitals were overburdened with patients, while others were treated on the roads. The country's oxygen cylinder supply was acutely limited. Those unable to get the oxygen cylinders died on roads, pavements, homes, and in hospitals. India's administration failed to stop the second wave, that was deadlier than the first. The opposition parties turned to social media Moly Ghatak a politician from West Bengal tweeted "India will never forgive PM @narendramodi for underplaying the corona situation in the country and letting so many people die due to mismanagement,". "At a time when India is going through a health crisis, PM chose to export millions of vaccines to other nations." Rahul Gandhi tweeted if Modi's government had "done its job, it wouldn't have come to this" (PTI,2021)

Many citizens of India were quite angry about the government's mishandling of the situation. Election rallies were permitted, religious meetings were not prohibited, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi participated in both types of gatherings, indicating that the administration did not take the pandemic threat seriously. Netizens vented their anger against the government on social media platforms and asked Modi to resign. The hashtags #ModiMadeDisaster, #ModiResign were quite trending and tweeted more than 108,000 times (World's Biggest Covid-19 Crisis Threatens Modi's Grip on India, 2021). People shared scary pictures of dead bodies on hospital beds, crematories overburdened with dead bodies, and patients crying out for oxygen cylinders on social media. One of the girls whose mother was suffering from Covid tweeted

"Im Baljeet and my mother is slowly dying due to low oxygenation because of covid and for the last 4 days No BED and oxygen is available in any hospital in delhi. In this scenario I request Mr Modi to kindly legalize mercy killing and would ask him to do the honours for my mother" (Frayer,2021)

The Indian government immediately asked Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to take down the anti-government posts by citing the reason that they were misleading.

The Ruling Party BJP tried to turn the vaccine campaign into a political campaign on social media

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The BJP faced harsh criticism for its mishandling of the pandemic during the second wave; the party was going to great lengths to depict Modi as the saviour on social media. In June 2021, Modi officially launched "free vaccination campaign" on his Twitter handle by terming it as the "World's largest" drive. The tweet had gained over ten thousand retweets, 507 quote tweets, and more than 57 thousand likes. Narendra Modi attended the video conference on Twitter the day when the pan India vaccination drive started. This video conferencing was also streamed live on YouTube, it received 28,37 views and 267 engagements. The same video on the vaccination campaign was also shared on other social media platforms. As the free vaccination campaign started, the BJP president, JP Nadda started visiting several vaccination centres where he praised doctors and also attacked opposition parties by claiming that they were creating misleading information about the vaccination campaign. JP Nadda had announced that every vaccination centre would have a BJP help desk which was a clear sign that the Nadda was promoting the party's campaign, as the elections were approaching in eight states (Mahaprashasta, 2021). Twitter was flooded with the hashtags #FreeVaccinationDrive praising Modi and BJP. The educational institutions were also affected by this campaign. The UGC secretary Rajnish Jain instructed Vice-chancellors, school and college principals to display vaccine posters congratulating the prime minister for a free vaccination drive.



Fig. 2. Screenshots are taken from Twitter

### Third Wave and Politics on Social media

On December 2, 2021, the union health ministry announced that two men from Karnataka who had travelled to South Africa had tested positive for the omicron strain of coronavirus. In comparison to Delta, Omicron was highly transmissible and possibly less dangerous. After being reported in South Africa, the number of persons testing positive for the Omicron strain of Covid-19 rapidly increased worldwide. According to data provided on January 9, 2022, by the Indian Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 3,071 cases of Omicron variant had been recorded across 27 states, and union territories, with 1,203 recovered or relocated.

On July 16, 2021, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi interacted with the CMs of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Odisha and directed them to take proactive steps to contain the surge of new covid cases reported in these states. The meeting was mainly with the CMs of these five states as most of the cases, around 80%, were reported from these states (*PM Modi to Interact With CMs of 6 States on Covid Situation on July 16, 2021*). Modi had also interacted through video conferencing with the CMs of eight North-eastern states asking them to ramp up the vaccination to contain the pandemic. All these steps were taken to prevent the third covid wave in India. Despite this, a third Covid wave has swept through India, with rising Covid cases daily.

The assembly elections were conducted in five Indian states, and political parties continuously held rallies despite a covid third wave. Narendra Modi addressed the big rally in Manipur and was supposed to address another rally in Ferozpur, Punjab. However, he could not reach the avenue due to a security lapse. It was only later that some political parties realized the growing cases of covid 19 in India and they decided to cancel all physical rallies. It was the first Congress that took the lead in cancelling all its physical rallies in poll-bound states, followed by Samajwadi Party. As the rising number of COVID cases had been reported in India. India's election commission finally banned all physical rallies until the situation improved.

As the COVID situation had become an electoral issue, political parties targeted one another on social media to exacerbate the COVID situation. The Congress was attacking the ruling party on its official Twitter handle for mishandling the covid 19 situation in India. The Congress criticized the BJP government for hiding the number of deaths due to Corona. The Congress party tweeted.

“What could be more shameful than an apex body like WHO refusing to believe the covid 19 death toll released by Modi government. What could be more hurtful than our own government refusing to acknowledge the death of our near and dear ones?<sup>4</sup>”

The Congress veteran member Rahul Gandhi has demanded that the government should provide 4 lakh rupees as compensation to those kin whose members had died due to Corona. Congress and its supporters had created the hashtags #4LakhDenaHoga on Twitter to pressure the ruling party. However, the ruling party was accusing Congress of misleading the people. On the completion of India's one-year vaccination drive, Modi tweeted:

"Our vaccination programme has added great strength to fight against Covid-19". It has led to saving lives and thus protecting livelihoods<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, Congress claimed that BJP's vaccination drive had failed by creating hashtags like #BJPFailsVaccination. Congress declared that BJP had failed to come up with a promising vaccination strategy, and 30% of youth were still not fully vaccinated in India. Congress shared the data on its official Twitter handle, which showed that the fully vaccinated population in India was lower than UAE, China, UK, and USA. Rahul Gandhi tweeted on August 14, 2020, that India needs

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<sup>4</sup> Visit <https://mobile.twitter.com/INCIndia/status/1483106848765009930>

<sup>5</sup> Visit <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1482596443709788164>



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an "inclusive" vaccine strategy for all". But Modi's government had failed to implement the effective vaccination strategy as the party focused more on its election campaigning. Congress portrays Modi as a 'marketing leader' on social media who was more concerned about his image than the people of India. While Congress portrays Rahul Gandhi as a "visionary leader" who concerns and cares about the people of India. The Congress Party also criticized the BJP for being a pro-corporate party, claiming that the income of corporate businessmen had increased during the pandemic while ordinary people grew poorer. Indian prime minister Modi employed Twitter to praise his government's vaccination program. Modi directed citizens to get vaccinated and follow covid protocols on Twitter. He conducted several video conferencing to interact with CMs of states regarding the pandemic in India. Modi rarely criticized Congress on his official Twitter account, while Congress tweets on its official Twitter handle mostly attacked BJP and Modi.

### Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that the research questions covered in this study were related to the BJP's response to the pandemic, internal disputes over containment measures, the opposition parties' response to the pandemic, the targeting of Muslims for the spread of Coronavirus, international status-seeking, and vaccine diplomacy all being conducted through social media channels. This study suggests some research questions that needs to be addressed in future are; How the Indian government used digital media/ICT to tackle the covid-19 pandemic? How has RSS used its media channels to promote the ruling party's narrative during the pandemic? More study is needed to answer these research questions.

### Discussion

The virus had impacted many facets of life., including politics. India was also among the countries that had been badly affected by a coronavirus pandemic. Initially, the Indian government under Modi showed a bit of delay in taking coronavirus seriously. When the government realized the severity of the coronavirus, it made a hasty decision to impose a nationwide lockdown. The poor and migrant workers were severely affected by this nationwide lockdown. To contain the pandemic, India produced drugs and vaccines in a short period. India under Modi saw an opportunity to bolster its claims to be a global leader by donating and selling vaccines and drugs across the globe. Social media platforms, especially Twitter, became an important communication medium for the prime minister to enhance his drug and vaccine diplomacy worldwide. The leaders of the aid and vaccine-received countries turned to Twitter to thank and praise Indian prime minister Narendra Modi. India also found the pandemic an opportunity to play her leading role in organizing the SAARC meeting on Covid -19. Modi said in a video conference and on Twitter that the SAARC nations should work together to build a strategy for containing the coronavirus in South Asia.

During the first wave of covid-19, Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary organization, was accused of spreading the coronavirus in India after holding a religious congregation. Social media was flooded with discriminatory hashtags against Muslims, such as #CoronaJihad, #IslamicCoronaVirus, and #TabighiJammatt. The opposition parties, especially Congress, showed active presence on social media by continuously attacking the BJP and Modi for their mishandling of the coronavirus situation in India. With the advent of the third wave

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of coronavirus in India, the Congress harshly criticized Modi's handling of the coronavirus and his use of a vaccine campaign for political gains on social media. While Modi seemed relaxed and optimistic on Twitter, he rarely attacked Congress. Modi's tweets were about directing citizens to get vaccinated and to follow proper covid protocols. Through Twitter, he had communicated with the CMs of several states about containing the new variant of Omicron in India.

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