

Life in the Time of the Lockdown: The Effects of the First Lockdown in India and the Resilience to Bounce Right Back

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ABSTRACT

Background: The year 2020 will be remembered as the year of the worst pandemic till time immemorial to ever engulf mankind. The world saw many stages of the fatal complexities of the COVID-19 virus. Different countries shared the horror that the virus entailed. India, as a growing economy and an overpopulated state, faced one of the biggest catastrophes ever to be witnessed by the nation. Resources became limited and livelihood became difficult to attain with the sudden lockdown imposed at the end of March, 2020. Even though the country was under complete lockdown for a marginally short period, life as we know it has changed drastically for all. This paper explores the hardships and apprehensions faced by people during the first lockdown, followed by their adjustment into the new normal as phases of unlock commenced. **Materials and Methods:** Over 7000 responses have been tabulated, assessed and discussed, covering working and non-working professionals, homemakers and students. The paper further attempts to analyse the dilemma and constraints faced as life moves forward in different sectors, with a renewed variant of the virus resurfacing every year and the pan-country vaccination drives. This paper uses qualitative analysis of empirical as well as secondary data to draw inferences. **Results:** The questions targeted the stress related to future goals, social interaction and sustainability. **Conclusion:** The paper concludes with a comparative investigation of the different timelines and the way forward.

Keywords: COVID-19, Lockdown, New Normal, Pandemic, Novel Coronavirus

Life in India took an unexpected turn right around the time the country was getting ready to celebrate Holi, a prominent Hindu festival, in the year 2020. The novel coronavirus had changed life on Earth as we know it. Since the beginning of its spread, it has been a complete pandemonium. Countries with excellent healthcare systems were collapsing under the tolling death rate caused by the COVID virus. The pernicious virus was evolving rapidly and killing in great numbers. By the time India became affected by it, first-world countries like Italy had already lost almost 5,000 (Deodia, 2020) of its citizens. In the light of these events, India went into a sudden lock-down, overnight. Within hours life came to an absolute standstill. In the first phase, the lockdown was imposed for 21 days (Chaudhary & Pradhan, 2020). This decision was implemented so suddenly that thousands were stranded, away from home, with no work and no future in sight. Migrant

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workers gathered in tens of thousands at bus terminals (Khanna, 2020) to find their way back home. Due to the imposition of travel restrictions, millions of migrant workers were forced to walk back home, thousands of kilometres away (Biswas, 2020).

Industries like IT and education that could operate through online mediums transitioned as smoothly as possible, while sectors like aviation closed down abruptly. This led to immediate and grave economic losses, incurred by all, that in turn affected the national economy adversely (Garg et al, 2021). Chaudhary et al (2020) predicted an almost 25% decline, i.e., a loss of 18 billion dollars to the aviation industry alone. Only after two months of lockdown, the State had to declare phases of unlock despite the still existing threat of the virus, in order to sustain whatever semblance of an economy that remained. While these phases of lockdown and unlock were going on, the common Indian man faced a gamut of unexpected circumstances. There was vagueness regarding what was to come, there was uncertainty as to when things would go back to normal and there was a severe lack of accurate information with regard to the severity, cause and how to shield oneself from the deadly virus. As a result, there was a reported deterioration of mental health throughout the country. Roy et al (2020) argued that even frontline workers are perplexed by this unprecedented situation, which takes a toll not just on their personal and professional lives but also puts them in a grave moral dilemma since there was no right choice or decision. Every step was an attempt to fend off the unknown crisis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current research offers a look into the psychosocial effects of the first lockdown, with reference to work-related futures, sustainability and general well-being. The lockdown extended from March 25th, 2020 to May 31st, 2020. Starting from June 1st, many businesses reopened, with strict government guidelines on the capacity of the workforce and general conduct. The data evaluated here were collected during the term of the lockdown when many Indian states had yet to report COVID deaths. The research covers different aspects of both the professional and personal lives of people throughout the country, from different states. A questionnaire consisting of thirty questions was circulated via an online medium by means of a snowball sampling to cumulate the following data. The questions are divided into categories of stress related to work, availability of resources and limited social interaction. The population was divided into students, working professionals, unemployed individuals and stay at home adults. The working professionals have been further divided into employees, private practitioners, business owners and retired personnel. The data collected from the students have already been analysed for the purposes of a different research. The data from all the other professions shall be scrutinised and discussed here. The questions targeted the stress related to future goals, social interaction and sustainability. The response was received from over seven thousand Indian citizens. Table 1 gives a complete bifurcation of the number of responses received from different divisions of the population.

Table 1 Division of respondents on the basis of their profession

S.No.	Profession of the Respondent	Number of responses	
1	Students	4241	
2	Working Professionals	2844	
		Employees	1933
		Private Practitioner	829
		Retired Personnel	82

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S.No.	Profession of the Respondent	Number of responses
3	Stay-at-home	393
4	Unemployed	11
	TOTAL RESPONSES	7488

Findings And Analysis

The result computed from the data thus collected has been presented in the tabular and graphical form hereunder. The calculations show clear upward changes in stress levels over different aspects of the day-to-day life of the respondents.

	Working professionals / Business owners (829)		Employees (1933)		Retired personnel (82)	
	BEFORE	DURING	BEFORE	DURING	BEFORE	DURING
Less than 4	81	258	171	527	55	24
4-6	162	162	264	399	5	8
6-8	288	82	807	303	6	3
More than 8	298	61	691	284	16	4
Not working at all		258		420		43

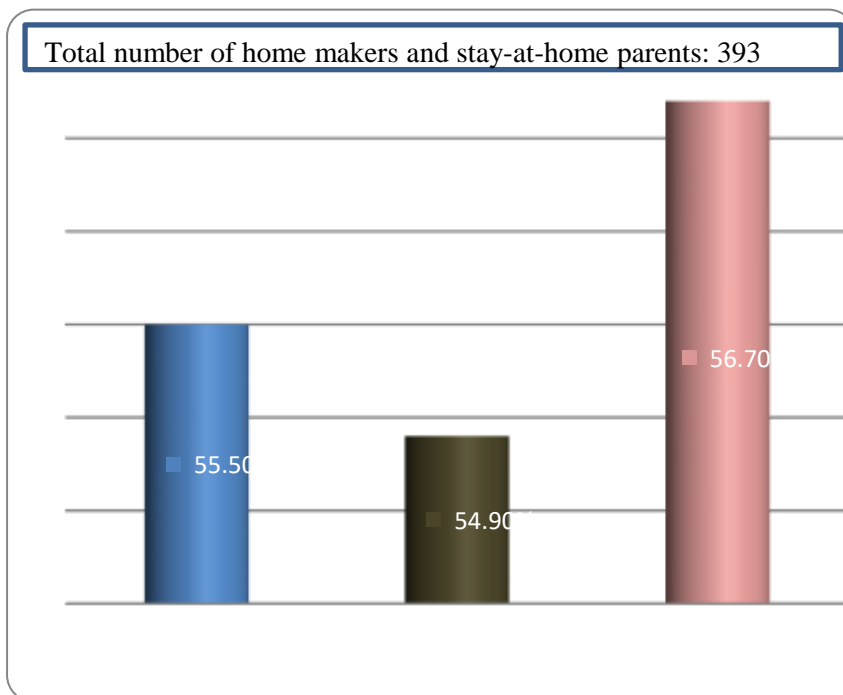
Result Table 1: Difference in working hours before and during lockdown

The data in result table 1 show that the productivity of people at the place of work has taken a definitive hit as they moved to the work from home or online working patterns. The lockdown was so sudden that no preparation could be made for what was to come. “After weeks of dithering, India had just been served with four hours of notice” (Ray & Subramanian, 2020). Studies conducted on struggles and well-being during the lockdown elaborate on this diminishing productivity while juggling life and work within the confines of home. Papandrea & Azzi (2021) reported in their research that work from home during the pandemic adds excessively to the already burdensome lives of workers. They argue that home lives include taking care of dependents as well as organising the daily chores. Fitting in work while tending to the children or the ill is onerous and drains away from the well being, both mental and physical, of the breadwinners.

There has been a remarkable increase in mental health concerns of children and young adults during the insecurity and ambiguity of the pandemic (Express New Service, 2021). The closing of schools and other educational institutions has affected their well-being and overall development as well as put extra responsibility on the parents for their well-being (Gogoi, 2021). Chung et al (2020) talked about the gender difference among heterosexual couples who shifted to the online mode of working. They reported extra burden being shouldered by women. Statistically, women were doing a lot more, sometimes even all the household chores while managing their work requirements (Deshpande, 2020). In comparison, men showed even lesser involvement in housework during the lockdown as opposed to their pre-COVID involvement. Instances like these led to frequent instances of domestic unrest and violence (The Print Team, 2020), breaking homes and disrupting family life for all and sundry. 58% of the respondents who were staying at home parents reported an unnecessary

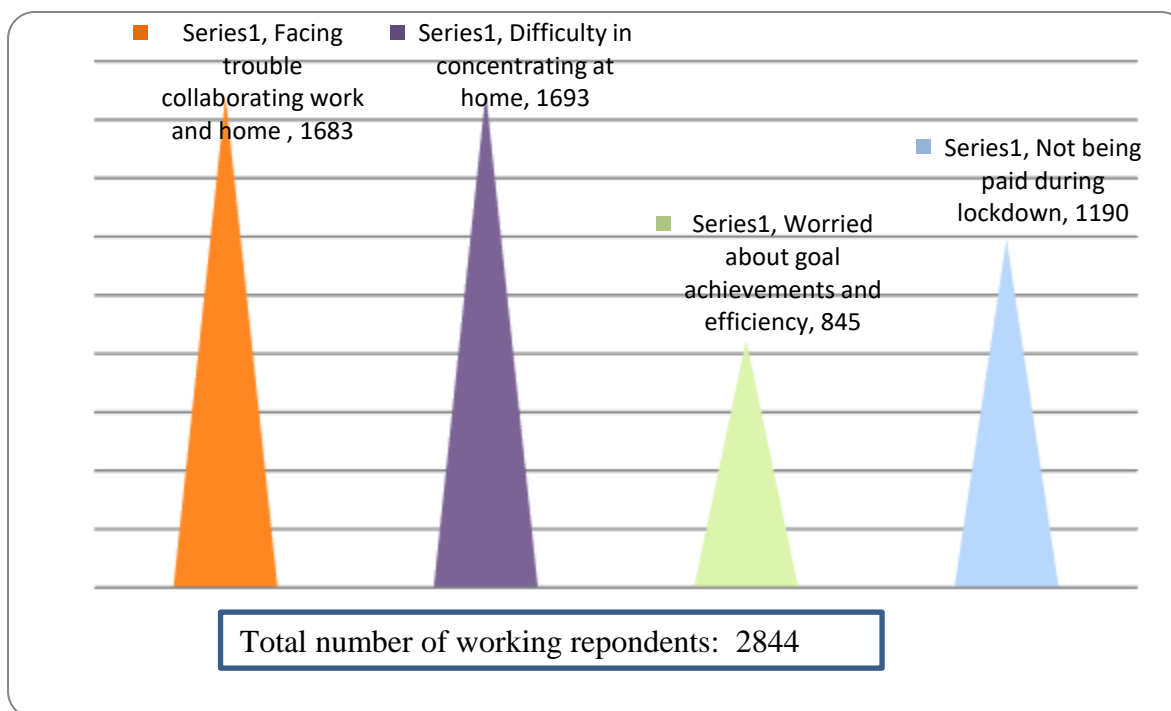
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and unfathomable increase in stress levels in the household. They further reported a crisis over finding items of daily need and fear of running out of provisions. Graph 1 shows that one of the primary concerns of homemakers was regarding the daily struggle of feeding and keeping their families.



The status grew more calamitous when the unlock phases started from June 1st, despite no measurable control over the spread of the virus could be assured. There was no compassion or concern from the employers, who called in their staff members to the workplace, without taking all necessary precautions and providing no support for infected members. The healthcare in the country was already overstrained and there were no more beds available. More and more job-holders were losing their jobs left, right and centre. As Graph 2 shows, about 42% of employees did not receive any payment for the work done during the 2 or so months of lockdown. Employers were reluctant to hire out of station workers (Mulye, 2020). Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director of Human Rights Watch, urged the Indian government to fulfil its responsibility to protect and ensure that the poor are given access to food and healthcare and not mistreated or stigmatised (Human Rights Watch, 2020). However, it was not just the marginalised struggling to make ends meet. The middle-class working people faced various kinds of stressors while struggling to keep their work and personal life on track.

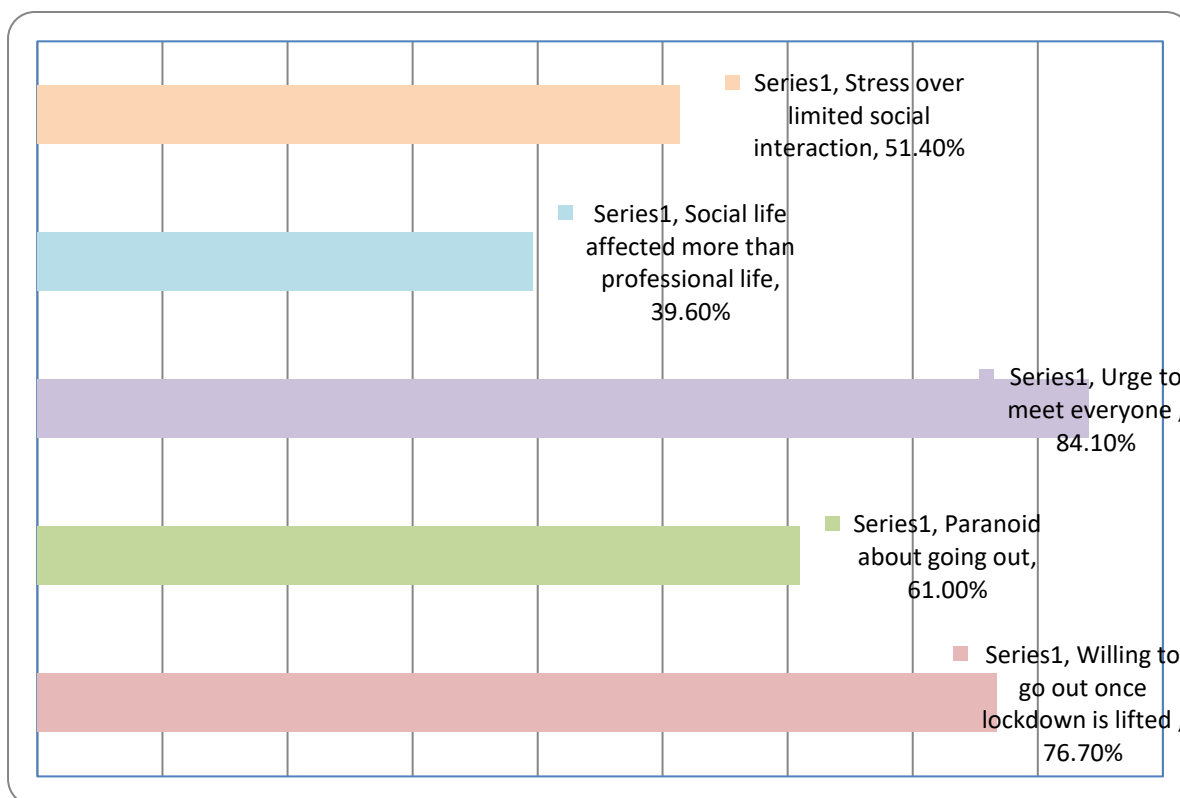
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Graph 2 Percentage of people facing trouble at work

Those who did manage to keep their jobs faced many work-related pressures, failures and insecurities. As can be further seen from the data represented in Graph 2, work-related efficiency became a major concern for many. Almost 20% of the respondents stated that their salaries were dependent on their performance during the lockdown or on the economic state of the country. As news of people losing their jobs circulated, the fear of being fired increased and added to the already traumatised work experience. Another strenuous outcome of the pandemic is the sudden increase in toxic productivity. Akhter & Vaidyanathan (2020) explain how toxic productivity, like the hustle culture, is “an unhealthy and extreme obsession to be productive”. The onset of the pandemic was so abrupt and unprecedented that no mode of working seemed any better. The frontline workers were at threat of contracting the fatal virus, while those who were working from home had no job security. In the midst of an economic crisis, there was also grave fear, sometimes valid, sometimes baseless, of not finding the necessary supplies for the survival of the individuals and their family members, as Graph 1 illustrates. Yet there was a simultaneous horde to come out triumphant at the end of the pandemic, whenever that might be. This meant before the pandemic ends, one must learn a new skill, achieve multivariate goals and in general have a report card with flying colours to prove their utility. Both these extremes of paranoia and overblown motivation were doing nothing for the mental health of the common working class of the country.

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Graph 3 Responses to the lockdown and social distancing

Apart from professional and family life, the isolating and lonely nature of the pandemic also added to worry vis-a-vis social interactions and interpersonal relationships. As seen in graph 3, about 85% of people reported an urge to meet people despite the nationwide lockdown owing to a global pandemic. In a follow-up survey, almost 50% accepted that they flouted the lockdown guidelines to meet their relatives and friends. The restricted social movement and communication did receive a less than happy response from the general public. Some were flouting the rules openly while the others tried to move around under the garb of delivering necessary supplies to their elderly relatives. Almost 40% of people showed distress over a limited social life, while only 24% were concerned about work being affected. The rest reported activities like shopping being restricted the most. Along with stunted social exchanges, another major stressor turned out to be the fear of contracting the virus. Although 61% of people reported being sceptical about leaving their homes even after the lockdown was lifted, there were 76.70% respondents who were willing to be up and about once permitted. Some of the primary reasons that the public had a confused stance about the pandemic were lack of accurate information, superfluity of misinformation and mystification of reality. In the first year, many non-scientific and fantastic origin stories and totems to combat COVID 19 were being circulated in the nation. This led to misreading the enormity of the situation, encompassing false optimism and behaving recklessly in social situations.

From the information collected and evaluated above, the general mental state of the public can be discerned. There was a lot of chaos and terror when the sudden lockdown was imposed. However, right after the first 21-day lockdown was extended (Choudhary, 2020); people began to show a more casual approach to the pandemic. People could be seen out on the road, without masks, not following the protocol of social distancing. The Indian Prime

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Minister called for a “Taali, thaali bajao” stint in March 2020 (BusinessToday.in, 2020) to commemorate the frontline COVID warriors, followed by the call to light earthen lamps (Pandey, 2020) to fight the coronavirus. As Shekhar Gupta (2020) puts it, “the people, if anything, had over-delivered on his call.” The public, once they had fulfilled both the above-mentioned tasks genuinely believed that they were free from the virus-scare for good. The lax mass attitude that ensued thus, in addition to the impossibility of imposing sanctions for flouting rules over a population of 1.3 billion people led to a rapid increase in exposure, contamination and fatality due to the coronavirus. Following this apathy from co-citizens, the public aware and scared of the virus faced higher levels of stress and terror than they did during the lockdown. This entire ordeal of the first wave of COVID-19 and the lockdown followed by negligent, undemocratic behaviour of the public emphasises on a severe reluctance to register the gravity of the conditions (Press Trust of India, 2021).

THE WAY FORWARD

Despite the devastation and loss of life, India, as a country, was one of the first underdeveloped nations to go into the “unlock” mode in the year 2020. Being the second most populated country and a developing economy, the country needed to reopen all forms of trade and commerce before long, owing to the sudden nosedive in the economy. At the beginning of June, 2020, the government directed unlocking in different phases (DNA, 2020). Life in the country swiftly came back to normal where people were quick to discard their masks and take no notice of social distancing. This was probably the reason why the second wave of the pandemic in early 2021 was preceded by congestion and overflowing tourists in prime tourist locations of the country (Das, 2021). The second wave caused greater devastation, with the death of younger populations. Yet, despite wave after wave of lockdown, the country seems to be ready to bounce back. The citizens seem more keen on vacation plans than on getting themselves vaccinated. A majority of the population has been vaccinated, yet there remain those choicest few who still deny the existence of a fatal virus as well as the efficacy of the vaccines.

CONCLUSION

The novel coronavirus is being considered one of the deadliest viruses that mankind has come across. It has been compared to the Spanish Flu of the previous century (Annapurni, 2021) which also returned for a second and third wave. The COVID virus has similarly mutated and returned for another wave in 2021. India is currently overcoming the fatal second wave, with more widespread deaths and preparing for the third wave with the delta variant of the virus. It has been over 18 months that life in the country has been affected. Some places reopened intermittently around the end of the year 2020 but had to shut down again at the beginning of 2021. Some places shut down for good. People lost their jobs, their businesses, even their homes. A lot of disruption within families was reported, with everyone cramped under the same roof for days in the end. Interpersonal differences led to frequent discords, which led to tension among family members. There was no way to let off steam as a movement within and outside the city was restricted. Any subsequent behaviour was a high-wrung reaction to the disabling regulations imposed. Public behaviour in the sporadic moments of unlocks or relaxation to lockdown rules has been erratic, to say the least. The recent overflow of tourists in the tourism hotspots in Himachal Pradesh (Sharma, 2021) and Uttarakhand (Pakrasi, 2021), while COVID cases were still prevalent show a resigned and erroneously buoyant stance of the general masses. This research depicts only the beginning of these two years of constrained, stifling, an almost dystopian lifestyle that has become "the new normal". Understandably, when it all began people were scared,

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unprepared and confused about their personal lives, social relationships, work and career growth and the future that seemed bleak. Over the two years that are now being called the "COVID years", life has settled down as best as it could, given the circumstances. The shift to the online mode of working has become more comfortable as awareness and literacy into work from home has increased. Face-to-face interactions are allowed with certain caveats like masks and social distancing, as numerous workplaces have reopened. Meanwhile, certain restrictions are still intact. Despite the recurring crisis, the lockdown has led to a relatively better understanding of this pandemic and there have been attempts made to normalise the situation to whatever extent possible in these devastating times. There has been an enhanced awareness of mental health and well-being, and the choice of a healthy life and good immunity has become the new trend. The road ahead is still uncertain, but there is still hope that the human capacity to heal will help overcome this hurdle soon.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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