



The Pandemic, India's Lockdown and the Fear of the Indian-Americans

By Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt

India announced its lockdown for its 1.3 billion people on Tuesday evening, March 24, 2020, for the next 21 days by giving only a four hours' notice. "There will be a total ban on venturing out of your homes," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a televised address. "The entire country will be in lockdown, total lockdown . . . This is a curfew" he said.

This is a double-edged sword for millions in a country where the wealth gap is enormous and physical distancing is hardly an option for many. The pandemic does not care about this wealth gap or access to water or not between the rich and the poor. Masking everybody is not a possibility. Social distancing is for the middle and upper-middle class. For the poor and the lower class in India social distancing is akin to a curse.

What is, however, inevitable is that in spite of the lockdown, that there will deaths. This is an equal opportunity virus. But on the forefront will the elderly. In fact, it is the

deaths of the elderly in India that has kept me and countless other NRI's awake at night in our adopted homes abroad.

What would happen if one, or even both of our parents, or the only surviving parent in India living alone or in a retirement community get infected by the Coronavirus? Or worse, what if they just get sick and die now?

The truth is that none of us will be able to go back due to the lockdown in India, along with global travel restrictions.

The US has one of the largest Indian diasporas outside India. An estimated [4,460,000](#) Indians live in the US, followed by Saudi Arabia which has the second-highest NRI population at 4,000,000. The truth is that while many of us have been making a living here, and those fortunate enough have stable jobs and professions and have been building their assets, many have left the biggest assets back home — our parents.

For these parents, “between the broad smiles, behind the cheerful exterior and in those moist, rheumy eyes lies an [untold story](#). A tale of loneliness, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty . . .” This is a story that goes both ways. It is a story of acute alienation that every migrant and their parents, if alive cannot escape. It is a fear of dying alone.

In the phone calls that many of us regularly make to connect with our parents back home, there are uncanny moments of silences. These are unspeakable silences of

sadness, loneliness, and terror. These are the inevitable silences of acknowledging that death may be closer than we thought as those visions of our aging parents getting more frail, more dependent, more vulnerable, more susceptible to sickness and diseases have become more tangible.

And then there is the fear of every migrant and every NRI — the inevitability of missing the most important deadline to say our last good-byes. And even worst, the impossibility of being able to travel back home now to perform the last rites, due to the lockdown.

This global pandemic has made the emotional distance between here and there grow smaller, yet the physical distance marked by lockouts and closing of borders have grown much larger. There is heightened anxiety, followed by agitation and part paralysis felt by millions whether in Mumbai, London, or New York, as we have been following the mandates of “stay home, stay safe and save lives.”

“What if we cannot save the lives of our parents from so far away?”

The NRI parents remain awake too. The death of the 59-year-old celebrity Indian chef [Floyd Cardoz](#) on March 25th, 2020 in New Jersey has reached the Indian shores. And with this tragic news, many parents are silently asking, “what if one of their children abroad get infected by the Coronavirus and die?”

These questions of mortality emerging from fear and uncertainty have been asked in

silence. A fear of losing those we love who live so far away is a fear that is punctuated with isolation and the desperation to be mobile again. It is a fear that every migrant goes to sleep with and wakes up and hopes that it will disappear — knowing fully well that this fear is permanent. The fear of losing a parent or a loved one in another nation and the possibility of not being able to go back home is no longer imaginary. The lockdown has made this possibility real.

My father is 92. My mother is in her early 80's. They have grown more frail, vulnerable, and even childish over the years. My mother is always anxious. My father is an eternal optimist. I have lived away from them for the last thirty years and watched them age. They have become much slower and more forgetful. Like all migrants I have always felt this unsurmountable rift due to the 8,000 miles of separation between us, accompanied by an intense pain and sadness as I leave them back in India and come back to my life in the US. For the last decade or so, every leaving has always felt like maybe this is our last goodbye.

Like others, I am used to making our routine phone calls to check on my parents. When we have talked in the last two months over the phone, I noticed something had clearly shifted as they expressed their anxiety about the lockdown. Last night my mother said that she heard on the news that no planes were still flying. Then her voice dropped like a heavy stone descending. "You know our old neighbor in Kolkata, Mr. Samar Banerjee

passed away four days ago. His own daughter could not come from Boston. It was even difficult to find any flowers to put on his dead body.”

There was an eerie silence between us. Nothing more needed to be said after that. She had named our mutual fear.

