



COVID-19 IN SOUTH ASIA

SOCIETY, ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

Edited by
Manhal Ali, Rakib Akhtar
and Mohammad Tarikul Islam



COVID-19 in South Asia

This book studies the impact of COVID-19 in South Asia. With case studies from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, the volume assesses the long-term effects of COVID on the countries' political economy, public health, education, and society and offers recommendations for creating a more robust and resilient society for South Asian countries in response to the threat of future pandemics. The authors also make suggestions for shared policy goals, identifying smart strategies, and aligning policy instruments into short and long-term policy decisions to address wider societal issues of economy, migration, refugees, and averting the threats of extremism.

Topical and comprehensive, this book will be indispensable for scholars and researchers of sociology, medical sociology, political sociology, social anthropology, South Asian studies, public policy, political economy, and political studies.

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Society, Economics and Politics

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Foreword

The discovery of the new Covid-19 virus in China in early 2020 was the precursor to a pandemic that went on to spread rapidly across the globe, wreaking havoc on a world that had for many people already become unsustainable, fragmented, and unequal. It pushed millions of households further into poverty, precarity and insecurity and in many countries policy makers seeking to respond to the crisis were stretched to breaking point.

The pandemic shone a light into the contemporary order and highlighted a wide range of shocking limitations – differential access to health systems, our overextended and brittle international value chains, the fragility of food systems, the increasing and unsustainable pressure placed on natural ecosystems by human societies, and the crisis of social care that disproportionately places the burden of unpaid work on women.

The pandemic not only made these inequalities more visible but in addition to the lost lives, economic downturn, and the reversal of key human development indicators in many societies, it also profoundly deepened them. It led to an increased concentration of wealth and income in direct contradiction of Sustainable Development Goal 10, which in 2015 had made an explicit commitment to the reduction of inequalities within and between countries. During the pandemic, for example, Oxfam estimated that a new billionaire was created every 30 hours.

The pandemic also exacerbated the rolling back of state service provision and increased roles for corporations in the shaping of public policies responding to the pandemic. These effects are now undermining efforts to reduce poverty and exclusion, feeding into anti-human rights discourses, and contributing to right wing extremism and nationalism.

All of this now requires a massive effort by researchers of all kinds to understand the pandemic and its effects, of which this book makes a timely and important contribution. At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic is far from over and its economic, social, political and environmental effects continue to unfold. The countries of South Asia have felt many of these effects keenly.

Drawing on leading scholars drawn primarily from social scientists from the Global South, the diverse and multifaceted chapters featured in this volume

offer readers a valuable set of detailed, evidence-based analyses of key aspects of the pandemic across four themes – political economy, public health, education and society. It will be useful reading for development scholars, policy researchers and decision makers in South Asia and beyond.

David Lewis
London School of Economics and Political Science
January 2, 2023



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Introduction

Overview

The Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges to highly interconnected human societies, education, health, and livelihoods. Notwithstanding its abatement and the recent declaration by the World Health Organization to end its emergency measures – the deleterious impact of Covid-19, for example, high borrowing costs and learning loss may be felt for decades to come (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, it is expected that over the next decades, the emergence of future contagious diseases or pandemics is more likely to occur with greater frequency due to pervasive urbanisation, peak populations, climate change, and stresses from uneven development. Moreover, notwithstanding the important steps taken by countries to respond to Covid-19, countries – across all income levels – remain dangerously unprepared (Gwin and Miller, 2021). This raises a very salient and fundamental question as to how to make societies more resilient and robust to future pandemics. To this end, this edited book produces an assortment of papers on the impact of Covid-19 in South Asia and key lessons that can be learned towards creating a more resilient and robust society.

Although Covid-19 threatened global economic and health resilience, poor and developing countries were more prone and vulnerable than others due to their limited health infrastructure, limited financial and human resources, high inequality, and limited capacity of the governments to respond (Shonchoy et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant to countries in South Asia – home to almost 2 billion people – that still continue to experience new Covid-19 cases and deaths and face the possibility of the emergence of new variants that may lead to future pandemic waves (Shonchoy et al., 2023). Moreover, the impact of Covid-19 on people living in South Asia may have been exacerbated due to their genetic predispositions that made them more vulnerable to health risks (Bashar et al., 2021). For instance, during the first half of 2021, countries in the South Asian region accounted for half of all new Covid-19 infections globally, where every second, more than three new cases were recorded (Shonchoy et al., 2023).

Moreover, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has pushed millions of households in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh into poverty, leading to

enormous economic and social hardships, and therefore, further exacerbating income inequality. Such effects were magnified due to poor social protection systems and a large share of informal employment in countries in South Asia (Valizade et al., 2022). Global conflicts, such as the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, pose serious near-term and future challenges to policymakers, especially, since rising food and commodity prices compound economic securities.

In addition to various social, economic, and public health challenges, the political implications of Covid-19 and its aftermath for the countries in the South Asian region remain bleak and perilous. The related concern is that global health crises like Covid-19 can provide incumbent regimes with opportunities to impose authoritarian rules, suppress political dissent, and thereby, consolidate political power (Mahapatra and Sombatpoonsiri, 2021). This is especially, true, for countries in South Asia that have poor records on democracy, human rights, poorly defined property rights, and weak governance structures (LSE Southeast Asia Blog, 2020). The anxiety and fear that such political consequences may persist and subsequently become permanent features in South Asia over months and years is real. This, in turn, has certainly created a huge challenge for pro-democracy and human rights groups in the future. Yet, regardless of whether there is conclusive evidence, there is danger: if we fail to manage the crisis going forward, and in the future, the people of the South Asian region may look to a system outside of democracy (Bollyky et al., 2022; Lewkowicz et al., 2022). The extent depends on how long the impact of the pandemic on the economy and society lasts and its magnitude.

Aims

This book aims to bring together a collection of a diverse range of papers relevant to South Asia to understand the various socio-economic, health, and political impacts of Covid-19, and lessons that can be taken to prepare for future pandemics.

The book first explores the impact of Covid-19 on South Asia using Bangladesh as a case study. Although, countries in South Asia differ in terms of their macroeconomic structures – for example, inflation rates, unemployment rate, debt-to-GDP ratio etc. – there exist many structural similarities. For instance, the presence of large informal sectors, migratory workers, self-employment rates, weak social-protection systems, and governance. Hence, some of the policy proposals presented in the first chapter can be beneficial to planners or policymakers to make a resilient economy better protect itself from future public health shocks. In addition, the volume examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration, refugees, and on other aspects of society, namely, religious practices and rise of extremism, and political ramifications.

Education remains one of the key drivers to spur innovation, economic growth, and wider prosperity. Despite the commendable rise in school enrolment and student financing, literacy and numeracy rates continue to lag in

South Asia compared to advanced developed countries. This ‘learning-gap’ was further exacerbated by the prolonged school closures at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. To this end, this book assesses the impact of Covid-19 on the education sector in South Asia, and recommends steps that can be taken to mitigate learning losses due to Covid-19 and potential future disruption in education. This will be particularly relevant to interested scholars, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders in the areas of education.

The book looks at some of the correlates of the severity of the disease and healthcare challenges, especially given the strained healthcare resources and weak capacity that plague all South Asian countries. For instance, according to the 2021 Global Health Security Index, except for two countries, namely, India and Bhutan, all the other countries have scored below the global average of 38.9. India which achieved a score of 42.8 is, however, 0.8 points lower compared to the 2019 Global Health Security Index (Gwin and Miller, 2021). This book, therefore, suggests some possible remedies – for example, free testing – that can be taken by relevant stakeholders and policymakers in the healthcare sector to improve future pandemic preparedness.

In general, this book is intended for academics, practitioners, students, and researchers in the areas of political science, sociology, social and public policy, development studies, governance, regional development, public health, and education in South Asia in addition to other low-resource-developing countries with weak infrastructures.

Policy Benefits

The identification of the optimal set of policies and instruments to address relevant Covid-19 challenges and their alignment with broader social goals – such as education, migration, refugees etc. – will be critically important for sustainable recovery from the pandemic and creating a more resilient society. The way in which governments in South Asian countries set their priorities, policies, and programs, and coordinate activities will affect the outcome.

This book is a collection of papers that aims to identify and prioritize policy actions to address Covid-19 challenges in South Asia. The book offers several important policy implications for creating a more robust and resilient society for South Asian and developing countries in response to the threat of future pandemics. The chapters of this volume outline some of the key principles and criteria, and suggest policy approaches for assessing and prioritizing policy choices in planning and decision making in various sectors, such as education and healthcare. The chapters offer some guidelines for shared policy goals, identifying smart strategies, and aligning policy instruments into short and long-term policy decisions to address wider societal issues of economy, public health, migration, refugees, and averting the threats of extremism.

Chapter Synopsis

The book is organized around four core themes: political economy, public health, education, and society. There are five chapters in the political economy theme followed by five and two chapters apiece for the public health, education, and society themes.

In Chapter 1, Shahadat Hossain Siddique uses the tools of exploratory analysis to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the economy of Bangladesh – a major country in South Asia – and one of the fastest growing economies of the world. Although the study focuses on a single country, the lessons and policy recommendations suggested can generally be applicable to other countries in South Asia as the economies of all these countries were adversely affected by the pandemic, albeit at different magnitudes.

In Chapter 2, Imran Saqib and Jas Kalra study the economic and social issues and potentially long-term impacts on the economy and stability of Pakistan. Women's empowerment, employment, supply chains, polio vaccinations, education, and infrastructure investments are also discussed. The chapter also narrates, how public consciousness is raised through issues strongly highlighted in the traditional and social media and spurs action.

In the third chapter of this book, Subhasish Dey and Upasak Das evaluate the impact of lockdown policies implemented in India in March 2020 from the perspective of political economy. Though the chapter focuses on India, its conclusions and observations are equally applicable to other developing countries.

Chapter 4, by Tariqul Islam and Zaki Faisal, gives us a more detailed ethnographic scrutiny of the impact of refugees during the pandemic. They study the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to understand the impact of the pandemic from the standpoint of both the refugees as well as the local communities where the refugee colonies are located. They find that inequality is growing in areas where refugees are concentrated: the poorest have been hit the hardest by inflation, job scarcity, and a general sense of downward economic journey. Against such a backdrop, they foresee a possible increase in criminal incidents in the localities which host the Rohingya refugees. As efforts by donors and aid organisations often fail to be conflict-sensitive enough, there is also a possibility of mistrust between the locals and refugees. To address the need for information, health information, social safety nets, and security (hence a range of public services), the authors suggest that the number of Digital Centres that have delivered a number of services through joint efforts by public, private, and community organisations should be increased. This should in the longer run, promote livelihoods for host communities and advocate self-sufficiency and socioeconomic empowerment.

Sabahat Ambreen, in Chapter 5, focuses on the early impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable and marginalised section of society – the various types of displaced migrants across South Asia, especially focusing on the Indian cases. For migrants, Covid-19 has been a 'crisis within a crisis.' In the midst of a

recent global refugee and immigrant crisis, when the pandemic struck, nations were shutting down borders. Sabahat Ambreen highlights the need for governments to come up with both short and long-term policies to extend all possible assistance to both internal and international migrants. He argues that the pandemic should be treated as a wake-up call to deliver social protection measures to migrant workers.

Chapter 6 is the first chapter of the second theme of the book: public health. In this chapter, Tarikul Islam uses tools of exploratory analysis to study the role of environmental correlates, namely, air quality and temperature with Covid-19 disease severity amongst multiple cities in South Asia.

Usman Chohan, in Chapter 7, examines the Covid-19 cases and deaths in Pakistan. Chohan offers numerous health and non-health explanations as to why the Covid-19 cases and deaths in Pakistan have been much lower than initially feared by scientists and public health experts. He goes on to explain some of the lessons that can be learnt from Pakistan and by other similar developing countries and suggests some policies that can be adopted.

Shafiq Shimul in Chapter 8 uses a simple cost-benefit analysis within an SIR framework from epidemiology literature to examine the impact of free Covid-19 testing in a low-resource developing country, such as Bangladesh. While Bangladesh was very prompt in taking action to thwart the growth of infection by shutting its economy down, it took the initiative when total case numbers were lower than 50 nationally and only had a single digit death. The author considers that, to curb the rise of viruses, the classical playbook is to reduce contacts, to ensure extensive contact tracing and massive testing. Though Bangladesh declared lockdown immediately after getting cases, other must-have measures, such as contact tracing and massive testing, did not take place at their expected levels.

In Chapter 9, Atiqa Khalid and colleagues highlight the enormous challenges faced by the under-resourced countries in South Asia on the back of weak health infrastructure. While the government in Pakistan scrambled for resources and had to depend on its friendly donors, such as China, for medical equipment and vaccines, the authors found that the indifferent attitude combined with the spread of conspiracy theories worsened the challenges. Although the government did not follow a call to opt for a strategy to achieve 'herd immunity' that could have been far more catastrophic, it did come close to adopting one. The authors cover the later second and third phases during the years 2020 and 2021 and notice that neither the government nor the public learnt much from their experience in the first phase.

In the final chapter of this theme, Chapter 10, Amal Mondal looks at the mental challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic in India and relevant policy responses. With ever mutating virus and nearly two years of physical, economic, and social devastation, the pandemic had overwhelming effects on the mental health of the infected, and more ominously, of the general people. The author also mentions that the upheavals around psychological distress surpass

the fallouts of the physical health devastation. Covid-19 will afflict a certain proportion of people, but the mental scars or phobia affect almost everyone. The pandemic has not only heightened the contributing factors of the pervading panic but also exacerbated the prospect of patients relapsing into a range of mental, neurological and substance use disorders.

Chapter 11 is the first of the two chapters under the education theme of this book. The two chapters in this book analysing the educational sectors provide a grim picture of what many of the South Asian countries have witnessed and what can be forecast. To provide a detailed picture of the educational institutions' struggle at various levels (primary, secondary, or tertiary) during the pandemic to deliver education in Nepal, Karna Rana and Prem Poudel, in Chapter 11, undertake a survey with teachers and administrators. What they find in the case of Nepal, which follows a similar narrative across the rest of South Asia as shown in other chapters, is the absence of e-learning infrastructure and how most schools and universities have been unable to adopt a fully-fledged online mode of learning due to the lack of existing infrastructure. They noticed that students' lack of access to various gadgets such as, smartphones, and teachers' lack of digital competencies even in situations where such gadgets were available, were major challenges in implementing a digital form of learning during the pandemic. What is more concerning in the longer run, however, is that the limited practice of online teaching and learning has substantially widened pre-existing inequalities, indicating important implications for achieving equitable quality education in Nepal as well as putting the nation a few steps backwards when it comes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The only optimistic picture during this period has been a range of collaborative efforts by teachers and community activists to pull resources together to deliver some form of online and/or distance learning, particularly in urban areas. Although such cases are too few for us to claim them to be solutions for the future, their very existence in the face of the utter failure of the states to do the basics, nevertheless provides us a ray of hope.

However, a similar analysis of the province of West Bengal in India by Zee-shan Siddique and colleagues in Chapter 12, does not reflect much optimism. What they highlight is a worsening trend when it comes to access to basic education. As teaching in these institutions tried to adopt an online mode of teaching because of the strict lockdown measures by national and provincial governments, many of the institutions especially run by the public sectors, have been unable to manage this transition leading to an increase in dropout rates. The impact was too adverse in the rural and remote areas due to a multitude of pre-existing fault lines in the education system. What this resulted in the province of West Bengal was a similar outcome to what was noticed in Nepal: asymmetrical distribution of educational resources, declining public education, dropout rates, and degrading overall student growth that is transforming and shifting the education system of West Bengal. Both chapters should act as a warning to South Asian policy-makers and urge them to take immediate measures in addressing the education loss of the millions of students of different age groups.