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Structural Barriers: COVID-19 and Lockdown Lessons from India

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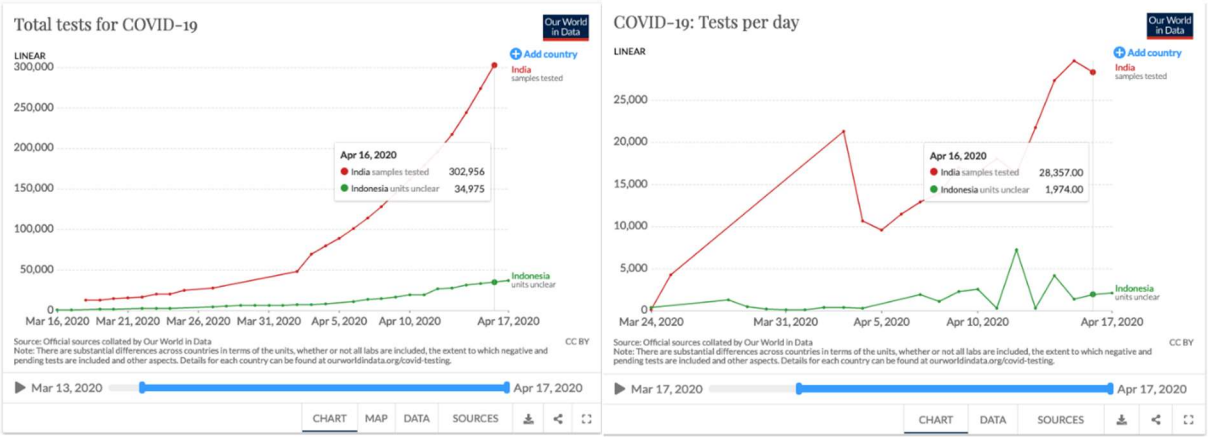
India has been on a nation-wide lockdown since March 24 as a preventive measure against COVID-19. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the measure on March 24 at 8 PM, he only gave the country about four hours to prepare. The lockdown restricts 1.3 billion people from leaving their home. While essential services continued, commercial establishments, factories, schools, offices, markets and places of worship have been closed. Most transportation services have been suspended except for the delivery of essential services. Domestic and international flights have been halted as well.

On April 14, the government extended the lockdown until May 3rd. The extension allows the government to widen its testing activities (see figures below) and evaluate how every town, district and state adhere to the lockdown rules and to refocus existing efforts on hotspot areas.[1] Some activities will be permitted after April 20 to keep the rural and agricultural economy running and help employ daily wage earners.[2]



As of April 17, India had 13,495 confirmed cases with 448 deaths. Overall, given its population size, several hundred thousand tests are far from sufficient. There are also challenges with how testing has been conducted, especially since initially only the central government was authorized to conduct tests while private testing was not widely available.[3] Regardless of the health outcomes, what can we learn from lockdown? This essay argues there are structural barriers and contexts shaping and shoving India's lockdown efforts.

Lockdown politics: an opportunity to be seized?

The lockdown started on the heels of a difficult political situation for the ruling BJP-led coalition. There were widespread protests and violence over the new citizenship law that could disenfranchise millions of Muslim minorities.[4] The February riots in Delhi killed more than 50 people and injured more than 500.[5] The government's decision to engage in a rapid lockdown in March would have taken into account the political crisis in the preceding weeks.

Some analysts argue the government is also taking political advantage of the lockdown to advance a divisive agenda by pinning the outbreak on Muslims. Fake news and rumors were spread, for example, that Muslims were deliberately poisoning others, including police and health workers, by spitting on them.[6] Others noted how a Tablighi Jamaat event worsened the situation.[7] Either way, it is likely that the ruling elite could shift the attention away from the citizenship law and how the government may be mishandling the pandemic.

At the very least, the lockdown likely gave the BJP leaders the opportunity to turn the narrative around. Indeed, just before the lockdown, Modi met with top news executives and urged them to publish "inspiring and positive stories" about his government's efforts. During the lockdown, the government also persuaded the Supreme Court to order all media to "publish the official version" of coronavirus developments, although outlets are still allowed to carry independent reporting.[8]

Some officials may have taken a few steps further to exploit the political opportunity. The Uttar Pradesh police, for example, arrested a prominent supporter of the women-led anti-citizenship law protests.[9] In another case, Indian authorities detained two rights activists on April 14 who have been strong government critics.[10] Additionally, nearly 100 people have been arrested for spreading virus-related misinformation.[11] In most of these cases, the authorities used archaic colonial-era laws or draconian security regulations.[12]

It is difficult to disentangle these measures during the lockdown—between those designed to maintain an effective outbreak prevention and those designed to take on the political opposition. After all, the

opposition also appears to have increasingly found its voice in challenging the government's narrative while proposing its own policy suggestions.[13] At the local level, some have noted that the relatively successful Chief Ministers tackling the pandemic in their respective states are not part of the BJP-led coalition.[14] In any case, one cannot separate the lockdown efforts from these broader political dynamics.

Lockdown logistics and economics

One of the toughest challenges during the lockdown was perhaps not the lack of supplies but the logistics of delivering them, the management of internal migrants, and welfare provision. Analysts note that emergency provisions, form cash transfers, wage increases, to food rations, were simply not enough to support large swaths of the population.[15] Furthermore, the lack of prior warning and preparation for the supplies of foods, medicine and other household items has led to disruptions during the lockdown.

In rural areas, farmers were unsure how they can harvest or transport their crops if rural markets are closed. Large e-commerce companies (e.g. Amazon, Flipkart) were also hamstrung, with the police closing their warehouses or harass their online delivery couriers.[16] Even though the home ministry issued a list of exemptions, the police may not have been able to fully implement them. Initially the police even stopped goods trucks from moving across state lines—tens of thousands of trucks were stranded on state borders at one point.[17]

But India's most vulnerable population may be the biggest victim of the lockdown: the migrant and casual laborers. More than 80 percent of the Indian labor force works in the informal sector (i.e. excluded from any form of protection, contract and guarantee of continuity).[18] Casual laborers account for one-third of the work force, with vendors, construction workers, domestics and a vast array of other low-skilled workers surviving on daily wages.[19] Many of them are also migrant workers from outside of the major cities. About 20 percent of India's workforce are these migrants journeying from another state, while a larger share is made up of people who travel from different parts of the state where their workplace is located.[20]

Unfortunately, while India maybe a vibrant democracy, few migrant laborers transfer their voting rights to the cities they work in, leaving urban politicians few incentives to protect them.[21] It is not entirely surprising that when the lockdown was taking place, millions of migrant workers attempted to return to their villages, which could further stretch local health care systems if the virus diffuses further. [22] But without their city jobs, their village homes were their last refuge. Those lucky enough to made it back are now unsure whether they should return back to the cities after the lockdown is lifted. Companies are already reporting labor shortages at ports and factories, potentially exacerbating an economic slowdown.[23]

Overall, India may already be losing close to 400 billion rupees ($5.2 billion) daily due to the lockdown and up to 100 million internal migrant workers could be displaced.[24] Meanwhile, even though the lockdown has given the government some breathing space to expand testing, its healthcare facilities are limited and burdened with patients having comorbidities (e.g. undernutrition, tuberculosis, chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases).[25] India might need up to one million ventilators, although when the lockdown started its public hospitals only had 8,432—it has been forced to import almost 75% of its needs as the domestic production capacity stands at 5,000 ventilators per month.[26]

Hospital bed disparities made it more challenging to ensure proper care during the lockdown. Hospital beds per 1000 population for 12 poorer states in India (70 percent of India's population) are lower than the national average which stands at 0,7 bed per 1000; by most conservative estimates, 75 percent

of Indian provinces will run out of beds for coronavirus patients by June.[27] Overall, the economic and logistical costs and challenges of the lockdown are huge and likely to further strain India's underwhelming health capacity to begin with.

Lockdown policing: between colonial legacies and politicization

The rapid announcement also meant the police tasked with enforcing the lockdown did not have enough time to prepare. There were reports of policemen soliciting bribes and engaging in excessive violence and brutality (from harassments to assaults).[28] The police appears to have resorted to teargas, baton-charge, and other forms of corporal punishment to enforce the lockdown. There were also some breakdown of law and order in parts of the country.[29] While it is unclear to what extent these problems are nation-wide, cases of violence against and involving migrant workers appear to be more widespread.[30]

In response to these measures, some citizens may be retaliating against the police.[31] After all, before the lockdown, many have criticized the police for their brazenness and high-handedness, with protesters and university students being arrested on apparently false charges and assaulted on campuses.[32] During the recent Delhi riots, police personnel were caught damaging public property, even as they allegedly sided with rioters.[33] It is not entirely surprising then that thousands have been charged, disciplined or arrested for minor violations of the lockdown.[34]

Several broader trends and structural contexts help explain these problems.

First, as far as the minorities (i.e. Muslims) are concerned, police heavy-handedness during the lockdown is merely another extension of the ruling government's divisive approach. Since the Modi-led BJP came into power 2014, there has been a rise in violence against minorities. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 44 people were killed in "cow-related violence" across 12 Indian states between May 2015 and December 2018 (36 of them were Muslims).[35] The police investigations over the incidents have been inadequate.[36] More broadly, Muslims were victims in about 83 percent out of 195 hate crimes against religious minorities between June 2014 and the end of 2018.[37]

Second, anti-minority (especially anti-Muslim) violence and hate crimes are likely facilitated by the weakening of state-level law enforcement.[38] This weakening, in turn, is shaped by the "criminalization of politics" and the "politicization of the police." In 2004, the number of candidates with serious criminal cases and those who won was around eight and twelve percent, respectively—the figures grew to 13 and 28 percent in 2019.[39] Indeed, candidates linked to crime might even have an electoral advantage: data from 2004, 2009, and 2014 suggests candidates with a criminal case were, on average, almost three times as likely to win against those without cases.[40] The growing "criminalization" of Indian politics has consequences for how police officers work professionally and effectively.[41]

Meanwhile, some argue the politicization of the police began during the Indira Gandhi era, where the decay of party organizations made both the Congress party as well as its rivals dependent on assorted slumlords and gang leaders (who "needed police protection").[42] Others argue the politicization of the police is a legacy of the colonial era; political intelligence gathering, for example, was and remains a major focus of the police.[43] One comprehensive study suggests that, "Police establishments across India continue to function largely in the same casual and repressive fashion as the colonial masters had envisioned."[44]

Either way, the public considers the police to be politicized. Surveys suggest that many Indians feel the police is unlikely to follow up a victim's complaint unless there is some political influence.[45] Few citizens repose any faith in the integrity of even the superior officers; they are seen as playing a partisan role at the behest of the wealthy, vested interests, and politicians.[46] Police officers themselves

acknowledged their politicization. Twenty-eight percent of police personnel believe that pressure from politicians is the biggest hindrance in crime investigation. Thirty-eight percent personnel reported always facing pressure from politicians in cases of crime involving influential persons.[47]

Third, the police force lacks resources and is confronted by numerous personnel and organizational inadequacies, both in terms of the lockdown conditions as well as various long-term structural challenges. During the lockdown, police personnel are likely to be strained by stress and fear as they are now expected to work longer shifts while maintaining public order through closed physical contacts with the local population. This combination of stress and fear may make future citizen-police interactions more violent, especially if the police perceive the civilians as 'carriers' or 'criminals.[48]

Unfortunately, surveys of police personnel are not encouraging in this regard, especially when Muslims and migrants are involved. In 2019, 14 percent of police personnel surveyed feel that Muslims are 'very much' naturally prone to committing crimes, while 36 percent feel that Muslims are 'somewhat' naturally prone to do so. Twenty-four percent believe that migrants are 'very much' naturally prone to committing crimes, 36 percent feel that they are 'somewhat' naturally prone to do so.[49] It should not be surprising then that violence against minorities and migrants have ramped during the lockdown.

These lockdown stressors and pre-existing views are compounded by numerous long-term structural weaknesses and capacity challenges. The sanctioned strength of the police across states was around 2.8 million in 2017 but only 1.9 million were employed. As a result, there are only 144 police officers for every 100,000 citizens (behind most countries and the UN-recommended ratio of 222).[50] By 2019, the police work at only around 77 percent of its sanctioned strength and required capacity.

They are also under-trained, under-equipped, under-funded, and over-worked. Between 2011 and 2015, states spent 4.4 percent of their budgeted expenditure on policing on average but this has reduced to 4 percent over the last four years.[51] A major share of the budget goes to fixed expenditure like salaries, while a miniscule part goes to training infrastructure.[52] Over the last five years, on an average, only 6.4 percent of the police force have been provided in-service training. Police personnel work for 14 hours a day on an average, with about 80 percent working for more than 8 hours a day.[53] A national survey in 2014 found that 73 percent of personnel did not have more than one day off per week.[54]

Policing a lockdown or a public health crisis requires the kind of "soft policing" method that allows for police personnel to build trust with the community as well as with the relevant stakeholders such as public health workers and others who provide essential services.[55] Instead, the analysis above reveals the structural barriers and contexts plaguing India's police force—many of which cannot be easily fixed overnight.

Policy lessons and takeaways

There are several policy lessons to be drawn from India's COVID-19 lockdown—some of which might be salient for Indonesia.

First, the lockdown decision, while based on sound public health reasons and applauded for its decisiveness and rapidness, cannot be viewed in a political vacuum. We can debate whether the lockdown was politically motivated or beneficial to the ruling government as a way to deflect attention away from a political crisis. But in a polarized political milieu, it seems unlikely to expect that lockdown decisions could be made free from political contexts.

Second, regardless of the political motivation, the lockdown bought time for India to shore up its testing capacity and "flatten the curve". Unfortunately, because the decision-making and announcement was rushed, there were too many structural barriers on the logistical, economic, and

health system front that could not be addressed quickly. Coordination between national and local governments is imperative to ensure the smooth functioning of a lockdown because the cost of initial policy fumbles could quickly compound over time.

Third, the structural barriers surrounding the lockdown—from policing capacity, health care system, to the economy—means that regardless of the personalities or idiosyncrasies of the political leaders, India will face enormous challenges in dealing with a pandemic like COVID-19. Some political decisions may make a difference in terms time and saving lives, but one should not expect that an entirely different political elite would be able spare the country from the destructive consequences of the pandemic.

Fourth, one cannot effectively police and enforce a lockdown with a politicized force lacking in public legitimacy. If the government was already lacking political legitimacy to begin with, deploying a heavily criticized police force—plagued with numerous problems, from corruption to politicization—is likely to increase public resistance. The more the public resists, the likelihood of social unrests and violent clashes increases. If the police force responds with more heavy-handed tactics—as India did in the beginning phase of the lockdown—the more likely that public trust of the government and police declines. The lack of public trust, in turn, would hamper efforts by the government to educate and control the public to prevent further deterioration of the public health system. In short, the cycle of public trust and lockdown enforcement will spiral out of control if the government insists on deploying an under-funded, under-trained, and over-worked, heavily politicized police force.

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[1] See Bibhudatta Pradhan and Anurag Joshi, "Modi Extends India Lockdown as Coronavirus Fight Intensifies", *Bloomberg*, April 14, 2020

[2] These include cargo movements, farming operations, fisheries, etc. See the full list in "New lockdown guidelines: Here's a list of economic activities that will be allowed after April 20", *The Economic Times*, April 17, 2020.

[3] Alex Ward, "India's coronavirus lockdown and its looming crisis, explained", *Vox*, March 24, 2020. But just before the lockdown, India had 118 accredited labs for a population of 1.3 billion with huge geographical inequalities—some states like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland had no testing centers. The government was only capable to testing around 90 samples per day, which was why they let private health providers conduct testing. Many Indians however could not afford to pay for such private tests, leaving them at the mercy of the government. See Mathieu Ferry, Govindan Venkatasubramania, Isabelle Guérin, and Marine Al Dahdah, "The COVID-19 Crisis in India: A Nascent Humanitarian Tragedy", *Books and Ideas*, April 13, 2020

[4] The citizenship law, passed last year, grants fast-tracked citizenship to illegal or undocumented migrants who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and who entered India on or before 31 December 2014. Muslims were not listed. See "Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law explained", *BBC News*, December 11, 2019.

[5] See Akanksha Singh, "Democracy is dying in India, and Trump shouldn't be on Modi's side", *CNN International*, March 22, 2020

[6] Mihir S. Sharma, "India's lockdown politics', *International Politics and Society*, April 13, 2020

[7] Akash Bisht & Sadiq Naqvi, "How Tablighi Jamaat event became India's worst coronavirus vector", *Al-Jazeera*, April 7, 2020

[8] Vindu Goel, Jeffrey Gettleman and Saumya Khandelwa, "Under Modi, India's press is not so free anymore", *The New York Times*, April 3, 2020

[9] See Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, "Outrage as Adityanath Govt Uses Epidemic Diseases Act to Arrest CAA Dissenter", *The Wire*, March 27, 2020.

[10] See "India: Activists Detained for Peaceful Dissent, *Human Rights Watch*, April 15, 2020

[11] See "Asia cracks down on coronavirus 'fake news'", *The Straits Times*, April 10, 2020.

[12] These include for example India's principal counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897

[13] See "Rahul Gandhi calls for two-pronged strategy", *The Hindu*, March 25, 2020

[14] See "7 chief ministers who made war with COVID-19 look easy", *LiveMint*, March 26, 2020

[15] See for example "Concerned citizens' response to the COVID 19 relief package announced by the finance minister", *The Caravan Magazine*, March 27, 2020; Sidharth Bhatia, "A Government Without Strategy, and Also Without Humanity", *The Wire*, March 30, 2020; Debraj Ray, Sreenivasan Subramanian, Lore Vandewalle, "India's Lockdown", *Vox CEPR Policy Portal*, April 8, 2020.
[16] See Amy Kazmin, Jyotsna Singh and Stephanie Findlay, "India's sudden lockdown threatens food supply chains", *Financial Times*, March 28, 2020
[17] See Shivam Vij, "Modi's poorly planned lockdown won't save us from coronavirus, but will kill economy", *The Print*, March 25, 2020
[18] See the data in *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, 3rd Edition (Geneva: International Labor Office, 2018).
[19] See *Report on Fifth Annual Employment – Unemployment Survey (2015-16)*, Vol. 1 (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2016)
[20] See Archana Chaudhary and Anurag Kotoky, "Migrant Workers in India May Shun Cities After Lockdown", Bloomberg, April 16, 2020. More broadly, internal migration includes long-distance, inter-state migration, and short term forms of commuting from villages to nearby towns. There are massive flows from the poorest states in north-eastern India to the most employment-intensive states located in the west and south. See Mathieu Ferry, Govindan Venkatasubramania, Isabelle Guérin, and Marine Al Dahdah, The COVID-19 Crisis in India.
[21] Mihir S. Sharma, "India's lockdown politics', International Politics and Society, April 13, 2020
[22] Mathieu Ferry, Govindan Venkatasubramanian, Isabelle Guérin, and Marine Al Dahdah, The COVID-19 Crisis in India
[23] See Archana Chaudhary and Anurag Kotoky, "Migrant Workers in India May Shun Cities After Lockdown", Bloomberg, April 16, 2020
[24] See Bibhudatta Pradhan and Anurag Joshi, "Modi Extends India Lockdown as Coronavirus Fight Intensifies", *Bloomberg*, April 14, 2020; Ferry, Venkatasubramanian, Guérin, and Dahdah, The COVID-19 Crisis in India
[25] Ferry, Venkatasubramanian, Guérin, and Dahdah, The COVID-19 Crisis in India
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] See for example Anisha Circar, "India's coronavirus lockdown is bringing out the worst in its police force", *Quartz India*, March 28, 2020; Ankita Mukhopadhyay, "India: Police under fire for using violence to enforce coronavirus lockdown", *Deutsche Welle*, March 28, 2020; Tim Hume, "Indian Police Are Being Accused of Beating a Man to Death for Violating the Coronavirus Lockdown", *Vice News*, March 26, 2020
[29] See Sruthisagar Yamunan, "On Day 1 of nationwide lockdown, complaints about supply bottlenecks from across India", *Scroll.In*, March 25, 2020; Pragya Tiwari, "After the Lockdown, Fear and Chaos in India", *New York Times*, March 25, 2020
[30] See "Migrant workers in Surat resort to violence fearing lockdown extension", *India Today*, April 11, 2020; "India's lockdown extension sparks migrant worker protests ", *Financial Times*, April 15, 2020; Rohini Mohan, "Police violence and stranded migrants mark India's coronavirus lockdown", *The Straits Times*, March 30, 2020; "Migrant workers demanding to return to their homes in Surat torch tyres, vegetable carts", *Hindustan Times*, April 11, 2020
[31] Anisha Circar, "India's coronavirus lockdown is bringing out the worst in its police force", *Quartz India*, March 28, 2020
[32] See "India: Footage appears to show police attack on Jamia students", *Al-Jazeera*, February 16, 2020
[33] See Soutik Biswas, "Delhi riots: How Muslims' homes were targeted and burnt", *BBC News*, March 4, 2020
[34] See "Day 16 of coronavirus lockdown: Ground report from Indian cities", *Times of India*, April 9, 2020
[35] Mohammad Ali, "The Rise of a Hindu Vigilante in the Age of WhatsApp and Modi*", Wired,* April 14, 2020
[36] See K.S. Subramanian, "The Sordid Story of Colonial Policing in Independent India", *The Wire*, November 20, 2017
[37] See Depankar Basu, *Dominance of Majoritarian Politics and Hate Crimes Against Religious Minorities in India, 2009-2018*, Political Economy Research Institute Working Paper No. 493 (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019), 26
[38] See Depankar Basu's persuasive empirical study, Ibid.
[39] Sriharsha Devulapalli and Vishnu Padmanabhan, "India's police force among the world's weakest," *liveMint*, June 19, 2019
[40] Milan Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 10
[41] Vaishnav argues that the criminalization is a consequence of: (1) the rise of powerful criminals who had acted local power brokers to reap greater social and financial rewards, (2) political parties who wanted to cut their election costs by bringing in criminally suspect but financially powerful candidates, and (3) voters who might see criminal cases as "badges of honor" when the rule of law is weak and social divisions are high. Once in power, they would have little incentive then to "reform and professionalize" the police forces.
[42] Sriharsha Devulapalli and Vishnu Padmanabhan, "India's police force among the world's weakest," *liveMint*, June 19, 2019
[43] See Sandy Gordon, "Policing Terrorism in India", *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 50 (2008): 116; K.S. Subramanian, "The Sordid Story of Colonial Policing in Independent India", *The Wire*, November 20, 2017; Anisha Circar, "India's coronavirus lockdown is bringing out the worst in its police force", *Quartz India*, March 28, 2020
[44] See *Status of Policing in India Report 2018: A Study of Performance and Perceptions* (Delhi: Common Cause and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2018), 11
[45] See Mahes K. Nalla and Manish Madan, "Determinants of Citizens' Perceptions of Police–Community Cooperation in India: Implications for Community Policing", *Asian Criminology* 7 (2012): 290

[46] Arvind Verma, *The New Khaki: The Evolving Nature of Policing in India* (London: CRC Press, 2011), 1
[47] Data in this paragraph is from *Status of Policing in India Report 2019: Police Adequacy and Working Conditions* (Delhi: Common Cause and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2018), 80
[48] Zoha Waseem, "COVID-19 in South Asia: 'Hard policing' approach has left police ill-prepared to respond to a pandemic", *Policing Insight*, April 14, 2020
[49] *Status of Policing in India Report 2019*, 111
[50] Policing strength varies by states. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal's police forces are all extremely understaffed. The only states with police forces that meet the global standard are the police forces in the insurgency-affected states in the North-East and Punjab. See details in Sriharsha Devulapalli and Vishnu Padmanabhan, "India's police force among the world's weakest," *LiveMint*, June 19, 2019.
[51] See details in Ibid.
[52] Figures and data are from *Status of Policing in India Report 2019*
[53] Figures and data are from Ibid.
[54] "The shortcomings of India's police are not entirely their fault", *The Economist*, August 18, 2018
[55] Zoha Waseem, "COVID-19 in South Asia.