

India is used to tragedy and pain. That does not mean it is inured to it.

The New York Times recently quoted an Indian who had witnessed COVID-19 patients dying from lack of oxygen. He described the situation with a horrible intensity: "Have you seen a fish out of water? It's unimaginable. Just like a fish out of water."

Those who know India were surprised that the first round of COVID to strike the country did not do more harm. The inhabitants of its huge cities live in crowded and confined spaces. Overall, the country's public health structure is weak and in rural areas, rudimentary. Most of its people are poor.

The second COVID outbreak struck with a vengeance. The reported figures are well over 300,000 new cases and more than 2000 deaths a day. Most observers believe these figures are conservative.

The reasons for the upsurge are manifold. One is that Indians, particularly its youthful population, got careless about social distancing. Another is that its vaccination campaign has been unable to keep up with the country's massive population of about 1.3 billion.

Moreover, Prime Minister Modi's government has not distinguished itself. It has allowed melas, or huge Hindu religious festivals, to go ahead, one of which, the Kumbh Mela, attracts over 50 million pilgrims. He has declined to curtail government party rallies being held as part of this year's state elections.

There are also concerns about a possibly more virulent new variant of the virus termed B.1.617, which has a so-called double mutation.

Demonstrating both the government's desperation and its regrettable inclination towards autocracy, over the weekend it banned on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, social media posts critical of its handling of the pandemic.

The forecasts are dire – that the number of cases per day could peak in May at about 500,000 with commensurate deaths. Some private but well-informed views suggest much higher infection rates – as high as 1 million cases per day.

The shattering impact of the pandemic on India has already got the geopolitical savants thinking. What will it mean for Modi's political fortunes? Does it have implications for India's strategic posture?

The more immediate issue for India's neighbours and allies is what we do about it.

India is important to Australia.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, India is now our third biggest source of migrants after England and China. It's the world's sixth largest economy by nominal GDP and third largest as measured by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). It is our eighth biggest trading partner and fifth biggest export market.

With the rise of China, India has become central to our strategic policy focus – demonstrated by our joint membership of the Quad group of countries (the others being the United States and Japan).

For a country that takes pride in having significantly reduced its reliance on foreign assistance, it has taken the difficult step of seeking help from abroad to help it respond better to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 25, the Biden administration announced that the US would provide to India materials used in the manufacture of vaccines as well as ventilators, test kits and personal protective equipment (PPE). Britain and other countries are following suit.

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The government is expected to announce tomorrow that Australia's contribution will include personal protective equipment, ventilators and other necessary medical supplies.

One can correctly claim that India might have better managed the crisis. But that is beside the point. We have all made mistakes in our handling of this pandemic. Australia's response to India must be generous, even if it stretches our capacity.

We owe it to India not just for strategic reasons but because it is the right thing to do in a humanitarian crisis.

As well as providing material aid, the government needs to consider the estimated 8000 Australian citizens stranded in India. Instead of looking at cutting back evacuation flights, we should be helping these people return home.

Some of our state governments might wish to think a bit more, not only beyond their borders, but beyond Australian shores. Our problems are negligible compared with countries like India.

It is understandable that we need to keep Australians safe, but in current circumstances that includes bringing home stranded citizens. One way of doing this would be to allow aircraft carrying relief supplies, empty on return flights, to bring back our citizens.

In the end, what we do on India will show whether our inclination as a country is essentially Australia First or more than that – a recognition that through location, generally sound management and luck, we have come out well and, as internationalists, it is time to share our luck.

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