



## Current Affairs, 19th April to 25th April, 2020

### International

#### Amid Pandemic Crisis, President Returns to His Favourite Agenda

- With his decision to temporarily suspend issuance of green cards, U.S. President Donald Trump has taken his administration's war on immigration to the next level. U.S. President Donald Trump has said he will temporarily suspend immigration in order to protect Americans' jobs. "In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens, I will be signing an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States!" he said (Washington time), in a reference to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **What Does It Mean?**

He said in a press briefing that the executive order, which is still being written, would suspend issuing new green cards for 60 days, but would spare guest worker programmes. The New York Times reported that Mr. Trump had considered stopping new immigrant visas, but backed off in the face of protests from businesses. Now, the order would not impact immigrants already living in the U.S. or those who come on temporary visas for work or travel, including H-1B visa holders and temporary farm workers. American citizens will still be able to bring their spouses and children to the U.S., but the relatives of the current green card holders or those who want to apply for green cards based on a job offer would be blocked, according to administration officials. Mr. Trump has said that after 60 days, the policy will be evaluated "based on economic conditions" in the country, which he would personally assess. Between October 2018 and October 2019, the U.S. had issued about 5,77,000 green cards.

#### **Rationale Behind Ban**

About 22 million Americans lost jobs over the as the pandemic has devastated the economy. "By pausing immigration, we will help put unemployed Americans first in line for jobs as America reopens. So important," said the President, explaining the rationale behind his decision. Administration officials painted the move as a healthcare emergency step. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said, before Mr. Trump's briefing, that the President's decision was to protect the American people's health.

#### **Political Calculations**

The administration has already restricted immigration to the U.S. in the wake of the pandemic. It has barred travel to the U.S. from China and much of Europe and sealed off the land borders with Canada and Mexico for non-essential travel. In March, the State Department suspended visa processing at its Consulates and Embassies overseas, which has practically brought issuance of new visas to a halt. Illegal immigrants being apprehended on the country's southern border are being sent back. The administration has also announced visa sanctions on countries that do not take back their citizens being deported from the U.S. With the new move, Mr. Trump has not only tightened his immigration policy but also sent the boldest message yet to his support base that the President is committed to crack down on both legal and illegal immigration, a hot issue among the conservative and right-wing voters. It also gels with Mr. Trump's strategy of building counternarratives to the mounting criticisms of his administration's handling of the virus crisis. The U.S. has the greatest number of confirmed infections – 8,26,250 cases so far and rising. The country has also seen at least 45,150 deaths. Mr. Trump faces criticism for failing in moving fast



in containing the outbreak in the early days and in mobilising resources to fight its spread. But he has rebuffed such criticism and blamed China and WHO for the crisis. He first called the virus “Chinese virus” and then suspended funding for the WHO. He attacked the “stay-at-home” orders issued by State Governors and even endorsed protests organised by his supporters to end the restrictions in States. Now, [by suspending immigration, he's back to his favourite agenda in an election year in the midst of the severest economic crisis in decades.](#)

National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien cast the President's announcement as a move to protect the American people's health. Mr. O'Brien said the temporary halt to immigration would not be “dissimilar” to limits on travel to the U.S. from China that Mr. Trump put in place in January.

Mr. Trump has issued a number of immigration-related executive orders before after the pandemic began – such as allowing the immediate deportation of migrants without valid papers and the potential sanctioning of countries that do not accept their citizens back from the U.S. Like those, his temporary immigration suspension order will likely be challenged in court.

## Trump Endorses Lockdown Protests

- With more than 22 million Americans seeking unemployment benefits over the last month, and with a general election looming, Mr. Trump has been keen on opening up the U.S. economy – battling with some Governors to open up States. Last week, Mr. Trump issued an advisory telling States they could open by May 1 or before. Some States such as Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina – all headed by Republican Governors – are planning to ease restrictions.
- Coronavirus deaths have surged past 1,50,000 worldwide with nearly a quarter of them in the U.S., where President [Donald Trump lent his support to protesters rallying against lockdown orders.](#) Evidence is mounting that social distancing successfully slowed the COVID-19 pandemic after more than half of humanity – 4.5 billion people – were confined to their homes. Governments around the world are now grappling with when and how to ease lockdowns that have crippled the global economy, even as the COVID-19 death toll climbs further in hard-hit countries. [Demonstrators in three U.S. States staged public rallies this week to demand an end to the restrictions, with the largest protest in Michigan attracting 3,000 people – some of whom were armed.](#) Mr. Trump has largely left decisions on easing lockdowns to State officials even as he laid out guidelines for a staged reopening of the national economy. [But his call to “liberate” Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia in a series of tweets were quickly rebuked by the Democratic leaders of all three States.](#) Earlier, the President had claimed he had the power to “open up” States and conservative groups have backed protests against “stay at home” orders across States.

### **Most Number of Cases**

The U.S. accounts for nearly a third of the 2.25 million coronavirus infections reported globally. It has also recorded over 37,000 deaths, more than any other nation, followed by Italy, Spain and France. Mr. Trump, who has angrily shot back at claims [he reacted too slowly to the virus threat, has accused Beijing of downplaying the impact of the virus within its borders. “It is far higher than that and far higher than the U.S. not even close!”](#) he tweeted. Mr. Trump did not offer evidence to back the claim, but pressure has mounted in recent days on Beijing to come clean over its handling of the initial outbreak. Leaders in France and Britain have also questioned China's management of the crisis but Beijing hit back, saying it had not concealed information. Signs that the outbreak could be easing in parts of Europe prompted Switzerland, Denmark and Finland to begin reopening shops and schools this week. Germany's Health Minister said that the virus was “under control after 3,400 deaths. Germany is now beginning the delicate task of lifting some restrictions.

## Amazon Alert! The Virus Has Breached the Rainforest

- Though Manaus is now the epicentre of the outbreak, the real tragedy is unfolding in its rainforest where many tribes, some of them uncontacted, are in the danger of contracting the deadly virus. This month, a 15-year-old Yanomami boy fell to COVID-19, confirming the fears that the virus has



breached the thick forest. With the world's attention focused on the virus, illegal miners, loggers and smugglers have invaded the forest, plundering its riches and infecting the tribes with the virus. "Most tribes are vulnerable to this virus. Even common cold can kill them within 24 hours. As forests are being invaded, many people will die before they get any medical assistance. We don't have resources to save them," says a doctor from a Manaus hospital, speaking on condition of anonymity.

### Biggest State

Amazon is the biggest State in this country spread over 1.57 million sq. km with a population of just 3.4 million. Of 305 tribes in Brazil, most are based in Amazon and neighbouring States. "The general health of most people in isolated tribes is very good. But when an infectious disease from outside reaches them, it is potentially lethal," says the doctor. When the Portuguese landed in Brazil in 1500 AD, it was inhabited by millions of indigenous people belonging to hundreds of tribes. A vast majority of them perished as they got infected by diseases such as measles brought by the Europeans, who tried to enslave them for work. Researchers fear history repeating itself as miners and loggers try to force the tribes to carry out their illegal work. Marcia Oliveira, a well-known academic in the region, fears that several tribes can be "eliminated" as happened in the "Haximu Massacre", when encroachers slaughtered an entire community in 1993. "There is no doubt that an out-of-control movement of gold miners, loggers and missionaries puts the indigenous peoples at risk of getting the coronavirus and [they could] face a genocide," says Ms. Oliveira, a professor at the Federal University of Roraima. But even as the State fails to check the movement of gangs, which have become emboldened since the 2019 rise to power of Jair Bolsonaro, who has repeatedly talked of "opening the Amazon for business" and "civilising" the tribes, the indigenous groups are practising self-isolation to protect their communities. "Keeping away from strangers is the key in their fight against diseases 'brought by the Whites'. It is their ancestral learning as it has affected them since the colonisation," says the academic. The tribes may be taking all precautions but it may not be enough as the government fails on two fronts – stopping the Amazon plunderers and strengthening the country's stressed healthcare system. The fight against coronavirus got a huge setback as Mr. Bolsonaro fired Health Minister Luiz Mandetta. In Dr. Mandetta's place, the President named Nelson Teich, an oncologist with no experience in public health. Within hours of his appointment, a 2019 video appeared on social media showing Mr. Teich's views about public health system. "If I have an old person with a chronic disease and a teenager with the same problem, I will spend the same amount of money in their treatment. The teenager will have a lifetime ahead. The elderly person may be at the end of their life. What should be the choice?" Mr. Teich asked in the video shot at a medical congress. Mr. Bolsonaro's choice is making Brazil shudder.

### The Fragile Ceasefire in Syria's Idlib War (Krishnan Srinivasan - Former Foreign Secretary)

- United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called for warring parties the world over to cease fire in order to support the bigger battle against COVID-19. One such conflict is in Syria's Idlib province involving President Bashar al-Assad's military forces with support from Russia, and where Turkey's armed intervention and backing of anti-Assad militants, including Islamist terrorists, had been halted even before Mr. Guterres's appeal by a fragile agreement on March 5 between Russia and Turkey which no observer believes can endure long. In this imbroglio, described by many as the world's greatest humanitarian tragedy, it is necessary to disentangle the priorities of the several contestants. To first summarise the ground situation, Idlib bordering Turkey is the last stronghold of jihadists funded by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a terrorist unit designated by the United Nations, and assorted Syrian anti-government elements evacuated from areas liberated by Damascus. The region was spared a Syrian offensive in 2018 on Turkey's plea that it could not suffer any further influx of refugees besides hosting some three-



and-a-half million already. There are about 200,000 displaced persons on the Syria-Turkey border and 85,000 in refugee camps, in addition to nearly 400,000 people displaced by the Turkish offensive against Syrian Kurds. A Turkey-Russia agreement of 2018 established a demilitarised zone (DMZ) with terrorists, including the HTS, leaving this zone, while so-called moderate rebels had to withdraw heavy weaponry. A chain of Turkish observation posts was established, and militants rejecting the plan were to be legitimately targeted by Mr. Assad's military. But Syria and Turkey accused each other of violations, with Russia increasingly agitated due to drone attacks against its airbase in Latakia from Idlib-based jihadists. With the rebels making territorial gains, Syria resumed its offensive in April 2019, retaking territory and targeting Saraqib that strides the M5 highway connecting Aleppo with Damascus. The Syrian advances brought Turkey and Syria into direct clashes, with accusations by Damascus and Moscow that the Turks were supplying jihadists with weapons and shielding them by intermingling Turkish forces among them. The Turks denied this, objecting to their observation posts being encircled or bypassed by the Syrian army. Over 5,000 Turkish forces, with artillery and combat drones, have intervened and suffered 50 or more casualties, whereas Mr. Assad's losses in men and material have been much higher, despite being assisted by Russia controlling the airspace and denying the Turks the use of aircraft other than drones. Moscow has also used direct air power in support of Syria, though this is denied. The conflict seriously strained Turkey's relations with Russia to their lowest level since the 2015 crisis and the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey.

### Tangled Up in Politics

[The latest Russo-Turkish agreement reaffirms their 'dedication to combat and eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria'](#). Given the fact that the majority of the anti-Assad forces are HTS cadres that have been weaponised by Ankara, implementation appears highly improbable. The agreement provides for safe passage along the M4 and M5 highways linking Aleppo with Latakia and Damascus. The Syrian Army had gained control of M5 and was about to take M4 when the Moscow agreement was concluded. Both highways are important for Syria for commercial and strategic reasons. The new DMZ will bestride the M4 highway with a 12-kilometre strip jointly patrolled by Turkey and Russia. The Moscow agreement is destined to fail because the priorities of the countries concerned cannot be reconciled. [Mr. Assad, recognised by the United Nations but not by the West, and openly supported by few of the nations that recognise him, now controls some 70% of his country and wishes to secure the remainder, but his forces remain dependent on Russia in the air and Iran and Hezbollah on the ground. He is in haste because his troops are exhausted by nine years of continuous fighting and he cannot count on Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah support much longer. Iran is in domestic turmoil apart from suffering U.S. sanctions and COVID-19, while the Hezbollah is deeply involved in Lebanon's complex domestic politics. Turkey, under President Erdoğan, nominally a member of the western alliance against Russia, wishes to play a lead role in the Arab world, and has deliberately extended its reach in Syria and Libya to have a say in the futures of those nations. Upset with NATO for lack of support both during the failed coup of 2016 and his campaign against Syrian Kurds whom he regards as anti-Turkish terrorists, Mr. Erdoğan has leveraged the refugee problem to extract €4.5 billion from the European Union and uses the refugees continuously as a bargaining counter. He also needs manageable ties with both Russia and the U.S. to play each off against the other. The confrontation with Moscow four years ago led to severe economic difficulties for Turkey after Russian curbs on trade and tourism, which Mr. Erdoğan would not wish to have repeated. Both countries also have a vested interest in the TurkStream pipeline conveying Russian gas to southern Europe. Criticism of Mr. Erdoğan has lately emerged domestically but his position is solid provided he retains his army's support by avoiding more casualties in Idlib.](#)

### Russia's Call

Russia is now the country of first resort in Syria and its influence in the entire West Asian region has expanded remarkably in recent years. In principle it backs Mr. Assad exercising sway over the whole of Syria and has saved him from being toppled, but it now wishes to bring the Syrian conflict



to an end with a negotiated settlement, avoid losses and more expenditure, while consolidating its naval and air bases in that country. The Americans are content to be bystanders in the belief that they will be the gainers whatever the Idlib outcome. The Europeans have neither the will nor the means to affect developments, and the United Nations is continuing the thus-far futile enterprise of persuading the Syrian multi-party talks in Geneva to arrive at a new constitution to be followed by free elections.

**Fishing in Troubled Waters During A Pandemic (Harsh V. Pant - Director, Studies, At Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, And Professor of International Relations, King's College London; Premesha Saha - Associate Fellow with The ORF's Strategic Studies Programme)**

➔ Even as several countries struggle to cope with the challenges posed by COVID-19, Beijing's military moves in the contested South China Sea continue to take place unabated. In recent days, China has conducted military drills and deployed large-scale military assets to the maritime area, while officially celebrating strides made in exploiting disputed energy resources in the sea.

**Strategy for Expansion**

The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported early this month that a Chinese Coast Guard vessel "rammed and sunk" a Vietnamese fishing boat carrying eight Vietnamese fishermen in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. It maintained that this violates "Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, causes property losses and endangers the lives, safety and legitimate interests of the Vietnamese fishermen". It underlined that Chinese actions "also run counter to agreements reached by Hanoi and Beijing's leaders and the proposed Code of Conduct that would govern all interested parties in the South China Sea dispute." The Vietnamese government lodged a diplomatic protest with China's embassy in Hanoi, requesting the Chinese side to investigate the incident, strictly discipline the officers aboard the Chinese vessel aforementioned, prevent the recurrence of similar actions, and make adequate compensation for the losses of the Vietnamese fishermen. There have been incidents involving Chinese fishing vessels and the Chinese Coast Guard with Indonesian fishing vessels in waters around the Natuna Sea as well. In February, Chinese fishing boats flanked by Chinese Coast Guard vessels dropped their trawl nets yet again. China's illegal fishing near the Natuna Sea carries global consequences, reminding regional governments of Beijing's expanding claims to the South China Sea through which one-third of the world's maritime trade flows. Besides these incidents, there were satellite images showing a Chinese military plane landing on Kagitingan Reef in the West Philippine Sea in late March. There are also reports that China recently opened a research station on Kagitingan and Zamora Reef, also in the West Philippine Sea, to gather data on the ecology, geology, and environment in the Spratlys. It seems as though the COVID-19 outbreak in China did little to diminish the country's strategy of regional expansion. Routine operations of





transport aircraft in the South China Sea indicate that the Chinese military is hardly affected by the country's health crisis. Other claimant countries such as the Philippines have condemned the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing vessel. The Foreign Ministry of the Philippines issued a statement that said, "Such incidents undermine relations between Southeast Asian nations and Beijing." Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department also published a statement, "We call on the PRC to remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic, and to stop exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea." These encroachments and advances by China in the South China Sea not only dampen China's image globally, and affect its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours, but also raise questions on why it continues its assertiveness in the disputed waters when most of the claimant states are having to contend with the challenges posed by COVID-19.

### Window of Opportunity

While a military policy of expansion in the neighbourhood can be one way of shoring up the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party, which has been bruised by its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is also a response to what many in the party would view as a rare window of opportunity as the U.S. is grappling with the pandemic. American ties with Vietnam have been on an upward trajectory in recent times. Vietnam has been an ardent supporter of the U.S.'s freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) carried out in the South China Sea. China has always taken a strong stand against these FONOPS of the U.S. It has flexed its muscles to match up to these operations. In that direction, China also recently conducted anti-submarine drills in the disputed areas soon after the Pentagon deployed the U.S.-guided missile destroyer USS McCampbell in a FONOP in the South China Sea before the pandemic hit the U.S. mainland with full force. At present, Vietnam is the chair of the ASEAN and will be presiding over the discussions on the Code of Conduct which has been a work in progress for long. Vietnam has always been in favour of non-claimant countries or external players having an active voice and calling out China for its growing assertiveness in these contested waters. Among all the claimant countries, Vietnam has always taken a strong stand against Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Unlike the Philippines, which has changed its stance quite often with respect to Chinese activities in the South China Sea, and Indonesia, which recognised the Chinese threat in the Natuna Sea rather late, Vietnam has held a firm stand against the China. Even with regard to its COVID-19 response, Vietnam was the first country in the ASEAN to suspend all flights to and from China as early as February. Hence, China has always kept a watch on Vietnamese manoeuvres in the South China Sea dispute. As China seeks to restore its global credibility, creating tensions in the South China Sea should be the least of its priorities. A more generous China during a global pandemic might go a long way in ensuring its global ascent. But that's a hope that has been belied many times in the past and it's unlikely that the Chinese Communist Party would let go of its regional security agenda of expansion.

### China Allowing N. Korea To Evade Sanctions

- ➔ On October 10 last year, eight North Korean vessels — several carrying illicit coal shipments — were anchored in Chinese waters off the port of Ningbo-Zhoushan, according to a photo in a UN report published online. That appears to be a lax enforcement by China of UN sanctions aimed at curbing Pyongyang's nuclear programme under which countries are required to inspect cargo destined to or coming from North Korea that is within their territory or being transported on North Korean-flagged vessels.

### Annual Report

The annual report to the UN Security Council by independent sanctions monitors said North Korea continued to flout council resolutions "through illicit maritime exports of commodities, notably coal and sand" in 2019, earning Pyongyang hundreds of millions of dollars. A UN Security Council diplomat said China has the capacity to stop sanctions busting by its ally North Korea but "is simply choosing not to implement the Security Council resolutions." According to a Security Council



member. Chinese warships have received notification in real time on multiple occasions of vessels entering its territorial waters who have been observed to be in violation of the UN Security Council resolutions, the diplomat said. China's policing of neighbour North Korea's adherence to UN sanctions is considered crucial to the effectiveness of the measures, spearheaded by the U.S. and unanimously adopted by the Security Council. Reuters first reported in February that the sanctions monitors report found North Korea continued to enhance its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes last year. A second photo from the UN report shows ten North Korean vessels anchored in Chinese waters on September 15 last year near the port of Lianyungang. The photos were provided to the UN sanctions monitors by an unidentified member state.

### Cutting Off Funding

The monitors reported that North Korea conducts ship-to-ship transfers of illicit cargo such as coal, which has been banned since 2017 in a bid to cut off funding to Pyongyang. Under UN sanctions imposed in 2017 all countries were also required to repatriate North Koreans working abroad by the end of last year to stop them earning foreign currency. The U.S. has said it believed Pyongyang was earning some \$500 million a year from nearly 1,00,000 workers abroad, 50,000 of whom were in China.

### Moon Rising

→ South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, whose government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic won acclaim, scored a political victory as his **Democratic Party (DP) swept the parliamentary elections**. Despite the health-care crisis, he decided to go ahead with the poll, with stringent precautionary measures in place. While the DP won 163 seats, up 43, the progressive coalition it leads commanded 180 seats in the 300-strong National Assembly. The Opposition United Future coalition got 103 seats. The results marked a substantial turnaround in public sentiments from last year when protests broke out amid a slowing economy and corruption allegations. **With more parliamentary seats, the President, who is into the third year of his five-year presidency, can follow his reform agenda and North Korean rapprochement without legislative bottlenecks**. But tackling these challenges arguably poses an even greater test of his leadership and political will than his government's effective handling of the disease. **The desire for normalcy with the North is evident among other things from growing impatience to end the disruption of business activity across the border. Since the thaw in ties between the neighbours began in 2018, Mr. Moon and Pyongyang's leader Kim Jong-un have also met on the Demilitarised Zone before a global media blitz. But the endeavour for peace is fraught with challenges, not all of which seem entirely amenable to Mr. Moon's control. Foremost, he would have to consider the implications of his initiatives towards Pyongyang for Seoul's military alliance with Washington.**

Besides the suspension of their annual military exercises in South Korea, Seoul and Washington have been unable to agree on more substantial measures to ease tensions with the North. Moreover, the formal declaration of an end to the Korean war of the 1950s, where the U.S. was involved, is hostage to the more recent international demand for the Korean Peninsula's denuclearisation. But progress on the North's nuclear stand-off has been stalled ever since the Trump-Kim **Hanoi summit in February 2019**, broke down. Their meeting, in **Singapore in June 2018**, resulted in no more than vague promises to end the long deadlock. **Pyongyang insists on crippling economic sanctions ending as a precondition for any meaningful reduction of nuclear testing in the future. Washington has, meanwhile, harped on access to the North's nuclear sites in exchange for a relaxation of sanctions.** Mr. Trump, himself facing re-election in November and focused on combating the pandemic, is unlikely to renew attention to the dispute with North Korea. Paradoxically though, the collective desire among nations to confront the unfolding health emergency could open avenues of cooperation, even defying the ordinary operation of realpolitik. Therein lies a ray of hope. Mr. Moon must make the most of the situation.



## Foreign Affairs

### Putting the SAGAR Vision to The Test (Kate Sullivan De Estrada - Associate Professor in The International Relations of South Asia At the University of Oxford)

→ In March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited three small but significant Indian Ocean island states – Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. During this tour, he unveiled India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean: Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). SAGAR seeks to differentiate India's leadership from the modus operandi of other regionally active major powers and to reassure littoral states as India's maritime influence grows. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar signalled at the fourth Indian Ocean Conference in September last year, India's SAGAR vision is intended to be "consultative, democratic and equitable". India's recent admission as observer to the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) will put this vision to the test.

#### **IOC, A Trusted Regional Actor**

Following a request from New Delhi, the IOC granted observer status to India on March 6 at the Commission's 34th Council of Ministers. Founded in 1982, the IOC is an intergovernmental organisation comprising five small-island states in the Western Indian Ocean: the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (a French department), and Seychelles. Though Réunion brings a major power, France, into this small-state equation, decisions in the IOC are consensus-based, and while France's foreign policy interests are represented, the specifics of Réunion's regional decision-making emerge from its local governance structures. Over the years, the IOC has emerged as an active and trusted regional actor, working in and for the Western Indian Ocean and implementing a range of projects. More recently, the IOC has demonstrated leadership in the maritime security domain. Since maritime security is a prominent feature of India's relations with Indian Ocean littoral states, India's interest in the IOC should be understood in this context. However, India has preferred to engage bilaterally with smaller states in the region. What India will not find in the IOC is a cluster of small states seeking a 'big brother' partnership. The IOC has its own regional agenda, and has made impressive headway in the design and implementation of a regional maritime security architecture in the Western Indian Ocean. In 2012, the IOC was one of the four regional organisations to launch the MASE Programme – the European Union-funded programme to promote Maritime Security in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean. Under MASE, the IOC has established a mechanism for surveillance and control of the Western Indian Ocean with two regional centres. The Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC), based in Madagascar, is designed to deepen maritime domain awareness by monitoring maritime activities and promoting information sharing and exchange. The Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), based in Seychelles, will eventually facilitate joint or jointly coordinated interventions at sea based on information gathered through the RMIFC. These centres are a response to the limitations that the states in the region face in policing and patrolling their often-enormous Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). They deliver an urgently needed deterrent against unabating maritime crime at sea, only partly addressed by the high-level counter-piracy presence of naval forces from the EU, the Combined Maritime Forces, and Independent Forces. Seven states in the region have signed agreements to participate in this multilateral maritime security architecture, and once ratified, will provide its legal foundation. Many major powers have expressed interest in accessing the RMIFC. The IOC has also wielded a disproportionate degree of convening power. In 2018 and 2019, it served as Chair of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). Leveraging the CGPCS Chair, the IOC held ministerial meetings in 2018 and 2019 on maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean, drawing state representations from the region plus major powers such as India, the EU, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and Russia. These meetings, resulting in formal declarations, facilitated convergence around common, sub-region-specific definitions of maritime security threats and the legal way of dealing with them. The IOC's





achievements offer an opportunity for India to learn, and also to support. The IOC style of 'bottom-up regionalism' has produced a sub-regional view and definition of maritime security problems and local ownership of pathways towards workable solutions. A 2019 policy brief published by the IOC (with inputs from this author), 'Strengthening Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean', sets out how the counter-piracy response off the coast of Somalia delivered unprecedented regional and international cooperation in the domain of maritime security. However, it resulted in multiple players, the duplication of actions, and regional dependence on international navies. The IOC has been seeking more sustainable ways of addressing maritime security threats in the region, with the RMIFC and RCOC as part of this response. Its regional maritime security architecture is viewed locally as the most effective and sustainable framework to improve maritime control and surveillance and allow littoral States to shape their own destiny. Moreover, with proper regional coordination, local successes at curbing maritime threats will have broader security dividends for the Indian Ocean space.

### How Can India Contribute?

The IOC's maritime security activities have a strong foundation, but they require support and buy-in from additional regional actors. India has already signalled a strong interest in the work of the IOC through its request to be admitted as an observer. The view from Ebène (Mauritius), where the IOC is headquartered, and from where its maritime security strategy is directed, is that major powers are warmly invited to support its initiatives. Nearly all littoral states in the Western Indian Ocean need assistance in developing their maritime domain awareness and in building capacity to patrol their EEZs. All would benefit from national information fusion centres that can link to those of the wider region. With its observer status, India will be called upon to extend its expertise to the region, put its satellite imagery to the service of the RMIFC, and establish links with its own Information Fusion Centre. If India seeks to calibrate its Indian Ocean strategy away from outdated, neo-imperialist conceptions of great power and spheres of influence that are costly to regional followership, one route will be to learn from and support sub-regional efforts such as those of the IOC. As a major stakeholder in the Indian Ocean with maritime security high on the agenda, India will continue to pursue its interests and tackle maritime security challenges at the macro level in the region. However, as an observer of the IOC, a specific, parallel opportunity to embrace bottom-up regionalism presents itself. There are those in the Western Indian Ocean who are closely watching how India's "consultative, democratic and equitable" leadership will take shape.

### The COVID-19 Paradox in South Asia (Deepak Nayar - Emeritus Professor of Economics at JNU And Former Vice Chancellor of The University of Delhi)

- The oldest and largest democracies in the world are often compared. This time is different. The first person tested positive for COVID-19 on January 21 in the United States and on January 30 in India. Roughly three months later, on April 20, the total number of infections was 7,23,605 in the U.S. and 17,265 in India, accounting for 31.2% and 0.75% of the world total, while the number of COVID-19 deaths was 34,203 in the U.S. and 543 in India, making up 21.7% and 0.33% of the world total. The share of the two countries in world population, by contrast, is about 4% and 18%, respectively.

### A Puzzling Situation

It is even more surprising that a comparison with South Asia — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — yields similar results. In Nepal too, it was in late January that the first person tested positive for COVID-19, though it was end-February or early-March in the other countries. On April 20, South Asia, with a share of 23.4% in world population, accounted for 1.25% of infections and 0.5% of COVID-19 deaths in the world. Before the pandemic, it would have been impossible to predict, let alone imagine, such a reality. Income per capita in South Asia is just 16% that of the world, and a mere 4% of that in industrialised countries. One-third of the world's



poor live in South Asia, so absolute poverty is high and nutrition levels are low. Population density in the subcontinent is among the highest in the world. The poor, who live cheek by jowl in urban slums and in cramped spaces in rural areas, are most susceptible to a virus that is contagious. Public health systems and facilities are perhaps the worst in the world. The outcome, then, is puzzling, if not paradoxical. Compared with North America, Western Europe and East Asia, or their own population size, the number of infections and deaths in South Asia is far lower. Of course, it is plausible to argue that, unlike those parts of the world, South Asian countries are in the early stages where community transmission has not gathered momentum. An explosive growth in infection numbers could yet surface later, or in a second round. But it is simply not possible to assess probabilities or make predictions. However, evidence available so far does suggest some flattening of the curve in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Infection numbers in Maldives and Nepal are in double-digits and Bhutan's infection numbers are in single digits.

## Two Possible Explanations

How can we explain this situation in which, so far, South Asia has fared better than many other parts of the world? Past experience of the Spanish influenza in 1918, when India accounted for 18-20 million of the estimated 50 million deaths in the world, or conventional thinking even now, would have led to the opposite conclusion. There are two possible explanations. First, the reality might be much worse than the statistics suggest because the total number of infections is almost certainly underestimated, as testing has been nowhere near enough, given the scarcity of testing kits and the massive size of populations. Improved statistics might change the numbers but cannot transform the asymmetry emerging from the above comparisons. Second, the lockdowns imposed by governments in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, which started in the last week of March and continue until April 27, or longer, have clearly made a difference. The lockdown in India, straddling its vast geography, is perhaps among the most stringent in the world. The common purpose was to break the chain of transmission through physical distancing, which has two dimensions. For one, it confined people to their homes. But this created physical distancing only for the privileged living in homes that have spaces and doors. It was impossible for people in urban slums in mega-cities, where migrant workers lived in cramped spaces, often as many as 10 to a room. For another, it meant that people could not move within cities or across States. Migrant workers could not return to their villages, and citizens or foreigners who might carry the virus could not come from abroad. It did strangle potential chains of community transmission, reducing the geographical spread of the virus through contagion, and flattening the curve compared with what it would have been without a lockdown. This obvious explanation is necessary but not sufficient because other countries which have imposed lockdowns, say in Western Europe, with public health systems that are far superior, have not managed to slow down the phenomenal spread in the number of infections as much. The impact of diseases can and does differ across countries, possibly attributable to differences in cultures, immunities, or even climates. I am not an epidemiologist or a virologist. But as a social scientist, it is possible to observe an association of attributes.

## A Possible Hypothesis

It has been suggested that countries which have mandatory BCG vaccinations against tuberculosis are less susceptible to COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. Compare, for example, the Iberian Peninsula countries, Spain and Portugal. On April 20, the former had around 1,96,000 infections and 20,500 deaths, whereas the latter 20,200 infections and 700 deaths. Is it only a coincidence that BCG vaccinations are mandatory in Portugal but not in Spain, or that the U.S. and Italy, both ravaged by COVID-19, never had universal BCG vaccination programmes? Obviously, it is only scientific investigation that can establish cause and effect. But the BCG vaccine seems to have a stimulating effect on the immune system that goes well beyond tuberculosis. For that reason, perhaps, some countries are running trials of BCG against COVID-19, or thinking of it as a means of protecting health workers. Similarly, countries are buying hydroxychloroquine in large quantities from India, as a prophylactic for health workers and for treatment of COVID-19 patients. In South



Asian countries, universal BCG vaccination is mandatory, while immune systems of people have a lifelong exposure to malaria. These could provide possible explanations for the relatively limited spread of COVID-19 in South Asia so far.

### Lives and Livelihoods

Obviously, lockdowns have also mitigated the spread. In doing so, they have saved lives, but at the same time, they have also taken away livelihoods. In South Asian countries, almost 90% of the workforce is made up of the self-employed, casual labour on daily wages, and informal workers without any social protection. The lockdowns have meant that hundreds of millions of people who have lost their jobs, hence incomes, have been deprived of their livelihoods, imposing a disproportionate burden on the poor and those who survive just above the poverty line. For them, the trade-off between getting sick and going hungry is no choice. Livelihoods are an imperative for preserving lives. The problem will not vanish after lockdowns are lifted. Economies that have been shut down for six weeks or longer will be close to collapse. In the short-run, it will be a matter of survival for households and firms and stabilisation for the economy. Economic growth will be zero or negative this year. In the medium-term, it will be about recovery. That will take time. Rapid economic growth in the past 25 years had enabled South Asian countries to bring about a significant reduction in absolute poverty, even though it was associated with rising inequality. Alas, absolute poverty will increase once again, while economic inequality will rise further.

### Islamophobia Is Rising in India

- Calling on the Indian government to take steps to protect Muslim minorities who are being “negatively profiled,” facing “discrimination and violence” amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has criticised what it called “growing Islamophobia” in India. “[We] urge the Indian Govt to take urgent steps to stop the growing tide of Islamophobia in India and protect the rights of its persecuted Muslim minority as per its obligations under international Human Rights law,” said a tweet issued by OIC’s Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (OIC-IPHRC).

### PM’s Call for Unity

The statement came on the same day Prime Minister Narendra Modi had clearly said that “unity and brotherhood” must be the response to the coronavirus, which does not see “race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking.” The Ministry of External Affairs declined to comment on the statement. It had reacted sharply to two similar statements on religious “stigmatisation” of minorities in India by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). In one statement, the U.S. Commission criticised India, Pakistan and Cambodia for “failure to protect vulnerable religious communities” and “increased stigmatisation”.

### Patient ‘Segregation’

In another specific statement, the USCIRF reacted to reports, which the government denied, that COVID-19 patients were religiously segregated at a hospital in Ahmedabad. It also held an expert hearing on “Religious Freedom on South Asia”, organised by the “Hindus for Human Rights”, “Indian-American Muslim Council” and “International Christian Concern,” ahead of its annual USCIRF report release on April 28, where India has been categorised as a “tier 2 country of particular concern.”

### Misguided Reports: MEA

“As if its peremptory commentary on religious freedom in India is not enough, the USCIRF is now spreading misguided reports on the professional medical protocols followed to deal with spread of COVID-19 in India,” the MEA spokesperson had said. Meanwhile, on March 30, the United Nations’ Office of The Commissioner for Human Rights had issued a more general statement



against the “exploitation” of coronavirus-related fears by groups and politicians to “scapegoat minorities” in various countries.

## Imams Overrule Pakistan’s Lockdown as Ramzan Approaches

→ While clerics and governments across the Muslim world will greet Ramzan under lockdown, working together to shut mosques and urging worshippers to pray at home, in Pakistan, some of the most prominent imams have rallied their devotees to ignore the anti-pandemic measures. Ramzan, which begins in Pakistan, is the holy month in which Muslims crowd into mosques and fast all day, holding feasts after sundown with family and friends. Those are ripe conditions for the coronavirus to spread, and imams around the world are asking people to stay home. But in Pakistan, pandemic or no pandemic, hard-line clerics are calling the shots, overriding the government’s nationwide virus lockdown. Most clerics complied with the shutdown when it was announced. But some of the most influential ones called on worshippers to attend Friday prayers in even greater numbers. Devotees attacked police officers who tried to get in their way. As Ramzan drew closer, dozens of well-known clerics and leaders of religious parties — including some who had initially obeyed the lockdown orders — signed a letter demanding that the government exempt mosques from the shutdown during the holy month or invite the anger of God and the faithful.

### **20 Rules to Be Followed**

The government gave in, signing an agreement that let mosques stay open for Ramzan as long as they followed 20 rules, including forcing congregants to maintain a 6-foot distance, bring their own prayer mats and do their ablutions at home. By the time Prime Minister Imran Khan met with the clerics, deferentially promising to abide by the deal, critics were demanding to know who was in charge during this national crisis: the government or the mosques. “The state has become totally subservient to these clerics,” said Husnul Amin, an Islamabad-based professor and scholar on Islam and politics. “It is very difficult for the state to implement what’s best for the public good. The larger public interest is always up against the clerics. It’s completely undemocratic.” Pakistan’s imams were empowered by the military during the 1980s when mosques across the country churned out jihadists to fight the Soviet military in Afghanistan with the support of the U.S. While other countries tried to curb hard-line clerics’ influence after the Afghan war, in Pakistan, the powerful military continued to use them as tools of foreign and domestic policy. But their defiance of the lockdown is exposing the limits of the military’s control.

### **Beyond Army’s Control**

The military wanted the shutdown, pressuring Mr. Khan to back the measure at a time when he was reluctant and worried about the economic toll. But when the security forces tried to prevent worshippers from gathering at mosques for prayers, they found themselves under attack. In Karachi, the largest city, scenes emerged of worshippers chasing the police through narrow alleyways, pelting them with rocks and sending several officers to the hospital. “The military has created a monster they can no longer control,” Mr. Amin said. “They are the creation of the military, and only they could handle them. That may no longer be the case.” By the time Ramzan approached, police officers were no longer willing to erect cordons around mosques to stop congregants. While clerics acknowledge that their mosques are perfect vectors for the coronavirus’s spread — worshippers gather to perform ablutions together before cramming into the mosques, shoulder to shoulder in supplication — they say they have to protect their bottom line: money and influence. “We know the pandemic is a global health issue, but religious duties cannot be abandoned,” said Maulana Ataullah Hazrabi, a Karachi-based cleric, adding that, “mosques depend largely on the donations collected during Ramzan.”



## Nation

### No 100% Quota

- The Supreme Court is right in considering cent per cent reservation as anathema to the constitutional scheme of equality even if it is for the laudable objective of providing representation to historically deprived sections. The verdict quashing the reservation of 100% of all teaching posts in 'Scheduled Areas' of Andhra Pradesh for local Scheduled Tribes is not against affirmative programmes as such, but a caution against implementing them in a manner detrimental to the rest of society. A five-judge Constitution Bench found that earmarking teacher posts in areas notified under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution adversely affected the interests of other candidates not only from Scheduled Castes and other backward communities but also other ST communities not native to those areas. The case stemmed from a legal challenge to January 10, 2000 order issued by the erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh Bench providing 100% reservation to the Scheduled Tribe candidates, out of whom 33.1/3% shall be women, for the post of teachers in schools located in the Scheduled Areas of the State. The court said the 2000 notification was "unreasonable and arbitrary".
- Of course, what the State government did, in its original orders of 1986, and thereafter in a subsequent order in 2000, was not without its own rationale. It found that there was chronic absenteeism among teachers who did not belong to those remote areas where the schools were located. However, its solution of drafting only members of the local tribes was not a viable solution. As the Bench noted, it could have come up with other incentives to ensure the attendance of teachers. Another aspect that the court took into account was that Andhra Pradesh has a local area system of recruitment to public services. The President, under Article 371D, has issued orders that a resident of a district/zone cannot apply to another district/zone for appointment. Thus, the 100% quota deprived residents of the Scheduled Areas of any opportunity to apply for teaching posts. Affirmative action loses its meaning if it does not leave the door slightly ajar for open competition. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar observed during the debate in the Constituent Assembly on the equality clause that any reservation normally ought to be for a "minority of seats". This is one of the points often urged in favour of the 50% cap imposed by the Court on total reservation, albeit with some allowance for relaxation in special circumstances. It is still a matter of debate whether the ceiling has innate sanctity, but it is clear that wherever it is imperative that the cap be breached, a special case must be made for it. Such a debate should not divert attention from the fact that there is a continuing need for a significant quota for STs, especially those living in areas under the Fifth Schedule special dispensation. In this backdrop, it is somewhat disappointing that courts tend to record obiter dicta advocating a revision of the list of SCs and STs. While the power to amend the lists notified by the President is not in dispute, it is somewhat uncharitable to say that the advanced and "affluent" sections within SCs and STs are cornering all benefits and do not permit any trickle-down. Indian society is still some distance from reaching that point.

### Preparing for A New Political Field In J&K

- With National Conference leaders Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah being released after over seven months of detention, there is an air of inevitability to the leader of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Mehbooba Mufti, being released as well. There were expectations that Mr. Omar Abdullah and Ms. Mufti would be released in tandem, but nearly a month after Mr. Omar Abdullah's release, it is strange that her detention should continue. Ms. Mufti has merely been moved out of a sub-jail into her official residence, where she remains in detention.



## New Contours

Notably, since they've been set free, neither of the Abdullahs has rocked Delhi's political boat leading to speculation whether there had been some understanding reached prior to their release or whether they are keeping their powder dry following the Gupkar Declaration of August 4, 2019. During that meeting, politicians from across the spectrum, minus those from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), pledged to unite to safeguard the special status and autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir. Perhaps there is fear that Ms. Mufti could queer the pitch when she is unencumbered of her strictures and inconveniently starts harking back to August 5, 2019; after all, she has support among the Jamaat in south Kashmir. There is no doubt that Kashmiris have felt let down by their politicians, and although Ms. Mufti has been self-destructive as a politician, the longer she remains locked up, the more credibility she gains. Competitive jostling for political space could have an undesirable domino effect as New Delhi struggles to create a new political playing field, the contours of which are becoming clearer now. For one, it would make the going much tougher for New Delhi's favourite, Apni Party, led by Altaf Bukhari and comprising a motley group of politicians who have defected, resigned or were fired from different political parties. Left alone in the political field, the Apni Party will gain disdain and derision rather than political heft. This must have been a big factor in the rethink on continuing to keep the Abdullahs in detention. The question remains: what will be New Delhi's road map for Jammu and Kashmir?

## A Cauldron of Resentments

Eight months of sustained lockdown has indubitably left many sections of Kashmiri society crushed economically and otherwise. There is perhaps a cauldron of resentments there, more susceptible than ever before to radical blandishments. Before the novel coronavirus came along, Kashmir's apple orchards did some business. But all other avenues of income, such as the handicrafts industry, small enterprises, the papier-mâché industry, the carpet industry and tourism, could not have thrived. There was a stranglehold on social media. Broadband as well as mobile Internet services in the region were banned for months. Broadband and 2G Internet were restored in January, but they severely constrain all sorts of community, communication and business activities that normal societies thrive on. It's spring in Kashmir, and the security forces confront a situation of increased armed activity. After claiming responsibility for the Kabul Gurdwara attack on March 25 that killed over 25 people, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province said that the attack was "revenge for Kashmir." This mutual reinforcement could turn into a wellspring for the radicalised Kashmiri as well as for Pakistan which is set to get a better grip on Kabul via the Taliban. India temporarily closed two consulates in Afghanistan (Herat and Jalalabad) in the first week of April anticipating growing security threats, among other things. At least two of the five militants who killed para commandos in early April in Kupwara, close to the Line of Control, were local youth from south Kashmir. The COVID-19 crisis has certainly changed the dynamic of the discourse somewhat. It has given time for the government to prepare the playing field better. Delimitation will be the key. There will be more electoral loading in Jammu, which will take away some of the emphasis from the constituencies in Kashmir, which have espoused separatist sentiments. Yet, delimitation based on the infirmities of the 2011 Census would make less sense than one based on 2021, which has been deferred indefinitely. Elections could happen once the seats have increased from 83 to 90, which gives plenty of time to get the panchayat elections right. The last panchayat elections were a disaster because the mainstream political parties boycotted it. Nearly 12,000 posts were left vacant. This time the government will be keen to ensure more healthy participation.

## The Road Ahead

The rough road ahead looks something like this: if the COVID-19 crisis abates, the Amarnath Yatra will be held from mid-June to end-July, and if the security situation permits, the panchayat elections will be held. Later, the Census will be conducted and delimitation will occur. Following all this, the Assembly elections will take place. All this could take more than a year and a half. Somewhere in



the middle dangles the carrot of promised statehood. Though individual members are popular enough to stand on their own feet in their constituencies, the Apni Party cannot provide an overarching political framework for Jammu and Kashmir. Jammu BJP and Jammu and Kashmir People's Conference chairman Sajjad Lone might add some numbers. The rest the BJP may manage, as it did in Goa, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. It is unclear if the National Conference and the PDP, and others of the Gupkar grouping, if they contest, can come together to deny New Delhi political space. But right now, the Kashmiri is a mere bystander as the framework of a new political order is sought to be worked and put in place by New Delhi.

## Uddhav's Nomination to Council (Prof Faizan Mustafa Is Vice-Chancellor, NALSAR University of Law, And an Expert on The Constitution)

- On April 9, after a meeting presided over by Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, the Maharashtra Cabinet recommended to Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari that Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray should be nominated to one of the seats reserved for the Governor's nominee in the state Legislative Council. A fortnight on, Koshyari is yet to act on the Cabinet's recommendation – even as the Chief Minister's current term in office approaches its end. A constitutional crisis looms.

### Provisions of the Constitution

Thackeray took oath on November 28, 2019 – and in accordance with Article 164(4), "a Minister who for any period of six consecutive months is not a member of the Legislature of the State shall at the expiration of that period cease to be a Minister". It follows that the Chief Minister must become part of the Maharashtra legislature before May 27; however, with the pandemic raging, a by-election cannot be held. The only way to fulfil the requirement, therefore, is for Thackeray to be nominated to the Upper House by the Governor. If that does not happen, he will have to make way for someone else to lead the Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress coalition. In *S R Chaudhuri vs State of Punjab and Ors (2001)*, the Supreme Court had ruled that "it would be subverting the Constitution to permit an individual, who is not a member of the Legislature, to be appointed a Minister repeatedly for a term of 'six consecutive months', without him getting himself elected in the meanwhile. The practice would be clearly derogatory to the constitutional scheme, improper, undemocratic and invalid".

### The Nomination Route

A situation in which an individual who is not a member of the legislature becomes chief executive of the government is in itself fairly common. H.D. Deve Gowda was not a Member of Parliament when he was appointed Prime Minister in June 1996. Sushil Kumar Shinde and Prithviraj Chavan were not members of the Maharashtra legislature when they became Chief Minister in 2003 and 2010 respectively. Thackeray is likely to have had no problems becoming a member of the legislature had the pandemic not hit. The nomination route for non-member Ministers is less common – but not unconstitutional. In 1952, C Rajagopalachari was nominated as Chief Minister of Madras by Governor Sri Prakasa. In Maharashtra, Datta Meghe and Dayanand Mhaske were nominated to the Vidhan Parishad by the Governor after being appointed Ministers. Under Article 171(5), the Governor can nominate "persons having special knowledge or practical experience in respect of literature, science, art, co-operative movement and social service". Last month, the President nominated former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi to Rajya Sabha even though there were doubts about him meeting these prescribed qualifications. Thackeray can be said to have a stronger claim in this regard – he is an ace wildlife photographer and, as per the Allahabad High Court in *Har Sharan Varma vs Chandra Bhan Gupta And Ors (February 15, 1961)*, even politics can be seen as 'social service'.



## The Role of The Governor

Two Legislative Council seats in the Governor's quota are currently vacant; however, the terms of these vacancies end on June 6, and a fresh appointment can be made only for the remainder of the term. It has been argued that Section 151A of The Representation of the People Act, 1951, prohibits the filling of a vacancy if "the remainder of the term of a member in relation to a vacancy is less than one year". However, this cannot be a reason for the Governor to refuse nomination – because the bar is in respect of by-election to fill a vacancy, not nomination. Of course, the Governor could argue that he is not obligated under the Constitution to act swiftly on the advice of the Council of Ministers; also, why should he nominate Thackeray only to save his chief ministership? But it is important to note the extraordinary context – India is currently battling a health emergency of the kind not seen in the history of the republic. Political uncertainty is the last thing that Maharashtra, which has the highest coronavirus case load and death toll by far in the country, needs at this moment.

## The Question of Discretion

What are the limits to the Governor's discretion in nominations? In *Biman Chandra Bose vs Dr H C Mukherjee (1952)* the Calcutta High Court rejected the plea that none of the nine nominated members to the legislature fulfilled the required criteria, and held that the Governor cannot use his discretion in nominating members to the Council. He has to go by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. Article 163(1) of the Constitution makes it clear that the Governor must follow the recommendations of the Council of Ministers in all situations "except in so far as he is by or under this Constitution required to exercise his functions or any of them in his discretion". It can be argued that Koshiyari is bound by the advice of the Council of Ministers only in executive matters as defined in Article 162 (those "with respect to which the Legislature of the State has power to make laws") – and since the nomination of members is not an executive power, he can act in his discretion. However, it must be noted that under Article 169, while Parliament has the power to abolish or create a Legislative Council, it can pass such a law only after the state Assembly has passed a resolution to that effect. Thus, the legislative power of the Assembly can be inferred from this provision. Also, the Constitution specifically mentions the situations in which the Governor can act in his discretion, e.g., Article 239 (Administration of Union Territories), Article 371 (Special provision with respect to the States of Maharashtra and Gujarat), Article 371A (Nagaland), Article 371H (Arunachal Pradesh), and in the Sixth Schedule (Provisions as to the Administration of Tribal Areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram), etc. The Governor does have a general discretion in appointing the Chief Minister, but there are well established conventions governing the exercise of such discretion. Even the Governor's pardoning powers are to be exercised on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers (*Maru Ram vs Union of India, 1980*). In *Hargovind Pant vs Dr Raghukul Tilak & Ors (1979)*, the Supreme Court held that the Governor is not an employee of the central government. He is neither under its control nor accountable to it, and is an independent constitutional office.

## Karnataka Gives Devanahalli Chakota New Wings

- Endowed with a unique taste and flavour, and a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, the Devanahalli Pomelo, the citrus fruit popularly known as chakota, is getting a fresh cultivation push. The Karnataka Horticulture Department is set to provide the plant to interested farmers in Devanahalli and Doddaballapur regions. As urbanisation grows and the landscape changes, the number of farmers growing the fruit has dropped over the years. The fruit is localised to around 13 villages in Devanahalli taluk, eight villages of Sidlaghatta taluk and seven villages of Doddaballapura taluk. A Joint Director in the Horticulture Department, Krishnamurthy, said, "Farmers in these areas grow chakota on the borders of their fields or near their houses. After the fruit received the GI tag, they





are coming forward to grow the plant more widely. The department is using its farms in Chikkaballapur and Bengaluru Rural district to provide plants and promote it.”

## Festivals, Turbans and Rice Beer Are All Part of An Exhaustive Cultural Heritage List

→ Manipur’s tradition of making rice beer, the practice of tying turbans in Rajasthan and several different dances, forms of music and festivals from across the country were among the 106 items listed as intangible cultural heritage in a draft released by the Union Culture Ministry. Releasing the list, Culture Minister Prahlad Singh Patel said 13 traditions of Indian intangible cultural heritage were already recognised by UNESCO and the national list was an attempt to further awareness and protection to more such elements. The initiative is a part of the ministry’s Vision 2024 programme. In the list released on the ministry’s website, a total of 106 practices from different States are mentioned, though some are repeated as they occur in more than one State and five elements are common to the whole country. As per the 2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the list has five broad categories – oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices related to nature and traditional craftsmanship, the Culture ministry observed in a statement. This list was a “work in progress and may be considered a draft version”, the ministry added. There was, however, no deadline for the public to send in contributions, suggestions or amendments, an official said, declining to be identified.

### **Traditions**

Among the traditions seen across the country are the devotional music of Qawwali and the music of the oldest instrument in the country, the Veena. The Kumbh Mela and Ramlila traditions of different States have also been included. The list includes the traditional folk festival of Pachoti in Assam, where the birth of a baby, particularly a male infant as the tradition “relates to the birth of Krishna”, is celebrated with relatives and neighbours, according to the ministry. The oral traditions of the transgender community called Kinnar Kanthgeet and compositions of Ameer Khusro are among the entries from Delhi. Gujarat’s Patola silk textiles from Patan with its geometric and figurative patterns also made it to the list. The practice of tying a turban or safa across Rajasthan was included. From Jammu and Kashmir, the Kalam Bhat or Qalambaft gharana of Sufiana music in Budgam district and from Ladakh, the Buddhist chanting across both Leh and Kargil districts were on the list of intangible cultural heritage. The making of khor, a rice beer, by the Tangkhul community in Manipur, as well as other crafts associated with it, like making gourd vessels and wicker baskets, were also on the list. Kerala’s martial art form, Kalaripayattu, and the practice of making designs at the entrance of homes and temples called kolam in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh were also included in the list.

### **Puppet Theatre**

Different forms of shadow puppet theatre – Chamadyacha Bahulya in Maharashtra, Tolu Bommalatta in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Togalu Gombeyatta in Karnataka, Tolpava Kuthu in Kerala and Ravanchhaya in Odisha – have also been included.

## Most Online Content on Child Sexual Abuse from India

→ In a global compilation of reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) found online, India stands right on top of the list, with 11.7% of the total reports or at 19.87 lakh reports, followed by Pakistan, which contributes 6.8% of all reports (11.5 lakh reports). Bangladesh comes in fourth with 5.5 lakh reports and a share of 3.3%. The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) urges people to report CSAM found online across the world annually, on their online platform CyberTipline. This year, the Centre received a total of 1.68 crore reports. The material thus reported by the members of the public and electronic service providers, principally comprises still pictures and videos depicting children in a clear sexual angle. Three of the top four countries were in South



Asia, raising concerns among child rights activists about the online safety of children in the region. The NCMEC adds that the reports include geographic indicators related to the upload location of the child sexual abuse material, but country specific numbers may be impacted by proxies and anonymisers. John Carr, a member of the Executive Board of the UK Council on Child Internet Safety, says, "It has long been suspected that India was very high (as CASM source) but the data wasn't being published before now so I guess nobody on the inside track will be surprised. Their suspicions have merely been confirmed." Mr. Carr added, "I am not going to venture any guesses as to why India is the world's number 1 but it is astonishing that three out of the four top countries – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – are all in the same part of the world." Vidya Reddy of Tulir Centre for Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, raised concerns about the fact that the reports only account for material that has been uploaded. "We are not even talking of downloading or browsing. We need to focus on finding out whether this is re-uploading content already circulating on the net, or whether it is new content being uploaded," Ms Reddy said. Pointing out that the numbers are consistent with Google searches on sexual content across the world, she said, "We need to look at the South Asian region with great interest and concern, at their interest in using children's pictures for sexual stimulation."

### Lockdown Impact

There is also concern that the lockdowns across the world will lead to an exacerbation of the situation. Mr. Carr says: "Police and child welfare experts around the world are all expressing great anxieties about the impact of the mass lockdown. [Paedophiles who work online are seeking to exploit the situation, looking for bored children.](#) It might be some time before official figures show any increase in arrests or harms to children. That's unavoidable but also, sadly, inevitable." "The coronavirus pandemic has led to an unprecedented rise in screen time," said Howard Taylor, of Global Partnership to End Violence Executive Director.

## Caught in The Heightened Arc of Communal Polemics (Ambreen Agha - Associate Professor at The Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University)

- Communal politics around the Tablighi Jamaat has been intensifying ever since this little-known organisation was in the spotlight after dozens of people who attended a religious congregation the group held at its headquarters in Delhi in March tested positive for COVID-19. For a nuanced perspective on this polarising issue it is imperative to make a conscious attempt to read the history of this particular trend within Islam. The attacks on the group by the right wing have gone as far as equating it to a case of 'health terror', and even urging the government to proscribe it. This impassioned suggestion is quite misplaced while at the same time dangerous as it is likely to instil fear among a section of those who follow Tablighi Islam. [This peripatetic group of preachers look at faith renewal and bringing back non-practising Muslims to the fold of 'true' Islam.](#) Looking at their conduct suggests that [while the rest of the world was getting to know about the novel coronavirus outbreak in December 2019, the 'apolitical' Tablighis, who consciously distance themselves from 'worldly affairs', had already acquired and spread the virus among fellow travellers who were returning home after days and months of global spiritual patrolling.](#) While the Tablighi is responsible for not taking timely action in dispersing the gathering at the Nizamuddin Markaz, which is the global headquarters of the movement, the lack of care by the state in underplaying the threat of the novel coronavirus and the delay in initiating testing cannot be ignored. By this time, the Tablighis had travelled across the world becoming one of the major carriers of the virus in India. The reaction of hate is both reductive and demagogic. The polemical narrative that is infused with Islamophobia is based on unfounded fears and deep-seated prejudices.



## History as Subtext

The political lexicon that has evolved around the Muslim minority within a right-wing stream operates on the presumption of their otherness, which includes stereotypical attitudes towards their eating habits. As the spread of the virus turns communal it is important to take a cursory glance at history. History has lessons for all. The Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Islamic revivalist movement, was founded in early 1926 British India by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi and spread by Ashraf Ali Thanawi, the two patriarchs of the movement. The political vicissitudes of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century India had a tremendous social, political and psychological impact on Muslims of the country, which led to vigorous religious expressions facilitated by the British. The 19th century was the period when a variety of new influential as well as controversial religious reform movements, both Hindu and Muslim, were emerging within India with a desire to rediscover their 'lost glory'. In the search for this 'lost glory' and a sense of belonging and identity, the Tabligh emerged as a response to the Christian missionary and the Shuddhi Sangathan. There exist interconnected social and political patterns that led to the formation of the Tabligh with its original focus on 'detracted Muslims' and later evolving into a proselytising group. Though it emerged in an intensively political context, the Tabligh maintained an 'apolitical' demeanour, specifically in India.

## The Message for All Players

There are lessons for the paranoid mind. Tabligh lays emphasis on individual social 'reform' and revocation of the political. This clearly means that the Tabligh does not directly hanker after state power; it has adopted a "bottom-up approach" to Islamise society and claimed a complete disengagement on issues that involve politics. Since the Tabligh is about a withdrawal from the political it does not emerge as a 'security threat'. Despite its claimed distancing from politics, the movement exists, operates and travels through political boundaries and among political communities. The persistence of being apolitical has serious political implications; the price of political ignorance or apathy is quite high, as seen today in the Tabligh being implicated in the spread of the pandemic and a demonization of the larger community. While there are lessons for the different sets of people embroiled in the current controversy, it is important to identify the problem at the moment – the 'common enemy', which is the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In the hierarchy of priorities, any action other than this would amount to inaction against the overarching threat that looms over us. Life in the steps being taken to flatten the curve as far as the virus is concerned is difficult. The politics of hate around the Tabligh only heightens this condition of national and global anxiety with isolation taking its toll on mental health. Is it a coincidence that the novel coronavirus, much like the cow issue, has intensified communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims? Clearly, it is not a coincidence. It is a pattern; a political design to caricature, frame and endanger one part of the nation.

## Meerut Hospital's Ad Kicks Up A Row

- A private cancer hospital in Meerut has kicked up a controversy by issuing an advertisement in a Hindi daily, appealing to "Muslim patients" to come to the hospital only after getting themselves and the attendants tested for COVID-19. It said the rule will remain in practice till the pandemic subsides. In the 11-point circular, Valentis Cancer Hospital, which promotes itself as the only cancer speciality hospital in western U.P., held the religious congregation in Delhi responsible for the spread of the virus in the country. It also chastised a section of the community for misbehaving with health professionals. The quarter-page advertisement in Dainik Jagran, dated April 17, further said in case of emergency, the hospital will send the samples of the patient and the attendant for testing and will charge ₹4,500 each. A day later, the hospital issued a clarification in the same paper, regretting if the circular had hurt the feelings of any community. People said the regret was directed towards the Hindu and Jain communities as one of the points in the advertisement described them as "miserly" and appealed to them to contribute to the PM Cares Fund. Haris



Mehmood, who runs Saif Herbal Clinic in Meerut, said the discrimination was already happening. "Some doctors are looking at the name before treating a patient. It's just that in this case, the doctor has openly talked about it," he said. Chief Medical Officer Raj Kumar told The Hindu that he has issued a notice to the hospital. "The notice says that in a secular country such kind of discrimination cannot be accepted. If the hospital doesn't give a credible response, further action could be initiated against it." Senior Superintendent of Police Ajay Sahni said a FIR has been registered under Sections 188, 295-A and 503 (3) of the IPC against Ajay Jain, the proprietor of the hospital, for hurting the sentiments of a community. Dr. Jain did not respond despite repeated attempts.

## Script of Unity

→ Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reminder that COVID-19 does not recognise "race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or border" before striking, was axiomatic but essential. The pandemic has fanned the flames of communalism instead of dousing them, as it has compounded economic woes. The Prime Minister has recognised the calamitous rage of the virus when he called for "response and conduct" that "should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood". He cannot be more right about the fact that countries and societies can no longer afford to face off with one another and the future can be secured only through togetherness and resilience. He spoke against the backdrop of criticism of the apparent communal strand in the response of some sections to the COVID-19 challenge. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the UN expressed concern over stigmatisation in India of a particular community. India sought to reject these concerns as external interference, which they were. But then, as he noted, the virus threat has made borders irrelevant. There have been reports of religious discrimination towards patients. The situation was aggravated when a vocal section of the Indian diaspora, often touted as proponents of India's interests in their host countries, was seen as Islamophobic in the UAE. Such odious digital behaviour routinely goes unquestioned in India, but in the UAE, the response has been quick. Many have lost their jobs for posting hateful content and this culture of diatribe now looms over a critical bilateral relationship that Mr. Modi has personally nurtured. The Indian Ambassador to the UAE reminded expatriates that discrimination was against "our moral fabric and the rule of law". Indeed. The narrative of the pandemic as a communal conspiracy against the nation began to take shape immediately after a Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi in March turned out to be a prodigious source of the contagion. The Centre and the Delhi government appeared to be using the unfortunate episode scripted by an irresponsible and ignorant group to fend off scrutiny of their own shortcomings. A section of the media continues to play a dishonourable role in amplifying it. In an environment that is already rife with fear and uncertainty, the official communications strategy must focus on building trust and offering reassurance. The extremely inadequate messaging has led to stigmatisation of patients and their families, and despicable incivility towards even the bodies of unfortunate victims. All this makes the Prime Minister's statement timely. His call for unity in the face of this calamity must be translated into firm action, and a good place to begin is the government's own messaging.

## PM-CARES Donations Cut from Govt. Staff Salaries

→ Employees from a number of government departments and agencies have donated a day's salary toward the PM-CARES fund. While the donations, meant for COVID-19 relief, were said to be "voluntary", government circulars show that the deductions were made directly from salaries. Those unwilling to donate were asked to submit their refusal in writing.

### **Revenue Dept. Notice**

The Revenue Department in the Finance Ministry sent a circular to all officials, including those on the boards for direct and indirect tax. "It has been decided to appeal to all officers and staff to contribute their one day's salary every month till March 2021 to the Prime Minister's Citizen



Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situation (PM-CARES) Fund to aid the Government's efforts to fight the coronavirus pandemic," the circular read.

### 'Objections in Writing'

"Any officer or staff having objection to it [the donation] may intimate Drawing and Disbursing Officer (DDO) in writing mentioning his/her employee code latest by 20.04.2020," the circular added. The communication come as a surprise to the officers and staff of the department as, they say, typically requests for such contributions come through the employees' association. Further, employees were never asked to give it in writing if they did not want to donate.

### Protection for Protectors

- Since the first case of novel coronavirus infection in India was reported in end-January, many healthcare workers have been subjected to abuse and violence in the line of duty. Most of the attacks have been on healthcare personnel sent to localities to collect samples from people who are suspected to have been infected or have come in contact with those who have tested positive for the virus. Some doctors returning home from duty have been prevented from entering their homes and, in some cases, even asked to vacate their premises. While such acts have been widely condemned, nothing much changed on the ground. The dastardly act of a few people in Chennai who not only attacked healthcare workers but also prevented a decent burial of a neurosurgeon who died of COVID-19 complications on April 19 shook the nation's conscience. Though belated, the Union Cabinet's decision to promulgate an ordinance to amend the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 to make acts of violence against medical personnel a cognisable and non-bailable offence and also provide compensation in case of injury or damage or loss to property is thus commendable. The ordinance proposes that in cases of attacks on healthcare workers, the investigation will be completed within 30 days and the final decision arrived at within one year. The punishment for such attacks will be three months to five years and the fine ₹50,000 to ₹2 lakh. In severe cases, where there are grievous injuries, the punishment will be six months to seven years and the fine ₹1 lakh to ₹5 lakh.
- Doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers who are forced to work long hours treating patients infected with the highly infectious virus, and even when protective gear in the form of gloves, face mask and personal protective equipment are scarce, need more empathy, compassion, unmitigated support and cooperation from the society. Symbolic gestures such as clapping hands and lighting candles in recognition of their selfless service during these trying times do not bolster their morale as much as understanding and support does.

### Rapid Failures

- Rapid testing kits that State governments have been using to detect antibodies to the novel coronavirus have proved unreliable, making the shift to normal life after the lockdown ends on May 3 more difficult. Governments around the world have been looking for an accurate blood test that can tell people if they have immunity through past COVID-19 infection, and can therefore return to their duties to kickstart the economy. While the diagnostic RT-PCR test to confirm the presence of the virus using a nasal swab in a laboratory setting is considered reliable, attempts to design a rapid test that uses a blood sample to find antibodies after past infection have thrown up errors in as much as a third of cases: a study in the U.K. showed that they were high on specificity – accurate in cases that they found to be antibody positive. But they still missed about 30% of positive cases, showing low sensitivity. This is the phenomenon worrying India, which has imported several hundred thousand rapid testing kits, and its experience is shared by the U.S., U.K., Spain and other countries. Rajasthan had laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 positive cases not being detected by rapid testing kits. Several States have independently ordered thousands of kits, mainly from China, and are in a quandary.



The ICMR has advised States, to whom its distributed kits, that they could be used for surveillance testing, rather than to make medically important decisions. Narrowing down the test to reliable methods is the challenge, and the WHO along with its collaborating centres is working to identify them. The results will be crucial and all countries, including the U.S. White House Coronavirus Task Force, are looking at serosurveillance, the process that will determine the status of the population on COVID-19. An exit from lockdown and other public health measures depend on such testing. India should remain focused on identifying tests that work well. This requires close integration with efforts launched by diagnostics regulators in the U.S., Europe and China who have used emergency provisions to allow early use of kits; the kits themselves are under evaluation. There are reports indicating that some vendors of rapid testing devices in China have run afoul of regulators in that country since they have no prior expertise in the field. Making purchase decisions, therefore, calls for rigorous review. In the immediate context, the message should go out to States that rapid tests cannot substitute for RT-PCR to diagnose infection. It is by no means clear that antibodies developed in response to COVID-19 provide long-term protection against reinfection. Yet, a good test to certify a large section of the population as having developed immunity seems to be a promising tool to reopen the economy with some confidence.

### Indian Test Kits Must for Reliability

- For reliable antibody testing kits, India will have to make its own, according to independent epidemiologists and biotechnologists. A day after the Rajasthan government said that it would stop antibody tests because they were returning inaccurate results, the Indian Council of Medical Research announced that it had advised putting such tests on hold because it was generating widely varying results. The ICMR said it had forwarded a “protocol” for rapid antibody tests to all States, but did not specify the details.

#### **Quick Results**

Much like home-based pregnancy tests, antibody tests are valuable because they give results quickly and only needs a pinprick’s worth of blood. However, they can only detect antibodies produced by the immune system in response to the virus and this can take as many as seven to 14 days to manifest. The PCR technology is confirmatory because it identifies the SARS-CoV-2 based on genes, whereas the presence of viruses has usually been detected via antibody kits by the proteins produced by the virus’s genes. An antibody test only tells you whether a person has ever been infected by the virus. These antibodies that are produced are not necessarily specific to SARS-CoV-2 and could even be generated by a variety of other pathogens. “There are other four other common coronaviruses and antibodies could be generated to that too. So far, nobody has found a protein that is specific to SARS-CoV-2.”

#### **Surveillance Tool**

The ICMR’s current recommendation is to test those who show symptoms such as cough, fever and breathlessness and even a sore throat. After quarantining for 14 days, an antibody test is to be done and if positive, the person ought to be tested by RT-PCR. The ICMR has underlined that tests are a surveillance tool. The utility of the test was evolving and its value was dependent on field conditions. They were not a replacement for RT-PCR tests. However, with the accuracy widely ranging from 5% to 71%, there are questions on whether they can reliably help indicate the spread of the infection. All kits need to be validated by the National Institute of Virology, Pune. They test two things: are the kits detecting antibodies at specified intervals after an infection mirroring when antibodies actually show up in people with confirmed COVID infections? And do they falsely respond to the presence of other pathogens? It is not clear how tests validated by the NIV began showing widely discordant results for them to be paused by the ICMR. “We need tests that are locally developed and validated,” Dr. Joseph said. “The need of the hour is to have rapidly deployable RT PCR kits. If we can reduce the time taken for analysis, or have a paper-based strip



that can detect the virus, it would be more useful,” said Asha Kishore, Director, Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram. [The institute has developed a rapid PCR test that awaits final approval from the ICMR.](#) Renu Swarup, Secretary, Department of Biotechnology, said that India’s challenges with diagnostic kits were temporary. “There are at least seven Indian manufacturers of these kits awaiting approval from the National Institute of Virology and we are hoping to be able to produce at least a million kits by end May.”

### DRDO Develops Mobile Virology Lab

- Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated through videoconference a mobile virology research and diagnostics laboratory (MVRDL). It has been developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), together with ESIC Hospital, Hyderabad, and the private industry. “The mobile lab will be helpful in carrying out diagnosis of COVID-19 and in virus-culturing for drug screening, convalescent plasma-derived therapy, comprehensive immune profiling of patients towards vaccine development and early clinical trials specific to Indian population,” the Defence Ministry said in a statement. The MVRDL is the combination of a bio-safety level (BSL)-3 lab and a BSL-2 lab and was set up in a record time of 15 days. It can process 1,000-2,000 samples a day, the statement said. The laboratories comply with the biosafety standards of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) so as to meet international guidelines. The first such MVRDL was developed by the Research Centre Imarat (RCI), Hyderabad, in consultation with ESIC Hospital. It can be positioned anywhere in the country, the statement said.

### IIT Bombay Develops IT Solutions to Help with Physical Distancing

- Software can greatly help with the demands of physical distancing necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and IIT Bombay members have developed some interesting solutions. One involves a platform named [World Wide Help \(WWH\)](#) which can be used to connect people seeking medical help with helpers, such as doctors. The other is a system to generate [e-tokens](#) that can be deployed by local markets and small vendors to ensure physical distancing.

#### **Patients and Helpers**

The WWH platform can be used with an app or a phone. The user simply calls a dedicated number and can input basic data such as the age of the person in need of help and whom they wish to solicit help from. They can supply the phone number, too. This is registered as a task in the app and assigned to a primary helper who is a junior doctor or medicare professional. Further, the task may be re-designated by the primary helper to a senior doctor, who is the second level of helper. Or the primary helper may settle the issue through a phone call. The platform has seen a few deployments in the last two years (for providing agricultural advice, nutrition advice, career counselling advice and so on). “It is mature, but each deployment requires its own customisation... the bottom of the pyramid do not have the resources or may not have the digital literacy for this. Hence a low-cost, phone-based solution with humans in the loop to make information access easier for this population is in order.” The technology aspect was not as challenging as the need-assessment and promotion of the platform. [Ma and Shishu Poshan](#), a helpline that provides nutrition and breast-feeding support for mothers and infants has been using this platform already. Now the group is in talks with King Edward Memorial hospital, Mumbai, to put it to use. “A few other features we are currently looking to integrate it with WhatsApp and support for video conferencing,” says Dr Chebrolu.

#### **Vegetable Market**

Every Tuesday and Friday, between 2.00 pm and 8.00 pm, the consumer society vegetable market opens at IIT Bombay. As is expected, people may need to crowd the market to pick up their fruits



and vegetables. To avoid this crowding, along with the email that informs the residents of the opening of the market, a link is sent. Clicking on this link generates an e-token for the user. This email is sent to approximately 1,000 households in the campus. The e-token is a number that informs the users of their places in the queue. By checking a link provided in the email, the user can check the status of their token – if it is close to their turn, they can move to the market and pick up what they want. “We also wanted to adapt this to people who were not comfortable with emails, such as senior citizens,” says Bhaskar Raman, from the Computer Science department, who developed this system. “Hence, we made it so that the e-tokens are always even in number. Those who are challenged by the system can call and pick up a physical token which is an odd number. They can at least do this till they learn how the system,” he adds. This system is also being used in IIT Bhilai where some students who were unable to go back during the lockdown have to be organised to collect food from canteens, he explained. Dr. Raman is in talks with Prof. K. V. Subrahmanyam of Chennai Mathematical Institute, and the two, along with their students, plan to develop an app that will generalise this for use by small vendors and shopkeepers. “Because of the lockdown, people want to order online, hence small vendors may tend to lose out, and this app can avoid that,” he explains.

## Implement Aarogya Setu, But Only Through Law (Kashish Aneja, A Practising Lawyer in New Delhi, Specialises In Global Health and Privacy Law; Nikhil Pratap - Practising Lawyer in New Delhi)

- It is only a matter of time before the lockdown starts to ease. The threat of COVID-19, however, will continue. Studies say that there will be multiple waves of infection following the first wave. This will lead to a fundamental transformation in the role of the state in regulating society. Heightened epidemic surveillance by the government could lead to an increased risk of institutionalised surveillance of individuals. To protect large swathes of the population from possible exposure to the infection, the movement of individuals will also be heavily regulated.

### **Purpose limitation**

At present, the movement of individuals is subject to permits in various parts of the world, including India. In China, it's alarming to note that a phone app was started as a voluntary service for informing users of their potential exposure to infected persons, but soon began to be used as an e-pass for allowing access to public transport. The situation in China raises similar concerns in India. The Aarogya Setu app launched by the government is designed to enable users who have come in contact with COVID-19 positive patients to be notified, traced and suitably supported. It has been criticised for not complying with data protection principles of data minimisation, purpose limitation, transparency and accountability, all of which are crucial to protecting the privacy of its users. According to the app's privacy policy, Aarogya Setu collects the personal data of its users and allows the disclosure of such data to the government to provide it with necessary details for “carrying out medical and administrative interventions necessary in relation to COVID-19.” Such vague articulation weakens the app's purpose limitation. The government is also at liberty to revise the terms of the privacy policy at its discretion (and has done so) without notifying its users. Given the design of the app, it is not difficult to conceive of the wide dangers of its misuse to carry out surveillance of users. Concomitantly, the app also equips the government with an instrument for restricting and regulating the right of freedom of movement of citizens, especially due to its fluid terms of service. Some reports suggest that the government is considering using the app as a criterion for restricting users' movement. The potential restriction on freedom of movement will have considerable impact on an individual's access to basic government benefits and services, thus endangering citizens' right to life. For example, entry into banks and access to PDS may become subject to the colour coding of the person on the Aarogya Setu app. There is no limitation





on the gamut of restrictions that may be imposed using the app. The resultant impact will be disproportionately higher on the most vulnerable sections of the society.

### The Unconstitutional Bargain

A seemingly benign app based on voluntary consent is thus loaded with potential to be used as a tool to violate fundamental rights. Individuals may be forced to download the app to be able to access basic amenities and services. This situation could posit the problem of an unconstitutional condition or barter – a situation where citizens are forced to give up their rights (right to autonomy and privacy in this case) in exchange for government benefits. Further, the existing users of the app could be subject to arbitrary restrictions in their fundamental rights without their informed consent as they would not have foreseen such restrictions at the time of giving their consent to downloading the app. The situation bears resemblance to Aadhaar. Originally designed as an optional programme to provide government benefits to citizens based on their voluntary consent, Aadhaar was later made compulsory, even for private services such as banking and mobile phone registrations. The Supreme Court then disallowed private parties from using Aadhaar for authentication on grounds that it exceeded its intended purpose. To avoid unforeseeable dangers of mass surveillance and disproportionate restrictions of fundamental rights, it is therefore imperative that the Aarogya Setu app is implemented only through law, especially since India lacks a comprehensive data protection or surveillance law. It is already a settled legal principle that any limitation of fundamental rights must be implemented only through a law pursuing legitimate state interest. Enacting such a law will not only subject government actions to limitations but will also facilitate its constitutional scrutiny.

### Is the Lockdown Helping India?

- The night of his address, India recorded 564 cases – a six-fold jump in less than two weeks; there were 11 deaths. Government and health officials feel that a complete lockdown and cessation of travel will keep those who are infected isolated and restrict infections to contained clusters. This would avoid community transmission when it becomes impossible to trace the source of infections and quarantining is of no use. Such a situation would quickly overwhelm hospitals as seen in Italy, Spain, Iran and the United States. With among the lowest per capita availability of hospital beds and health-care workers, health experts say if there are too many cases, it will be catastrophic for India.

### What Do the Numbers Reveal?

The lockdown has coincided with an increase in testing and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has widened the pool of people of suspected cases who need to get tested. Earlier, only those with a travel history and displaying symptoms were being tested. Now, even those who show flu-like illnesses and are in a hotspot are likely to be tested and quarantined. Since the lockdown, confirmed cases have risen 25 times to over 14,000; deaths too have risen 40 times. Every weekly rise in cases has seen an increase by a factor of 3.7, 2.5 and 2.0, respectively, until April 16. Testing grew in those same weeks by a factor of 2.4, 2.1 and 1.1 times, respectively. A slower growth in testing thus appears to be corresponding to a slower rise in confirmed cases.

### Should India Test More Aggressively?

Increased testing does not necessarily mean a rise in cases, and could be explained by a fall in the speed of disease transmission. However, to conclude so would be premature, caution health officials. That is because India has still tested only a limited proportion of its population. There is a pool, and we do not know how large, of asymptomatic people, that is those who have been infected but do not show symptoms, but can infect others. Testing must be increased and contacts traced so that asymptomatic are also under the radar. Only this week India has effectively unveiled a new set of strategies – the use of rapid antibody tests and the concept of pooled testing to



estimate the extent of undetected infections in hotspots which are places with a large number or large increase in cases. These are useful but relatively crude measures and can still lead to several asymptomatic people going undetected, according to health officials.

### Is the Lockdown Being Followed?

While India's lockdown has been among the harshest in the world, there have been several instances of people gathering in large numbers. In fact, the makeshift relief camps that States have set up for migrant labour, the high average density of population are all aggravating factors for the spread of clusters as is seen in Mumbai. Finally, India's high dependence on imported testing kits and the chemicals needed to analyse them means that testing cannot be equally ramped up across the country. The ICMR has said that it has enough testing kits "for the next eight weeks" but this does not account for the variable testing capacity of various States. The extension of the lockdown for another three weeks, until May 3, may buy time but the government needs to clarify its goals. Does it expect the number of hotspot districts of which there are 170 as of this week to come down? Is it to bring down the number of infections by a particular percentage or is it to achieve a more manageable doubling time? This refers to the time it takes for cases to double, which has increased from four days in the last week of March to seven days as of this week. The longer this stretch is, the more time hospitals will have to treat and release COVID-19 patients, refurbish and safely dedicate manpower for clinical management.

### What About Deaths?

Post-April 8, India has seen at least 25 deaths a day, or about 1-2% of the confirmed cases. While this proportion is in line with global trends, they are likely reflective of cases that were confirmed in one to two weeks before the lockdown. On the other hand, from April 3 the recovery rate of those confirmed has increased from 70% on April 3 to 80% on April 17, which also corresponds to a dip in the death rate. In all, 80% of those infected in India are believed to be below 60.

### Some States Have Managed to Flatten the Curve. What Does That Mean?

New cases in Kerala, on a daily count, have dropped to single digits: the number of recoveries exceeds those being hospitalised in Tamil Nadu. Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are also showing signs of a dip. These are signs that these States have been able to manage infections effectively through stringent contact tracing and curtailing asymptomatic persons from spreading infection. They also reflect the importance of having moved early to stymie the spread. However, a region is said to have stabilised only if no fresh cases are reported for 28 days – and no State is close to that scenario yet. The rise in infections is also due to the disproportionate influence of clusters. Mumbai and Delhi show that even with high rates of testing, infections will keep rising if quarantining and contact tracing are effective. Indore in Madhya Pradesh shows that laxity in enforcing quarantine and testing last month could have seeded several clusters that will be difficult to contain. Moreover, the demands that a total lockdown make on the economy and the extent to which it suppresses normal life can mean that a staggered relaxation of the lockdown is likely. But health officials warn that this may lead to infected people travelling to new places. India may have to continue dealing with frequent outbreaks for a while, they feel, rather than expect to decisively stamp out the disease during an extended lockdown.

- All approaches to easing the lockdown carry risks of infection spikes. How can we minimise the risk while allowing work? The government is following a geographic (zonal) approach. This is a high-risk approach which can also prove ineffective. A more effective, minimal-risk approach would be to create infection-free worker pools, by a strategic combination of antibody and PCR testing of workers in businesses that open up. Let me explain why. The government has demarcated three zones: green, orange and red. The green zones are those where no new cases were reported over 28 days since the last case tested negative. The orange zones are those with a few cases, and the red ones have a large number of cases. The government suggests opening up the green zones first. But these zones may have many asymptomatic cases, that is, infected people with no symptoms. The Delhi government found recently that 25% of those who tested positive had no



symptoms. China had 44% asymptomatic cases. These are very high figures. If green zones are opened and 25% people are asymptomatic carriers, infections will spike. If workers are together in factories, even with social distancing a single asymptomatic carrier can infect others, forcing the entire unit into quarantine. The effort of opening up that factory will be wasted. Moreover, many factories are located in red zones, and supply chains often cut across zones. For example, Baddi town in Himachal Pradesh is India's biggest pharma hub, and home to major companies that produce numerous essential drugs for domestic and export markets. It is in a red zone but is being allowed production, with many workers coming from other states. What if the workers bring infection? A lower risk method would be to create "pools of green workers" (rather than green zones) who are infection free. Hence, if an industry wants to open (and all should be allowed, whether producing essential or non-essential goods) it should first identify its workers. Those who have already recovered from the virus will have some immunity. Give them a green certificate or stamp their arms. Give antibody tests to the remaining workers in that industry. These are blood tests which can identify in an hour if someone has been infected, even if asymptomatic. Some antibodies (IgM) appear a few days after infection and others (IgG) a little later. Some of those who test positive may still be infectious, others would have recovered. To identify the recovered, give a PCR test. Those testing negative can join the green workers. Those testing positive should self-quarantine for say 7-8 more days, and then get PCR tested again and cleared. This procedure will create a worker pool who can work without endangering others or themselves. They will not need on-site lodgings, since they will have some immunity, and can come from any zone, including red.

### What About False Negatives or False Positives in Antibody Tests?

The false negatives, that is, those showing no antibodies even if infected, would be excluded anyway from the green worker pool. On false positives, that is those showing antibodies without being infected, if the PCR test finds them infection free and they have been in self-isolation for 14 days, including them in the worker pool will carry minimal risk. There will still be some risk, since they will lack immunity, but their co-workers with antibodies will have immunity. The second issue is identifying services and businesses for antibody testing. Health service workers are already on the priority list. Another priority is industries manufacturing PPE kits, ventilators, oxygen concentrators and medicines, but they should also create green worker pools. Beyond this, any factory or business that has its requisite number of green workers should be allowed to open, whichever zone it falls in, with minimum red tape in granting permission. Given low consumer demand, rather few may initially come forward in any case. By focusing on green workers and not green zones, we can also minimise the need for housing in work locations, which most businesses lack. But those who want to provide housing can minimise the chance of cluster infections, if they have pre-tested workers. The third issue is housing migrant workers who may join the work force later but need accommodation now, given continued lockdowns across states. For them, large spaces (stadiums, convention centres) should be opened up. These allow for social distancing, showers and toilets, community kitchens or even self-organised cooking, virus testing spaces, and parking for transport buses, etc. Many states are using schools and colleges for migrants, but these will be needed when they open, and seldom have stadium-type facilities for a few thousand people. Basically, we need an effective but low risk strategy to return to work and ease the lockdown. A zonal approach can prove ineffective and carries high risk. The answer lies in creating green worker pools, not green zones, through targeted antibody plus PCR testing, and a generous plan to house migrant workers. We can thus work with the lockdown with minimum risk and maximum effectiveness.

### Behind Containment in Kerala

- ➔ By January 30, the day India – and Kerala – reported its first COVID-19 case, a 23-year-old medical student who had returned from Wuhan, as many as 800 persons with China travel history had already been kept under observation in Kerala. Kerala, which has to date seen 437 cases, 308



recoveries and two deaths, has consistently stayed ahead of the coronavirus curve, with its 70% recovery rate being the highest in the country. Kerala has so far tested 20,821 samples, also the highest for any state. Kerala has bucked the national trend for novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) with a doubling time of 72.2 days – which means that the number of cases in the state doubled in that many days – against a national average of 7.5 days. What sets its containment strategy apart?

### Legacy of Public Health

Much before Kerala became a separate state in 1956, the region had seen several pathbreaking public health interventions. In 1879 the erstwhile Travancore rulers made a proclamation making vaccination compulsory for public servants, prisoners and students. In 1928 a parasite survey, done in association with the Rockefeller Foundation, led to the control of hookworm and filariasis. This community health legacy got a further boost as the state's focus on literacy and women's education helped it attain near 100% vaccination levels and develop a culture of personal hygiene. The World Health Organization, in a survey held in 12 countries in 2005, found that hand-washing with soap after defecation had a prevalence of 34% in Kerala, the highest among the states/countries surveyed. So, when the state began its 'Break the Chain' campaign during the COVID-19 outbreak – to promote hand-washing and use of sanitisers – it only served to reiterate some of those best practices.

### Health Infrastructure

A critical factor in Kerala's COVID-19 battle has been its robust healthcare system, considered on a par with those of many developed countries. In June 2019, Kerala topped all states on the NITI Aayog's annual health index with an overall score of 74.01, more than 2½ times that of the least-performing state, UP (28.61). Though Kerala has only been investing 5% of its total state plan outlay on healthcare – which is also roughly the national average spending in the sector – its focus on healthcare at the level of Primary Health Centres and Community Health Centres has stood it in good stead. With the management of these centres in the hands of three-tier local bodies, many of these have modern diagnostic facilities and offer tele-medicine services. The state's private health sector, once dominated by the Church, has grown rapidly in the last two decades, mainly on the back of investment from NRIs and corporate healthcare groups. At present, Kerala has 142,924 beds in its hospitals, of which the private sector accounts for 93,042.

### Focus on The Front Line

On February 1, the state's coronavirus control cells laid out guidelines on testing, quarantine, hospital admission and discharge criteria – a living document that is regularly updated. Until late January, the state did not have any testing facility and throat swabs of suspected cases had to be sent to the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune. But by the first week of February, NIV-Alappuzha got sanction to conduct the tests. Over the last two months, Kerala's COVID-19 testing facilities have grown to 13, ten of those in the government sector. The state also stepped up its medical facilities, turning defunct hospitals into COVID-19 facilities. So far, 38 government hospitals have been converted into COVID-19 hospitals, and 800 ventilators in public hospitals and 1,578 in the private sector have been identified.

### Lessons from Nipah

While broadly sticking to the protocol set up by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Kerala put in place its rigorous surveillance network, one that had been fine-tuned to perfection during the outbreak of the Nipah virus in 2018 and 2019. Besides tracing contacts of positive cases, Kerala strictly enforced 28 days of home quarantine although the general incubation period of the virus is 14 days. From early March, the state screened all international passengers. Even if someone managed to skip airport screening, they would have to deal with village committees, who kept the health department informed about fresh arrivals and ensured they remained indoors. In



hotspots of Kasaragod and Kannur districts, some village panchayats even launched call centres, connecting those quarantined with the authorities. Besides, route maps of positive cases, drawn through GPS data, were released to help people self-report if they suspected they might have come in contact with an infected person. Geo-mapping of those under observation enabled better cluster management. Once flight operations were suspended, the state focused on inter-state road and rail travellers. Those who reached Kerala from other states since March 8 – and their contacts – were asked to isolate themselves. It's this strategy that helped the state rein in infections from participants of the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi. While several other states started acting only when positive cases from among the Tablighis were reported, Kerala had already placed around 217 such persons under observation. Eventually, 20 of them tested positive.

## What Is the Sprinklr Row Kerala Govt's Covid-19 Response Is Embroiled In?

- Even as it earns praise within India and outside for its deft handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the 'flattening' of the infection curve, the Kerala government is in the dock for allegedly [breaching privacy of 1.75 lakh people under quarantine in the state by striking a deal with a US-based tech firm to handle the data compiled from them.](#)

### **What Is the Sprinklr Controversy?**

Leader of the Opposition Ramesh Chennithala, at a press conference in the state capital, mounted an offensive against the ruling LDF government accusing it of [allowing the US-based tech firm Sprinklr to collate and handle the health data of 1.75 lakh people under quarantine without taking their individual consent. The data, including details of their symptoms and underlying health conditions, was compiled by workers at the grassroots level using a tool developed by Sprinklr with the aim of assisting doctors and medical officials in making an informed choice about possible hospitalisation.](#) The Congress-led Opposition charged that the government did not follow due procedures in appointing Sprinklr and thereby risked the transfer of crucial health data of thousands of people to pharmaceutical companies. It questioned why the administration took the assistance of a foreign firm when there were institutions like Centre for Development of Imaging technology (CDIT) and Kerala State IT Mission that can do the same job. Chennithala said the decision to appoint Sprinklr, owned by a Keralite named Ragy Thomas, was taken unilaterally with the knowledge of the chief minister without obtaining clearances from departments like law, local self-government and finance.

### **How Did the LDF Government Respond?**

The state government defended the move by stating that the company's tool was offered free-of-cost as a software-as-a-service (SaaS) and that the firm was owned by a Keralite. The IT department said the data was being collected on a massive scale and therefore needed the intervention of an application which can collate it in a quick way and help analyse it. Sprinklr's SaaS tool was already ready and therefore had to be just customised to meet the state's needs. The government, in a bid to reaffirm its transparency, also released documents in connection with the contract it signed with Sprinklr on April 2. Documents include the purchase order form, service agreement, privacy policy of the company and a non-disclosure agreement. The documents state that the data belong to the Kerala government. Additionally, the agreement order signed with the company stated, "Every employee participates in mandatory data protection and information security trainings and is formally obliged to data secrecy. Sprinklr established a data protection steering committee of key functional leaders throughout the company and Sprinklr also appointed an experienced Data Protection Officer." Following the allegations, the government changed the domain name for the entry of data from [citizencenter.sprinklr.com](http://citizencenter.sprinklr.com) to [citizencenter.kerala.gov.in](http://citizencenter.kerala.gov.in).



### Is There Truth in The Allegations?

*From the looks of the non-disclosure and service agreements signed with the company, it certainly appears that the ownership of the health data remains with the Kerala government, even though it may have been temporarily hosted on servers owned by Sprinklr. There is no exchange of financial favours in the arrangement. But questions still remain how and why Sprinklr was singularly appointed for the task without even putting out a global tender. Since the exercise involves confidential data of thousands of people, it begs to ask the question why the government did not feel the need to make the deal public.*

### What Is the Political Relevance of The Controversy?

The Opposition Congress-led UDF, perturbed at the praise the CPM-led government has been receiving for its handling of the pandemic, has sensed an opening in the battle ranks with which it can target the chief minister. Since the IT department, which signed the deal with Sprinklr, is held by the chief minister, the Opposition believes the buck stops with him. With Assembly elections just a year away, the Opposition believes the row can help it politically to target the ruling coalition. The nature of the row is also particularly troubling for the CPM as it had aggressively taken on the BJP-led Centre over data privacy concerns surrounding the national Aadhaar project.

### No Transparency in West Bengal (Divya Guha - Kolkata-Based Independent Journalist)

- West Bengal has acquired the dubious reputation of conducting the least number of COVID-19 tests among the larger Indian States (62.7 per million of population). To make matters worse, its methodology for aggregating 'asymptomatic and those under observation', 'sick' and 'deaths' leaves important questions unanswered. Doctors complain that the Standard Operating Procedure for COVID-19 death certification has not been followed. In Kolkata Medical College and Hospital, for instance, when doctors clinically assess a person to have died of COVID-19, and is yet to be lab-tested (test results may take up to two days), the bodies in their highly infectious states have been released to family members for last rites. No tests are being conducted posthumously outside of the specialised (Level 4) hospitals converted for treating COVID-19 positive patients, doctors say. With the testing rate low, we don't know if there are COVID-19 deaths outside Level 4 hospitals. How many are succumbing in general wards, homes and villages? Who is checking? West Bengal's numbers come under further doubt as the State government is instructing doctors to be cautious while recording COVID-19 as the cause of death in the case of those patients who have other underlying medical conditions. This is not in keeping with international standard practices. In the U.K., doctors record a wider set as having succumbed to COVID-19, including deaths strongly suspected as being by COVID-19, even if no laboratory test has taken place, or if there are co-morbidities such as kidney, lung or heart disease. West Bengal authorities are telling doctors to do the opposite. As more healthcare workers test positive, their calls for testing much more are stonewalled. Authorities, they say, have "no intention" of doing enough tests. This is unconscionable, a galling failure of the State government's duty of care towards medical professionals and the public. Then there is the newspeak: how do surveillance, quarantine and being under observation differ? Do these numbers (31,023) include those in self-isolation? Who collects, collates and checks these figures from hospitals and District Collectors' offices before they reach the panicking public? Is it only up to the hospitals to track COVID-19 deaths? The lack of transparency indicate that true figures are being suppressed to appear low.



**Bihar's Dystopian Moments and A Looming Crisis (Yashwant Sinha - India's Former Minister of Finance (1998-2002) And Minister of External Affairs (2002-2004). Atul K. Thakur - Delhi-Based Policy Professional and Columnist)**

→ The Centre's much-touted spirit of 'cooperative federalism' has been nothing more than a hollow promise. There is a glaring gap between stark ground realities and propaganda. India's federal system is badly challenged today with partisan Governors, misplaced policies and languishing financial assistance. Bihar is no exception. States, including Bihar, have been in the throes of financial stress from before; the novel coronavirus outbreak and the national lockdown have further weakened their fiscal position. In fact, Bihar is still waiting for the elusive 'special status' that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised during elections and again soon after Nitish Kumar formed the government with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Sadly, it has proved to be another 'Jumla'. Bihar has had a long history of suffering because of a persisting feudal political culture that neglected efforts to create industrial capabilities and employment opportunities in the State. Consequently, the exodus of labour has become a new normal since the 1990s. Despite the fact that construction of new roads and overbridges made through central assistance in Mr. Kumar's first term along with the contractual recruitments (especially in schools) could draw a few migrants back to the State, the situation on the migration front remained grim. Mr. Kumar has been in power for 15 years, yet the fate of these workers has not improved. They continue to be vulnerable and compelled to work without any legal protection.

### **The Forgotten People**

With the global pandemic and national lockdown causing unprecedented loss to lives and livelihoods, Bihar's vulnerabilities have come full circle. The State government has failed to ensure proper equipment and health-care facilities to the people. It has also dealt with migrants with disdain. A large number of Bihari migrants in Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of the country were left stranded when the lockdown took effect. Some of them tried their best to stay wherever they were, but finally gave up as they had no money or food to survive. The heart-rending visuals of the poor and helpless migrants desperately walking from Delhi/National Capital Region back to Bihar reflect the hollowness of the State's approach to tackling a disastrous disease and the consequent lockdown. Also, some recent developments show that the government adopted a selective approach in disaster management. For example, while an MLA from the ruling party was issued a special pass to travel to Kota in Rajasthan to bring his child back from there, countless others were left to face socio-economic hardship and apathy. Within the State, pauperisation is in full swing and the hunger is just killing; Biharis with no support of remittances are on the fringes in their own homeland. In Gaya and other parts of Bihar, children were seen eating roasted frogs. What could be more pitiful than this in a country that will have food grains of over 100 million tonnes in warehouses by the end of April, and as according to the Food Corporation of India (FCI), where the annual produce is expected to be record 292 million tonnes in year 2019-20? Reportedly, India has enough in macro projection. Reportedly, India has too little with lack of insight in disaster management in a trying time such as this.

### **Floundering Health Care**

In Bihar, public health was the next thing after education that became corrupted and collapsed. Opening of new hospitals including an All India Institute of Medical Sciences and few others were hardly beneficial for the poor living in rural areas since they do not have the means to avail them. Unlike the highly publicised claims of Mr. Kumar, health-care facilities at district and block levels are in pathetic shape. As per National Health Profile 2019 of Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (CBHI), there are 7,13,986 total government hospital beds available in India. More precisely, this amounts to 0.55 beds per 1,000 population. Many States even lie below the national figure, Bihar is one of them, experiencing an acute shortage of government hospital beds with just 0.11 beds



available per 1,000 population. This is something alarming in a State that was once known for its socialistic leanings. Even when Mr. Kumar may no longer be charmed with socialism, how can he overlook the unimaginable hardship of the poor, the unemployed and the marginalised? He must bargain for more from the Centre, because his alliance with the BJP has not benefited Bihar.

Also, he should not be wary in seeking the views of the Opposition's views in terms of crisis management and a plan to rebuild. As the global and national order is in a phase of reset, it is no longer an option for Bihar to ignore chronic issues such as industrial backwardness, unemployment and outbound migration. For Mr. Kumar, who was once known as 'Sushasan Babu', the time has come to follow Raj Dharma. What is expected from him is to be dutiful, not the balancing plays of caste arithmetic and crossing the fence merely for political survival. The state of affairs in Bihar is worrisome; accordingly, policies and plans have to be prioritised. Politics in the State should not defeat the aspirations of millions of Biharis who have already suffered too much. For sure, the land of Bihar should never be known as the 'imaginary homeland' for its people who are now home-bound as the cities which they contributed to build have failed them.

## Migrant Issue

- Seasonal migration is one of the most critical issues of our time. The condition of seasonal migrants has emerged as no less an important issue than the novel coronavirus itself. The COVID-19 crisis has, for the first time, brought migration to the centre stage of public health and disaster response in India.

### **Why Migrants Occupy Centre Stage**

In the past, a mass exodus would take place because of a disaster such as a famine, drought, flood, or regional conflict. An exodus would be from the area where such a calamity was unfolding. While we continue to see episodes of such exodus, now there are new narratives of mass exodus caused by demonetisation, violence against migrants, and the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19. What is common in these narratives is the decisive role played by the state or the lack of it. It is in the context of state action that migrants have drawn sharp attention in debates over public health and political economy for at least five reasons. First, the numbers involved are very high. Let's take the example of Bihar which has a population of about 123 million. The number of migrants in Bihar is estimated to be close to 10 million, of which three million may be inter-State migrants. An estimate based on NSSO 64<sup>th</sup> Round and Census 2011 data and a look at monthly per capita expenditure data suggest that there are approximately 2 million daily wage workers. The months of February and March are a lean season for rural-to-rural migration, yet the current figure of inter-State seasonal migrants stands at about 1.4 million. Further, if we take the example of the National Capital Region, where, as the data suggest, 20% of Bihari migrants are working, we are referring to 0.28 to 0.3 million seasonal migrants. Even if half of them try to return home during a crisis, facilitating their journey can be a logistical improbability. Second, India's economy, particularly of the growth centres, depends on the services of migrant workers. Sectors such as construction, garment manufacturing, mining, and agriculture would come to a standstill without them. One of the biggest challenges after the lockdown is lifted will be to bring back the migrants to kickstart these sectors. Third, the return of migrants brings to the source States an economic shock as there are no compensatory sources of livelihood. The poor States may find it difficult to sustain themselves without the remittances. This will not only cause demand side setbacks but also impact nutrition, health, education and the well-being of the older population. Fourth, in the case of epidemics, the exodus of seasonal migrants creates apprehensions about the spread of the disease and runs counterproductive to the very purpose of a lockdown. Working from home or getting paid leave is largely a middle-class luxury. Daily-wage earners do not have the capacity to stay at a destination without work. Their families back home depend on their daily savings. A considerable number of workers live within the manufacturing units or at work sites. Any lockdown results in loss of their accommodation too. Fifth, the pathetic working and living conditions of migrants defy the very idea of decent work and general security. Slums and slum-like colonies are





breeding grounds of ailments and communicable diseases. People living in these areas simply cannot practise social distancing. Lack of sanitation, hygiene, safe drinking water, health services, social security measures, and affordable housing have resulted in a low quality of life.

### Delivering Relief Packages

Some amelioration may be in sight with the ₹1.70 lakh crore relief package announced by the Central government. However, despite the government's good intentions, the package will not benefit seasonal migrants. Those migrants who are unable to return home and are not ration cardholders in the cities where they are stationed will not benefit from additional free food grains under the PDS. They cannot avail of increased MGNREGA wages until they go back home. As many seasonal migrants are landless or marginal farmers, they will not benefit from the grant to landholders. Neither will they get benefits under the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board because of low registration. Thus, this workforce will remain largely deprived of the benefits under the present package at their destination places. The State needs to think out of the box in delivering relief packages. Disasters provide opportunities to correct structural wrongs. The state could work out a strategy of addressing immediate distress conditions and simultaneously initiating long-term measures to bring structural changes in the policy towards migrants and the informal sector.

- Post-COVID-19, whenever that happens, one of the most enduring images of it would be that of the multitudes of migrant workers who became, all of a sudden, nowhere people, no one's people. For the policymakers, it would be a trigger to rework a strategy for them and to ensure a better legal framework which doesn't leave them high and dry yet again during tough situations. It is in this context that we need to revisit the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. It was drawn up after repealing The Orissa Dadan Labour Act, 1975. Based on a very specific background, it couldn't perhaps see much beyond the then-existing migrant workmen system. The ISMW Act defines inter-State migrant workman as any person who is recruited by or through a contractor. This definition keeps away any migrant workman out of the ambit if he is not brought in through a licensed contractor. It is common knowledge that most of the migrant workmen are not routed through licensed contractors. This small catch, in the definition, has been sufficient to exclude bulk of the migrant workmen from getting any benefit out of the Act. Furthermore, the Act is only applicable to any establishment in which five or more inter-State migrant workmen are employed. In reality, only a minuscule proportion of migrant workmen are placed under such establishments these days. So, if the establishment doesn't come under the purview of the Act, its migrant employees, numbering less than five, cease to be migrants, legally, even though they may actually be one!

### 'Inadequacy of Act'

The current crisis has comprehensively exposed the inadequacy of the ISMW Act. While it has become anachronistic, the need for legal safeguards and welfare measures for migrants has become even more pressing and urgent. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security (UWSS) Act, 2008 was enacted to provide for social security and welfare of unorganised workers. The Act defines unorganised workers as home-based worker, self-employed worker or wage worker in the unorganised sector. The Government of India has, in the recent past, introduced a host of social security schemes. Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan Yojana is meant to ensure old age protection for unorganised workers. Atal Pension Yojana has been launched under the National Pension System. Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana is a life insurance scheme. Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana is an accident insurance scheme. Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana aims at providing health cover. The UWSS Act itself has two very vitally useful features, viz., (a) Registration of unorganised workers, and (b) Portable smart I-card with a Unique Worker's Identification Number. The coverage of these useful provisions and schemes, however, is still sub-optimal. The entitlements and benefits for the migrant workers have an unquestionable economic, legal and moral basis. In the present context, the following suggestions may require urgent consideration:



Repealing of the ISMW Act, 1979 forthwith and replacing it with a new Act, or alternatively, enlarging the scope of UWSS Act to include legal entitlements, to define the migrant workman as a subset, to provide for contingencies of livelihood loss and to make the Act legally enforceable. Universalisation of registration and issuance of Aadhaar-based UWIN (Unique Worker's Identification No.) ought to be done. It will serve multiple objectives.

Schemes like MNREGA, PDS and Ujjwala need to be made portable. Geofencing of different benefits can be done so that a migrant workman can choose location-wise benefits for himself and his family from a matrix available.

A comprehensive database of the migrant workers' source and destination, demography, employment patterns and skill sets would not only help in skill development and providing for social security benefits, but would also be useful in planning for mass transit of migrant labour, and preparing for any contingency plan in abnormal situations.

Issues related to migrant workmen have complex Centre-State and inter-State dimensions. The Inter-State Council, set up under Article 263 of the Constitution, may be a more appropriate forum to effectively and comprehensively deal with larger issues related to migrant workmen.

It's time to initiate a legal lattice that means business to the migrant workmen, and say goodbye to the antiquated law of 1979 that seems to have outlived its utility. It is better late than never.

### The Key Strategy Is Fiscal Empowerment of States (M. Govinda Rao Was A Member, Fourteenth Finance Commission And Former Director, National Institute Of Public Finance And Policy)

→ Being closer to the people, the States have a much larger responsibility in fighting this war. Public health as well as public order are State subjects in the Constitution. In fact, some States were proactive in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak by involving the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, even before the Government of India declared a universal lockdown invoking the Disaster Management Act, 2005. Of course, the Centre under Entry 29 of the Concurrent List has the powers to set the rules of implementation which states, "Prevention of the extension from one State to another of infectious or contagious diseases or pests affecting men, animals or plants". While Central intervention was done to enable, "consistency in the application and implementation of various measures across the country", the actual implementation on the ground level will have to be done at the State level. Furthermore, States are better informed to decide the areas and activities where relaxations should be done as the coronavirus curve is flattened. Hopefully, there will be better coordination between the Union and State governments instead of claiming credit and apportioning blame.

The pandemic has underlined the historical neglect of the health-care sector in the country. The total public expenditures of Centre and States works out to a mere 1.3% of GDP. In 2017-18, in per capita terms, the public expenditure on medical and public health varied from an abysmal ₹690 in Bihar and ₹814 in Uttar Pradesh to the highest of ₹2,092 in Kerala. The centrally sponsored scheme, the National Health Mission, is inadequately funded, micromanaged with grants given under more than 2,000 heads and poorly targeted. The focus of "Ayushman Bharat" has been to advocate insurance rather than building wellness centres. Besides protecting lives and livelihoods, States will have to initiate and facilitate economic revival, and that too would require substantial additional spending. Hand holding small and medium enterprises which have completely ceased production, providing relief to farmers who have lost their perishable crops and preparing them for sowing in the kharif season are other tasks that require spending. In fact, States have been proactive. Kerala came out with a comprehensive package allocating ₹20,000 crore to fight the pandemic. Almost all States have taken measures to provide food to the needy besides ramping up health-care requirements.



## Extensive Revenue Losses

While the requirement of States for immediate expenditures is large, they are severely crippled in their resources. In the lockdown period, there has virtually been no economic activity and they have not been able to generate any revenue from State excise duty, stamp duties and registration fees, motor vehicles tax or sales tax on high speed diesel and motor spirit. The revenue from Goods and Services Tax is stagnant and compensation on time for the loss of revenue has not been forthcoming. In Karnataka for example, it is reported that as against the estimated ₹12,000 crore every month, the State may not be able to generate even ₹300 crore in April. As the recovery process will be staggered, it is doubtful whether tax revenues will register any positive growth in 2020-21. Not surprisingly, the State has decided to monetise land through auctions to get money besides regularising unauthorised constructions by paying high fees. The position regarding tax devolution from the Centre is even more precarious. To begin with, the tax devolution in the Union Budget estimate is lower than the Commission's estimate by ₹70,995 crore. In fact, the Budget estimate for 2020-21 itself is a huge overestimate when seen against the 11-month actual collections in 2019-20. The required growth to achieve the Budget estimate is 33.3% over the annualised actual collection. The projections are that the growth of nominal GDP in 2020-21 will be just about 4% and if the tax revenue increases by the same rate, devolution to the States would be lower by ₹2.2-lakh crore than the Finance Commission's estimate. This results in a loss of ₹9,173 crore for Tamil Nadu, ₹9,000 crore for Andhra Pradesh, ₹8,000 crore for Karnataka, ₹4,671 crore for Telangana, and ₹4,255 crore for Kerala. There is a strong case for the States to go back to the Finance Commission with a request to make and give a supplementary report. The war on COVID-19 can be effectively won only when the States are armed with enough resources to meet the crisis. But as mentioned earlier, they are faced with stagnant revenues while their expenditure commitments are huge. There is only limited scope for expenditure switching and reprioritisation now. Their borrowing space too is limited by the fiscal responsibility and budget management limit of 3% of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). Faced with an acute fund crunch, Kerala floated 15-year bonds but was faced with a huge upsurge in the yield to 8.96%. The announcement by the Reserve Bank of India on the increase in the limit of ways and means advances by 60% of the levels prescribed in March 31 could help States to plan their borrowing better; but that is too little to provide much relief. Therefore, it is important for the Central government to provide additional borrowing space by 2% of GSDP from the prevailing 3% of GSDP. This is the time to fiscally empower States to wage the COVID-19 war and trust them to spend on protecting lives, livelihoods and initiate an economic recovery.

## There May Be No Going Back

- Offices, restaurants and even trains resume service, people in China are, however, finding that the normalcy they were waiting to return to is, in fact, anything but normal. The shadow of COVID-19 is still hanging over every aspect of daily life. In constant fear of the possibility of a second wave of infections, authorities are continuing with a range of physical distancing measures as a precaution. For the rest of the world too, this may be the new normal that awaits us. An April 14 study by Harvard researchers suggested physical distancing measures may be here to stay, perhaps on an on-and-off basis, until 2022, because one-time lockdowns will not be enough to control the pandemic. Some are suggesting this could continue even longer until the world achieves 'herd immunity', which most scientists say can only be achieved through widespread vaccinations, which could take years. The post-COVID-19 world may be here to stay for a while yet. Conversations I have had in recent days with acquaintances in Beijing and Shanghai have painted a picture of what this world may look like, a world where all those new words and phrases that have now become a part of our vocabulary – nucleic acid testing, social/physical distancing, and temperature screening – are becoming an integral part of day-to-day life. A friend who works in a start-up in Beijing's Zhongguancun tech district told me offices now have to choose which employees go into work every day. Offices are reorganising their staff so every department is split into several teams, to ensure that one infection won't paralyse the entire team. In some buildings,



offices cannot hold more than a specified number of people on a given day, which may range from five to 10 depending on the size of the office, according to rules imposed by the property management. Health is no longer a private matter. Your health QR code is now the most important passport to get you anywhere in any Chinese city. An app that every citizen has to download marks you green (safe), while orange or red may mean you can't enter a shopping mall or restaurant. The colour depends on your travel history and who you have been in contact with, among other things. Then there is temperature screening. Getting half-a-dozen temperature checks a day is now the norm. Building authorities check every employee's temperature every time they enter or leave the building. So, do shopping malls, railway stations and airports. A high temperature means an ambulance may be called and you'll have to go to hospital, whether you like it or not. If you are running a fever, even if you don't have COVID-19, you may not be able to board a subway, or catch a train, or enter a shopping mall. Some businesses require every employee to take a nucleic acid test before returning to work. And of course, you cannot leave home without a face mask. Not wearing a face mask in public is now a punishable offence. Social gatherings aren't what they used to be. Weddings are being put on hold. Restaurants have reduced the number of tables by half, and you can only seat three at a table. In some restaurants, you will be sprayed with disinfectant before entering. Forget about ambience, too – plastic sheets separate every table. In China, the way people eat isn't what it used to be either. On April 12, the National Health Commission said diners will have to be served meals in separate dishes. So, if three diners order a dish, it will be served to each separately to prevent the risk of infection. Shops and restaurants are opening, but many other establishments remain closed. Bars and pubs now firmly limit the number of patrons who can be present at any given time. Some bars in China are openly barring foreigners, because of what the government calls a rise in "imported infections", which is fanning a new kind of health-triggered xenophobia.

### Transformative Changes

While some businesses have opened, gyms, swimming pools, cinema halls, and not to mention most schools and colleges, remain shut. Perhaps the most transformative changes are being seen in education and tourism. Some 300 million Chinese students in schools and universities are now taking classes online every day, and all kinds of new e-learning platforms, teaching everything from classical music to Pilates, are now booming. Travel and tourism have been the hardest hit. In Beijing, starting April 12, a nucleic acid test certificate has to be produced when you check into a hotel. If you don't, you can't get a room. (If you're a foreigner, you may not get a room anyway, according to the policies some hotels are following). Inter-city travel is now a costly exercise. Travelling to another city for work may bring you a 14-day mandatory quarantine when you return home. Then there is air travel. Travel for pleasure may become a thing of the past. And forget about travelling in pleasure. In China, most airline passengers are now decked out in not just masks, but full hazmat suits and goggles. Some airlines, such as Emirates, have started testing passengers for COVID-19 before boarding. Results are issued in 10 minutes. As a result of the continued closures and restrictions, many businesses are floundering. To get consumers to support them, some cities in China are now issuing 30-day spending vouchers to encourage people to support small businesses and retail. They are also making two-and-a-half-day weekends the norm – perhaps one small sliver of a silver lining to hold on to amid all the dark clouds.

### The Village Is Still Relevant (Krishna Kumar - Former Director of The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT))

- ➔ The upheaval caused by the novel coronavirus should inspire a review of past choices and policies. Some of these policies had gained so much acceptance that one felt there was no point left in questioning them. Public health and education are two areas in which India took a decisive turn in the 1990s. When several States decided to stop giving permanent appointment letters to doctors and teachers in the mid-1990s, they were guided by an ideological shift at the national level



towards allowing health and education to be opened up for private enterprise. This was viewed as a major policy reform, a necessary part of the bigger package of economic reforms. They were presented as a package, offering little choice for specific areas.

### Taking A Back Seat

The new buzz was public-private partnership. It covered everything from roads to schools. The form it took made it amply clear that the state would take a back seat after issuing a set of rules for private operators while the state's own infrastructure will shrink. Soon enough, cost-effective measures became the priority in both health and education. Chronic shortage of functionaries became the norm while young persons learned to wait for years for vacancies to be announced. Working on short-term contracts, with little security or dignity, became common. As we begin to imagine the post-coronavirus scenario, a key question to contemplate is whether we should revisit the policies put in place during the 1990s. Some will doubtless argue that the clock cannot be put back, and that we should not waver from the path we had chosen, no matter what hardships people have to endure. Certain policies were specific to domains such as health and education. Others were more like frameworks within which policies for specific areas emerged and evolved. One such framework had to do with villages. For a long time, a view had been gathering support that villages were no more viable as sites of public investment. A generalised logic had surfaced to justify and thereby encourage emigration from rural areas to cities. According to this logic, providing basic amenities such as running water, electricity and jobs to rural people becomes easier if they move to a city. This kind of thinking had considerable academic support. Modernisation was a dominant paradigm of social theory that saw nothing wrong in the growth of vast slums in mega-cities and depletion of working-age people in villages. Some social scientists did not mind declaring that the village as we had known it in Indian history was on its way to extinction. They argued that agriculture, the main resource of livelihood in the countryside, was no longer profitable enough to attract the young. And handicrafts too were destined to die, they said, as craftsmen and women cannot survive without state support. Only pockets of support survived the powerful wave of market-oriented economic reforms. All such arguments and the data they were based on provided a comfortable rationale for policies that encouraged emigration of a vast section of the rural population to cities. It was something 'natural' that happens in the course of economic development in countries like ours. Students were taught that shrinking of rural livelihoods was a universal phenomenon and it was, therefore, inevitable in India. Acceptance of historical destiny implied that we could simply sit back and let history take its familiar course. The only thing the welfare state might do was to mitigate the misery of the masses. As they faced the decimation of the rural people's economy, safety nets could be thrown at them to provide subsistence-level provision of food, literacy and disease control. Special measures were designed to select the 'best' among rural children and make them competitive enough to survive in the urban world that was treated as mainstream.

### Imbalance and Invisibility

This general framework justified discriminatory funding in every sphere, including health and education. No serious public investment could be made in villages. Even as medical education and teacher training became increasingly privatised, the availability of qualified doctors and teachers willing to work in villages dwindled. Ideologically-inspired pursuit of economic reforms swept State after State, leaving little room for dissent or longer-term thinking. A veneer of welfarism was maintained. It allowed the expansion of essential facilities of a rudimentary kind in villages. They served as sites for special schemes for the poor and provided minimalist provisions. The goal was to keep the poor alive and occupied. Privately-run facilities burgeoned, creating an ethos that boosted commercial goals in health care and schooling. Stuck between state minimalism and commercial entrepreneurship, villages lost what capacity they had for regenerating their economy or intellectual resources. No words can compete with recent pictures that cast a delayed doubt on this policy scenario. These are pictures of urban workers marching with their families to their native villages hundreds of miles away. There is more than one way of interpreting these pictures. On one



hand they encapsulate desperation and apprehension. On the other, these same pictures reveal a story that generations of policy makers and scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge. The photographs captured by the media show men, women and children walking on highways designed to provide high-speed connectivity to cities. In the absence of trains and bus, these families decided to embark on foot. With no prospect of work and income, they felt vulnerable in their shanty towns. They wanted to go home. In the city where they had lived for years, they were part of the informal economy which offers no protection against exigencies. The new urban architecture denies them visibility too. That is perhaps why no one thought about them till they emerged on the wide highways.

### Obsolete Debates

The novel coronavirus has demonstrated how unsustainable this socio-economic arrangement was, apart from being ethically indefensible. It was characterised by sharp and growing regional disparities. No matter how hard we will try to rebuild the world as it was before the virus struck it, its unsustainability will not go away. It is rooted in the structural imbalance between the urban and the rural on one hand and the predominance of a skewed vision of economic growth on the other. In this vision, the village has no future other than becoming a pale copy of the urban and eventually dissolving into it. Once upon a time, there were debates over the nature of India's rural society – on whether it was intrinsically good or bad. These debates are no longer relevant. The village is, however, still relevant, at least for the vast number of urban workers. Similarly, while the problem of defining a village in an academic sense has ceased to matter, its existential reality has asserted itself, and we need to recognise this assertion. If we do, we might agree to notice a problem in policies that do not acknowledge the right of villages to flourish as human habitations with their own distinctive future. They deserve to have new sites and forms of livelihood. They also deserve systems of health and education that are not designed as feeders to distant centres. Initiatives in this direction will make both cities and villages more sustainable and capable of coping with the kind of crisis we are currently facing.

### The Occasion to Revisit the Sovereign's Role (Parakala Prabhakar - Former Communications Adviser to The Government of Andhra Pradesh And Managing Director of Rightfolio, A Knowledge Enterprise Based in Hyderabad)

- Let us make no mistake. COVID-19 is forcing a paradigm shift. We are unlikely to return to a pre-coronavirus homeostasis after the war against it is won. No section or sector is going to remain untouched and unaltered by the devastation the novel coronavirus is now unleashing. The virus is going to stay around for a while. Its annihilation in the near future is not on the cards. Vaccines are going to be slow in coming; therefore, its taming is not immediate. A second wave of outbreak is a realistic probability. Unlike other threats to humanity such as global warming and a nuclear Armageddon, this threat is now, not in the future; it is here simultaneously for everyone, not for someone else and somewhere else; its casualties are around us, not in faraway battlefields or polar regions and coastal areas. No country can rescue another; it is each one fending for itself.

### Defining Moment

COVID-19 threatens to push the world into a deep recession. If the lockdown continues, the world economy will contract by as much as 6% according to the International Monetary Fund. If it is not extended, the loss of human lives could be of unacceptable proportions. The global community will be fortunate if it does not spiral into depression. Both demand and supply contractions are likely to be severe. They are not going to be short-lived. Political systems, economic architectures and cultural mores are on trial. Work patterns, production and distribution practices are up for redefinition. Denial and wishing away unpleasant, yet probable, realities by governments, global organisations and public intellectuals will only compound economic, social, political and human



costs. We must now be quick in seizing lessons from the present crisis and get ready to embark on measures to build a new paradigm of life, work and governance. The enlarged economic role of the state in the aftermath of the Second World War came under major assault since the 1980s. Leaders who asked 'where is society?' rode to power on 'cut the damn government down' ticket. Systems that were putative alternatives to capitalism fell into disgrace. Entrepreneurs heading unicorns and 'sooncorns' have become the new demigods. Minimum governance became the mantra. India too willy-nilly signed up to this creed. But COVID-19 is beginning to challenge the political economy of this creed. Very soon the full scores of the performance of state and non-state actors in the COVID-19 stress test will be available across the globe. The Indian state will also have to give answers as far as its report card is concerned.

### The Retreat of The State

India embarked on the path of trimming the role of the state, initially, with such caveats as 'safety net' and 'reform with a human face'. Gradually, those caveats fell by the wayside. The lurch became sharp, unapologetic and full-throated. The Indian state's role in health care, education, creation and maintenance of infrastructure and delivery of welfare has shrunk or become nominal, half-hearted, inefficient, and dysfunctional. Of course, it is true that it did not give a great account of itself in these sectors even before the 1991 departure. Disappointment with the dismal performance in its economic and administrative functions in the backdrop of a changing global ideological ecosystem encouraged a sharp de facto downsizing of the Indian state's role. Its retreat from vital functions and abdication of its social responsibility have gained acceptance and legitimacy among the articulate upwardly mobile. While retreat and abdication found influential and forceful evangelists, selective retreat had few advocates. This departure, however, was not vigorously interrogated. When it was, it was limited to the broad ideological opposition from the left which defended the discredited position of the Indian state occupying the commanding heights of the economy. Supporters of the departure, on the other hand, had little engagement in giving shape to the new policy. Nor did they worry about calibrating the architecture of the emerging role for the state. As a result, 'private sector' became the new holy cow in place of the 'state sector'. What made matters worse is the culture of a simplistic and shallow discourse of public policy that took hold in civil society. It mindlessly privileges the agenda of corporates. It transacts in the idiom of stock exchanges and international rating agencies.

### Lost Voices

Therefore, those with no social media handles, who cannot organise annual 'thought' conclaves, who are incapable of highlighting their problems with impressive presentations are rendered voiceless. Today, those who bear the brunt of the consequences of shrunken and unresponsive state are the farmer and farm labour, the migrant worker, the unemployed, those in the unorganised sector, the rural poor, and the small entrepreneur. They are paying the highest price for the necessary but unbearable lockdown. They are either stranded far away from home, or confined to their homes with no work and incomes, unsupported by the state. Underfunded public health systems are unable to serve them. Tips on how to beat lockdown blues, how to work from home, use Zoom, spend quality time with family that fill our pull-outs are irrelevant for them. But the dominant strand of public discourse is out of its depth. It has no time for these concerns. Worse, this discourse can be gamed from time to time. And the alternative discourse is too feeble to draw the attention of the government to the grave implications of COVID-19 for the weak in our society.

### Time for Tough Questions

But the state's first responsibility is the marginalised. They are also the crucial part of our economy. They lubricate its wheels and generate demand. Announcing stimulus packages that address the supply side alone without beefing up the demand side will be self-defeating to corporates. Prioritising the needs of corporate entities will lead to convulsions in our body politic in the wake



of COVID-19. The state is in danger of forfeiting legitimacy if it does not ensure the survival and revival of the marginalised sections. This is the appropriate context to revisit the political economy of the Indian state and its role. The country should begin a vigorous discourse on redefining every aspect of its involvement in our collective political, economic and social life. The relation between the state and economy, its role in allocating resources and addressing questions of inequality, its duty to provide basic human needs, the extent of the market's role in providing services such as health, education, civic amenities, and the responsibility of the state and private enterprise towards deprived sections, need urgent attention. We should re-examine the efficacy of our political structures too: the equation between citizens and government and what its implications are for individual freedom, privacy and national security; the equation between legislature and executive; the balance of administrative and financial power between provinces and the union on the one hand and provinces and local bodies on the other. The way we elect our representatives to legislatures must also come under the lens. The issue of atrophied local authorities and enfeebled legislatures needs attention. For, they are at the coalface, delivering the state to the citizen. The way legislatures are elected and governments are made and unmade must be scrutinised. Our outrage at the power of big money in our electoral system has not arrested its growth. The role of serving and retired members of higher judiciary ought to be a part of the debate. We had an opportunity for intensive debate when the Justice Venkatachaliah Commission submitted its report in 2002 (to review the working of the Constitution). We missed it. The opportunity that COVID-19 provides should not be squandered. The Indian state should be strong so that the weak in our society can lean on it. Our rishis told us: *durbalasya balam Raja*. The strength of the weak is the Sovereign. Not the market.

## Business & Economics

### Why Are Oil Prices in Negative Terrain?

→ Five decades after the oil shock of 1973, when an Arab embargo on the supply of oil to some western powers including the United States sent the price of crude skyrocketing fourfold to \$12 a barrel, the global economy faces a fresh shock from a free-fall in oil prices. Prices of West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the American benchmark for crude oil, fell to less than zero in trade. The price of a barrel of WTI fell to minus, yes, that's right, minus \$37.63 a barrel. What this means is that sellers have to pay buyers to get rid of their crude! This is unprecedented in the oil market, even accounting for its notoriety for being volatile.

In the recent past, the OPEC has been working with Russia, as OPEC+, to fix the global prices and supply. It must be understood that cutting production or completely shutting down an oil well is a difficult decision, because restarting it is both immensely costly and cumbersome. Moreover, if one country cuts production, it risks losing market share if others do not follow suit. The global oil pricing is by no stretch an example of a well-functioning competitive market. In fact, its seamless operations crucially depend on oil exporters acting in consort.

The May contracts for WTI, the American crude oil variant, were due to expire on Tuesday, April 21. As the deadline approached, prices started plummeting. This was for two broad reasons. By Monday, there were many oil producers who wanted to get rid of their oil even at unbelievably low prices rather than choose the other option — shutting production, which would have been costlier to restart when compared to the marginal loss on May sales. From the consumer side, that is those holding these contracts, it was an equally big headache. Contract holders wanted to get wriggle out of the compulsion to buy more oil as they realised, quite late in hindsight, that there was no space to store the oil if they were to take the delivery. They figured that it would be more costly for them to accept the oil delivery, pay for its transportation and then pay for storing it (possibly for a longish period, given the circumstances), especially when there was no storage available, than to simply take a hit on the contract price. This desperation from both sides — buyers and sellers — to get rid of oil meant the WTI oil contract prices not only plummeted to zero but also went deep into





the negative territory. In the short term, for both the holders of the delivery contract and the oil producers, it was less costly to pay \$40 a barrel and get rid of the oil instead of storing it (buyers) or stopping production (producers).

### Why Did Prices Fall Like This?

We need to understand a bit of oil market and trading dynamics here. WTI oil is traded as futures contracts in the NYMEX (New York Mercantile Exchange) where traders buy and sell monthly futures such as, for instance, May futures, June futures and so on. The sellers of such futures will have to deliver a barrel of crude oil at the contracted price in the contracted month just as buyers will have to take delivery at the contracted date. As with all trading in commodities, there's a huge speculative participation in oil futures trading too. So, speculators buy and sell contracts with no intention of taking delivery (in the case of buyers) or offering delivery (in the case of sellers) of the physical oil, on the contracted date. These speculators have to unwind their "positions" on the contract expiry date. If they fail to do so, they will have to take physical delivery of the crude oil on the contracted date. What happened on Monday was that speculators who had taken large bets on May futures began to unwind their "positions". This was because the futures contracts are set to expire today, Tuesday. Those not intending to take physical delivery have to square off their contracts before the expiry date. So, speculators who did not want to take delivery in May proceeded to unwind their "positions," leading to the massive fall in prices. It could be that these were financial speculators who never take physical delivery and hence closed their contracts. Or, these could also be delivery-based traders backing out as the bottom has fallen off demand for oil. In reality, it would be a combination of both categories of traders. The bottom line, though, is that prices fell as demand for oil is falling and the world, especially America, is running out of storage space.

### May WTI Futures Prices Went Negative but June Futures Prices Are Still At \$20.43 A Barrel. Why?

This could be due to two reasons. Traders expect demand to recover by June as lockdowns are lifted across the world and economic activity resumes. Second, traders also expect that storage space may be created as existing inventory is drawn down. America is also talking of adding to their strategic storage by taking advantage of the low prices. This could create demand for oil. Finally, contract expiry for June contracts is still a few weeks away, giving speculators that much more time to speculate.

### Market Reports Talk About Contango Trades in The Oil Market. What Do They Mean?

Simply put, contango kicks in when prices of a commodity in the futures market are considerably higher for deliveries many months later, compared to prices for immediate delivery. For instance, while May oil futures are negative and June is at \$20.43 a barrel, November futures for the same grade of oil ended at a hefty \$31.66 a barrel on Monday. Contango trades happen when traders anticipate a surge or rise in demand and value the commodity higher for the future.

### So, Why Can't Traders Buy Cheap Oil Now and Store Them for Release in Future When Demand and Prices Rise?

That's exactly what traders are now doing. Such a practice became famous during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 when a trader took massive positions at cheap prices ahead of the invasion and sold them when prices rose after the invasion. Oil was stored in tankers floating on the sea and unloaded at considerably higher prices. Traders are doing the same now. Year-long hiring contracts for VLCC (very large crude carriers) that can store up to 2 million barrels of oil are soaring through the roof. According to a report in the Wall Street Journal, VLCC hiring charges for year-long contracts are now at \$72,500 a day, compared to \$30,500 a day a year ago.



## The Prices of Brent Grade Are Still At \$20.58 A Barrel for May Futures. What's the Reason for The Difference?

Brent oil has traditionally quoted higher than WTI with the gulf being about \$6-7 a barrel between the two. Brent is a superior grade produced in the North Sea off the British coast and is the accepted benchmark for this part of the world. The market that it serves is considerably larger than that of the United States and demand is, therefore, higher. Transporting oil from the U.S. to Asia is not economical thus limiting the scope for the WTI grade. Refineries in Europe are configured for Brent rather than WTI. Prices of Brent are therefore always higher than that of WTI. Importantly, unlike WTI futures on NYMEX, Brent futures traded in London can be settled by cash when the contract expires. In other words, a trader who has bought oil for May delivery is not forced to take physical delivery of the oil but can settle the contract in cash. This big difference between WTI and Brent has ensured that Brent futures will not crash like that of WTI.

## How Is India Benefiting from This Price Crash?

In two ways. First, the oil import bill will fall sharply this fiscal year, giving tremendous relief to the government on the external account front. With merchandise exports from India badly hit due to the lockdown in the West, foreign exchange earnings are under pressure. With oil prices falling and foreign exchange outgo reducing, the pressure on the current account balance is off. In fact, we may be looking at a positive balance in the current account if global economic recovery is quick and our exports recover. Second, India is quietly building up its strategic reserves, taking advantage of the cheap prices. India has a capacity to hold over 39 million barrels of oil at its strategic reserves in Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur, near Udupi. These are underground salt caverns converted and built to store crude oil.

## How Oil Price Crash Impacts Sugar, What It Means for India

- It is not only oil that has tumbled, with prices of West Texas Intermediate grade crude closing at an unprecedented minus \$37.63 per barrel on April 20, before recovering a tad to \$13.78. On April 21, prices of raw sugar for May delivery at New York crashed to 9.75 cents per pound, the lowest closing for a nearest-month futures contract since the 9.70 cents recorded on June 9, 2008. Even commodities such as corn and palm oil have seen price declines following the slide in crude. A look at the connection:

## We Know About Oil. But Why Have Global Sugar Prices Also Collapsed?

All commodities have taken a demand hit from subdued economic activity and lockdowns imposed by many countries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. But sugar is one commodity that, until quite recently, was on a bull run. Most estimates showed global production in 2019-20 (October-September) to fall short of consumption by 8-9 million tonnes (mt). On February 12, the front-month raw sugar futures contract at New York actually closed 15.78 cents per pound, the highest since May 2017. A drop from that to below 10 cents is rather steep. One reason for this collapse is the closure of restaurants, weddings and other social functions not taking place, and people avoiding ice-creams and sweetened cold beverages that might cause throat infections. The impact of coronavirus-induced lockdowns on out-of-home consumption and institutional (as opposed to direct household) demand for sugar is obvious. Prakash Naiknavare, managing director of the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories, projects sugar consumption in India alone to dip by 1.5-2 mt in 2019-20, from the normal 25.5-26 mt levels.

## Is That the Only Reason?

Sinking crude prices appear an even bigger factor. The juice from crushing sugarcane can be crystallised into sugar or fermented into alcohol. When oil prices are high, mills – especially in Brazil – tend to divert cane for making ethanol (alcohol of 99%+ purity) that is used for blending with petrol. In 2019-20 (April-March), only 34.32% of cane crushed by Brazilian mills went for



manufacturing 26.73 mt of sugar. The rest was used to produce 31.62 billion litres of ethanol. But with oil prices tanking – WTI crude was quoting at \$53-plus two months ago – mills will not find it attractive to divert cane for ethanol. Brazil's mills, which have started crushing (the Indian season is from October), are seen to produce up to 36 mt of sugar and hardly 26 billion litres of ethanol this year.

### How Will This Affect India?

Dip in sugar consumption, together with higher Brazilian output, is bad news for both Indian sugar mills and cane farmers. Before COVID-19 happened, the Indian industry was expecting to export 5.5-6 mt of raw sugar in 2019-20. Mills had already entered into contracts of some 3.8 mt, out of which 3.05 mt have been shipped out so far. With ex-factory realisations from exports at Rs 2,250-2,400 per quintal and the Centre providing a subsidy of ₹104.48 (it was termed lump-sum assistance towards defraying marketing, internal transport, port handling and ocean freight expenses), the industry's woes from excess stocks were seemingly behind it. This was to be aided both by exports and lower production (26 mt, from 33.2 mt in 2018-19). The current plunge in world prices, plus Brazil's likely production surge, would upset these calculations. Naiknavare, however, is counting on Indonesia's increased import requirements and its decision last month to slash the duty on Indian raw sugar from 15% to 5%. Indonesian refiners are projected to import 3.3 mt of raws this year, up from 2.6 mt in 2019. "They buy mostly from Thailand, which is experiencing a bad drought that could lead to its production falling from 14.6 mt in 2018-19 to 9 mt. It opens up an opportunity for us," he says.

### What Is the Situation with Respect to Cane Farmers?

Exports slowing down and not much domestic lifting of sugar by institutional consumers has significantly undermined the ability of mills to make cane payments. Uttar Pradesh's factories have till now crushed cane worth roughly ₹32,000 crore in the 2019-20 season, but managed to pay only ₹16,456 crore. The state government, announced a scheme of mills giving "willing farmers" one quintal each of sugar for the next three months, in lieu of cane payments due to them. Maharashtra mills, too, had paid only ₹11,310 crore out of their total cane dues of ₹12,539 crore as on April 15. Moreover, the industry's problem is not from sugar alone. The lockdown has reduced offtake of alcohol, be it potable liquor or ethanol for blending with petrol. UP mills, according to the state's cane commissioner Sanjay Bhoosreddy, may produce around 100 crore litres (one billion) of ethanol this season, compared to 51.5 crore litres in 2018-19. But with cars and two-wheelers not running, oil market companies aren't very keen to procure ethanol.

### Are Other Agri-Commodities Impacted?

Prices of corn, which is also used for making ethanol, fell to their lowest since September 2009 at Chicago on April 21. Likewise, palm oil, again a feedstock for bio-diesel, ended 7.5% lower at the Bursa Malaysia futures exchange. Corn prices can, in turn, drag down other cereals, just as palm oil could to soyabean and other oilseeds. They are all ultimately linked to oil, whose prices matter as much to petroleum companies as farmers.

## How COVID-19 Is Hurting the Rupee's Exchange Rate with Other Currencies

- The economic disruption due to the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) over the past few months has adversely affected various aspects of the Indian economy. But is the impact on India more than the impact on other economies? There are different ways to answer this question. One could look at the growth rates of gross domestic product and gross value added. Or, in the absence of such data, one could treat other high-frequency data like sales of automobiles etc. as a proxy. In this regard, the exchange rate of the rupee can also be an apt marker on the state of the Indian economy's competitiveness.



## What Is Currency Exchange Rate?

Essentially, a currency's exchange rate vis-a-vis another currency reflects the relative demand among the holders of the two currencies. This demand in turn depends on the relative demand for the goods and services of the two countries. If the US dollar is stronger than the rupee, then it shows that the demand for dollars (by those holding rupee) is more than the demand for rupees (by those holding dollars). Typically, stronger economies have stronger currencies. For instance, the US economy is relatively stronger than India's and this is reflected in one US dollar being equal to around 76 rupees. The rupee has been losing value (or depreciating or weakening) against the dollar over the past few months. But the US is not the only other country in the world; India trades with many other countries. To have a better understanding of the Indian economy's overall competitiveness, one should look at how the rupee is behaving with its major trade partners.

## What Measures Should We Look At?

The Reserve Bank of India tabulates the rupee's Nominal Effective Exchange Rate (NEER) in relation to the currencies of 36 trading partner countries. This is a weighted index – that is, countries with which India trades more are given a greater weight in the index. A decrease in this index denotes depreciation in rupee's value; an increase reflects appreciation. In NEER terms, the rupee has depreciated to its lowest level since November 2018. The rupee has been steadily losing value – showing the Indian economy's reducing competitiveness – since July 2019. The dip in March was likely influenced by the net outflow of foreign portfolio investments from the Indian equity and debt markets – they stood at \$15.92 billion in March as against net inflows of \$1.27 billion in February. There is one more measure that is even better at capturing the actual change. This is called the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) and is essentially an improvement over the NEER because it also takes into account the domestic inflation in the various economies.

## And How Does Inflation Affect Exchange Rates?

Many factors affect the exchange rate between any two currencies ranging from the interest rates to political stability (less of either result in a weaker currency). Inflation is one of the most important factors. Here's how. Imagine that the Re-\$ exchange rate was exactly 1 in the first year. This means that with ₹100, one could buy something that was priced at \$100 in the US. But suppose the Indian inflation is 20% and the US inflation is zero. Then, in the second year, an Indian would need ₹120 to buy the same item priced at \$100, and the rupee's exchange rate would depreciate to 1.20.

Even in REER terms, the rupee has depreciated in March and fallen to its lowest level since September 2019. As domestic inflation started rising, the REER, too, started depreciating like the NEER.

## No Plan to Ease Fiscal Deficit Targets

- Despite the strain on government finances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no credible proposal to amend the legislation meant to control the fiscal deficit, Chairman of the 15<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission N.K. Singh said. Speaking to presspersons after a two-day meeting of the Commission's Economic Advisory Council, Mr. Singh said the government was currently looking to see how to ameliorate economic hardship while staying within the broad framework of the existing law. While presenting the Union Budget in February, the Finance Minister had invoked the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act's escape clause to relax the fiscal deficit target for 2020-21 by 0.5% percentage points to 3.5% of the GDP. If the government wishes to increase spending further in light of the current crisis, as many economists have recommended, it may need to amend the Act. The State governments have been demanding that their own 3% fiscal deficit targets be relaxed to 4% or even 5%, to give them elbow room in dealing with the impact of the lockdown.



### Need for New Law

Dr. Singh said that change would not be possible without fresh legislation being enacted by the States. A more expeditious method would be for the States to first trigger their own escape clauses, he said. He also cautioned that the States need to weigh the cost of borrowing from the market, and whether there would be appetite for their bonds.

### To Print More Money, Or Not To

- COVID-19 spread has meant that the Indian economy, which was already slowing down rapidly over the past couple of years, has completely stalled. Most estimates suggest that India's GDP (gross domestic product) will barely grow in the current financial year – that is, if it does not contract as is likely to be the case in most major economies of the world. What is the reason for this fall? With a nationwide lockdown, incomes have fallen and so have consumption levels. In other words, the demand for goods (say a pizza or a car) and services (say a haircut or a holiday) in the economy has gone down. What can be done to boost demand? People need to have money. But, of course, who will give them money. From the highest-ranking CEOs to stranded workers, incomes have taken a huge hit, if not completely dried up.

### Who Is Doing What?

For its part, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been trying to boost the liquidity in the financial system. It has bought government bonds from the financial system and left it with money. Most banks, however, are unwilling to extend new loans as they are risk-averse. Moreover, this process could take time. The government's finances were already overextended going into this crisis, with its fiscal deficit (the total amount of borrowings to bridge the gap between its spending and revenues) way over the permissible limit. As things stand, under normal circumstances, just because the economy has stalled and the government will not be getting its revenues, the "general" government (that is, Centre plus states) fiscal deficit is expected to shoot up to around 15% of GDP when the permissible limit is only 6%. On top of that, if the government was to provide some kind of a bailout or relief package, it would have to borrow a huge amount. The fiscal deficit will go through the roof. Moreover, for the government to borrow the money, the market should have it as savings. Data show that savings of domestic households have been faltering and are barely enough to fund the government's existing borrowing needs. Foreign investors, too, have been pulling out and rushing to "safer" economies like the US, and are unwilling to lend in times of such uncertainty. So, there isn't enough money in the market for the government to borrow. Moreover, as the government borrows more from the market, it pushes up the interest rate. As such, within the normal economic framework, things can only get worse before they get better, and the process of recovery could be painfully slow and full of hardships wherein children don't get an education, the hungry don't get adequate meals and so forth. But there is a solution – the "direct" monetisation of government deficit.

### What Is "Direct" Monetisation Of Deficit?

Imagine a scenario where the government deals with the RBI directly – bypassing the financial system – and asks it to print new currency in return for new bonds that the government gives to the RBI. Now, the government would have the cash to spend and alleviate the stress in the economy – via direct benefit transfers to the poor or starting construction of a hospital or providing wage subsidy to workers of small and medium enterprises etc. In lieu of printing this cash, which is a liability for the RBI (recall that every currency note has the RBI Governor promising to pay the bearer the designated sum of rupees), it gets government bonds, which are an asset for the RBI since such bonds carry the government's promise to pay back the designated sum at a specified date. And since the government is not expected to default, the RBI is sorted on its balance sheet even as the government can carry on rebooting the economy. This is different from the "indirect"



**monetising** that RBI does when it conducts the so-called Open Market Operations (**OMOs**) and/ or purchases bonds in the secondary market.

### Are Other Countries Doing It to Counter the Economic Crisis Related To COVID-19?

Yes. In the UK on April 9, the Bank of England extended direct monetisation facility to the UK government even though Andrew Bailey, Governor of the Bank of England, opposed the move till the last moment.

### Has India Ever Done This in The Past?

Yes, until 1997, the RBI “automatically” monetised the government’s deficit. However, direct monetisation of government deficit has its downsides. In 1994, Manmohan Singh (former RBI Governor and then Finance Minister) and C Rangarajan, then RBI Governor, decided to end this facility by 1997. Now, though, even Rangarajan believes that India would have to resort to monetising the deficit. “Monetisation of the deficit is inevitable. Such a large increase in expenditure cannot be managed without monetisation of government debt,” he said recently.

### Then, Why Does the Government Not Ask the RBI To Print New Money?

Direct monetisation of deficit is a highly contested issue. Another former RBI Governor, D Subbarao, recently cautioned against it. Subbarao wrote in the Financial Times: “There is no question that India must borrow and spend more in this crisis; that is a moral and a political imperative. But New Delhi should not forget that its bruising balance of payments crisis in 1991, and a near-crisis in 2013, were, at heart, a result of extended fiscal profligacy.”

### What Are the Main Problems with Direct Monetisation Of Government Deficit?

The main argument against it pertains not so much to its initiation as to its end. Ideally, this tool provides an opportunity for the government to boost overall demand at the time when private demand has fallen – like it has today. But if governments do not exit soon enough, this tool also sows the seeds for another crisis. Here’s how: Government expenditure using this new money boosts incomes and raises private demand in the economy. Thus, it fuels inflation. A little increase in inflation is healthy as it encourages business activity. But if the government doesn’t stop in time, more and more money floods the market and creates high inflation. And since inflation is revealed with a lag, it is often too late before governments realise, they have over-borrowed. Higher inflation and higher government debt provide grounds for macroeconomic instability, as mentioned by Subbarao.

### To What Level Should Government Debt Be Ideally Limited?

While no ideal level of debt is set in stone, most economists believe developing economies like India should not have debt higher than 80%-90% of the GDP. At present, it is around 70% of GDP in India. “It should commit to a pre-determined amount of additional borrowing and to reversing the action once the crisis is over. Only such explicitly affirmed fiscal restraint can retain market confidence in an emerging economy,” Subbarao wrote. The other argument against direct monetising is that governments are considered inefficient and corrupt in their spending choices – for example, whom to bail out and to what extent.

## Govt. To Suspend IBC Rules for Up to One Year

- In a major relief for corporate borrowers hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has decided to amend the insolvency law to suspend up to one-year provisions that trigger insolvency proceedings against defaulters, according to sources. Further, the sources said amendments to the IBC (Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code) would pave the way for banks to restructure loans. The sources said an ordinance would be promulgated to suspend three sections of the IBC for up to



one year and a decision in this regard was taken by the Union Cabinet. Sections 7, 9 and 10 of the IBC would be suspended for six months and the suspension time can be extended by up to one year. An enabling provision with respect to extending the time would be part of the ordinance, they added. Suspension of these provisions could be extended up to one year based on the economic situation going forward. The effective date of the amendments coming into force would be the date of promulgation of the ordinance, the sources said. Section 7 and 9 pertain to initiation of corporate insolvency proceedings by a financial creditor and an operational creditor, respectively. Section 10 relates to filing of an application for insolvency resolution by a corporate.

## How Reverse Repo Rate Became Benchmark Interest Rate in The Economy

- The Indian economy's slowdown during 2018 and 2019 is becoming much worse in 2020 with the spread of COVID-19 and the stalling of almost all economic activity. Like most other central banks in the world, the Reserve Bank of India, too, has tried to cut interest rates to boost the economy. However, unlike in the past, when the RBI used its repo rate as the main instrument to tweak the interest rates, today, it is the reverse repo rate that is effectively setting the benchmark.

### **What Are Repo and Reverse Repo Rates?**

The repo rate is the rate at which the RBI lends money to the banking system (or banks) for short durations. The reverse repo rate is the rate at which banks can park their money with the RBI. With both kinds of repo, which is short for repurchase agreement, transactions happen via bonds – one party sells bonds to the other with the promise to buy them back (or repurchase them) at a later specified date. In a growing economy, commercial banks need funds to lend to businesses. One source of funds for such lending is the money they receive from common people who maintain savings deposits with the banks. Repo is another option. Under normal circumstances, that is when the economy is growing, the repo rate is the benchmark interest rate in the economy because it is the lowest rate of interest at which funds can be borrowed and, as such, it forms the floor rate for all other interest rates in the economy – for instance, the interest rate consumers would have to pay on a car loan or the interest rate they will earn from a fixed deposit etc.

### **What Has Changed Now?**

Over the last couple of years, India's economic growth has decelerated sharply. This has happened for a variety of reasons and has essentially manifested in lower consumer demand. In response, businesses have held back from making fresh investments and, as such, do not ask for as many new loans. Add to this, the pre-existing incidence of high non-performing assets (NPAs) within the banking system. Thus, the banks' demand for fresh funds from the RBI has also diminished. This whole cycle has acutely intensified with the ongoing lockdown. As such, the banking system is now flush with liquidity for two broad reasons: on the one hand, the RBI is cutting repo rates and other policy variables like the Cash Reserve Ratio to release additional and cheaper funds into the banking system so that banks could lend and yet, on the other, banks are not lending to businesses, partly because banks are too risk-averse to lend and partly because the overall demand from the businesses has also come down.

### **So, How Has Reverse Repo Become the Benchmark Rate?**

The excess liquidity in the banking system has meant that during March and the first half of April, banks have been using only the reverse repo (to park funds with the RBI) instead of the repo (to borrow funds). As of April 15, RBI had close to ₹7 lakh crore of banks' money parked with it. In other words, the reverse repo rate has become the most influential rate in the economy.



## What Has the RBI Done?

Recognising this, the central bank has cut the reverse repo rate more than the repo twice in the spate of the last three weeks. The idea is to make it less attractive for banks to do nothing with their funds because their doing so hurts the economy and starves the businesses that genuinely need funds.

## Will the Move to Cut Reverse Repo Work?

It all depends on the revival of consumer demand in India. If the disruptions induced by the outbreak of novel coronavirus disease continue for a long time, consumer demand, which was already quite weak, is likely to stay muted and businesses would feel no need to borrow heavily to make fresh investments. If consumer demand revives quickly, the demand for credit will build up as well. From the banks' perspective, it is also important for them to be confident about new loans not turning into NPAs, and adding to their already high levels of bad loans. Until banks feel confident about the prospects of an economic turnaround, cuts in reverse repo rates may have little impact.

## Repo Auction Gets Poor Response

→ The first auction of the second tranche of Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) targeted long term repo operations (TLTRO 2.0), which were meant for liquidity support to non-banking financial companies, (NBFCs), received poor response as total value of bids received from banks was almost 50% less than the notified amount. The RBI received 14 bids worth ₹12,850 crore in the auction that was conducted, against a notified amount of ₹25,000 crore, of three-year tenor. "The total bids that were received amounted to ₹12,850 crore, implying a bid to cover ratio (i.e., the number of bids received relative to the notified amount) of 0.5," the RBI said. "Will review the auction results and take a view in the matter," the RBI added. While announcing the auction, the RBI had said that the funds availed from auction should be deployed in investment grade bonds, commercial paper (CPs) and non-convertible debentures (NCDs) of NBFCs. At least 50% of the total funds availed of by the banks was mandated to be deployed in small and mid-sized NBFCs. The central bank had further clarified that if banks failed to deploy the funds availed within 30 days, there will be steep penalties. "However, if a bank fails to deploy funds within the specified time frame, the interest rate on undeployed funds will increase to the prevailing policy repo rate plus 200 bps (basis points) for the number of days such funds remain undeployed. This incremental interest will have to be paid along with regular interest at the time of maturity," the RBI said. "Limited participation by banks in the TLTRO 2.0 clearly highlights the banks' reluctance to lend to mid-size and small NBFCs and MFIs in the current situation." said Vydianathan Ramaswamy, director and head, financial sector ratings, Brickwork Ratings. "Given the lack of risk appetite in banks, a structure with partial credit guarantee by the GoI, similar to the PCG [partial credit guarantee] scheme launched last year for securitisation, may be the only viable option to ease liquidity challenges of NBFCs," he said. NBFCs, including housing finance companies and MFIs, are facing stretched liquidity conditions as banks turned risk-averse and choked lending. Adding to the woes, banks have not extended the three-month repayment moratorium to the NBFCs. NBFCs, however, extended such a moratorium to their customers. As a result, fund inflow for NBFCs has been severely hit. A Crisil report estimated that NBFCs rated by it will see debt obligation worth ₹1.75 lakh crore maturing by the end of June.

## RBI To Restart Operation Twist to Manage Yields

→ The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has announced simultaneous purchase and sale of government bonds in a bid to soften long-term yields. The central bank will buy ₹10,000 crore of bonds maturing between 2026 and 2030 and sell the same number of T-bills. Such open market operations are known as 'Operation Twist,' which was used by the RBI in December last year for the first time. Following the announcement, the yields on the 10- year bonds dropped by 20 basis points (bps).

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur





The move will also aid monetary transmission by prompting banks to pass on interest rate cut benefits to their customers. The RBI had reduced key policy rate or the repo rate by 75 bps to 4.4% in the monetary policy review, announced in the last week of March.

## Why India Tightened FDI Rules, And Why It's China That's Upset

→ India recently revised its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy with the objective of preventing "opportunistic takeovers" of firms hit by the lockdown induced by the COVID-19 outbreak. The move has upset China, which has termed it a violation of international trade principles. A look at the move, and the implications:

### **What Was the Amendment?**

The government said firms in neighbouring countries wanting to invest in Indian companies would first need its approval. An entity of a country that shares a land border with India can now invest in firms here "only under the Government route". This also applies to "beneficial" owners — even if the investing company is not located in a neighbouring country, it would still be subject to these conditions if its owner is a citizen or resident of such a country. While the note did not name any country, analysts see the amendments as aimed at possible Chinese investments. The decision came days after China's central bank, the People's Bank of China (PBoC) had raised its shareholding in HDFC to over 1 per cent. HDFC vice chairman and CEO Keki Mistry had said that PBoC had been an existing shareholder, owning 0.8% as of March 2019. China's FDI has grown five-fold since 2014 and, as of December 2019, its cumulative investment in India exceeded \$8 billion — "far more" than investments by other countries that share borders with India, according to the Chinese government. A Brookings India paper pegs the total current and planned Chinese investment in India at over \$26 billion.

### **What Was China's Response?**

China has called for India to revise these "discriminatory practices" and treat investments from different countries equally. "The additional barriers set by Indian side for investors from specific countries violate WTO's (World Trade Organization) principle of non-discrimination, and go against the general trend of liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment. More importantly, they do not conform to the consensus of G20 leaders and trade ministers to realize a free, fair, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and stable trade and investment environment, and to keep our markets open," said Ji Rong, spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in India.

### **What Is India's Argument?**

India maintains the policy is not aimed at any one country and that the move is aimed at curbing "opportunistic" takeovers of Indian firms, many of which are under strain. "The amendments are not prohibiting investments. (We have) just changed the approval route for these investments. There are many sectors in India that are already subject to this approval route," a senior government official had said, adding that "many" other countries were taking such measures.

### **What Have Other Countries Done?**

Before India, the European Union and Australia had initiated similar measures. These, again, were seen as being targeted at Chinese investments. On March 25, the European Commission issued guidelines to ensure "a strong EU-wide approach" to foreign investment screening at such a time. The aim was to preserve EU companies and critical assets, notably in areas like health, medical research, biotechnology and infrastructures essential for security and public order, without undermining the EU's general openness to foreign investment. On March 30, Australia temporarily tightened rules on foreign takeovers over concerns that strategic assets could be sold off cheaply. This followed warnings that distressed Australian companies in the aviation, freight and health sectors could become vulnerable to buyouts by state-owned enterprises, especially China. All



foreign takeover and investment proposals will now be scrutinised by Australia's foreign investment review board. Spain, Italy and the US too have implemented investment-related restrictions, according to Khaitan & Co partner Atul Pandey.

### Is There Any Ground for The Argument That India's Move Is Discriminatory?

Some experts note that the amendments apply only to bordering countries. "Now, there are different sets of procedures for the same set of investments based on which country the company is investing from. This is where the potential issue of discrimination arises," said a trade expert on condition of anonymity. "While India can discriminate in favour of domestic investment, discrimination against certain countries for non-security reasons may not be seen favourably on the global stage." There could also be a potential violation of non-discriminatory obligations under the General Agreement on Trade in Services, if the sectors concerned involve services, the expert said. "Most of the other countries that have tightened their investment regulations have done so unanimously, which means that it would apply to all countries."

### Has India Done This Before?

The move to impose additional requirements for certain countries is seemingly unprecedented. So far, India has imposed such measures on investments into certain sectors, according to legal experts. For instance, while FDI in pharmaceuticals had been allowed under the automatic route until 2011, the government had mandated approval for any investment coming into the sector from November that year, said Pandey of Khaitan & Co. "This had happened after the government was alerted to intentions by certain overseas firms to increase investments in India's pharmaceutical industry with an intention to potentially take over these entities. This decision was taken with national health security in mind. After the new government was elected in 2014, the policy was liberalised, but even now investment is only allowed up to 74 per cent under the automatic route," he added. In 2010, the government banned FDI in cigarette manufacturing following recent announcements by Japan Tobacco that it would increase stake in its Indian subsidiary to 74 per cent from 50 per cent, according to Singh and Associates senior partner Daizy Chawla. In the past, India has also blocked certain FDI investments during bilateral standoffs with China, according to Pandey.

- According to a Brookings India study, the total current and planned investment by Chinese entities is over \$26 billion. Chinese capital is invested not just in brick-and-mortar industries but in technology and fintech start-ups where Alibaba and Tencent have funded a host of Indian names such as Paytm, Swiggy, Ola, Zomato and BigBasket. It is quite possible that a move to curb or control Chinese investment in Indian companies was always on the cards and that COVID-19 was a good excuse to pull the trigger. There has always been unease over the fact that there is a thin line that divides the state sector from private enterprise in China and several companies their trace linkages back to the security apparatus of that country.

So, while the decision to introduce a layer of government approval is probably valid in the current circumstances, the government could have adopted a more nuanced approach. Greenfield investments should have been kept out of the purview as they do not pose a threat of takeover of existing business; to the contrary, they create new capacities and businesses in the country. A distinction should also have been made based on the class of investors: venture capital funds are financial investors who may not necessarily be interested in taking over and running a business. While the FDI route has been plugged, it is not clear what happens to investments that come through the market route. SEBI has already sent out missives to custodians asking for details of Chinese holdings in listed entities. How will this be regulated? And, now that the wall has been raised, approvals should be quick for investment proposals in the technology start-up space, where cash burn is high and existing investors are often tapped for a top-up investment.

- A plain reading of the amended policy makes every type of investment by Chinese investors subject to government approval. It neither distinguishes between greenfield and brownfield investments nor listed and unlisted companies. It also does not distinguish between the different types of



investors, such as industry players, financial institutions, or venture capital funds. Such a blanket application could create unintended problems. For instance, it is likely that unlisted or private companies might find themselves under financial stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An acquisition in such companies can only occur between willing buyers and sellers. Making government approval necessary for acquisitions in private companies by Chinese investors will only reduce the number of potential investors available for a prospective seller, and drive down the valuation. The absence of a white knight may cause bankruptcy and job losses. Greenfield investments are another category where the new rules may pose obstacles. These are investments where Chinese investors bring fresh capital to establish new factories and generate employment in India. China has been the fastest growing source of FDI since 2014. The positive sentiment generated among industry players in China since then may well be punctured by the need for government approval. Moreover, the most visible 'Chinese investors' in India, most in the Internet space, may not even come under the definitions of the new rules. Most investors in companies such as Zomato, Swiggy, Bigbasket, Makemytrip, Oyo, Ola and Snapdeal are either venture capital funds registered in off-shore tax havens or listed in stock exchanges in the U.S. or Hong Kong. It will prove to be extremely difficult to attribute nationality to venture capital funds or fix the ultimate beneficial ownership of listed companies down to founders of a certain nationality. By abolishing the Foreign Investment Promotion Board in 2017, India took the decision of dismantling the last vestige of an FDI regime that sought to block sensitive foreign investments. What Delhi should have left behind then was a national security exception – along the lines of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) – to deal with genuine threats to national security or black swan events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, issuing an amendment that reverses what has been a highly-advertised new FDI policy position may have unintended consequences in the minds of foreign investors.

- ➔ Previously, only investments from Pakistan and Bangladesh faced such restrictions. Pakistani investors face further restrictions in requiring government approval for FDI in defence, space and atomic energy sectors as well. India shares land borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Investors from countries not covered by the new policy only have to inform the RBI after a transaction rather than asking for prior permission from the relevant government department. Housing finance company HDFC informed the stock exchanges that the People's Bank of China now holds a 1.01% stake in the company. This was an instance of portfolio investment through the stock market and not FDI. The official statement added that a transfer of ownership of any existing or future FDI in an Indian entity to those in the restricted countries would also need government approval. The decisions will become effective from the date of the Foreign Exchange Management Act notification.

## Franklin Templeton Winding Up Credit Funds Means to Investors

- ➔ Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund, the ninth largest in the country, has jolted investors with its decision to wind up six yield-oriented managed credit funds. The six schemes – Franklin India low duration fund, dynamic accrual fund, credit risk fund, short term income plan, ultra-short bond fund and income opportunities fund – have combined assets under management of around ₹28,000 crore, nearly 25% of the total assets under management (₹116,322 crore) of Franklin Templeton MF in India. The fund house has said it took the decision in order to protect value for investors via a managed sale of the portfolio, amid the severe market dislocation and illiquidity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Investors, however, are bracing for substantial losses.

### **What Does the Winding Up of Schemes Mean for Investors?**

It essentially means that Franklin Templeton MF will first liquidate the assets in the schemes and then return the money to investors. With the market situation tough for now, investors may not get an immediate exit. Industry insiders say the fund house may find it difficult to get a buyer for the low-rated assets in the portfolio, so investors may have to wait. On the other hand, if the fund house



pushes hard to get new buyers for those assets, it will go at a substantial haircut, which would mean a big loss for investors on their capital investment. As one investor put it, “investors will pay a heavy price for the incompetence of the fund house”. The fund house has blamed the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown for its failure in managing the assets of investors.

### Will This Decision Affect Other Schemes of The Fund House?

The fund house has said that all other funds it manages – equity, debt and hybrid – are unaffected by the decision. So, the winding up of these schemes will have a limited impact on investors of other schemes. The fund house said the ongoing liquidity crisis in the market has impacted higher yielding, lower-rated credit securities in India and, since these six schemes had direct exposure to them, they have been impacted.

### What Are Credit Risk Funds?

Credit risk funds are debt funds that play on the principle of high-risk-high-reward. By definition, credit funds invest 65 per cent of the portfolio in bonds that are AA rated or below, and investors must be aware that they are investing in schemes that are investing in lower-rated papers. While higher-rated bonds of companies are more secure and offer lower interest rates, credit risk funds generally invest in lower-rated bonds which offer higher return but also carry a higher risk. Shutting down six schemes is unprecedented and can break investor confidence in mutual funds.

### Why Are They Risky?

The managers of most credit risk fund have been seen chasing high yields and ignoring the associated higher risk. This strategy worked well when the external environment was good – the economy witnessing higher growth rates, and no undue pressures on the liquidity front. In such times, when credit funds were exposed to companies with a weaker balance sheet, chances of default were low. However, when there is stress in the economy, and even strong companies are finding it tough to raise funds, companies with a weaker balance sheet and higher leverage (AA rated and below) are most vulnerable. At such a time, banks, mutual funds and financial institutions that have lending exposure to such companies will see stress building in their books, and borrowers will not be able to service the interest and principal payment. Investors are now questioning why only Franklin Templeton was unable to read the writing on the wall and act early.

### How Important Is the Role of The Fund Manager?

While all credit risk funds invest up to 65 per cent in bonds rated AA or below, market experts say that fund managers can lower their risk by following a higher diversification strategy. If the scheme is diversified significantly on the asset side (not given large exposure to a few companies), then even if there is a default by one or two companies, the entire portfolio does not get affected. Similarly, if the scheme is well diversified on the liability side (not having just a few large investors), then even if one or two investors seek redemption, it does not push the fund house to sell – as has happened with Franklin Templeton.

### Should Investors Worry About Their Money in Credit Funds of Other Fund Houses, And Debt Funds?

While winding up of a scheme does not impact investment in other schemes, investors still need to assess where their investments are. As the economy is facing a serious challenge on account of the lockdown and several companies across sectors are struggling, it is time for investors to look at the quality of the companies where their investments lie. If their investments have exposure to debt or equity of lower-rated companies that are highly leveraged, they must consider reallocating them. The Association of Mutual Funds in India held a conference call where industry leaders reassured investors that they should not panic. Terming what happened at Franklin Templeton an isolated case, Nilesh Shah, chairman AMFI and MD of Kotak Mahindra Mutual Fund, said the credit profile and liquidity profile of investments by the industry is good and the isolated



event will have no bearing on the industry's day-to-day operations. Milind Barve, MD, HDFC AMC, also reassured investors. Stating that the size of the credit risk fund is only around 5 per cent of the debt AUM, he said, "It is not an industry of category problem. Retail investors should not panic in what we believe is a one-off incident. They should look carefully at the portfolio of credit funds and take comfort from that."

## Listed Firms Can Raise Funds 6 Months Post Buyback Offer

- As part of measures to ease fund-raising for companies amid the ongoing volatility due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has allowed listed companies to raise funds after six months of making a buyback offer. Under normal circumstances, SEBI norms stipulate a minimum gap of 12 months between a buyback offer and any fundraising activity by a listed company. "To enable relatively quicker access to capital, it has been decided to temporarily relax the period of restriction provided in Regulation 24(i)(f) of the buyback Regulations. Accordingly, the words 'one year' shall be read as 'six months' in the said regulation," the regulator said in a circular.

### **Effective till Dec. 31**

While the relaxation will come into force with immediate effect, it will be applicable until December 31. The latest move comes following a relaxation in norms for preferential allotment by companies with stressed assets. The watchdog has also relaxed certain compliance norms for entities that are planning to come with an initial public offer (IPO), while enlarging the definition of entities eligible for making fast track rights issue. In another circular regarding valuation of money market or debt securities held by mutual funds, the regulator has said that if an issuer defaults on payment obligations due to the lockdown or the moratorium allowed by RBI, then valuation agencies should not term it a default. The amended norms will be in place till the period of the moratorium of the central bank, it added.

## What the Jio Deal Means for Reliance and Facebook

- Facebook's purchase of a nearly 10% stake in Reliance Industries' digital business unit Jio Platforms brings one of the world's largest Internet companies on the table with India's largest telecom player. The \$5.7-billion deal, which values Reliance's digital operations at around \$66 billion, pushes the Indian conglomerate ahead in its plans of de-leveraging its balance sheet while accelerating the launch of its new commerce business. Further, it not only marks Facebook's long-pending formal entry into India's telecom sector but also catapults it to a place among the biggest foreign investors in India's technology space.

### **What Does the Deal Mean for Reliance Industries?**

Back in August 2019, while addressing the company's shareholders at the annual general meeting, Reliance Industries Chairman Mukesh Ambani had said the group had prepared a roadmap for becoming a zero net-debt company within 18 months. The Facebook deal significantly contributes to that plan by paring about ₹43,574 crore from its outstanding debt as of September 2019 of ₹2.92 lakh crore. The other primary contributors to the debt-reduction plan will be a potential \$15 billion (around ₹1.05 lakh crore) deal with Saudi Aramco for a 20% stake in Reliance Industries' refining and petrochemicals business and ₹7,000 crore from a 49% sale in its fuel retail joint-venture to British firm BP. However, experts believe the Aramco deal to be under threat on account of the oil prices crash caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides the balance sheet de-leveraging, the timing of the deal with Facebook is significant for another reason: online platforms selling essential goods have suddenly witnessed an upsurge in demand. For example, before the outbreak, just 1% of the ₹80,000-crore grocery market in India was represented by online players. After the lockdown, online platforms started to account for 50% of the grocery demand in the country by some estimates before it corrected. Experts have said the arrangement among Reliance Retail, Jio Platforms and



Facebook-owned WhatsApp to offer consumers the ability to access the nearest kiranas, or grocery stores, which can provide products and services to their homes by transacting with JioMart using WhatsApp, has come at a very opportune time. WhatsApp boasts 400 million users in India. Further, using WhatsApp's base also allows Reliance Retail to promote its services to users of Jio's rival telecom players.

### What Does the Deal Mean for Facebook?

Facebook has been trying for years to get its finger in the Internet pie. In 2015, it had experimented with [Free Basics](#), which provided free access to basic Internet services as a partnership with service providers. However, criticised for being a walled garden, it soon pulled out of the idea after differential pricing was disallowed by the telecom sector regulator. [It had even looked at the possibility of beaming free Internet from the air using a solar-powered drone called Aquila, and enabled low cost high-speed Wi-Fi in some remote parts of India with an initiative called Express Wi-Fi.](#) But data was expensive in those times, and free access to the Internet was envisioned as the easiest way to bring the next billion users online. Then, Reliance Jio happened. It launched with data rates so low that they became the industry standard in one of the largest online markets in the world. Jio alone helped bring 388 million users online, well over a third of what Facebook had planned. The partnership with Reliance could also help Facebook navigate the regulatory environment in India, where it has had several skirmishes with the authorities, including for its major initiatives such as WhatsApp Pay.

### What Does It Mean for India's Internet Ecosystem?

The deal also marks Facebook's entry among elite investors in India's technology space, joining the likes of SoftBank, Amazon and Google that have together poured in billions of dollars in Indian tech start-ups and their own ventures over the years. Prior to Jio Platforms, Facebook had invested around \$20-25 million in social commerce platform Meesho in 2019, and participated in a \$110 million funding round for edu-tech company Unacademy earlier this year. The deal with Reliance also gives Facebook access to the latter's bouquet of digital apps. These include in-house apps such as Jio Money, Jio TV, etc in addition to the young start-ups acquired by Reliance or its subsidiaries across categories such as logistics, e-commerce and artificial intelligence.

### What Does It Mean for Reliance's Data Localisation Principles?

In January last year, speaking at the Vibrant Gujarat Summit, Ambani had stressed that India's data "must be controlled and owned by Indian people – and not by corporates, especially global corporations". "For India to succeed in this data-driven revolution, we will have to migrate the control and ownership of Indian data back to India – in other words, Indian wealth back to every Indian," he had said. [While some have raised the red flag over Facebook's track-record on data privacy issues, executives of both companies said Wednesday that data sharing was not a part of the deal.](#) "There will be areas that we will collaborate in but there will be areas where we will potentially not agree with each other," a Jio official said. Facebook, on the other hand, maintained its stance in favour of an open ecosystem for data to flow across boundaries.

## Life & Science

### JNTBGRI to Play Key Role in Sequencing of Indian Species

- The [Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute \(JNTBGRI\)](#) here is gearing up to play a key role in a nationwide project to decode the genetic information of all known species of plants and animals in the country. The Institute has been selected as one of the Biological

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



Knowledge and Resource Centres of the Indian Initiative on [Earth BioGenome Sequencing \(IIEBS\)](#). It will join hands with other premier research institutes to utilise cutting edge technologies for genome sequencing. The Union Department of Biotechnology has allotted ₹143.89 lakh for JNTBGRI to take up the project.

## 24 institutes

[The whole genome sequencing of 1,000 species of plants and animals will be taken up in the initial phase of IIEBS to be completed over a period of five years at an estimated cost of ₹440 crore.](#) The National Institute of Plant Genome Research, New Delhi is the coordinating centre for the nationwide project involving a total of 24 institutes. JNTBGRI Director R. Prakash Kumar said the [project was part of the Earth BioGenome Project, an international initiative to catalogue life on the planet.](#) "This will eventually lead to the generation of the genetic blueprint of all living forms," he said. Described as a "moonshot for Biology", [EBP aims to sequence the genetic codes of all of earth's eukaryotic biodiversity over a period of 10 years.](#) The digital repository of genome sequences is expected to provide the critical infrastructure for better understanding of ecosystems and conservation of biodiversity as well as the development of new treatments for infectious and inherited diseases, agricultural products, biomaterials and biological fuels. Dr. Prakash Kumar said India's participation in the EBP would provide a boost for the field of genomics and bioinformatics within the country. "The project will enable collection and preservation of endangered and economically important species. *The decoded genetic information will also be a useful tool to prevent biopiracy,*" he said. With over 5,000 plant species in its field gene bank and conservatories, JNTBGRI has a major role in conserving the endemic flora of the Western Ghats.

## Types of Human Coronaviruses and The Symptoms They Cause

- While there are hundreds of coronaviruses that cause diseases in animals such as pigs, camels, bats and cats, till date seven different types of coronaviruses have been identified that infect humans. What are they and what kind of symptoms do they cause?

### What Are Coronaviruses?

[Coronaviruses are a large family of single-stranded RNA viruses](#) that cause diseases in animals and humans. In humans, the viruses usually cause [mild to moderate upper-respiratory tract illnesses](#) such as the common cold. In the last two decades, more aggressive coronaviruses have emerged that are capable of causing serious illness and even death in humans. These include [SARS-CoV, MERS and now SARS-CoV-2.](#) Human coronaviruses were first characterised in the mid-1960s and they are mostly considered to be responsible for causing upper respiratory tract infections in children. [In 1965, scientists DJ Tyrrell and ML Bynoe were the first ones to identify a human coronavirus, which they isolated from the nasal washing of a male child who had symptoms of common cold. They termed the strain B814 and later in 1968 the term "coronavirus" was accepted.](#) These viruses are named so because of spikes found on their surface that give them the [appearance of a crown](#) when looked through an electron microscope. In animals, coronaviruses can cause diarrhoea in cows and pigs and upper respiratory tract disease in chickens. [The first coronavirus was isolated in 1937 and it was the infectious bronchitis virus \(IBV\) that caused respiratory disease in chickens.](#)

### Classifying Coronaviruses

Broadly, coronaviruses (CoV) are the largest group of viruses that belong to the Nidovirales order, which includes Coronaviridae among three others. Coronavirinae are one of the two subfamilies of Coronaviridae, with the other being Torovirinae. Coronavirinae can be further subdivided into alpha, beta, gamma and delta coronaviruses. The Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee for Taxonomy of Viruses is responsible for classifying them and roughly seven years ago they classified them into the aforementioned divisions instead of the serological groups of three. According to a paper published in the Journal of Virology, while coronaviruses from all four



categories can be found in mammals, bat coronaviruses are the likely gene source of alpha and beta coronaviruses, while avian coronaviruses are the probable gene sources of gamma and delta coronaviruses. While there are hundreds of coronaviruses, there are seven that we know can infect humans. Out of the seven, two are alpha coronaviruses (229E and NL63) and four are beta coronaviruses (OC43, HKU1, MERS and SARS-CoV). The classification of the viruses is based on their phylogeny, which is to say it reflects how these virus strains evolved from their common ancestors. Essentially, this means whenever a virus newly emerges, its classification depends on how it relates to other known viruses and if it is distinct enough to be called a new species or if it belongs to an existing species. For instance, SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2 are genetically linked. Alternatively, coronaviruses may be classified based on serology (monitoring the immune system's antibody response to viral exposure) as per which they can be divided into three groups from I to III. Groups I and II refer to mammalian coronaviruses and Group III includes avian coronaviruses. 229E is included in Group I, which largely includes animal pathogens. Group II largely consists of pathogens of veterinary relevance and includes OC43, HKU1 and NL63. SARS coronaviruses are classified in Group II as well. Around the world, people commonly get infected by 229E, HKU1, NL63 and OC43. Sometimes, coronaviruses that infect animals can evolve and become a human coronavirus, which include MERS, SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2.

### When the Human Coronaviruses Were First Identified

**229E:** One of the first coronaviruses strains to be described in the mid-60s, possibly by D Hamre and JJ Procknow in their 1966 paper titled, "A new virus isolated from the human respiratory tract", published in Experimental Biology and Medicine.

**OC43:** Discovered in 1967 according to the Journal of Virology. However, a paper in Virology Journal has described it as the first human coronavirus to be discovered in 1965, citing a 1966 paper written by Tyrrell and Bynoe who worked with the nasal swab titled B814.

**NL63 and HKU1:** First identified in the Netherlands in 2004, probably after it was isolated from a seven-month-old infant showing respiratory symptoms. During this time, there was an increase in research on human coronaviruses, which led to the discovery of NL63 and HKU1 in Hong Kong in early 2005.

**SARS-CoV:** 2003 in China (animal source not yet known, bats thought to have given it to other animals, probably civet cats)

**MERS:** 2012 in Saudi Arabia (transmitted by dromedary camels)

**SARS-CoV-2:** 2019 in Wuhan (source not yet known, possibly bats)

### What Are the Symptoms They Cause?

Before SARS-CoV-2 and MERS, SARS-CoV was the first example of a human coronavirus that could cause serious illness in humans in the form of severe acute respiratory syndrome. Other human coronaviruses such as OC43 and 229E are known to cause the common cold, whereas NL63 is associated with serious respiratory symptoms such as upper respiratory tract infection and pneumonia. According to a paper published in Microbiology and Molecular Biology Reviews in 2005, while NL63 is primarily associated with infections among children, it has also been detected in immuno-compromised adults with respiratory tract infections. OC43 can also cause gastroenteritis. SARS-CoV on the other hand, was identified after the 2003 outbreaks in China. It is thought to have come from an as yet unknown animal source, probably bats. Symptoms of SARS include cough, shortness of breath, diarrhoea. In severe cases, the symptoms can progress to respiratory distress, which may require intensive care. MERS is another viral respiratory disease caused by a human coronavirus, which was first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012. Typical





symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Further, while SARS-CoV-2 is considered to be milder than SARS-CoV and MERS, it is especially difficult to control its outbreak, given its high infectiousness.

## The COVID-19 Virus and Its Polyproteins

→ Every day, we hear about the novel coronavirus, how it is easily infecting and transmitting itself from people to people, and how scientists and medical experts are waging a war against its spread. We also hear how different this is from bacteria, and why treating people with antibacterial drugs may not help wipe this out. What then is the difference between a virus and a bacterium? Well, bacteria are alive. Each bacterial cell has its own machinery to reproduce itself. Take a bacterial cell, and put it in a solution containing nutrients, it grows itself and multiplies in millions. The genes in the cells (genome, made up of DNA molecules, the information contained in which is transcribed as a message to the messenger molecules called RNA), and the message therein is translated into action molecules called proteins, which are the foot-soldiers that help the growth and multiplication of the bacterium. Coronaviruses do not have DNA as their genome, but RNA; in other words, they can only translate and not transcribe. Thus, they are 'dead', unable to renew and grow themselves; they need help. This they achieve by infecting 'host cells' which they bind to, and multiply by the millions. With no host cell to help, a virus is simply a dead storage box.

### **The Polyprotein Strategy**

Upon infection, the entire RNA with its 33,000 bases is translated in one shot as a long tape of amino acid sequences. Since this long chain contains several proteins within it, it is called a "polyprotein" sequence. One needs to analyse this long chain, find the relevant proteins, isolate and study what each of them does in helping infection. (Scientists call the polyprotein a 'single reading frame', containing several 'open reading frames', namely those that contain a start code and end with a stop code, each containing the relevant protein to be expressed by the host cell). This strategy allows the viral genome to be compact, and express the protein when the need arises. This is somewhat like a thrifty individual who keeps his money in a fixed deposit in a bank, and withdraws chosen amounts as the demand arises. For the virus, the demand is to multiply upon infecting the host. No demand, no withdrawal, no infection, no multiplication! COVID19 has RNA-based genomes and sub genomes in its polyprotein sequence, that code for the spike protein (S), the membrane protein (M), the envelope protein (E), and the nucleocapsid protein (N, which covers the viral cell nuclear material) - all of which are needed for the architecture of the virus. In addition to these, there are special structural and accessory proteins, called non-structural proteins (NSP), indeed 16 of them, which serve specific purposes for infection and viral multiplication.

### **How the Drugs Work**

We thus have a large set of proteins in the virus, against which a number of potential molecules and drugs can be tried to interfere and stop the production of these viral proteins. Indeed, this has been tried to advantage by several recent publications during the last month alone. One of them has attempted to target the translation of the key enzyme RDRp in the virus, whose production was stopped by the drug Remdesavir. Three studies from the US, Germany and China have come up with methods to stop the production of the enzyme (called CL3pro, also called as Mpro) which is needed to make the spike (S protein). And the paper by Yu Chen et al, quoted above lists as many as 16 NSPs in the viral polyprotein, which can be targeted by potential drug molecules. (And Dr PandurangaRao from Boston is quoted as stating that the enzyme nsp12 to be a high-value target). It is important in this context to cite the longstanding excellent work being done by an Indian researcher, Thanigaimalai Pillaiyar (what an auspicious name- in homage to the street he was born in the village, he was born in Thiruvannamalai district in Tamilnadu), who is settled as a medicinal chemist working at the University of Bonn, Germany since 2013. In this paper, he used the X-ray crystal structure of a related virus TGEV (Transmissible Gastroenteritis Virus), found by 3D



modelling a key enzyme of the SARS-CoV, called Chymotrypsin-like Cysteine Protease (3CLpro) also called the main protease (Mpro), and found that this enzyme fits into the virus structure in a lock and key manner. The next step after this molecular modelling was to find drugs that can deactivate this binding and thus inhibit the SARS-CoV from infecting. A total of about 160 known drugs were predicted to be of value with varying efficiency.

India is well versed with expertise in the area of organic and medicinal chemistry since the last 90 years and in manufacturing quality drug molecules, and exporting them for use at home and across the world since the 1970 patents act of India. Our expertise today, in both the public and private sector, includes not just synthesizing made-to-order molecules, but has added new methods involving computer modelling of target proteins from bacteria and viruses, homology modelling, drug design, repurposing of drugs, and other methods. The CSIR has taken upon itself the express task of coming out with molecules and methods to counter the dreaded virus, and we have every hope that they will succeed in the nearest future!

## Hydroxychloroquine Does Not Reduce Viral Load, Randomised Trial Shows

- Results of a randomised, control trial using hydroxychloroquine drug in 150 COVID-19 patients show that the drug does not reduce the viral load even on day 28. Seventy-five patients got the drug and standard of care while the remaining got only standard of care. Patients were given 1,200 mg of the drug for three days followed by 800 mg daily for two and three weeks in patients with mild/moderate and severe symptoms, respectively.

### First Randomised Trial

Researchers from the Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine, Shanghai, who led the team say that in contrast to other trials that have shown good results, the **randomised trial** did not show that hydroxychloroquine drug was able to suppress viral replication. This is the first trial using hydroxychloroquine where patients have been randomised to receive either the drug or just standard of care. **However patients who got the drug did show quicker alleviation of clinical symptoms, possibly through anti-inflammatory properties and improvement in white blood cell count.** The drug did not cause any serious adverse effects in patients. But some patients did experience adverse effects. The most common adverse event in patients who got the drug was diarrhoea (10%). The results were posted in preprint server MedRxiv. Preprints are yet to be peer-reviewed and published in scientific journals. Patients (mean age 46 years; 55% males) were enrolled at 16 government-designated COVID-19 treatment centres in three provinces – Hubei, Henan and Anhui – between February 11 and 29, 2020. During the trial, specimens were taken from the upper and/or lower respiratory tract on the day of screening and during treatment and post-treatment follow-up. The authors say that the dosage used in the trial was meant to reach the 50% effective concentrations of hydroxychloroquine against the virus. “It is not likely to have additional anti-viral effects by further escalating dosage,” they write. **In the case of COVID-19, systemic inflammation or cytokine storm is the driver of disease progression and death. Substantial reduction in white blood cell count and increase in inflammatory response have generally been observed in patients who have eventually progressed and died. The researchers observed “moderate increase” in white blood cell count and “significantly greater reduction” in the marker for inflammation.** These effects were seen after fifth day of treatment and continued till the end of the treatment.

### Clinical Benefits

“These encouraging results suggest clinical benefits of adding hydroxychloroquine into the current standard management to limit inflammatory response, which is the key to prevent systemic inflammation and subsequent multiple organ failure and death,” they write. “The shorter time to alleviate the symptoms might be useful for preventing disease progression.”



## Remdesivir: Hope, With Caution

- The drug remdesivir has been under the spotlight as a possible treatment for critical cases of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Globally, it is one of the four possible lines of treatment being investigated in the Solidarity trials under the aegis of the World Health Organization (WHO). While the drug is yet to get approval in any country to treat COVID-19, recent studies have claimed they have found promising results.

### What Is Remdesivir?

It is a drug with antiviral properties that was manufactured by US-based biotechnology company in 2014, to treat Ebola cases. It was also tried in patients of MERS and SARS, both caused by members of the coronavirus family, but experts said it did not show promising results back then. Coronaviruses have a single-strand RNA as their genetic material. When the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2 enters a human cell, an enzyme called RdRP helps the virus replicate. Remdesivir works by inhibiting the activity of RdRP. Infectious disease expert Dr Tanu Singhal said, “When the virus engulfs itself around a human cell, it injects its RNA inside the cell. The RdRp enzyme causes viral replication. Remdesivir inhibits the enzyme and stops further replication.”

### What Have Studies Found?

A small cohort study published in The New England Journal of Medicine on April 10 used remdesivir on 61 patients in USA, Canada, Europe and Japan. These patients were critically ill with low oxygen levels, and were administered remdesivir under manufacturer Gilead’s compassionate use programme. Each patient was administered a 10-day course of remdesivir – 200 mg on the first day and 100 mg each on the other nine days. Of them, 53 patients were studied. The study found clinical improvement in 68% of the cases, with their oxygen levels improving; 47% patients could be discharged after treatment, and more than 50% patients (17 of 30) no longer required mechanical ventilator support. The study found that clinical improvement was less frequent in patients on invasive ventilators or among elderly people. Seven patients died despite treatment with remdesivir. Another study, published on April 13 in the Journal of Biological Chemistry by researchers from the University of Alberta, reported promising results but not in patients. The researchers conducted a laboratory study in which the drug was able to prevent the virus from replicating. The lab study also targeted the enzyme that drives the virus’s replication in the body. Matthias Götte, chair of medical microbiology and immunology at the University of Alberta, said that remdesivir tricks the virus by mimicking its building blocks. “These coronavirus polymerases (RdRP enzymes described above) are sloppy and they get fooled, so the inhibitor gets incorporated many times and the virus can no longer replicate,” Götte said in a statement.

### How Promising Are These Results?

No study on remdesivir so far has been large enough to be viewed with credibility. The study published in The New England Journal of Medicine looked at 53 patients, who represent too small a cohort to draw definitive conclusions. Also, 13% of the patients in the study died. The study had no control arm, meaning another group of patients who were not administered the drug, to compare outcomes of treatment with and without remdesivir. Unless such trials are conducted, the effect of the drug remains a grey zone. The study’s lead author, Jonathan D Grein, director of hospital epidemiology, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, said “no definitive conclusions can be drawn from these data” but he encouraged further controlled trials to validate the treatment potential of remdesivir. Dr Harshad Limaye of the internal medicine department in Mumbai’s Nanavati Hospital, a designated COVID-19 hospital, said remdesivir did not show great results with Ebola either. “But the Ebola and coronavirus are different. We should wait for the trials to measure the efficacy of the drug for COVID-19,” Dr Limaye said.



### What Is India's Stand on Remdesivir?

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has said it can consider using the drug if local manufacturers are willing to procure it. Remdesivir is currently not available in India. The ICMR plans to wait and watch for the results of WHO's Solidarity trials to make an assessment on the efficacy of remdesivir for COVID-19 treatment.

### Will Convalescent Plasma Help COVID-19 Patients?

- Convalescent plasma is a time-tested strategy that has worked successfully with several other diseases, and doctors struggling to bring relief to COVID-19 patients have turned towards it – it is blood derived from patients who have recovered from COVID-19 – on the assumption that their body contains antibodies it used to fight the virus.

### What Is Convalescent Plasma? How Does It Work?

As Dr. Michael Joyner, professor, Mayo Clinic, explains on the institution's website: People who have recovered from COVID-19 have antibodies to the disease in their blood. Doctors call this convalescent plasma. Researchers hope that convalescent plasma can be given to people with severe COVID-19 to boost their ability to fight the virus. The blood – about 800 ml or so – is collected from the donor through the regular withdrawal process, tested for other pathogens, and if safe, the plasma component is extracted and subsequently used for transfusion on to patients. Everyone who has suffered from a disease possibly carries what are called neutralising antibodies that when extracted via plasma and transfused on to others with the infection can help their immune system fight it off. Whether it works or not depends on whether the disease produced a lot of antibodies in people or not. For some diseases, the body needs more cellular immunity to fight the infection, while for others, the body needs more antibodies. Most diseases, however, require a combination of both these mechanisms, Dr. Sampath Kumar points out. Since trials are going on, there is no standardised protocol on how much of convalescent plasma or how often it must be used. Even before we knew what sort of antibody levels have to be administered, doctors began using this technique because there did not seem to be anything else that worked. The understanding why some people have more antibodies and some have less, whether those who were asymptomatic have antibodies at all, and in what strength, are issues that will have to be answered over the course of the trials. But, she says, these are important questions that need answers, because giving whole plasma to an individual may even overload the system since it might be a large volume. There are no commercially available assays in the market that could measure the antibody level in the plasma. However, research is on at Mayo Clinic for an assay that would take at least a few weeks, to conduct such a test, according to Dr. Sampath Kumar. Once that is done, experts would have to figure out the standard minimum dose of antibodies that will kickstart the immune response in the recipient against COVID-19 infection. Rapid serological antibody tests have only recently become available for testing in some nations.

### How Far Are We from Using It and What Are the Challenges?

Dr. Sampath Kumar says for all these studies to get off the ground, researchers would need enough donors who have recovered fully and can be tested for other pathogens as well. People should be willing to donate plasma, and good tests should emerge to estimate how many antibodies they have. While studies are required to show the timing and dosage, there is broad consensus that early administration will be ideal. Dr. Joyner says attempts are on to understand the issue via the large cohort of patients being observed. His colleague, Dr. Sampath Kumar, explains, early on in the disease, there is a lot of virus in the system and the antibodies will bind with the virus eliminating it. If this is not done at this stage, then the virus sets off a cascade of inflammation in the body. If the patient has reached that stage, the plasma may not be helpful. And yet, at least two studies from China, the results of which were published in peer-reviewed journals, showed that in severe patients in the intensive care unit, the level of neutralising antibodies increased rapidly or remained high after convalescent plasma transfusion and the clinical symptoms also showed



significant amelioration. Trials are also required to examine the effect of other anti-virals or anti-inflammatory drugs on convalescent plasma, and see if there is an additive effect or take-away from the benefits, she adds. Dr. Joyner speculates that there will likely be concentrated immune globulin products in a few months, and these will likely supersede plasma as a way to deliver passive immunity via antibodies to both patients with active disease and to temporarily prevent disease. Since it rests on blood donation, people from the more common blood groups, for instance, O+ve, will have easier access to plasma. Naturally, the pool for rare blood groups is going to be smaller. However, experts have been laying emphasis on the need for people who have recovered to voluntarily come forward and donate plasma to help with research and other patients.

### What Is the Future?

Trials will conclude in a few weeks/months for definitive conclusions to emerge. The Indian Council of Medical Research has approved Delhi and Kerala to undertake clinical trials, and Tamil Nadu has also applied for permission to conduct trials in the State. If trials clear convalescent plasma and approvals are given for a clinical rollout, it can be employed in hospital settings widely to help patients. If that were to come to pass, the government would also do well to bring in regulations to ensure that plasma donors are not exploited under any circumstances. Creating a broad-based pool of donors would also be advisable, following the Mayo Clinic model, to cover rare blood types as well.

### Social Vaccine

- The case-fatality of 2% to 3% is indicative of the large number of deaths India can expect. Debates about the relative merits of mitigation to “flatten the curve” versus allowing “herd immunity” to build naturally are increasingly irrelevant. The failures in widespread testing for infection or for immunity imply that transmission-chains via asymptomatic, mildly-symptomatic and pre-symptomatic people remain undetected. Most countries, including India, are inadvertently employing hybrid strategies. The lockdown (an extreme example of mitigation) has been extended to May 3. The dire socio-economic consequences and the scale of human tragedy that play out daily make a prolonged total lockdown undesirable. Alongside infection-control, a strategic plan of action to mitigate suffering and to stimulate economic recovery is urgently needed.

### As A Series of Measures

In a recent interview, the Union Health Minister, Harsh Vardhan, asserted that lockdowns and social distancing are the most effective “social vaccines” available to fight the pandemic. A social vaccine has far broader implications. So, what is a social vaccine? A social vaccine is a metaphor for a series of social and behavioural measures that governments can use to raise public consciousness about unhealthy situations through social mobilisation. Social mobilisation can empower populations to resist unhealthy practices, increase resilience, and foster advocacy for change. This can drive political will to take action in the interests of society and hold governments accountable to address the social determinants of health by adopting progressive socio-economic policies and regulatory mechanisms that promote health equity and reduce vulnerability to disease. When applied to pandemics, the effectiveness of a social vaccine is determined by the extent of dissemination and uptake of accurate information about personal infection risk and methods to reduce the risk through consistent core messages disseminated through a variety of means. A social vaccine addresses barriers and facilitators of behaviour change, whether attitudinal, social, cultural, or economic, and supplements information, education, and communication (IEC) with targeted social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) strategies. Uganda and Thailand used these strategies effectively during the HIV/AIDS pandemic to bring down the incidence of HIV infection, before highly active antiretroviral treatment (HAART) was introduced in 1995. They demonstrated how an effective social vaccine helped “flatten the



curve” till effective treatments were discovered that dramatically reduced mortality, viral loads and infection transmission.

### Lessons from HIV Pandemic

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is believed to have made the zoonotic jump from monkeys through chimpanzees to humans in Africa as early as the 1920s, but the HIV/AIDS epidemic was detected in 1981 and was a pandemic by 1985. From 1981 till December 2018, around 74.9 (range: 58.3 to 98.1) million people worldwide were HIV-infected, and around 32.0 (range: 23.6 to 43.8) million died (43%, range: 41 to 45%) from AIDS-related illnesses. The early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic were also a time of global panic. The cause was unknown (till 1984) and diagnostic tests were unavailable (till 1985). Since there was no treatment, a diagnosis of HIV infection was a death sentence. Widespread fears of contagion rendered many infected people homeless and unemployed. Many were denied access to care. Stigma, discrimination and violence towards infected individuals, their families, social groups (sex-workers, gay men, drug users, truck drivers, migrants), and even health workers, were common. Criminalising sex-work and injecting drug use followed. Conspiracy theories, misinformation and unproven remedies were widely propagated. The blame game targeted world leaders and international agencies. The preparedness of health systems, societal prejudices and socio-economic inequities were starkly exposed. Reducing HIV transmission centred on acknowledging that everybody was potentially infected – even those apparently healthy – and that infection occurred predominantly through sexual transmission and intravenous drug use. The core preventive messages involved being faithful to one sexual partner or 100% condom use during sexual intercourse outside stable relationships; resisting peer-pressure for risky behaviours, and harm reduction for intravenous drug use. These measures conflicted with prevailing cultural, social, religious, behavioural and legal norms. IEC and SBCC activities targeted (and partnered) individuals, families, community leaders, peer-led community networks and social and health systems to change attitudes and behaviours. Religious and community leaders were key change agents. For example, the Catholic Church in Uganda did not initially support promoting condoms for safe sex since its use prevents life. After large numbers of people died of AIDS, their tacit acknowledgment that their religion did not preclude the use of condoms to prevent death was an important turning point. Thailand pioneered the effective use of social marketing of condoms for safe sex and used humour to defuse social taboos about publicly discussing sex. These strategies and advocacy against stigma and discrimination were successfully adapted in India. These skills and experiences can be innovatively adapted for the current pandemic.

### How It Can Work

The core infection-control messages are available from official sources. Maintaining physical distancing in social situations (unless impossible) and wearing cloth masks or facial coverings in public (especially where distancing is impossible) by 100% of people (and 100% of the time) is key to preventing infection along with regular disinfection of oneself and one’s surroundings. Effective and innovative IEC and SBCC strategies should address the barriers and facilitators to implementation. People are more likely to practise these behaviours if all leaders (without exception) promote them publicly and consistently, the whole community believes in their importance, and if proper information, support, and materials are available and accessible. Coercive or punitive methods are invariably counter-productive, as was seen with HIV/AIDS. A social vaccine also requires people to hold leaders accountable to invest in: rapidly scaling-up testing; meeting the basic and economic needs of vulnerable sections; providing psychological support where needed; not communalising or politicising the pandemic; providing adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) to front-line workers in health, sanitation, transport and other essential services; and not compromising the privacy and dignity of infected individuals and their families in the interest of public health. Building trust is key if government-imposed mitigation strategies are to be embraced by the population. Re-purposing and funding relevant industries and small and medium businesses to produce materials such as PPE, hand sanitisers and medical



equipment; community groups to supply cloth masks, soap, etc., and innovative social marketing of these are other essential components of the social vaccine. The components of the social vaccine should be in place before relaxing or lifting the lockdown. There is still no biomedical vaccine for HIV/AIDS. Considering the limited efficacy and uptake of influenza vaccines, vaccines for SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 may not provide a panacea. Effective treatments to reduce deaths with COVID-19 may emerge, but till then, and even afterwards, a social vaccine is needed. [A social vaccine can build societal immunity to the devastating effects of future pandemics by the lessons learned about addressing the root causes, and our responses to the current one.](#)

## Substantial Coronavirus Spread Seen Before Symptoms Show Up

- In a study published recently, researchers found that people infected with novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) start shedding the virus and therefore transmitting it to others before symptoms show up. [The infectiousness begins at least two days before the person exhibits symptoms.](#) The study says that substantial proportion of transmission probably occurs even before first symptoms appear in the infected person. The work was done by a team led by Gabriel M. Leung from the School of Public Health at the University of Hong Kong and the results were published in the journal Nature Medicine. Studying 77 infector-infectee pairs – pairs of people who passed on the infection and those who got infected – from publicly available sources, the researchers estimate that 44% of secondary cases were infected when the person was yet to show symptoms. The researchers used information on the timing of symptom onsets in transmission pairs to infer the infectiousness profile of people with COVID-19 and found “substantial transmission potential” before symptom onset. Since most cases were isolated soon after they showed symptoms, the possibility of virus spread after symptoms showed up was prevented.

### Tracing Contacts

[The study suggests that efforts to track down contacts of people with coronavirus infection should include people who have come in contact with the infected person not just after symptoms show up but at least two-three days before the person exhibited symptoms. In the case of the 2003 SARS, infectiousness increased seven-10 days after symptom onset.](#) Hence, virus spread can be reduced once the infected person is quarantined soon after symptoms show up. In contrast, [influenza is characterised by increased infectiousness shortly around or even before symptom onset.](#) This makes it difficult to contain the spread by isolating people who have come in contact with the infected person after the person exhibited symptoms.

### Viral Loads

The researchers collected samples (nose swabs) from 94 coronavirus patients who were admitted to the Guangzhou Eighth People’s Hospital in China from January 21 to February 14. They detected high viral loads soon after symptoms showed up, which then declined by day 21. They say based on analysis [the viral shedding may begin two-three days prior to symptoms appearance and then decrease gradually.](#) When one person can infect 2.5 people, contact tracing and quarantine alone are “less likely to be successful” if more than 30% of transmission occurred before symptom onset, they write. [But contact tracing can be still effective in preventing the spread if people who came in contact with the infected person two-three days prior to symptom onset are also located and quarantined,](#) as was done in Hong Kong and mainland China since late February. They caution that even when mitigation measures such as lockdown are in place, contact tracing would still has an important role to play, particularly in the case of super-spreading events that may occur in high-risk settings including nursing homes or hospitals. Since the proportion of pre-symptomatic transmission is substantial, maintaining hand hygiene and physical distancing can play an important role in containing virus-spread in the community.

- On asymptomatic transmission, the WHO says it “refers to transmission of the virus from a person, who does not develop symptoms. [There are few reports of laboratory-confirmed cases who are truly asymptomatic, and to date, there has been no documented asymptomatic transmission.](#) This



does not exclude the possibility that it may occur. Asymptomatic cases have been reported as part of contact tracing efforts in some countries.” [The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) is clear that both pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic transmission of the virus are possible.](#) “The onset and duration of viral shedding and the period of infectiousness for COVID-19 are not yet known. It is possible that SARS-CoV-2 RNA may be detectable in the upper or lower respiratory tract for weeks after illness onset, similar to infections with MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV. However, detection of viral RNA does not necessarily mean that infectious virus is present. There are reports of asymptomatic infections (detection of virus with no development of symptoms) and pre-symptomatic infections (detection of virus prior to development of symptoms) with SARS-CoV-2, but their role in transmission is not yet known. Based on existing literature, the incubation period (the time from exposure to development of symptoms) of SARS-CoV-2 and other coronaviruses (e.g. MERS-CoV, SARS-CoV) ranges from 2-14 days,” the CDC says.

### **For How Long Can A Person Spread the Disease After Being Infected by The Virus?**

The reply to this question is commonly assumed to be 14 days. However, as it is a new disease, knowledge about it is evolving. In Kerala recently, a 54-year-old woman tested positive for the virus almost a month after she arrived from abroad, and had been quarantined at home ever since. [Health officials told The Indian Express that there have been at least a dozen cases so far of people testing positive after having been quarantined for 28 days.](#) Telangana decided to increase the home quarantine period to 28 days, from 14 days. The Union Health Ministry has advocated from the very start that patients should be followed up, at least through community surveillance, for 28 days and not 14 days. This is also in line with some of the global experiences. In a study last month in The Lancet Infectious Diseases, researchers from Imperial College London estimated that in China the [“mean duration from onset of symptoms to death to be 17.8 days and to hospital discharge to be 24.7 days.”](#) They also pointed out that all cases were hospitalised there, not so much because they needed hospital care, but to “prevent onward transmission”.

### **Can Covid-19 Spread from The Faeces Of an Infected Person?**

- ➔ If someone going outdoors during the lockdown needs to use a public toilet, or if someone shares a toilet at home with someone who might have contracted COVID-19, is there a risk of being infected through the faeces of the infected person? The short answer: it is [possible in theory, but very unlikely to happen.](#) Emerging information on the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2, which causes COVID-19 disease, suggests that the virus can be present in some cases. But as the Health Ministry notes in its FAQs, [spread of the novel coronavirus through the faecal route is not the main feature of the outbreak.](#) The primary route remains droplets from an infected person coughing or sneezing. Spread through this route is far more common than spread through touching infected objects and then touching one’s face, mouth or nose. The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that the [virus has been detected in the faeces of some COVID-19 patients, but what is unknown is the amount of virus in the stool, or whether the virus in stool is infectious at all.](#) As such, the risk of transmission is also unknown. It may seem that flushing a toilet will have got rid of the virus, even if it was present in the faeces. But [flushing creates “toilet plumes”, which are a subject of ongoing research.](#) Toilet plumes refer to the [dispersal of microscopic particles as a result of flushing.](#) Over the last several years, [researchers have been studying the risk of toilet plume aerosols sent into the air, then settling on the toilet seat and infecting someone.](#) In a study published in the American Journal of Infection Control in 2013, which itself was based on an analysis of several peer-reviewed studies, researchers found that potentially infectious aerosols may be produced in substantial quantities during flushing, which can expose subsequent toilet users. Yet, they added, [no studies have yet clearly demonstrated or refuted toilet plume-related disease transmission.](#) The paper stressed the need for additional research. [It is considered good hygiene if you flush the toilet with the lid down.](#) A widespread view is that doing so prevents some of the toilet plume from escaping into the air. [It also makes sense to wait a few minutes before using a toilet that has just been used by someone else.](#) While noting that the risk of catching COVID-





19 from faeces appears to be low, the Health Ministry adds: "Because this is a risk, however, it is another reason to clean hands regularly, after using the bathroom and before eating."

## How Pooled Testing Works, When It Helps

- Faced with criticism about insufficient testing and the reality of limited resources, India has decided go for pooled testing in districts where no cases have been reported. This would on the one hand give data on whether these really are zero-case districts, and on the other, save resources.

### What Is Pooled Testing?

It is a method of testing several samples together with the same technique (RT-PCR) that is being currently used to test individual samples. Samples taken from the nose or throat are pooled together by suspending them in a solution in laid-down proportions. The remaining samples are then labelled and kept separate. Pooled samples are subjected to a test; if it is negative then all samples in the pool are cleared. If it is not, then individual samples are tested to find out which one is positive.

### What Does the Indian Council of Medical Research Say on Pooled Testing?

The ICMR brought out an advisory on pooled testing, ideally in districts where incidence of COVID-19 is low. "Number of COVID-19 cases in India is rising exponentially. In view of this, it is critical to increase the numbers of tests conducted by laboratories... Hence, it may help to use the pooled samples for screening... As all individual samples in a negative pool are regarded as negative, it results in substantial cost savings when a large proportion of pools tests negative," the advisory said. The idea, it said, is to increase the capacity of laboratories to screen more samples for surveillance rather than diagnostic purposes. The advisory followed a feasibility study at the Virus Research & Diagnostic Laboratory at King George's Medical University, Lucknow. The study showed that "performing real-time PCR for COVID-19 by pooling 5 samples of TS/NS (200 microlitres/sample) is feasible when the prevalence rates of infection are low." The ICMR has also set an upper limit of five samples that can be pooled; this is to avoid false negatives because of excessive dilution. More samples can, however, be pooled if it is being done only for research purposes.

### Where Can Pooled Testing Take Place?

The ICMR document is clear that pooled testing is only to be used in "areas with low prevalence of COVID-19 (initially using proxy of low positivity of <2% from the existing data). Still a watch should be kept on increasing positivity in such areas". It adds: "In areas with positivity of 2-5%, sample pooling for PCR screening may be considered only in community survey or surveillance among asymptomatic individuals, strictly excluding pooling samples of individuals with known contact with confirmed cases, Health Care Workers (in direct contact with care of COVID-19 patients). Sample from such individuals should be directly tested without pooling." The ICMR does not recommend pooling in areas where positivity rates exceed 5%. Government sources, though, say pooled testing is currently being considered only in the districts from where no cases of COVID-19 have been reported so far. Reacting last week to reports of private hospitals resorting to pooled testing, Dr R R Gangakhedkar, head of epidemiology and infectious diseases at ICMR, said: "This is to be done in areas where the rate of seropositivity is less than 2%... five samples can be pooled. This helps clear more people with less tests. So far private hospitals are concerned, this is not exactly for individual diagnosis. Using it like that should affect the testing charges. Private hospitals should think about this."



### Is Pooled Testing Being Used Elsewhere?

In the US, pooled testing is being used in some areas to test population-level infection rates. For example, scientists from Stanford Medicine used it to estimate the prevalence of the disease in the San Francisco Bay Area while conserving scarce testing resources. It can be used for any disease whose test involves, like COVID 2019, an RT-PCR test, and is routinely used for HIV screening purposes. In a 2010 article in The Journal of Acute Immunodeficiency Syndrome, US researchers noted: "Pooling strategies have been used to reduce the costs of polymerase chain reaction-based screening for acute HIV infection in populations in which the prevalence of acute infection is low (less than 1%). Only limited research has been done for conditions in which the prevalence of screening positivity is higher (greater than 1%)." It is a well-recognised "screening tool" for epidemiologists.

### Cremations Possible, But Not Immersions

- In these lockdown days, cremations are possible but not immersions. That's what many have found after they cremated parents, siblings and friends at the Lodi Road shamshan, or cremation ground, in New Delhi. The Yamuna river in Delhi or the Ganga at Garhmukteshwar, a two-hour drive from Delhi, is used by many Hindus to immerse the ashes of their dead after cremation rites. But, with the strict COVID-19 lockdown in place, many people have opted to delay immersion. "You can see this room is full of urns containing ashes. People are storing the ashes in an urn (or kalash) here so that they can do the immersion after the lockdown is lifted," Dharminder, a pandit at the Lodi Road shamshan, told The Hindu. "In many cases, the children [of the dead] are abroad and are unable to even perform cremation rites. And, with all flights non-operational, they are doing the next best thing by storing the ash-filled urns for future immersion," Dharminder stated. Cremations, too, have become small affairs at Lodi Road. Getting to the cremation ground is not easy for most people, but policemen are usually cooperative in letting people through, even without a pass, for funerals.

### Uproar After Trump Suggests 'Injecting Disinfectant' As Cure

- The makers of Lysol and Dettol warned that their products should not be used as an internal treatment for the COVID-19 after President Donald Trump wondered about the prospect during a White House briefing. Mr. Trump noted that researchers were looking at the effects of disinfectants on the virus and wondered aloud if they could be injected into people, saying the virus "does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it would be interesting to check that." That prompted a strong warning from the maker of disinfectants Lysol and Dettol, which said it was issuing a statement to combat "recent speculation." "As a global leader in health and hygiene products, we must be clear that under no circumstance should our disinfectant products be administered into the human body (through injection, ingestion or any other route)," said the statement from Reckitt Benckiser. Mr. Trump has often talked up prospects for new therapies and offered rosy timelines for the development of a vaccine as he encourages states to move to reopen their economies.

### Sunlight, Humidity

The White House also pitched "emerging" research on the benefits of sunlight and humidity in diminishing the threat of the coronavirus. Past studies have not found good evidence that warmer temperatures and higher humidity of spring and summer will help check the spread of the virus. But William Bryan of the Department of Homeland Security said at a White House briefing that there are "emerging results" from new research that suggest solar light has a powerful effect in killing the virus on surfaces and in the air. He said scientists have seen a similar effect from higher temperatures and humidity. A biocontainment lab in Maryland has been conducting testing on the virus since February, Bryan said. "The virus is dying at a much more rapid pace just from exposure to higher temperatures and just from exposure to humidity," Mr. Bryan said. "I hope people enjoy



the sun. And if it has an impact, that's great," Mr. Trump said, adding, "It's just a suggestion from a brilliant lab by a very, very smart, perhaps brilliant man."

## Why Disinfectant Must Not Be Sprayed on Humans

- ➔ As the country prepares for some relaxations and industries get ready to start functioning with strict conditions including housing labourers on the premises, the Health Ministry has issued a detailed advisory against spraying humans with disinfectants.

### **What Does the Order Say?**

The order dated April 19 says, "Spraying of individuals or groups is NOT recommended under any circumstances. Spraying an individual or group with chemical disinfectants is physically and psychologically harmful. Even if a person is potentially exposed with the COVID-19 virus, spraying the external part of the body does not kill the virus that has entered your body. Also, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that they are effective even in disinfecting the outer clothing/body in an effective manner." The advisory has been issued, officials say, to prevent a rerun when labourers start returning to industries that qualify for relaxation. Home Ministry guidelines require them to be housed on the premises but "disinfection" at entry is a very real danger.

## Spare Monkeys the Virus, Say Biologists

- ➔ Feeding monkeys during the COVID-19 pandemic could have profoundly negative effects in the long-term, such as helping the SARS-CoV-2 virus mutate and infect primates, biologists have said in a note, advising caution. Honnavalli M. Kumara, principal scientist at the Salim Ali Center for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), said it was well documented that viruses and endoparasites could transmit between humans and primates. "The worst-case scenario is that SARS-CoV-2 mutates and infects other primate species. This could lead to many scenarios, such as the virus affecting the health of the affected animal populations or the animals serving as reservoirs or hosts and spreading the disease to other species or human populations." another senior wildlife biologist from Tamil Nadu said. "It is a matter of common sense to limit interaction between humans and wildlife, especially primates," he added. Feeding primates should be discouraged regardless of the pandemic, in order to prevent not just the spread of diseases but also to minimise problematic human-primate interaction. Ashni Dhawale, a researcher at the National Institute of Advanced Studies at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, who is studying ecology and behaviour of the endangered lion-tailed macaque, said primates and humans share a complex relationship.

### **A 'Provocation'**

Monkey troops accustomed to being fed by people could view denial of food as a "provocation," leading to hostile interactions. "Monkeys start associating humans with food, and when food is denied, can attack them." she said.

## Making Doctors Wash Hands (Anand Damani - Behavioural Scientist)

- ➔ Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, a Hungarian-born doctor came to Vienna in 1846 to work at the city's General Hospital. Semmelweis noticed that women delivered by doctors had three times higher mortality rate than women delivered by midwives. He spotted a link between the lack of hygiene of the doctors and the mortality rate of the mothers. After he initiated a mandatory hand-washing policy, the mortality rate for women delivered by doctors fell from 18% to about 1%. Despite such a brilliant outcome, the idea of hand washing was rejected by the medical community. Doctors were offended by the suggestion that they could be causing infections. Semmelweis's practice earned widespread acceptance only two decades after his death, when Louis Pasteur, of pasteurisation fame, raised awareness of pathogens. From the 1850s to 2020, hand washing has



been advocated as a simple way of reducing the risk of infection. But studies find that doctors still do not wash their hands often. A systematic review of studies on compliance with hand hygiene in hospitals, done by researchers Vicki Erasmus et al, found that only 32% of doctors and 48% of nurses wash their hands between seeing patients. Another study by researcher Didier Pittet, an infection control expert with the University of Geneva Hospitals, Switzerland found that compliance rates for hand washing amongst doctors and nurses was only 57%, and years of awareness programmes had little effect. A study amongst Indian doctors by researchers S. K. Ansari et al found that only 49% of doctors and 56% of nurses washed their hands with soap between patients.

### Modifying Behaviour

If India needs to contain the spread of COVID-19, everybody ought to be washing our hands, especially doctors and nurses. But how can we change their hand-washing behaviour? The traditional approach of changing behaviour is to educate doctors and nurses on the importance of hand washing. It seems like the rational and logical thing to do, but even though doctors and nurses know that they should be washing their hands, they forget to do so. That's why we need to apply behavioural design. Behavioural design is about creating subconscious nudges right at the moment where the desired action is to be performed.

### A Simple Intervention

Behavioural scientists piloted a low-cost experiment in rural schools in Bangladesh where nudges were used to guide hand washing with soap after toilet use. Hand-washing stations were built in visible and easy to reach locations, brightly coloured paths were painted from toilets to the hand-washing station, and footprints and handprints were painted on the path and at the hand-washing station. Hand washing with soap after using the toilet went up from 4% before these behavioural design nudges were created, to 74% six weeks after they were introduced. No other hygiene education was communicated. Similarly, in hospitals where wash basins and hand sanitisers are placed, stickers of brightly coloured footsteps should be placed so that doctors and nurses get attracted by them, which subconsciously directs them to the wash basin or the hand sanitiser. Such behavioural design nudges influence doctors and nurses to wash their hands with soap or sanitiser without making a conscious decision to do so. Hand washing is often done as a relatively subconscious habitual action, and can be easily triggered by contextual cues, so hand washing lends itself well to such behavioural design nudging. An experiment done at the Gentofte Hospital in Denmark has found that sanitiser usage increased from 3% to 67% when the hand sanitiser was placed at a prominent location with bright signage that caught people's attention. Not bad for such a simple and low-cost intervention.

### Collateral Gains from A Catastrophe

- Every catastrophe leaves behind something to cheer, they say. Can the novel coronavirus be an exception? The virus is changing the way we live in many respects, even refining some of our inappropriate habits. For instance, while counting currency notes or turning the pages of a book, many have the instinct to lick a finger and flick – an unhealthy habit that many of us had developed. It took the virus to put a full stop to the habit. The virus has also added some civic sense inside public washrooms. Loud retching and open spitting and blowing of the nose have been the norm at washroom sinks. Little do we bother about the discomfort caused to others. Thanks to the corona scare, sensible actions are now in place. It could be also due to the fall in footfall, but one only hopes that the good sense sustains. The Railways has removed the curtains from upper class coaches following the virus scare. The curtains were being used as towels to wipe hands, polish shoes and other unintended purposes, contaminating them. Then, Namaste has regained respect with world leaders endorsing it. A Namaste is characterised by humility and honour. To look modern, we dumped it and embraced the hand shake, fist bump and high five. When touch points are looked at askance, the "no-contact" Namaste caught on. U.S. President Donald Trump has rightly said that India is ahead of the curve in combating the novel coronavirus as they greet with



Namaste. Washing hands and feet before entering home is another healthy habit that is making a comeback. Again, it took an evil's knock for it to get back into our lives. Across cities, parties are being rescheduled. Unavoidable ones, such as weddings, happen with restricted audience – say, 50 in some cities. Grand weddings have become a norm with parents putting all their life savings into the ceremonies and even taking loans. The virus scare has set an example for how parties can be conducted in a reasonable and responsible manner. The virus is an enemy of humanity, but if we can learn good things during the pandemic, it will be all to the good.

## A Time for Planetary Solidarity (Sujatha Byravan - Scientist Based in Chennai.

### Sudhir Chella Rajan - Professor, Indian Institute of Technology-Madras)

- Self-help gurus say it takes 21 days to develop a new habit. However, in a crisis, we may learn quite a few overnight. The microscopic SARS-CoV-2, by causing a global pandemic, has forced much of humanity to cease everyday practices and jump-start new ones. It has also reminded us of certain tenets that we have always known. For instance, it is possible for individuals, communities, and nations to respond to a planetary crisis within days. The nature of the response in different settings, however, depends on leadership, the quality and strength of local institutions, resources deployed and the ability to deliver straightforward and meaningful messages regarding behavioural change. More reassuringly, empathy for fellow travellers around the world turns out to be at least as widespread as avarice and insularity. Compassion and structured forms of support by different kinds of non-state actors have been amply demonstrated across the world, with people enduring personal threats to life to assist the most vulnerable. As in any crisis, the poorest – daily-wage workers, the homeless, migrants and operators of micro-enterprises – are the worst affected. Even so, in the present instance, their fate is especially dire. Any person whose livelihood is directly connected with their physical labour has been left with zero options unless they are somehow connected with health care, food or sanitation. It is the old privileging of mental over manual labour, but the inequities and disparities are starker now in and in more brutal circumstances than ever before.

### **Learning Lessons**

For knowledge workers, one of the new social norms being created is extensive Internet use for learning and work. While some of this was happening earlier, the scale of international video meetings and virtual classes taking place now is unprecedented. In certain sectors such as accounting, desk-based research and software development, working remotely turns out to be profitable to companies. There are some guidelines to infer from this. The drastic reduction in flights, for instance, has affected the airline industry adversely but also highlighted the fact that many flight trips during 'normal' times are in fact unnecessary. Before the pandemic, business meetings, including international conferences and climate change meetings, were responsible for a bulk of flight travel. For example, a return flight, economy class, from Delhi to New York releases about 0.9 tonnes of carbon dioxide (it is twice as much in premium economy). This is half of India's per capita annual emissions. The same can be said of many vehicle trips. The lockdown has shown that up to half of these trips are dispensable, especially if commuting and education trips can be cut down severely. For a sizeable fraction of the workforce, conducting tasks from home ought to be encouraged, better organised and provide more freedom for people, not less. It should be the norm in many sectors and people could work from home at least half the time, thus reducing travel needs, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and simplifying child care and other domestic services. An even more revolutionary approach to education and learning is conceivable. Online schooling and college education without paywalls are already available, but if it were expanded to develop open access schools and universities, the scam of high admissions fees can be altogether eliminated. Industrial production and electricity generation also do not have to go back to pre-COVID-19 levels. Life under lockdown has already demonstrated that there are essentials, superfluous items and luxuries. Responsible consumer action and new social norms to limit the



last two can make a dent on greenhouse gas emissions while promoting simpler and potentially happier ways of life.

### Fundamental Change

There are many encouraging signs of truly 'green' alternatives to the current economic system and the beliefs that govern it. Becoming sustainable is vital for ensuring that the worst effects of climate change – another planetary crisis lurking just over the horizon of the present one – also do not fall on the already underprivileged. Unfortunately, the popular version of 'green growth' is flawed because it assumes that normal business activity can be made more sustainable merely by adding renewable technology and trees to it, for instance. But such spiritless measures often harm economic or social welfare even if they improve environmental outcomes. Sustainability will need not just decoupling economic growth from pollution but ultimately decoupling planetary welfare from economic growth while fostering social progress. U.S. President Donald Trump's \$2-trillion stimulus plan turns out to be mostly another corporate bailout. India cannot afford to do the same. The true losers are low wage and daily wage earners, who need assistance along with the farming community. Vehicle manufacturers, fossil-fuel companies, airlines and large businesses and even banks should not even be on the bailout queue. For the vast majority of the working class, the provision of universal basic income would be the first step towards reducing their precarity. Such change requires bold measures to reduce financial speculation and the hoarding of wealth by the rentier class by reintroducing the estate tax and putting brakes on high-speed trading, for instance. A transformation of work is also needed for the entrepreneurial class, where greater flexibility, coordination and access to markets are made easier. In addition, social measures must be strengthened to protect the health and safety of the poorest. Public hospitals need to be improved and have the capacity to respond to pandemics and related crises. Access to care in the emergency and beyond should be equally available to all. By focussing on the delivery of basic services, we will discover new opportunities for equitable action. What is also quite clear, and shared with the climate change crisis, is that if you ignore science, it will come back to bite you. Mixed and confusing messages from the government add fuel to a flaming pandemic. Ignoring or denying the science of climate change does the same. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said: "This is, above all, a crisis that calls for solidarity." That implies building shared programmes of knowledge and action for collective welfare, not fortress worlds.

### Science Shines Through the Pandemic

- The world has been brought to a standstill by a pandemic, and the future appears unclear. Naturally, humans have interpreted the infection in a wide variety of ways. The **animist** believes it is the wrath of the flora and fauna which have been subdued by technological and industrial advances. Their habitat has been infiltrated by the avarice of humans. The **nature lover** feels that non-human creatures have had the last laugh and are sneering at the now "caged" people forced into isolation. Despite the troubled times that we are in, the **vegans** seem to be on cloud nine, as they believe that the rest of the world may at last heed their cries. They have placed their two cents on the origin of COVID-19 to eating meat. They reason that the continued onslaught on animals to satisfy gluttony has resulted in the spread of the novel coronavirus. Unfortunately, this theory has garnered some support from the xenophobes who blame the Chinese for the pandemic.

### Divine Intervention

Many **god-fearing individuals** believe that the epidemic is a divine curse, giving several reasons. First, the disease has affected only the human race, leaving others safe. Second, it is global and not restricted to any particular geographic zone. Third, there is no cure at sight and the only way to protect yourself is to go into isolation and learn the importance of family and prayers without entertainment or luxury. **Astrologers** endorse the belief that awkward planetary positions have spread the bug. They say the epidemic will continue till the planets reach a favourable alignment.



Sections of [philosophers](#) are confident that the pandemic is holding a mirror at us to introspect on the consumeristic and materialistic ways of our life, the luxury and pleasure-seeking mindsets and the increasing reliance on electronic gadgets and rapid industrialisation. They believe that the virus has made us more empathetic and minimalistic and return to our roots. Such wide-ranging thought processes that attempt to colour a disease from various viewpoints are not new.

### Simple Triad

While [science](#) follows the simple triad of [pathogen, host and disease](#) at the three corners of a triangle, humans continue to promulgate alternative theories. In the olden days, those with psychiatric illnesses were shackled on the days of the full moon since it was believed that the patients' mental state changed with the phases of the moon. This gave birth to the term [lunatic](#). Plague is caused by a bacillus, but medieval Europeans believed that the [Black Death was a divine punishment](#). The dead were cursed to have incurred retribution for sins such as rapacity, blasphemy, sacrilege, promiscuity and worldliness. Despite the improved comprehension of diseases, humankind postulates different reasons for unexpected outbreaks. HIV infection and AIDS were believed by many as god's punishment for [adultery](#) and [homosexuality](#). Though multiple modes of HIV transmission are well elucidated by science, the affected are still stigmatised. Despite varying perspectives about COVID-19, it is heart-warming to notice the [improved scientific temper across all social and geopolitical strata](#). Many people follow scientific ways to curb the spread of infection by using masks and hand sanitisers and physical distancing. [Society's increasing reliance on medical science, epidemiological research and health care data is an encouraging sign that this pandemic can be fought off](#).

## The Invisible Face of The Fallout (Bindu Sivasankaran Nair - Diversity and Inclusion

### Expert. She Is the Founder of BEYOND Pink App)

- The world has suddenly woken up to the reality of a virus ravaging it. While catastrophes affect people at large, the economical, sociological and psychological impact that each catastrophe has on women is profound. Data indicate the need to address this during and after these catastrophic episodes.

### Crises and Gender

In the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the coastlines of countries in the region, including India, were affected and more than 2,00,000 people were killed or listed missing; a fourth of them were women. The traditional 'care giver' role that women play has much to do in explaining this. Women stay around looking for their loved ones in order to see them safe. Besides this, women lack many life skills such as swimming and climbing. During tsunami recovery phases, aid organisations and governments house the homeless in camps where women face many difficulties including abuse by men. Gender-skewed tsunami deaths resulted in a disproportionate gender ratio where men largely outnumbered women. Women also faced hygiene challenges in these camps due to inadequate sanitation facilities. In the United States, which has a high incidence of tornadoes, families headed by women are affected the most. Women often are engaged in sector-specific employment which when impacted result in unemployment. Women are also engaged in post-calamity care, missing job opportunities. An economic slowdown also leaves women with additional wage cuts, on a paradigm where pay disparity between genders is a norm. In Kerala, after the floods in 2018-19, thousands were housed in relief camps. Experts observe that relief measures focus on livelihood and assets, compelling aid agencies to focus on restoring livelihoods. Flood-destroyed kitchens forced women to cook in the open air with whatever they were left with. There was considerable added domestic work by women, which went unnoticed.



## Issues Faced in The Pandemic

Coming to the current COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on both genders is beyond the mere death statistics. According to World Health Organization data, around 70% of the world's health workers are women. 79% of nurses are women. Health workers in general are highly vulnerable and not ensuring their safety is a high risk that can severely impact the health system. India has a million-plus accredited social health activist (ASHA) workers who are an integral part of its health system. ASHAs, who work at the ground level, are reporting incidents of attacks while on COVID-19 duty. Stringent action against their tormentors is needed to ensure their professional safety. In many households where both partners work, the work from home (WFH) concept is now common. The entire family is now together within the limited space of their dwellings. As traditional roleplay is still prevalent in most sections of Indian society, the equal division of household responsibilities among couples is still distant. Women from all strata face substantial additional household work. Alongside this is the fear of job loss and reduced income which can create mental pressure on women, in turn affecting their physical well-being. The lower income groups are already facing job losses and anxiety is leading to domestic tensions and violence against women. A large number of daily wagers resort to alcohol consumption. The ban on alcohol sales, as a part of the national lockdown, is contributing to domestic tensions, leading to women abuse. Hormone-induced depression among women is another key point that needs to be understood and acknowledged. Women are twice as likely to face depression when compared to men. Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) among re-productive age groups, pregnancy-related depressive conditions, postpartum depression (PPDs) among new mothers as well as premenopausal and menopausal symptoms are common, interfering in everyday life and relationships. The lockdown is adding more intensity to these conditions. These are not discussed as women are trained to follow the 'culture of silence'. Awareness among men about these conditions' women experience is low. Even in these disruptive times, women's safety should become a priority. Be it domestic violence, women's depression and anxiety-related matters, or their safety while at work, all these issues need to be addressed and responded to. According to 2015-16 National Family Health Survey, around 30% of women in the age group 15 to 49 years face domestic violence. A recent report highlighted how the National Commission for Women has received 587 complaints relating to crimes against women from March 23 to April 16, out of which 239 were related to domestic violence. Assigning ASHA workers to specifically address women's welfare during this pandemic, setting up exclusive cells to quickly address domestic violence and women's health-related issues, including men in conversations, and even online counselling for alcoholism in men are not difficult to implement. Steps such as roping in non-governmental organisations, psychology students, teachers and volunteers and also using technology platforms would help speed action. What is important is to develop a culture of including women's safety in the planning phase itself irrespective of whatever the nature of the crisis is.

## On Helplines

Gender parity needs to be a conscious act and this observation is related to those who answer helplines. When only women attend these calls, we are reinforcing the stereotypical 'care-giver' role of women. Instead, we need to have a well-trained and gender-inclusive team which can handle such calls well.

## Singing the Corona Tune (Kunal Ray Teaches Literary and Cultural Studies at FLAME University, Pune)

- The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us into necessary isolation. Many of us are spending anxious hours sitting inside our homes and surfing social media for further updates. We are surrounded by a mountain of anxiety. Amidst all-pervasive gloom, I couldn't help notice the steadfast outpouring of music on social media platforms. Many of the songs posted are new compositions specific to the situation. While most of these are indeed rib-tickling and perhaps merit no serious artistic





attention, we ought not to dismiss this phenomenon. It perhaps reinforces the idea that tragedy invariably leads to comedy. Republican Party of India supremo Ramdas Athawale's video, where he is seen chanting "Go Corona, Corona Go" along with the Chinese Consul General in Mumbai, Tang Guocai, went viral and the novel coronavirus crisis found an unintended anthem in his utterance. "Go Corona, Corona Go" has been widely remixed and parodied. If it were a Hindi film song, it would have been a blockbuster. I say this while being fully aware of the abysmal standards of contemporary Hindi film music. This can surely be called COVID-19's 'Kajrare moment'. Amongst other things, I also saw an edited clip from a Jim Carrey film where the famous actor is dancing hysterically to the aforementioned 'corona anthem'. Far from true, this video regardless brought some cheer during a stressful time.

### The Pursuit of A 'Raag Corona'

Another video of a group of women singing "Corona Bhaag Jao" ("Run-away corona") received much attention. It was sung akin to a religious offering or prayer for benediction purposes. The Internet is also abuzz with some Bhojpuri singers using the COVID-19 outbreak to peddle several songs indicating what mayhem the virus might cause to the womenfolk. For anyone familiar with the raunchy lyrics of such Bhojpuri songs, the indications are obscene. Someone also shared a video of well-known devotional singer, Narendra Chanchal, singing "Kitthe Aaya Corona Maiyyaji" ("Where Did Corona Come From, Oh Goddess?") at a religious gathering and the audience looked deeply absorbed. There are numerous others using film songs to spread safety messages. Some are using familiar tunes while writing new lyrics pertinent to the situation. Many classical musicians are playing Facebook live recitals to stay in touch with their fans. On a lighter note, should we be surprised lest someone came up with a 'Raag Corona'? Numerous rappers have also risen to the occasion. We had our Italy moment too when some residents of a housing society in Gurugram came out on their balconies to recite the Gayatri Mantra and "Hum Honge Kamyab" ("We Shall Overcome"). Music seems to have captured everyone's fancy in distress.

### Immediate Connect

But why music? After all, singing will not destroy the virus and restore better times. Easy ways to resolve this could be that a catchy tune will spread faster because it has an immediate mass connect. This music might also offer momentary relief or escape from our grim on goings by eliciting some much-needed humour. It is an easy communication tool and thus an effective message dissemination service if properly used at a time when most of us are spending inordinate amounts of time online. Or is it that we are so vulnerable in the face of distress that we cling to anything that generates promise or serves as a distraction? The caveat, however, remains that none of these songs will be remembered after the pandemic. Is this only for temporary fame then? A poet colleague recently told me that this is also resistance. A catastrophe has been unleashed and there is very little that we can do other than trying to stay safe. Isolation isn't easy and may be music will keep us company through the trying times.

## Once in A Century Pathogens and A Coronavirus

- The modern history of viral contagions shows that pandemics are those catastrophes when health care professionals are overwhelmed while doing their job. As they also try to save themselves, they become unwitting amplifiers of disease and turn into objects of fear – as numerous videos of doctors and healthcare workers being harassed attest to. This, however, is precisely the time when one must trust medicine, the best system we have so far in tackling disease. While there appears to be no respite from COVID-19, two doctors and a clinical psychologist have come together to provide a lucid and exhaustive account of the virus, SARS-COV-2, which causes COVID-19, responsible for the global blight.



### Mode of Action

For non-specialists looking to understand how the world travelled from the 'Spanish Flu' of 1918 to COVID-19, The Coronavirus by Dr. Swapneil Parikh, Maherra Desai and Dr. Rajesh Parikh is a racy account of the rise and fall of the Asian Flu of 1957, The Hongkong Flu Pandemic of 1968, a segue into the early origins of HIV and of course, the SARS outbreak of 2002-03 among others. There's an excellent explanation of the virus's mechanism of action, and how it manages to dive deep into the lower respiratory tract, multiplies silently until its 'discovery' by the immune system. It's in the degree of the response, when the immune system itself hits panic mode that it launches a frenzied attack which, in more ways than one, can result in overkill. This severe respiratory disease can end up being detrimental to the aged, those with diabetes or cardiovascular disease, or have a history of smoking.

### What's in A Name?

There's illuminating background on David Tyrrell, an English virologist who investigated the common cold. Between 1964-66 Tyrrell and his colleagues discovered – and led others – to discover a slew of viruses that appeared to be responsible for the cold and, intriguingly, he did this by culturing viruses and infecting – under controlled conditions – healthy volunteers. The viruses so found appeared to have a 'crown' and so they were christened 'coronaviruses.' Tyrrell laid the ground for work on coronaviruses that specifically infected other mammals and those specific to birds and bats. He also found, early on, a virus that infected humans and was made of a combination of a bird bronchitis virus and a mouse hepatitis virus. The most evocative parts of the book are anecdotes on doctors, who then as now, sometimes battle ridicule and oppression when they unravel an aspect of disease.

### Anecdotes on Doctors

There's Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian obstetrician, who found a measurable dip in two clinics, where women were delivering their babies, by the simple act of doctors washing their hands. In spite of demonstrating this at multiple hospitals he was ridiculed – colleagues couldn't bring themselves to believe that they may be harbouring and transferring germs from other operations because they didn't believe in handwashing. This was before the discovery of germs and that they purveyed disease. Semmelweis died in a lunatic asylum, of a bacterial infection. Cut to 2020 and there's a chapter on Dr. Li Wenliang, who had first told the world via WeChat of the discovery of possibly a new kind of coronavirus. Li faced public humiliation for this and was made to apologise for leaking this information. While treating a patient who had caught the infection from a Hunan wet market, Li himself fell sick and died. He was only 34 years old.