

Analyzing the Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of State through different Theoretical Frameworks



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Abstract

The Coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19 is a contagious disease, which has been declared as pandemic by the World Health Organization. The present pandemic has severely affected the social, economic and political structures of nearly all the States of the world. It is the state which bears the responsibility to deal and finally eliminate this pandemic. The present study will be an innovative study in the sense that it will try to apply the various political theories to understand the emerging nature and functioning of the state during the times of current pandemic. It will try to examine that whether the Liberal democratic theory or the Marxist-Communist theory comprehensively explains the emerging powers of the state, due to pandemic situation? Further, attempt will also be made to analyze the current situation from the feminist perspective. An attempt will be made, through the present study, to evaluate that whether the increase in the state power during the pandemic will lead to rise in authoritarian tendencies among the present governments? And which forms of state- liberal democratic or communist authoritarian, is more efficient to deal with the pandemic situation? An attempt will be made to evaluate the role of social media during the corona crises and the emergence of different conspiracy theories. Finally, the paper will try to examine that whether the nature of the state can be explained only through the framework of a particular theory like liberal or Marxist theory or its actual functioning transcends the scope of different theories.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Liberal, Communist, Authoritarian

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19 is a contagious disease, which has spread across the globe and infected people in more than 180 countries. As a result, it has been declared as pandemic by the World Health Organization. In general sense, the term pandemic can be described as an epidemic, extending over a great area, infecting/killing people across the borders.

In the history of human civilization, the human race has faced several infectious diseases, which have infected and killed millions of people across the globe. The Plague of Athens from 430 to 426

B.C. can be described as amongst the earliest recorded incident of spread of infectious diseases in the human history. Later on, there have been several such incidents but in the contemporary history, the Spanish Flu (1918-1919), was the most lethal pandemic that has affected the human race. In the present century, Swine Flu in 2009-10, was also a pandemic, infecting many people in different nations. These pandemics have adversely affected large number of people across the globe.

The "era of pandemic" report brought out by specialists from different concerned spheres,

under the aegis of United Nations, have clearly pointed out that, the demolition of biodiversity; the change in world environment, due to human interference; rise in human population, putting constant pressure on existing resources and rising tendency of consumerism, especially in the developed countries, are some of the factors which will surely increase the intensity and frequency of the pandemics in the future.

The pandemics like COVID-19 affect every system created by human beings for their convenience, including the political system. The political systems around the world have to adjust according to the situations created by these diseases, in order to maintain their legitimacy among the people. The politics, within the borders and outside the borders, is influenced by the pandemic, as it shoulders the responsibility of taking decisions and thereby protecting the lives of the people.

The politics can be described as an activity through which power can be captured. It denotes a constitutional struggle to capture power. Politics involves various stake holders but the state power is at the heart of it. The State has been described as the institution which has the legitimate right to use power and so, it regulates the entire political system and ultimately decides all the aspects of the human life. The state power has become an essential commodity in the developed as well as in the developing and under-developed nations. It is through state power only that the other political, social or economic values can be attained by the people. Therefore, in politics or political discourses the state, its nature and functions have always taken the center stage, from Plato or Manu in the ancient times to John Rawls or Mahatma Gandhi in the contemporary era.

The notion of state existed even before its name came into existence. It was in the 16th century, that the name of 'State' first emerged in the writing of Machiavelli in the form of 'Stato'. However, some form of political organization has always existed since the ancient times. The Greeks have described it as the 'polis' & the Romans have used the term 'civitas', both the term denotes a form of political organization, which is essential for the

human existence. It was in the writings of Machiavelli and latter in that of Bodin and Hobbes that the notion of state found its most explicit and elaborate portrayal. It was these thinkers who attached the notion of absolute power, that is, sovereignty with the concept of state.

From the ancient times, various interpretations of the notion of state have been put forward by different thinkers. However, certain indispensable features of state can be enumerated like- it is a form of human association with clearly demarcated territories, it exercises authority through government and has the legitimate right to use coercive force so as to maintain law and order in the society. Finally, it enjoys supreme power within its territory as well as in the international arena. As MacIver have said '*The state is an association which, acting through law as promulgated by a government endowed to this end with coercive power, maintains within a community territorially, demarcated, the universal external conditions of social order*' (MacIver, 1926).

On the basis of the above decision, it can be concluded that the state is an entity with four elements, that is, population, territory, government and sovereignty. The state, as a concept, is different from the idea of society, government and nation. In the contemporary times, the state has become an 'overarching' entity, in the sense that it influences almost every sphere of the human life. It regulates every sphere of human activity and as a result the state power has become central to the welfare and wellbeing of every society. As a result, during the pandemic, it was the state which had the primary responsibility, to take decisions involving different spheres of individual life, not only to save the human life but also at the same time provide enough opportunity so that normalcy is restored in public life.

Methodology

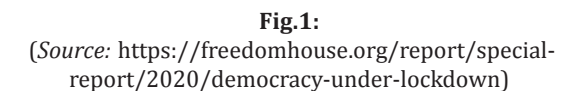
The study will mainly focus on the analysis of the secondary data available on the subject matter but at the same time an inventive attempt will be made to see the application of the political theories for examining the nature and function-

The study of the nature and functions of the state, as provided by different theories, requires a historical, descriptive and analytical examination of the subject. Through an investigative study, of the current behavior of the state during corona crises, an attempt will be made to understand that how states react at the time of the pandemics. During such emergency period, in practice the state functions beyond the scope of any particular theory or ideology and to explore this fact, a critical and diagnostic view point is required. Further, as the study seeks to compare the efficacy of different forms of state to deal with pandemic situation, so an empirical, scientific and value-neutral realistic approach will be adopted.

The different political theories like Liberalism, Social-Democratic, Totalitarianism, Marxism, Communism, Feminism, Internationalism and others have developed certain notions about the State and try to understand the state from that very perspective. During the ongoing pandemic, the state, around the world, has played an important role in dealing with the current crises and several new dimensions of politics and political discourses can be seen during this period, with regard to the functioning of the state.

Through the history of political theory, the existence of state has been both questioned as well as justified. The Marxist-Communists as well as Anarchists have denied the necessity of the state, whereas, the Liberals and Social Democrats have justified its existence on various grounds. One of the grounds for its existence, supported by the Liberal theory, is that, the state is essential for protecting the lives of its citizens. In this respect

Liberalism as an ideology has supported democratic form of government. But the recent COVID crises has led to decline in the democratic values of the governments around the world. The delay in the election processes, restrictions on the rights of the citizens, authoritative decisions, without proper deliberations and consultations, irresponsible behavior of elected representatives and lack of transparency in governmental working leading to distrust among people about their political representatives etc. were the signs witnessed in various liberal nations which raised serious questions on free and transparent democracies working culture.



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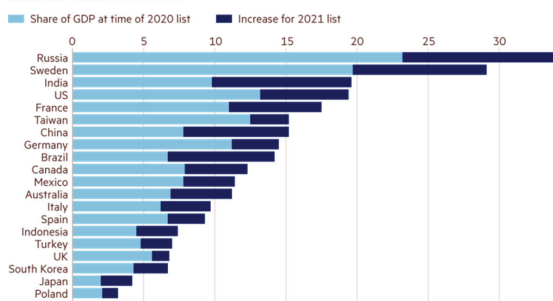
supported minimum state but again, during the pandemic, the state became all-powerful controlling every aspect of human life.

Marxist-Communist Theory and Nature of State during COVID-19

The Marxist- Communist theory claims that the so-called liberal democracies are not true democracies as they do not represent and protect the will of the majority of the working class. This argument of Marxist- Communists can be verified from the observation that during the pandemic on the one hand, there was a rise in unemployment and poverty levels, whereas, on the other hand, an increase in the income of few capitalists can be seen. This highlights their case that the modern liberal state is working for few capitalists.

The super-rich have increased their wealth during the pandemic

Billionaires' wealth as a % of GDP



Source: Ruchir Sharma team research using data from Forbes world's billionaires list © FT

Fig.2: (The billionaire boom: how the super-rich soaked up Covid cash cited from <https://www.ft.com/content/747a76dd-f018-4d0d-a9f3-4069bf2f5a93>)

There are different contesting theories regarding the beginning of Corona virus but certainly China has been blamed worldwide for being the cause of the origin of the said virus. It is being argued that the secrecy maintained by the communist regime of China is the principal cause behind the spread of covid around the world. The lack of transparency and control over press by the communist regimes have restricted the dissemination of actual social and economic impact of covid on these governments, though it is been claimed that these nations have also suffered human and economic losses as a result of this pandemic.

Further, the neo-marxists claim that the rising consumerism in the western societies will bring about new challenges before the human race, seems to be true, as one of the reasons behind the present pandemic is stated to be the same and hence there is a need to put a check on this tendency by adopting the Gandhian philosophy of 'ahimsa' towards environment, that is, only satisfying minimum needs and respecting all form of lives existing around us.

Totalitarian or Authoritarian tendencies & nature of state during pandemic: The totalitarian or authoritarian tendencies can also be seen in the functioning of the state during the COVID crises. An unprecedented increase in power can be seen in the working of the state during the pandemic. The federal structures of most of the democracies have been converted into unitary structure. The pandemic has reduced the powers of scrutiny of the elected houses of Parliaments and have increased the powers of executive. This expansion of powers of the state has an adverse impact on the rights of the people.



Fig. 3:

(Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>)

It has been observed that it is the internal tendencies within the democratic regimes, like the desire of those in power to retain it at any cost, which has led to increase in the totalitarian tendencies in these nations. Covid 19 has given opportunities to demagogues to regain or remain in power through curbs on press, misuse of state coercive structures like police, army etc. to suppress people's rights, encouraging violence or hatred against minorities and blaming them for pandemic spread or for eating up their resources,

all these have led to undermining of democratic values around the world in different nations.

Also, the communists and totalitarian regimes have come under the scrutiny of global society for not sharing timely and correct information regarding the origin and spread of the COVID pandemic.

The Feminist Perspective and the Nature of State during Pandemic

The Feminists often argue that women can handle the politics and state power in a better way than the men. Though the findings are in their primary stages but they are significant in proving this assertion of the feminists. In the nearly 12 plus states like Germany, New-Zealand, Denmark, Taiwan, Finland etc., which are led by the female leaders, the measures taken to combat this pandemic are found to be more responsive and effective. These states showed quick and sensitive decision making and as a result encountered lower death rates. Thus, this finding has supported the claim of the feminists that the women should have a greater role in national politics for effective, non-exploitative and responsive decision making.

From the feminist perspective, it may also be pointed out that during the pandemic, the liberal as well as the communist states have failed to safeguard the interest of their women population. According to UN Women, during the pandemic period the incidents of domestic violence against women increased manifold. Also, the economic impact of pandemic on women citizens was more severe than the men counterparts because the women employed in informal sector earn less and as a result have less capacity to absorb economic upheavals. Again, as health care workers, the women constitute a vast majority of health professionals but the governments did not take adequate steps, in the form of providing them protective equipment etc., to protect their lives.

Internationalism and Nature of State during the COVID Crises

Internationalism supports international cooperation and encourages the trend of globalization.

The pandemic has further highlighted the need for international cooperation to deal with such situations. Further to prevent the occurrence of such pandemic in future, it is necessary that the global society should come together to deal with the issues of climate change and depletion of biodiversity as these are considered as the major causes behind this pandemic.

But the current pandemic has also stressed on the need to further strengthen the international organizations like W.H.O. and others for dealing with such situation threatening human life.

Human Rights, Pandemic and State: The present pandemic has also affected the human rights of the people by giving extraordinary powers to the state. Like, certain laws during the crises period have allowed the state to detain people indefinitely and infringe upon the freedom of assembly and expression. Such laws could shape the civic life and policies for decades to come. Thus, there is a need to prescribe a framework for dealing with human rights issues during the pandemic period.

Key Government Abuses during the Pandemic

Governments across the Free to Not Free spectrum engaged in various abuses of human rights and democratic institutions in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

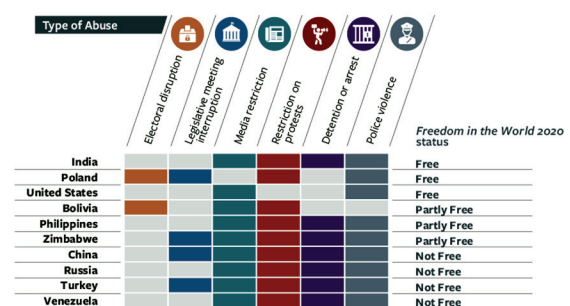


Fig. 4:

(Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>)

Inter-relationship between Forms of State and their Efficacy to Deal with the Pandemics

In general terms, the different political systems of the world can be divided into two categories- the Constitutional democracies and the Authoritarian regimes including the Communist governments. These forms of state have dealt with the current

pandemic in their own ways but there is debate regarding which type of state is better equipped to deal with such situation. For example, some intellectuals like Amartya Sen argues that the democratic systems are more capable of coping with such crises whereas, those supporting communist regimes believes that they can manage these pandemics in a better way. Thus, there is a need to explore the capabilities of different forms of state during the pandemic period.

The Impact of COVID on Third World Nations- Furthering the Dependency Theory

The dependency theory argues that the present world order facilitates the dependency of third world nations on the developed nations. The present pandemic has adversely affected the economies of the under-developed nations as compared to the developed nations. Several third world nations were dependent on the developed nations for the import of protective equipment, vaccines and other health care devices to deal with the pandemic situation. Long time socio-economic impacts have also been forecasted for the developing nations, as their economies have contracted resulting in employment loss or decline in the wages of the workforce.

Social Media, Pandemic and State: Emergence of Different Conspiracy Theories

The social media has greatly helped in disseminating right information at the earliest but at the same time it has also led to emergence of various conspiracy theories relating to pandemic, its spread and its vaccination program. The social media is used to propagate certain things, without ascertaining their authenticity; as a result, it may lead to conspiracy theories by putting forward false narratives on an issue. In fact, sometimes even the state uses these platforms to propagate its agenda.

The research findings point out that during the pandemic the state increased its power manifold. The democratic as well as communist regimes violated the people's right and even restrictions were placed on media, regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. The result of this can be seen

in the form of declining democratic values across the world. These signs are dangerous for liberal democratic political systems.

Conclusion

Thus, on the basis of the above analysis, it can be concluded that the nature of the state, during the pandemic period, cannot be examined through the framework of a single theory. The nature of state has diverse perspectives and to understand and comprehend them, diverse methodologies have to be applied. Like neo-marxists, it can be argued that the structures of the state have grown relatively autonomous and they function in a manner in order to maximize their own legitimacy, without showcasing any ideological affinity or conformity.

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