



Release from lockdown and revenge tourism; where did the communication go wrong?

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In May, there was a shortage of hospital beds. In July, there is a shortage of hotel rooms. We have come a long way in the last few weeks. We are, however, still in the midst of the pandemic. In Himachal Pradesh, there are choked roads, unprecedented traffic jams, midway hold-ups on the national highways, and parking lots brimming with the vehicles of tourists. India is experiencing a release from lockdown triggering a sort of “revenge tourism.”¹

In tourist destinations all over India, one can find similar scenarios. With hotels running at 100% occupancy last weekend, many tourists had to spend the night in their vehicles as they could not find any available hotel rooms in Shimla, the capital city of Himachal Pradesh. This has not just compromised seamless movement of the vehicles, but also made it impossible to adhere to Covid-appropriate behaviour. The police in Shimla have begun enforcing a fine of two million rupees for mask violations, suggesting an unwillingness to conform to the rules.

Fortunately, this was not the case during the first phase of the pandemic. People faithfully adhered to the strict guidelines as a result of an excellent communication strategy across the entire country of India.² The communication was clear, consistent, and largely focused on individual and community actions. The community responded because the messaging exhibited a hierarchy of information by ensuring the latest

¹ Covid What? Tourists Choke Roads, Hotels in Himachal Post Lockdown. Available online at: <https://www.outlookindia.com> › Website › National.

² Sunil Kumar Raina & Yaneer Bar-Yam. Was India saved by staying below the critical travel threshold and was lockdown and travel restriction the most important public health intervention? Available online at: <https://www.endcoronavirus.org>.

updates and the dismantling of myths were communicated well. Several key components of these messages were to provide an emphasis on certain words, cautiously used adverbs, and to deliver the message in its entirety. One message that was commonly played on radio was: “The relaxation of the lockdown has been announced by the government and not by the coronavirus.”

If India was worried about migrant labourers trekking long distances to reach their destinations and bringing Covid-19 infections with them last, it should be more worried about its middle class this year. When the cases have started falling to less than 40,000 per day from a peak of 0.4 million per day, the acceptance of the inevitability of a resurgence is baffling. A common refrain heard from people on the road is “It is two months of freedom! Let us enjoy ourselves!”

So where have we gone wrong? Fueled by our inability to predict a surge in cases leading to the second wave, we went into an overdrive to define the probability of timing of the third wave.³ This has been the most commonly talked about phenomenon in Indian media for the last month or so. The message being communicated to the masses from these debates is simply that “the third wave is inevitable and we are again heading for a lockdown in 2-3 months,” So, despite restrictions on travel, people are flocking to tourist destinations in huge numbers as if to prove right those predicting a third wave. Although top Indian leaders continue pushing out messaging that encourages restraint, it appears that people have become resistant to this messaging and want a release.

Revenge tourism is here, waiting for revenge from the coronavirus.

³ Could not predict exact nature of Covid second wave: Scientists working on mathematical models. Available online at: <https://www.livemint.com>.