



Credit: Reeteka Sud

# Indian scientists tackle the infodemic

At the time that COVID-19 began to take hold in India, a group of Indian scientists came together to combat what Reeteka Sud describes as one of the most potent threats: the spread of misinformation fueling the pandemic.

At the turn of 2020, fear of COVID far exceeded the number of positive cases in India. One could argue that the top of the list on most people's minds would have been how to keep yourself and your family safe. Against this backdrop, doing the rounds of people's social media feeds were preventative 'therapies' for COVID along the lines of 'your kitchen is where the cure is': oils, everyday spices, ginger, garlic—much of the pantry featured on the list. Anxious people were all too eager to share these recommendations with friends and family, mostly under the guise of 'you never know ... this might help someone'.

The number of infections in India were slow to pick up in the early days of the pandemic. So sure enough, we also had another stream of WhatsApp forwards claiming Indians are 'special', that 'we have better immunity' (we don't!), etc. Some even claimed that environmental pollution (which in fact, claimed 2 million lives in 2020 alone) actually bolsters 'Indian immunity', as if to say, 'if only the Westerners didn't have cleaner air!'

Amidst all this, many of us were especially concerned by the many myths that had the backing of the state. Unproven Ayurvedic or homeopathic 'treatments' were being promoted by the Government of India and members of the ruling party; this is something that continues to exacerbate an already precarious situation in the country. Whether touted by a relative in the family WhatsApp group or by the government, the counter argument for all tall claims is the same: what's the evidence? With dangerous misinformation spreading<sup>1</sup>, some of us urgently felt that this 'demand for evidence' has to be brought to the forefront. There were parallel conversations on what scientists in the country can do to help. The

outcome of those conversations was the Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19, the ISRC (<https://indscicov.in/about-us/>).

One of our primary objectives was to mobilise the scientific community towards communicating evidence-based perspective on the pandemic. Our website contains answers to how-to questions (e.g., how to make a mask at home) and dos and don'ts on daily life during the pandemic. I have been part of the hoaxbusters group, which actively took on the task of countering circulating myths on treatment and prevention of COVID. We pored over published literature and filtered out salient points. If the evidence was not settled one way or another, there was active debate over interpretation of published results. We ensured the language of the answers we provided was simple and jargon-free. Once the language and content were finalised, it was translated to multiple Indian languages. Many designers and illustrators also volunteered their time and helped us fit the evidence into WhatsApp-shareable format. The devil (in the form of misinformation) thrives there; it was important that 'the divine' followed the same route. And sure enough, we found out that more people have come across ISRC-generated content via WhatsApp than via any other avenue.

In addition to website content, we also organise virtual events. As part of our webinar series ([https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY)), we have invited experts in immunology ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw3yrnAdwQU&list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw3yrnAdwQU&list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=3)), psychiatry ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HohFxmLnvDk&list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HohFxmLnvDk&list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=4)), economics ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8C8KEjBKZY&list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=11](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8C8KEjBKZY&list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=11)), climate science ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iaMUwKdOCQ&list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iaMUwKdOCQ&list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5wHTMOhFENH-T6cqXHkIiY&index=10)), and so on, to discuss how their respective fields relate to the pandemic and our response to it. There's also the "Ask a scientist" series ([https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRU\\_pY-lzbY5hQe09OqqR1bKzfbqwOAYf](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRU_pY-lzbY5hQe09OqqR1bKzfbqwOAYf)), held in different Indian languages, in which ISRC scientists take questions from the public. We invite journalists, especially those from regional media outlets, to interact with us. So far, we have organised two virtual events in which ISRC member scientists have answered questions from journalists from Tamil media outlets.

Most of the work done by the group is online, and that is a limiting factor as well. Much of India is not online. And so, any chance we get, we team up with non-profit groups or activists on the ground who can help us expand our reach. If you are affiliated with a group like this, we want to hear from you: through the social media avenue of your choice or by email at [indscicov@gmail.com](mailto:indscicov@gmail.com). □

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## References

1. Sud, R. *Times of India* (28 October 2020); <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/how-misinformation-is-making-indias-fight-more-difficult-against-covid-19-2/>

## Competing interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.