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THE BOTTOM LINE

Partha Kar: “Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani”—the anguish of the Indian diaspora

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I have a strong sense of déjà vu, witnessing the scenes of carnage in India as covid rips through the country. Perhaps I'm feeling the pain more intensely because, having seen the impact that covid had in January in the country where I live, I'm now seeing it replicated in the country where my heart lies.

Thousands in the Indian diaspora—especially those working in the NHS—are watching with similar, heart wrenching anguish and worry about families and friends. It's frustrating, as somehow India seemed to have dodged the bullet the first time around. Yet a toxic mixture of political myopia, religious sentiments, and perhaps a degree of overconfidence has culminated in a mostly self-inflicted rise of covid-19 and its subsequent impact.

A misplaced sense of nationalism has also played its part. Nationalism may have a place in a debate about the outcome of a cricket match. But borders dividing nations mean little to a virus, and the UK experience should have served as a lesson to other countries.

In some quarters, the response to covid-19 has been about being somehow “better” than other countries—the exact same discussion that keeps raising its head in the UK. Rather than learning from mistakes, the reaction has been to think, “We got this right; you didn't.” With such jingoistic debate in a world with a desperate need to work as one, we all stood to lose. And we did. The UK's decision to encourage festive shopping in December and allow Christmas gatherings to go ahead was devastating for communities, and hospitals just about managed to cope with the demand only by cancelling most other activities.

Yet India decided to ignore that. Bring in the Kumbh Mela, political rallies, ill informed leaders, a rapidly spreading mutant variant, and a cricket match attended by 75 000 spectators, and you have a potent mix. Then add in a health infrastructure crying out for greater investment, and the touchpaper was lit.

Some amazing, committed, and hardworking individuals work in India's health sector. But they do so mostly on the margins of possibility, using creativity to bridge the gaps between the needs of a huge population and the availability of appropriate interventions. In a pandemic wave, that system simply didn't stand a chance. Witnessing this has been the culmination of fears that many healthcare professionals from India have always harboured. The present horrific scenes and statistics also have a feel of déjà vu, with some quarters looking at data through different lenses to justify them—or indeed compare

them to other countries—along with the narrative that “we are not as bad as other places.”

Families devastated by covid perhaps wish that there had been a willingness to learn from the missteps of countries such as the UK or the US, as this saga might have been avoided. But India is an incredibly resilient country, and it will get past this. Let us hope that this experience will pave the way for increased healthcare investment, in a country where healthcare professionals could make magic with their skill and ingenuity.

I ask all of you to keep this country in your thoughts and prayers as it battles through a low ebb: a country of proud individuals, a country with a warm heart, vibrancy, and joy, let down by hubris in its time of need. However much I commit my life to work in the UK, my heart still beats for India—or, as the Bollywood saying goes, “Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani.”

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