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# Individuals are more responsible for the spread of Covid-19 in India than the Government?

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## ABSTRACT

*It is an interesting debate as to who is more responsible for the spread of the Covid-19 virus in India- the individuals or the government. What caused the ghastly second wave? While I am deeply disappointed in our government for failing to provide an adequately strong health infrastructure or the lack of preparation to tackle the deadly second wave and instead indulging in blame-game and dirty politics, I must say that the spread can be contained or mitigated by the individuals' sense of responsibility and self-control. Without awareness and self-leadership from the individual level, any and every government action is likely to fail in the time of such a global pandemic which has, especially left India reeling under its second attack.*

*In a country like India where religious tourism is high and community gatherings for celebrating festivals record huge numbers, the government can set guidelines and issue health advisories, but it is actually up to all of us to take steps as individuals to follow the guidelines, take precautions and think about the impact of our own actions.*

*This article talks about the problem of responding to the pandemic in a democracy like ours just on the basis of government actions and no individual accountability, and further highlights the importance of self-leadership in the face of the deadly second wave. Further, it highlights how individual action can cause mitigation and why it is necessary especially in these tough times.*

**Keywords:** Covid, Pandemic, Individual Responsibility.

According to a study from researchers led by Professor Deirdre Hollingsworth at the University of Oxford and Professor Sir Roy Anderson at the Imperial College London in the UK, and Utrecht University and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands; how individuals respond to government advice on preventing the spread of COVID-19 is at least as important, if not more important, than government action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Individual response to COVID-19 'as important' as government action. (n.d.). Ox.Ac.Uk. Retrieved May 9, 2021, from <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-03-09-individual-response-covid-19-important-government-action>

In a country like India where religious tourism is high and community gatherings for celebrating festivals record huge numbers, the government can set guidelines and issue health advisories, but it is actually up to all of us to take steps as individuals to follow the guidelines, take precautions and think about the impact of our own actions. Even after restrictions from the government during the first wave, we have seen gatherings in our own circles. What happened when the Courts restricted pandal visits during Durga Puja in West Bengal? People went clubbing instead! Weddings, even when they were limited to fifty guests, were still a massive threat. I have seen so many people in my social media, get married with a massive guestlist even in the middle of the pandemic, and if that is not irresponsible, I don't know what is. If even one out of the fifty guests happens to test positive at some point or worse, if he or she turns out to be asymptomatic, imagine how the number of transmission will rise exponentially in this case. We had seen a surge in the number of cases after the controversial Tableeghi Jamaat in Delhi; or the Bhoomi puja of the Ayodha temple; or the Rath Yatra at Puri; or the most recent 2021 Bengal election circus and its aftermath, and in all of these, social distancing was a distant dream! We cannot even blame literacy here, because despite repeated health warnings and social media awareness drives, I see educated people flocking to bars or restaurants and putting up instagram posts with seemingly cool hashtags like “#CoronavirusThereNoCare” or going on “#Coronacations”! Can you believe it? People do not seem to understand that this is a global pandemic and not a vacation. Some of my friends have actually taken offense at my refusal to meet them when they very casually asked me to make plans as if this were just another time! So just like the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility in economics where a commodity loses its utility with increased consumption, the pandemic too has lost its gravity in most people's minds with boredom overriding panic and the typical “jo hoga dekha jayga” Indian attitude taking precedence. But the problem is that this attitude won't work here. I might be healthy and have a good immune system, so I step out with my friends for a coffee. What I need to understand is that I might just be an asymptomatic carrier of the virus and may unknowingly pass it on to somebody who is not so fortunate to survive it! This highlights the problem of responding to the pandemic in a democracy like ours just on the basis of government actions and no individual accountability.

I am definitely not saying that our government is not responsible; in fact, the government's lackadaisical attitude has a major role to play in the deadly second wave that India is experiencing. However, I am saying that it is on us to carry the responsibility within ourselves and do our part in the mitigation process. In fact, this is coming from a deep disappointment in our government. It is a proven fact that isolation is a key component of any pandemic fight.

Completely preventing infection and mortality is not possible, so this fight is about mitigation. In leadership studies, it is called “self-leadership”, which translates to the responsibility we take over our own actions. The current situation calls for reducing face-to-face interaction to an absolute minimum and limiting our use of public spaces. Even a small dinner with friends can be problematic at this point in the crisis, let alone clustering at parties or ceremonies. If we don't take up these responsibilities ourselves, the government will have to take harsher measures like imposing curfews and shoot-at-sight orders and that has its own set of drastic problems, which none of us want if we can avoid it. This is why self-leadership of citizens must go in tandem with whatever action is taken by the government to fight the pandemic. The more people bind themselves to rules of self-governance in periods of crisis, the more individual freedom we can preserve – even when we are in the eye of the storm. What we're seeing, both here in India and around the world, is governments walking a very fine line; attempting to balance society's health benefits with the potential economic costs of the pandemic, and to balance our personal freedoms with public restrictions for our own good. However, the more people flout these restrictions, the more likelihood there is of failure of any action that the government takes. Government actions like banning large events, closing workplaces, and insitutions, and or providing good diagnostic facilities and telephone helplines, will only be of limited effect without individual responsibility. The government can only do so much if there is lack of cooperation from the individual level. The aim of the social distancing measures is to "flatten the curve" of the infection, i.e., slowing the spread in the number of new infections. Containing the spread of an infectious disease relies on keeping the "reproduction number", i.e., the number of people infected by each infected person, below 1. That is when the pathogen will eventually die out. If it rises above 1, i.e. each infected person infects more than one other person, the pathogen will spread.<sup>3</sup>

The vaccination process is already underway, but it is likely to take some time before it can be effectively administered to everyone in a huge country like India, even assuming that the vaccines are successful in mitigating the effects of the virus. I am not even getting into the political turmoil in India with the government and political parties all playing blame-game and focusing on election and campaigning more than actually doing some work to slow the spread of the new deadly strain of the virus. The current situation of massive lack of health infrastructure, shortage of oxygen supplies, unprecedented number of cases as well as covid deaths, all paint a huge picture of the failure of the government in preparing for the second wave while there was time. Now it is needless to say that social distancing is therefore the most

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

important measure, with an individual's behaviour being the key factor. So while government-imposed sanctions are important, our own behaviour is the most crucial factor in the spread of the virus especially in a democracy like ours. Governments around the world are taking steps in order to avoid the ethical tragedy of doctors having to choose who to save. It is indeed a terrible choice and a terrible position to be in. We have seen this happening even in case of Italy and Spain, where reportedly only patients under 60 were getting ventilators because the healthcare system was overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup> Now we can only imagine what the state must be like in a country with a population like India's. In fact we don't even have to imagine- one look at the news or at social media is enough to instill ghastly images in our minds, where we are waking up to horrific news of rising number of deaths and pictures of burning funeral pyres all over our newsfeeds. And then, I see these people who are still carelessly going to restaurants or holding wedding ceremonies or finding innumerable shocking ways to flout the government restrictions. Honestly, who are we trying to fool?

Social distancing measures are heavily disruptive for the society as well as the economy, and thus, a balance has to be sought in how long they can be held in place. There are a lot of people who don't have a choice but to go out, maybe because of necessity or because their duty is such. So the ones amongst us that do have a choice, should avoid the unnecessary outings at least as a sense of solidarity to these frontline workers who putting their life at risk for the sake of the community. We can give it any name we like- be it common sense or self-leadership, but as citizens, we all have a responsibility to heed the current health advice and make it a point to stay at home. So the sacrifice we make as individuals is in order to protect ourselves, as well as everyone across the community or the country and even the world.

I would like to conclude with an example from Homer's 'The Odyssey', where the hero Odysseus binds himself to the mast of his ship while passing the alluring and deadly songs of the sirens. Odysseus is fully aware that he will be tempted by the sirens' song – but he also knows that it will lead him and his crew to shipwreck on the rocks. Thus, he ends up saving the ship by curtailing his own freedoms. Similarly, being responsible citizens of the country, it is the need of the hour to choose to confine ourselves to our homes as much as we can, in order to play our own part in reducing the spread of Covid-19; otherwise no matter how much action the government takes, they will only go in vain.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Maak, University of Melbourne. (2020, April 3). The COVID-19 responsibility we all own. Edu.Au; The University of Melbourne. <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-covid-19-responsibility-we-all-own>.