

‘Living in two realities’: Indian diaspora reckons with crisis abroad



By Fenit Nirappil and Ambreen Ali
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Avani Singh hops on Zoom around 11 p.m. every night with her mother in New Jersey and uncle in India, strategizing how to keep her coronavirus-stricken grandfather alive.

They already managed to get K.S. Walia, 94, out of a New Delhi emergency room where Singh said a worker demanded an \$8 bribe to keep oxygen running. A different hospital where her grandfather is now admitted said

the family would need to find oxygen and remdesivir, a drug that reduces recovery time, themselves, Singh said.

Before starting a new search last weekend, Singh, a 28-year-old consultant, walked her dog in her Arlington, Va., neighborhood where people lined up to get inside a rooftop tiki bar and a group pedaled by on a party bike, drinking beer. She returned to her apartment and stayed up until 2 a.m. scouring Instagram for phone numbers of Indians who might have oxygen and getting no replies to a flurry of messages.

Singh is among thousands of Americans struggling to help Indian relatives survive a catastrophic coronavirus surge that has caused the health-care system to collapse. The desperation of families in India has spread across time zones and borders as families fend for themselves in search of hospital beds, oxygen canisters and basic medication.

[Indians desperate for oxygen and hospital beds turn to Twitter]

“There was a huge disconnect where I felt very angry that the world isn’t paying attention, and would it be different if it was White bodies piling up on the streets?” Singh recalled. “How am I supposed to go about my normal day?”

This is the split-screen pandemic in the U.S., where vaccine selfies flood social media feeds and newly vaccinated families are reuniting as many are struggling to help loved ones with coronavirus around the world access medical care. Millions of Indian Americans now grapple with the horrors of one of the worst virus waves since the pandemic started. Several described feeling dissonance as normalcy returns in the U.S. while their WhatsApp accounts blow up with death announcements and pleas for help from loved ones and strangers in their country of origin.



K.S. Walia, left, with his granddaughter, Avani Singh, in India. (Family photo)

The ongoing crisis in India and the fallout in the United States illustrates how the global pandemic will continue to inflict misery even if infections plunge inside American borders. A nation of immigrants, and one so interconnected to the world through family, trade and culture, America still reels from lives lost as coronavirus ravages a mostly unvaccinated world, including in South America, where a variant-driven surge in Brazil has rapidly spread to other countries.

[Brazil has become South America's superspreader event]

“It’s almost like you’re living in two realities: one where things are getting better in the United States, and one abroad, where the situation is terrible,” said Sadaf Jaffer, the former mayor of heavily South Asian Montgomery Township, N.J. “It’s an extra burden that people who have connections on the other part of the world bear because they know how bad things are there.”

About 4 million Americans are of Indian descent, the third largest immigrant group behind Mexican- and Chinese Americans. They are among the most highly educated and paid immigrant groups, enabling them to help middle class and wealthy Indian relatives who are better positioned than poor Indians to buy access to care. They are also using their growing political and cultural power in the U.S. to raise alarms about the crisis.

Indian American doctors and public health experts who gained prominence during the pandemic are using their platforms to demand U.S. intervention. The Indian-born chief executives of Google and Microsoft pledged millions to address oxygen shortages. Indian American political groups and members of Congress have pressured President Biden to ramp up assistance.

Ashish Jha, the Indian-born dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, has been among the loudest voices clamoring for to U.S. to treat the Indian crisis as an American crisis, penning an op-ed for The Washington Post and frequently tweeting on the topic to 200,000 followers.

“Because India is so global, any strain of virus that gains set advantage — more contagious, more deadly or able to spread more efficiently — will not only become dominant there, but quickly become global,” Jha said in an interview.

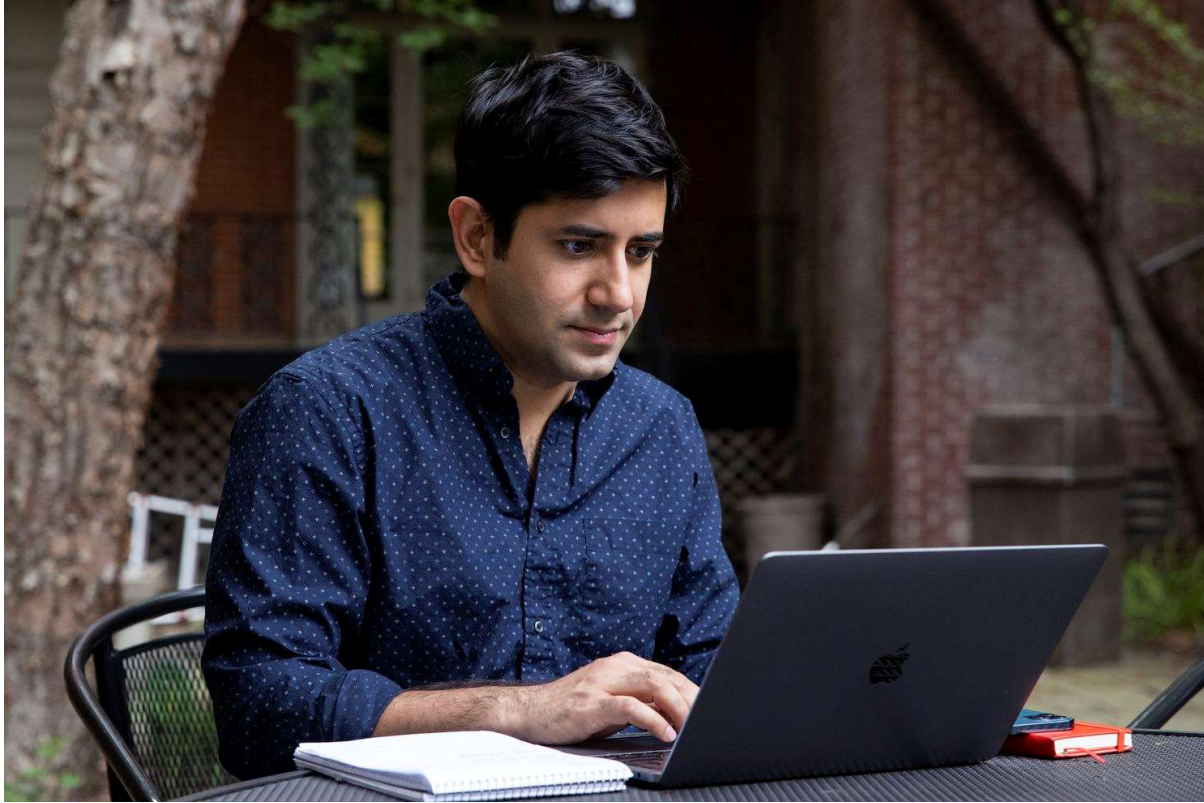
The Biden administration over the last week announced a series of actions to ship raw vaccine material, oxygen and therapeutics to India. Supply shipments began arriving Thursday.

Milan Vaishnav, director of the South Asian program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said an increasingly politically engaged movement of Indian Americans deserves credit for tapping their growing influence among elected officials and prodding the administration into action.

“The diaspora is still relatively new and relatively small, but I do think it punches above its weight,” Vaishnav said.

Indian American Impact, an advocacy group founded in 2016 that also donates to South Asian candidates was among the groups contacted by the White House as it formulated an India response. It is circulating a petition calling on the Biden administration to set aside half of all surplus vaccines for India.

“We are getting to the point where those in power are recognizing our power, and that I think gives us a voice and a seat at the table in a way we haven’t had before,” said Neil Makhija, the group’s executive director.



Neil Makhija is executive director of the Indian American Impact advocacy group, which was contacted by the White House as it formulated its response to India's coronavirus surge. (Rachel Wisniewski for The Washington Post)

Sanjay Puri, a tech executive who chairs the U.S. India Political Action Committee, noted the growing presence of Indian Americans in high-ranking government positions, including four members of Congress, Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, who has talked about losing relatives in India to the virus and Vice President Harris, whose mother was from South India. Harris, who has relatives living in India, on Friday called the crisis a “great tragedy.”

“It’s just been an evolution — you build a farm team and get stars and superstars and now you have a vice president,” Puri said. “There’s a realization that India is a strategic partner in that region from an economic standpoint, from a political standpoint. ... It does help to have Indian Americans who can explain these points.”

Some Indian Americans have called on Biden to go further, including sharing patents to develop generic coronavirus vaccines, which is opposed by U.S. drug manufacturers, and sending surplus vaccines to India. The Biden administration announced it would give other countries up to 60

million AstraZeneca vaccines that have not been authorized for use in the U.S., but did not say how many would go to India.

The administration said Friday it will restrict travel from India starting May 4.

Others want the U.S. government to take a harder line against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who faces widespread criticism for his response to the ongoing crisis. Before the surge, Modi lifted virtually all restrictions and held massive political rallies. The Indian government ordered Twitter to hide posts critical of its response.

[In India's devastating coronavirus surge, anger at Modi grows]

“We need to be calling out the regime and putting national pressure to stop this because they know they can get away with this,” said Chaand Ohri, a 35-year-old Indian-born Maryland doctor.

Ohri, who treated covid patients, described life as a “daze” seeing people out at bars while people are dying on the streets of his home country. He spends his nights on WhatsApp advising doctors treating patients in India, including one who sought advice on caring for a child before she died.

“What I’m hopeless about is the so-called progressive American who is now happy they have been vaccinated, but don’t give a [expletive] about what’s happening around the world,” Ohri said.

In an already exhausting year for health-care workers, the India crisis has prolonged the stress on doctors and nurses emerging from the devastating U.S. winter surge. Like Ohri, many are stretching their packed schedules to offer assistance from afar.

The American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin said it raised more than \$500,000 to send 1,000 oxygen concentrators to India and is working with both governments to allow U.S. physicians to practice in India. The group says it represents 80,000 physicians of Indian origin.

Some of those doctors are now urging their patients and neighbors to show compassion to the country key to staffing the front lines of the American pandemic response.



Aditi Nerurkar, a physician at Harvard Medical School, has been working with other doctors to amplify ways to help India's coronavirus crisis. (Sophie Park for The Washington Post)

“Personally as a physician of Indian origin, I don’t consider myself an activist. I don’t consider myself an influencer, but in this situation I feel compelled to speak out, so if that makes me an activist or influencer, so be it,” said Aditi Nerurkar, a physician at Harvard Medical School who joined other doctors to compile and promote a list of organizations to donate money to relief efforts.

“With what’s happening in India, we are seeing what happens to one of us as global citizens happens to all of us,” Nerurkar added.

Outside the medical profession, Indian Americans are trying to find ways to help.

Sudhanshu Kaushik, the 26-year-old leader of the North American Association of Indian Students, has watched two fellow Indian immigrants in New York City spend late nights on WhatsApp trying to help people find beds in hospitals owned by their relatives. With severe bed shortages, opportunities to help are vanishing.

[U.S. infections slip as spring wave ebbs]

Kaushik’s group distributed a template donation request letter for young Indian American professionals to send to their employers, as an opportunity to give back to a country that helped strengthen their workforces.

“Indian Americans are so highly placed in the corporate sector, the private sector, and there’s a lot of influence within these companies, but that doesn’t necessarily translate to impact in India or Indian issues,” Kaushik said.



TOP: Workers sort oxygen cylinders for covid-19 patients before dispatching them to hospitals at a facility on the outskirts of Amritsar, India. BOTTOM LEFT: Sudhanshu Kaushik, 26, has been organizing campaigns to help young Indian American professionals ask their employers to support relief efforts. (Sarah Blesener for The Washington Post) BOTTOM RIGHT: Kaushik leads a Zoom meeting with team members from the North American Association of Indian Students. (Sarah Blesener for The Washington Post)

While parts of the Indian diaspora are mobilizing for large-scale business and government intervention, most Indian Americans responding to the

crisis abroad are focused solely on their loved ones. Some are finding their options running out.

Ejaz Warsi, a 72-year-old scientist in Houston, lost a member of his brother's family in New Delhi earlier this week despite their best efforts.

The 60-year-old relative needed oxygen but family members were only able to get a small cylinder that quickly ran out. Late last week, they had driven for hours around the city trying to get him admitted at a hospital, but no beds were available. His wife remains critically ill, but with medicines largely unavailable, Warsi said the family is concerned that she may not get the care she needs either.

“There is no doctor to see them, no hospital where they can go,” said Warsi, who came to the U.S. in 1973. “There is very little we can do. Money these days doesn't buy you much. Things are not available.”

[Here's how unequal the global coronavirus vaccine rollout has been]

Lavanya D.J., a managing director at a public relations firm in New York City, said she is having trouble focusing on anything but the news out of India. Her family is based in a small village in the state of Karnataka, four hours from the technology hub of Bangalore. The virus hasn't spread widely there, but a member of her extended family who lives in another area died recently. Several of her friends are also dealing with loss. Her entire Twitter feed is filled with pleas for help.

Earlier this week, D.J., 41, started a document to crowdsource places to donate and help.

“If I didn't have this, I would just lose my mind,” she said. She was excited to get her second vaccine shot two weeks ago, but now her sense of optimism has faded. “I just feel so guilty even to have a laugh or anything.”



TOP: A doctor examines patients in a covid-19 unit in New Delhi. BOTTOM LEFT: Coronavirus patients receive treatment in New Delhi. India has averaged nearly 350,000 new infections per day for the past week. BOTTOM RIGHT: Madhuriben S. Parmar speaks to her family on a video call while lying in an ambulance waiting to enter a hospital. (Amit Dave/Reuters)

Avani Singh said she felt guilty when she left her Arlington apartment Wednesday night to grab drinks with a friend while her grandfather is still hospitalized in India. A 38-year-old neighbor of Singh's mother in New

Jersey recently died after traveling to Delhi and contracting the virus, exacerbating the family's fears.

A Delhi gurdwara — a Sikh house of worship — came through with an extra oxygen canister for K.S. Walia, and Singh's mother secured him an oxygen concentrator with the help of a high school friend. Doctors say he could survive and even live to his 100th birthday if his condition holds.

But worries persist. The family is raising money to keep her grandfather in the hospital for five weeks. Singh and her uncle are also searching for plasma donors on Instagram. Some models predict a May peak in India, which Singh fears will exacerbate the chaos at hospitals. On Saturday, Singh learned her grandfather would have undergo dialysis and the doctors urged the family not to lose hope.

Walia survived brushes with death before, his granddaughter said: As a young man fleeing Pakistan during the violent 1947 partition of India, he rode trains where children were set ablaze and as a government worker, he cleared out a jungle area controlled by criminals.

“Obviously we all have to die at some point,” Singh said. “But I cannot fathom someone dying this way. Gasping for air. I’ll do anything I can to prevent that.”

Ruby Mellen contributed to this report.

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