

Proposal for Organising ‘Public Inquiry Committees’ and ‘People’s Commission’ on COVID-19 Pandemic in India

It is less than six months since India saw the worst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the discussion already seems to have died down on why and how we lost so many lives in such a short span of time. What we heard instead, was the Union Minister of State for Health & Family Welfare, Dr Bharati Parvin Pawar, stating from the floor of the Parliament that there was no case of death reported from the states due to lack of oxygen shortage. Even as the collective trauma of past months lingers on, state governments continue to struggle to bring down the number of COVID-19 cases. The rate of vaccinations across the country is abysmally low, also due to the shortage of vaccines in the public sector. The entire country is living under the fear of an impending ‘third wave’ and millions remain crushed - both economically and otherwise. It seems as though the government has already ‘moved on’, without taking responsibility for the devastation caused by the pandemic or for the failure of governance. The only evidence of the Union Government engagement are the advertisements that congratulate the Prime Minister for the free vaccines and the excellent handling of the COVID situation.

The government of India used the pandemic as an opportunity to enforce archaic draconian anti-people laws like the Disaster Management Act, the Epidemic Diseases Act, Essential Services Maintenance Act and other such. Further, it put the entire country through an unprepared and a very harsh lockdown, leaving millions of the working classes and oppressed castes to fend for themselves amidst complete loss of livelihood. Alongside, the lockdown and the pandemic, became a tool to crush people’s protests like the anti-CAA-NRC movements, the students protests and farmer’s movement through trumped up charges and put civil rights activists and journalists behind bars.

The Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Yojana (the first Covid Relief package) and the second stimulus package were both characterized by their exclusion of the real victims of the lockdown like the migrant and casual labour, who hail from the underprivileged sections of the society (Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized communities).

Prime Minister Modi, at the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2021 announced that “India has been successful in saving so many lives, and saved the entire humanity from a big tragedy”. He went so far as to proclaim that “India not only solved it’s problems but also helped other nations to fight their pandemic too”. Evidently, the Government of India prematurely went on to proclaim victory over the pandemic, even as the second wave was setting in.

As of 13th September 2021, India reported 3,32,64,175 infections since the pandemic began and 4,42,874 covid related deaths, as reported by Reuters. But the New York Times looking at the death counts and infection fatality rate has put

India's toll at 0.6 million to 1.6 million. However, the government has refuted these claims despite state after state is reporting a very high number of 'excess deaths' during the pandemic.

The people of this country have been forced today to a point where they have no institution left that they can turn to, to hold this union government accountable for its deliberate false propaganda of winning the 'war against COVID', for not being firm on medical protocols, not preparing adequately for the second wave, punitive and ruthless suppression of information, permitting massive loot by the private hospitals and mismanaging the whole situation.

It is imperative that we do not allow this forever unfolding tragedy to limit us to numbers. We are aware that our people who died did not even get the dignity of being counted, nor were given dignified funerals. It is high time we asked, who was responsible for the crimson glow over the crematoriums and the bloated bodies in the Ganges? Who was responsible for the serpentine lines of ambulances in front of hospitals and for scores of images of people gasping for oxygen? Who was responsible for the river banks strewn with unmarked graves, the children made orphans, millions thrown into poverty and made bankrupt? We need to ensure that those responsible, don't get away with erasing the deaths of 4 lakh people in 60 days (official figures), while proudly putting up '*Thank You Prime Minister*' hoardings.

It is high time we the people exercise our rights as citizens to hold the government, its associated institutions and all those who are responsible for this crime against humanity, accountable. The need of the hour is to convert the pain, anger and suffering in each one of us, as we stood witness to a traumatic history, into a process that will ensure that such history is never repeated - to reiterate before all those in the highest echelons of power that, **WE DESERVE JUSTICE!**

Towards this, an all India meeting held on 1st August 2021, decided to propose 'Public Inquiry Committees' and 'Truth, Accountability & Justice Commission (People's Commission' on COVID-19 Pandemic in India).

This is to be noted that this initiative is not just another event or meant for a report launch but it's main principles lie in the process of creating public committees, empowering people's right to investigate/question and initiate a public process of state and private sector accountability.

The Idea & Proposal

Through the public Inquiry and commission, we want to focus on the impacts of the pandemic and the measures taken to handle the pandemic, like the lockdown. During the course of this process, we need to collectively emphasise the public

health impacts, broader impacts on society including those of education, economic impacts of the pandemic and lockdown. We must also interrogate the consequences of ill-planned government policies during the pandemic that led to the displacement, livelihood loss and other hardships on the people.

The pandemic, though was primarily a health crisis, cascaded its deadly impacts on almost every aspect of our lives - due to the way in which it was dealt with. There is a need to investigate each of these impacts since no efforts have been made by the government to investigate the mass suffering due to COVID-19 and lockdown related miseries caused to people. Hence this responsibility of holding the powers accountable falls on the public. In order to build this collective process, we need to have different approaches and methodologies to carry out the initiative successfully. Hence, it is proposed that the Public Inquiry Committees will engage with the direct impacts of every aspect of the pandemic on the ground and the People's Commission will take up the investigation of state response to the pandemic and other broader issues.

Public Inquiry Committee:

The **Public Inquiry Committees** - The soul of the committee lies in the basic idea of "we the people, by the people, for the people". It is proposed that we form multiple committees across the country at village/panchayat/ward/district, city and regional levels. The committees will be constituted by people from all spheres of life. The committees will uncover the sufferings of different strata of people by collecting and compiling the complaints and then investigating the same. The committee will work towards strengthening the voices of people who have been wronged by governance or the lack of it. The complaints can be with regard to the handling of the crisis by the government/s (union and state governments), medical institutions, judiciary, bureaucracy, media, pharmaceuticals, hoarders, etc. We request each one of you who believes in holding the government accountable, join the public inquiry committee.

People's Commission:

The People's Commission members or the People's Commissioners, will be appointed by civil society groups and the PICs jointly. In each state, the commissioners will have representation from different areas of expertise, including doctors, jurists, economists, academia and other concerned citizens. The People's Commission will perform the task of assisting and guiding the PICs, while also engaging with broader research, data compilation, etc with the help of thematic research teams. The Commissioners will also be part of different public hearings in their respective states.

Let us come together

Investigate and Expose the Truth
Hold the Government Accountable
Provide Justice to the Dead and Living

We need people to actively contribute in these following areas-

- Groups that have been involved in voluntary civic actions during the COVID crisis, kindly encourage the people in your network to form committees in different geographical areas.
- If you know of initiatives that operated helplines during any phase of the Pandemic or conducted people interface efforts like surveys, please link up and also encourage them to share knowledge and data with us.
- As networks/unions / national/regional organisations /Community based organisations, encourage your networks to reach out to members and take lead to form committees in areas of your work.
- If you are a Research organization / an academic/a journalist, contribute by taking themes of research and knowledge building.
- If you are a student/researcher kindly volunteer to strengthen the committees and commissions as volunteers

All India Working Group
Public Inquiry Committees / People's Commission on COVID-19

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