

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2020

EXPLAINED

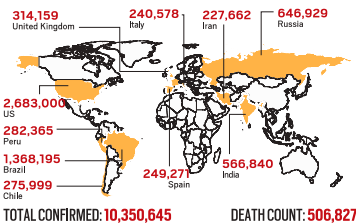


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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

CORONAVIRUS DASHBOARD

THE WORLD



Source: Johns Hopkins University, updated at 11 pm on June 30. JHU's India tally and Health Ministry's tally (below) may not match as these are accounted at different times.

Covid testing of entire town finds 40% cases asymptomatic

A LARGE number of Covid-19 cases are asymptomatic, but researchers have differed on what percentage these constitute of all cases. Now, a team has studied almost the entire population of a small, quarantined town — V0 in Italy, population 3,200 — and found that 40% of its cases were asymptomatic. The study was published in Nature on Tuesday.



NEW RESEARCH

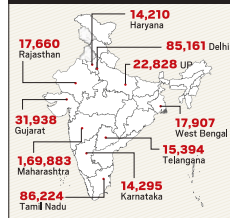
The town of V0 experienced Italy's first Covid-19 death on February 21. It was put into immediate quarantine for 14 days. During this time, researchers tested most

the population for Covid-19, both at the start of the lockdown (86% tested) and after two weeks (72% tested). The testing revealed that at the start of the lockdown, 2.6% of the population (73 people) were positive for Covid-19. After a couple of weeks, only 1.2% (29 people) were positive. At both times, around 40% of the positive cases showed no symptoms (asymptomatic). The results also show it took on average 9.3 days (range of 8-14 days) for the virus to be cleared from someone's body.

Source: Imperial College London

INDIA COUNT: 5,66,840 (16,893 DEATHS)

TOP 10 STATES



REST OF INDIA	Cases
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	90
Andhra Pradesh	13,891
Assam	187
Bihar	7,752
Chhattisgarh	6,640
Goa	435
Haryana	2,761
Himachal Pradesh	203
Jammu and Kashmir	1,198
Kerala	7,237
Madhya Pradesh	24,296
Mizoram	4189
Nagaland	13,370
Narayani	964
Northeast	1,227
Odisha	47
Punjab	148
Rajasthan	17,660
Tamil Nadu	86,224
Telangana	6,559
Uttar Pradesh	16,893
Uttarakhand	619
West Bengal	17,907
Yarlung	88
Zaskar	13,890
Uttarakhand	2,831

Union Health Ministry update as of 11 pm, June 30. Some states may have reported higher numbers. Only states/UTs with at least one case listed above. 3,34,822 PATIENTS DISCHARGED IN 35 STATES AND UNION TERRITORIES

Have a question on the COVID-19 outbreak and what you should/should not do? Write to explained@indianexpress.com

VAJIRAM & RAVI
INSTITUTE FOR IAS EXAM

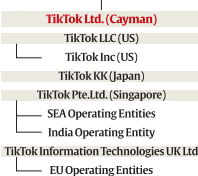
ONLINE MODULE 20-21

- G.S Prelims Test Series
- G.S Mains Test Series
- Optional Subject Test series
- Current Affairs Online Classes

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The business of Chinese apps

Corporate structure: TIKTOK (ByteDance Ltd [Cayman])



Note: As of December 31, 2019; shows only the main operating entities of ByteDance Group

Several of the 59 Chinese apps banned by the government have a wide reach in India. Who owns the most popular ones, who runs their India operations, and what is their reach in the country?

PRANAV MUKUL & AASHISH HARYAN

NEW DELHI, JUNE 30

ON MONDAY, the Centre announced an interim ban on 59 apps with Chinese links, citing "emergent threats" to the country's sovereignty and national security. These included popular mobile apps such as TikTok, CamScanner and UC Browser, which together command several hundred million users in the country. Some of the largest ones like TikTok, UC Browser and ShareIt also have a significant presence in the country in terms of revenue and number of employees on their payrolls.

A look at some of the more widely used apps among the 59 banned:

TikTok & Helo
The two social media apps, which are operated by an entity called ByteDance (India) Technology Pvt Ltd, together command more than 170 million active users across the country. Notably, India is the largest market for TikTok with more than 611 million downloads, representing nearly a third of the video-platform's base, followed by China (where it operates under a different brand) and the US.

However, India is not among the top revenue-generating geographies for the app. In 2018-19, the first full year of the company's operations in the country, ByteDance India posted revenues of Rs 43.6 crore, and the company targeted revenues of Rs 100 crore for the following year. In the US, the app has been downloaded 165 million times, with revenues

of \$86.5 million (over Rs 650 crore) in 2019. China, with nearly 197 million users, contributed \$331 million (around Rs 2,500 crore) during the year, according to Sensor Tower.

The company also has administrative presence across eight cities in the country and employs over 1,000 people. ByteDance India, however, is not owned by a Chinese entity. According to corporate structure available on ByteDance's website, the parent entity — ByteDance Ltd — is registered in the Cayman Islands. This parent company has five subsidiaries, one of which is TikTok Ltd — also registered in Cayman Islands. Under TikTok Ltd, a Singapore-based entity TikTok Pte Ltd is registered, under which entities operating from India and Southeast Asia are registered.

The IT Ministry is specifically expected to seek details from the companies running these apps on data sharing by these companies under a Chinese law, which requires companies of Chinese origin to share data with that country's intelligence agencies, irrespective of wherever in the world they are operating. Last year, ByteDance had announced an investment of \$1 billion in the Indian market over a period of three years.

UC Browser and UCNews
The Alibaba Group platforms are run by an entity called UCWeb Mobile Pvt Ltd, which has more than 130 million active users. UC Browser, in fact, is the second most used mobile internet browser in the country only behind Google Chrome, with a market share of around 22%, compared with Chrome's 70%. UCWeb Mobile,

which has less than 100 employees in the country, recorded revenues of Rs 226.68 crore from the country in 2018-19, primarily from advertising income, according to filings with the Registrar of Companies (RoC). This is part of Alibaba Group's digital media and entertainment segment, which clocked consolidated revenues of \$3.59 billion for the year ended March 31, 2019.

According to filings with the Registrar of Companies, the India entity UCWeb Mobile Pvt Ltd is held 99% by UC Mobile New World, based in British Virgin Islands. However, government data has recorded investment by this entity under FDI inflow from China. The remaining 1% stake in UCWeb Mobile Pvt Ltd is held by an entity UC Mobile International Ltd, registered in the Cayman Islands.

ShareIt
ShareIt is one of the most popular file-sharing tools, with more than 400 million active users in India. The app, which was almost entirely marketed on the basis of word of mouth, has more than 18 billion users worldwide. However, the company has not been able to monetise its platform beyond a point, making only Rs 14.73 crore during 2018-19 from its India entity ShareIt Technology India Pvt Ltd. In terms of revenue, the Indian segment contributes 15-20% to the company's global revenues. The company acquired entertainment platform Fastfilmz in 2018, and appointed its CEO Karam Malhotra as the CEO of ShareIt India.

The Indian entity ShareIt Technology India Pvt Ltd is held 99.99% by Hong Kong-based ShareIt HK Technology Ltd.

Club Factory

The online marketplace, which claims to be India's third-largest e-commerce company, has managed to onboard 30,000 sellers on its platform. The company's Indian entity GlobeMax Commerce India Pvt Ltd, is 99.99% owned by a Hong Kong-based company Unbeaten Price Ltd. During 2018-19, the GlobeMax Commerce clocked revenues of Rs 172.14 crore. Club Factory has around 90 employees on its rolls.

Shein

Shein is another e-commerce platform focused on fashion and lifestyle products. In India, its operations were being run by XYIN India Pvt Ltd, based in Gurgaon. The company, which targeted smaller tier-II and tier-III towns in India, has around 50 employees in the country. The company had crossed more than 1 million active users in India but last year partially shut down its operations after the Customs department cracked down on the company over alleged import duty evasion.

CamScanner

CamScanner, which is the most widely used mobile scanning app in the world, has more than 100 million users in India. The app, which is run by INTSIG Information Co Ltd registered in Shanghai, China, does not have an entity registered in India.

Covaxin, India's Covid-19 vaccine candidate

PRABHA RAGHAVAN

NEW DELHI, JUNE 30

THE CENTRAL Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) has allowed Bharat Biotech India (BBI) to conduct human clinical trials for Covaxin, an indigenously developed Covid-19 vaccine candidate. Trials are scheduled to start across India in July.

How was Covaxin developed?

The vaccine candidate was developed by BBI in collaboration with the National Institute of Virology (NIV), New Delhi, isolated a strain of the novel coronavirus from an asymptomatic Covid-19 patient and transferred it to BBI in early May. The firm then used it to work on developing an "inactivated" vaccine — a vaccine that uses an inactive virus — at its high-containment facility in Hyderabad.

"Once the vaccine is injected into a human, it has no potential to infect or replicate, since it is a killed virus. It just serves to the immune system a dead virus and triggers an antibody response towards it," a company

representative said, adding that inactivated vaccines usually have a proven safety record. Covaxin then underwent pre-clinical testing Phase III studies conducted on thousands of patients. After approval from the regulator, the firm has to continue monitoring the use of its vaccine on patients and submit post-marketing surveillance details, which checks for any long-term unintended adverse effects.

What does the approval mean for India?

The Drug Controller General of India, who heads CDSCO, has given BBI approvals for Phase I and Phase II clinical trials. This brings India a step closer to finalising a domestically developed Covid-19 vaccine at a time when the country's cases continue to surge.

The first phase, usually conducted on a small group, tries to find what dosage of the vaccine is safe for use, whether it is effective in building immunity to the virus, and whether there are side effects. The second phase is conducted on a group of hundreds of persons who fit the description of those for whom the vaccine is intended, using characteristics like age and sex. This phase tests how effective the vaccine is on the population group being studied.

How many stages of testing will follow?

After the Phase II trials, the vaccine will move to Phase III, which is the largest and most rigorous. It involves testing the vaccine on a large group of people, usually over a period of several months. If the vaccine is found to be safe and effective, it will be approved for use.



Oli (left) & Prachanda: rift wide open

and chose Bidhya Devi Bhandari, his long-time ally in NCP's factional feud. Prachanda, for his part, named a Speaker who could protect his group from disqualification as House members if the unity broke, and got Agni Sapkota elected as the new Speaker after KB Mahara quit following a sex scandal.

Last month, Oli brought an ordinance that said 40% support in the party working committee or in the parliamentary party would qualify as a split (rather than both) and not attract disqualification of House membership. "Many in the party misunderstood it, but it was actually to give an easy exit to the

Which other Indian companies are working on Covid vaccines?

These include Zyda Cadila, Serum Institute of India and, since earlier this month, Panacea Biotech. While Panacea is still in the pre-clinical stage, it is not clear whether Zyda and Serum have completed their pre-clinical studies or have applied to CDSCO for approval to conduct human trials yet.

How does Covaxin compare with other

Well there are these issues, ultimately what both sides are demanding today is a consolidated party, and dignified power-sharing and that will be achieved," said Manoj Jung Thapa, a member of the party central committee.

But with daggers drawn, Prachanda's camp expects that Oli ultimately has to go. It is not clear if it Prachanda who will succeed him, though.

According to Prachanda, Oli has hinted at times that "we should part ways if working together is not possible." At the inaugural session of the standing committee, he said he had been hearing about fashions and hood of coups of the "Afghanistan, Pakistan or Bangladesh models" — which is being widely interpreted as implying that Oli may use the Nepal Army to take total control.

Oli's camp, former Communication Minister Gokul Baskota has said — many felt it was at Oli's behest — that Prachanda may be investigated for a corruption case as he is accused of appropriating money meant for Maoist members during the peace process of 2008-2013. Besides, many in Oli's camp have demanded that Prachanda and his followers be tried for human rights violation during the conflict.

Prachanda group," an adviser to Oli said. The ordinance was however, withdrawn following allegations that Oli was out to split opposition parties to secure a two-thirds majority, which would allow him to amend the constitution.

Factionalism within the party has not been based entirely on previous associations. The nine-member central secretariat, which has the senior-most party leaders, is seen as heavily weighted against Oli. Besides, former PMs — Madhav Nepal, Jhalnath Khanal and Prachanda — three more leaders have opposed parliamentary endorsement of a \$500-million grant from Millennium Challenge Corporation, which they say is a loan, not a grant.

Why Nepal PM Oli blames India in tussle with old rival Prachanda

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE

KATHMANDU, JUNE 30

TWO YEARS after Nepal's two major left parties joined hands to form the Nepal Communist Party, laying a basis for power-sharing, a rift between Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and former PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, has raised questions about the future of the unity.

Oli, who steered a recently passed Constitution Amendment Bill endorsing the country's new map that includes territories with India, has been projecting Prachanda as conspiring to dislodge him. When New Delhi mediated a peace process in 2006 bringing insurgency to an end, Prachanda was the key figure. Now, Oli accuses India of instigating the effort to topple him.

"The activity in Delhi, a certain section of politics in Nepal and their collaboration is meant to dislodge me for my stance on the border dispute. Nobody should think they will succeed in dislodging me," Oli said at a programme on Sunday.

And Prachanda said at a meeting of the party's standing committee last week: "It was a mistake on my part to have given up on the

turn-by-turn Prime Minister agreement."

Six months ago, Prachanda made a statement that he has agreed to let Oli continue for the five-year term, apparently after Oli assured him that he would function as party chief with all executive authority. However, Oli takes all major decisions and exercises the party chief's duties, reportedly without informing Prachanda at times.

Until a general convention takes place, both are chairpersons of the NCP. At the time of unification, Oli headed the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (UML) and Prachanda the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists.

Rivals-turned-allies

Oli, at 69, is three years older than Prachanda. A school dropout, Oli was imprisoned at age 22 for the murder of Dharm Prasad Dhakal, a farmer in eastern Nepal, during the Naxalite movement. He spent 14 years in prison from the early 1970s before getting a royal pardon in the mid-1980s. His election to Parliament in 1991 launched his rise in politics.

Prachanda, like Oli, entered underground politics during his student days in the mid-1970s. When a multi-party democratic sys-

tem began in 1990, Prachanda chose not to join and instead launched armed insurgency, adopting Maoism in 1996 with an avowed objective to finish the monarchy and multi-party democracy and to establish a "people's republic". Oli was among the strongest critics of Maoists all through the insurgency, which left 17,000 people dead.

When the conflict ended in a peace process in 2006 — with New Delhi's mediation — Prachanda emerged as the hero. Oli was sceptical about the transition from a Hindu kingdom to a secular, federal republic, and famously said: "You will not get to the US riding on a bull's back cart."

But the transition to coalition rule also brought the two leaders together. They decided to contest the 2017 elections together and merge after the results, with Oli projected as PM. They won 174 seats in a house of 275. Since then, Oli who has emerged a hero, especially after he stood up to India against the blockade, and signed a trade understanding with China.

Why they fell out

Differences between the two leaders were visible right from the beginning. Oli needed a President who could protect him in a crisis,

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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NEW RED LINE

India's decision to ban Chinese apps sends a clear message on the road ahead. There is need to tread firmly and carefully

ON MONDAY, the government banned 59 mobile applications with Chinese links such as TikTok, UC Browser, Shareit, and Cam Scanner. The decision, which comes amid continuing tensions between India and China, after the killing of 20 Indian soldiers on the Line of Actual Control, is the first clear message from New Delhi that it will now view the rules of engagement. It is a stern order and firms have been given 48 hours to respond to questions on their compliance with data security and privacy but this marks a decisive break from the past. It serves as a statement of intent while sending a clear signal to China that there will be costs for acts of aggression.

How to manage and respond to China's growing assertiveness in the face of a growing power imbalance is a challenge for India. There is an asymmetry in power, a visible economic disparity. The Chinese economy is roughly five times larger than India's. While India accounts for only 3 per cent of China's exports, China (excluding Hong Kong) accounts for 14 per cent of India's imports, and 5 per cent of exports. But the situation at the LAC demands a response. In this context, the ban on Chinese mobile apps may be construed as long hanging fruit and a relatively soft target, but it is, at the same time, a decision that makes the point without leading to a revenue loss for India or hurting it economically — for that same reason, calls for boycotting all imports from China at this moment are ill-judged. These using these apps have been readily available alternatives but Chinese firms stand to lose a fast-growing market. Given that India's digital economy is tracked globally — it is one of the largest markets in the world for these apps — blocking access here does impact the valuations of the companies.

Other retaliatory steps are being considered. E-commerce firms have been asked to explore the idea of listing the product's country of origin amidst a growing clamour in some sections for boycott of Chinese products; there is talk of raising tariffs, curbs on contracts in some infrastructure projects. In fact, earlier, in a move that was apparently aimed at Chinese firms, the government had made it mandatory for foreign direct investment from neighbouring countries to take prior approval to curb opportunistic takeovers during this period. However, given how pervasive Made in China is, how sweeping its presence in the technology space in India — its investments in a long list of Indian unicorns — each step will come with its own set of consequences. New Delhi should prepare for these and calibrate its response, step by careful step.

AS GEELANI EXITS

It's a moment for moderate and mainstream parties and politics in the Valley that is waiting to be seized

THE DECISION BY Syed Ali Shah Geelani to step down from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference is an important milestone in Kashmir and in the separatist strain of its politics. It also marks a turning point for the Hurriyat, part of which is based in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The resignation of the 90-year-old Geelani, who was "chairman for life" of the APHC, appears to have been prompted by how matters have unfolded in the Valley after August 5, 2019, when the Centre stripped J&K of its special status and bifurcated the state into two union territories. His long illness also appears to have played a role. The resignation letter laments the failure of leaders of the APHC constituents to speak out against the changes made in Kashmir. He makes no mention of the moderate APHC faction led by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who, along with Yaseen Malik of the JUIF, had joined hands with Geelani in the protests that followed the 2016 killing of Burhan Wani.

Curiously, much of Geelani's ire is reserved for the Hurriyat based in PoK. He has spared only its leader, Abdullah Geelani, who he declared "would continue to perform the duties as my representative" on the other side of the LoC, while flaying others in the PoK-based Hurriyat for "connecting family members" with power structures in Pakistan, for inflighting, financial misappropriation and other misdeeds. From the letter, it seems as if Geelani wishes to leave this act of rebellion against his own party as the last memory of his politics in a fraught moment in Kashmir. Be that as it may, the Hurriyat leadership is now up for grabs, and the runnings in its corridors, which began to be heard since the National Investigation Agency began enquiring into the finances of several of its leaders and their associates two years ago, will grow louder. Separatism may still be alive in the Valley, but there is now a vacuum in the separatist leadership.

This should have been an opportune moment for moderate and mainstream parties and politics in the Valley. Unfortunately, Delhi has followed an older playbook in seeking to undermine and erode the legitimacy of parties and leaders that espouse moderate and mainstream views. While Farooq and Omar Abdullah of the National Conference have seemed tongue-tied after their release, Mehbooba Mufti of the People's Democratic Party continues to be detained under the stringent Public Safety Act. While elimination of militancy is an important element in the Centre's Kashmir policy, it also needs to think about its next political steps in Kashmir.

CALL OF THE ARTS

Lockdown has robbed artists of their canvas and stage, those in margins in small towns and villages need support

THE ARTIST COMMUNITY, too, has been hit by COVID-19, especially those in the margins in small towns and villages. The lockdown imposed by the government in late March has forced them to stay at home without any opportunity to earn. Since social distancing is central to the strategy to contain the pandemic, public performances and activities are unlikely to restart soon. This has left thousands of artists and artisans in limbo. Many of them, surviving precariously, could slip into poverty. They may even be forced to abandon art and craft and turn to unskilled work.

In the absence of a social security net for artists and artisans, in many places, individuals have come together to crowd-source funds and provide aid to needy artists. This is, however, insufficient. There is a compelling need to look beyond individual initiatives and work out institutional mechanisms to address this crisis. The production of art needs to be seen in the framework of the cultural economy and artists must be recognised as producers/workers in that economy. Art production — from temple artists, traditional folk performers to modern musicians and gallery-supported artists — is an essential part of human existence and necessary for a society that is happy and at ease.

In an interview to this newspaper, Carnatic musician TM Krishna suggested a welfare programme on the lines of the MGNREGA to provide a safety net for marginalised artists and artisans. The government could step up to create opportunities for performance and teaching in schools, colleges and other public spaces. Such assured support would ensure that the less "market-friendly" art forms too can flourish and practitioners can pursue their vocation with dignity and self-respect. The existing support, including from government-sponsored academies, is limited to a small number of established artists, those who are engaged in art forms patronised by the social elites. Those living in the margins depend on religious festivals, carnivals, local markets to make a living. It is important that these artists are not forgotten in this time when the pandemic casts a lengthening shadow on their canvas and stage.



ABHISHEK SINGHVI

IN THE CURRENT context of the reprehensible custodial deaths in Tamil Nadu, I am reminded of my own trust with this seminal issue, being the Supreme Court's Amicus on the subject, through the important *DK Basu* judgments, since 1987. Starting with a letter complaint of 1986, this converted PIL spawned four crucial and comprehensive judgments — in 1996, twice in 2001 and in 2015, laying down over 20 commandments.

Additionally, it led to at least five other procedural, monitoring and coordinating judicial orders, in the best traditions of continuing mandamus. These have created a valuable and seamless web of legal principles and techniques to reduce custodial death and torture. Little more by way of theoretical structure is required if *DK Basu*'s comprehensive coverage is genuinely implemented. But where we fail — as in many other things in this country — is in operationalising the spirit of *DK Basu* in punitive measures, in last mile implementation, in breaking intra-departmental solidarity with errant policemen and in ensuring swift, efficacious departmental coercive action plus criminal prosecution.

As Amicus, we started with the existential Roman dilemma: "Who will guard the guardians", the so-called "akshah bhakshah" syndrome. Justice AS Anand, who piloted it till the end, based his approach on my written submissions, generously adding praise, tracing how torture is anathema to democracy, tracing Royal Commissions in the UK, Law Commissions and Police Commissions in India, Supreme Court progressive case law, like *Joginder Kumar* (1994) and *Nilabati Behera* (1993), to grapple with the core issue, not really soluble even today. Relatively little high-handedness occurs after formal arrest, most torture is done before the arrest is recorded. Safeguards obviously kick in only after the arrest is shown. This is a perennial, insoluble dilemma and all devious police forces globally use it.

The first 11 commandments in 1996, therefore, focus on vital processual safeguards: All officials must carry name tags and full identification, arrest memo must be prepared, containing all details regarding time and place of arrest, attested by one family

Implementation of *DK Basu* judgments, monitoring by civil society, can protect against custodial torture, death

The first 11 commandments in 1996 focused on vital processual safeguards. All officials must carry name tags and full identification, arrest memo must be prepared, containing all details regarding time and place of arrest, attested by one family member or respectable member of the locality. The location of arrest must be intimated to one family or next friend, details notified to the nearest legal aid organisation and arrestee must be made known of each 'DK Basu' right, all such compliances must be recorded in the police register, he must get periodical medical examination, inspection memo must be signed by arrestee also and all such information must be centralised in a central police control room.

member or respectable member of the locality. The location of arrest must be intimated to one family or next friend, details notified to the nearest legal aid organisation and arrestee must be made known of each *DK Basu* right, all such compliances must be recorded in the police register, he must get periodical medical examination, inspection memo must be signed by arrestee also and all such information must be centralised in a central police control room.

This first judgment went further, applying the principle that rights without remedies are illusory and futile. Hence, the above preventive and punitive measures could go with, and were not alternatives to, full civil monetary damage claims for constitutional tort.

The decades in between detailed judgments were spent in vital orders of monitoring and grading compliance. Each state and union territory was forced to file information in pre-designed charts by our team to make comparisons and collations simple. To get all responses and data from states after several adjournments for a country of India's size was no mean achievement of the SC. They were then presented, analysed in court state-wise, and general and state-specific directions were then formulated, based on data found in these pre-prescribed formats.

The third and last phase ended in 2015, ironically with another chief justice from J&K, JST Thakur. Stern directions were given to set up SHRCs but, more importantly, to fill up large vacancies in existing bodies. The as yet unused power of setting up human rights courts under Section 30 of the NHRC Act was directed to be operationalised. All prisons had to have CCTVs within one year — a similar direction sought by me for all police stations was given as a court exhortation to start a phase-wise CCTV in every police station without formulating it as a mandatory direction. It was directed that non-official visitors would do surprise checks on prisons and police stations and prosecutions and departmental action were unhesitatingly mandated.

I am amused by the ignorance and mulishness of both the Tamil Nadu police and their political masters when they suggest that *DK Basu* applies only in police and not in judicial custody. That is a travesty and a pitiable distortion. *DK Basu* is all-encompassing, loophole covering and makes absolutely no such distinction amidst categories of custody. Our democracy tax is too high and too dilatory. A 1985 Law Commission report directing enactment of section 114-B into our Evidence Act, raising a rebuttable presumption of culpability against the police if anyone in their custody dies or is found with torture, has still not become law, despite a bill introduced as late as 2017. We still have abysmally deplorable rates of even initiating prosecutions against accused police officers. Actual convictions are virtually non-existent. Figures for initiating departmental action are better but woefully low and hardly ever taken to successful dismissal. Not much is needed. Monitoring and implementation of *DK Basu* by independent and balanced civil society individuals at each level, under court supervision, is sufficient to minimise this scourge. Sadly, this is so near yet so far.

The writer is an MP, former chairman Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law, former ASG, India and national spokesperson, Congress. He is SC Amicus since 1987 on custodial death tort issues

NATURE'S HISTORIAN

Richard Grove raised questions about empire and ecology that are relevant today



MAHESH RANGARAJAN

THE DEMISE of Richard H Grove, environmental historian and polymath extraordinaire at Leves, Cambridge, this June, leaves a void. A pioneer in global environmental history, he made a major contribution to studying the roots of modern environmental concern and linking it to the colonial era and to early scientific debates.

Professor Grove had taken up a position in the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, in 2006 a few months prior to a serious automobile accident. Though it impaired his work and mobility, he was a fighter to the last. Prior to this, he had held appointments at Cambridge and Yale universities. He founded the Centre for World Environmental History in Sussex in 2002.

Grove's early career showed a rare ability to cross the boundaries of disciplines. Born in July 1956 and son of the eminent geographers, Alfred T and Jean Grove, his work spanned several disciplines and continents. He got a BA in geography from Hartford College, Oxford and then a Masters in Conservation Biology from University College, London. His doctoral degree awarded in 1988 at Cambridge treated the story of early ecological concern back in time and literally across the oceans and seas.

In a nutshell, rapid changes in the ecologies of islands such as St Vincent in the Caribbean and St Helena and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean followed on the heels of colonial rule. Surgeon botanists in the East India Company and its Dutch equivalent were among the first to trace changes in hydrology due to loss of forest cover. In West-

ern and southern India, the early botanists warned of famine and unrest, prompting early steps for forest protection.

His book, *Green Imperialism*, based on his doctoral thesis, is a citation classic. A great raconteur, he was happy to share the story of how the thesis got past his examiners though it was twice the word length. The secret was his extra-long foot-notes — he used archives in over a dozen countries.

Grove blazed the trail for a new kind of history of ideas that spanned continents. Most crucially, he placed India, Africa and the Caribbean at the centre of global environmental change. The absence of strong local landed interests, as was the case within Europe, made regulation of forests, land and water easier. Over time, his work paid careful attention to local resistance and conflicts.

His work on El Nino and long-term relationships of climate change and economic and social events published in 1998 was ahead of its time. Global warming, he showed, had been studied and known in Victorian times, though early warning signals were brushed aside and ignored.

He raised a larger question about empire and ecology that has much relevance to our troubled times. Was power capable of being moderated by knowledge? Could enlightened self-interest control untrammelled greed? His work did not give rise to conclusions. But the history of the colonial world, and India even more so, held many clues.

In particular, he saw the emergence of early scientists in the Company as harbingers of a new autonomous actor who could

try and check the use and abuse of nature. Why and how serious ideas about achieving harmony with nature could become a "Trojan horse" to punish the poor was a recurrent theme of his later work.

The titles of his coedited works are impressive enough but a closer look shows how he served as a connecting link across generations, disciplines and regional studies specialists. *Conservation in Africa*, 1987, was followed by a volume on Zimbabwe and in 1998, by *Nature and the Orient*, which brought together South and South East Asia.

Assessment of his contribution is complete without his remarkable ability to mentor younger scholars. A generosity of intellect and person was his hallmark. In 1996, he founded the journal, *Environment and History*. It was my privilege to work closely with him on this venture for five years.

A reverence for power was not his preferred trait. His plainspeak, while courageous, also meant he had few powerful mentors. A senior scholar once privately remarked how the university as institution had been created so that minds such as Grove's could thrive. What he left undisturbed, if only they had done so — and would do so — to the fullest. Are narrow departmental bounds and celebration of conformity not worth a second look?

Grove was an intellect that broke such boundaries. His work was a continuous engagement on a planet where all are now more conscious of the fragility of life.

The writer teaches History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University

JULY 1, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

ASSAM ERUPTS WHILE VIOLENCE ERUPTED again in parts of Assam, the agitates announced their plans to disrupt the state's road and air links with the rest of the country and paralyse the administration from July 4. In two separate incidents, armed assailants killed five persons in Sibasagar village by mounting grenade attack on a marriage party while a youth was shot dead at point-blank range. The announcement of the new agitation programme came from the All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad and the AASU amidst flailing prospects of resumption of a dialogue to end the nine-month-long deadlock on the foreigners' issue.

TRIPURA VIOLENCE AN EXODUS OF Bengalis from the riot-hit Agartala, Kalyanpur and Teliamura in west Tripura began as the death toll in mob violence and arson since Saturday night rose to four. The troops fired several rounds at different places to disperse rioting hordes and non-tribal residents from one hundred huts were burnt down at Moharchara, Narayandas Para, Vishnumaster Para, Barakathi, Kalamsimura and Jaykrishna Tila. Miscreants also set fire to a house in front of the police post for its role in the violence. Chakravarty blamed violence for instigating mob violence.

ADVICE TO BREZHNEV WEST GERMAN CHANCELLOR Helmut Schmidt made a stronger appeal to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev for a complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan. In remarks at a Kremlin dinner after the first round of his official talks, Schmidt told Brezhnev, "I am sure that you, Mr General Secretary, would contribute considerably to the defusing of this dangerous crisis if you could declare that the announced withdrawal of some Soviet troops from Afghanistan is the start of a continuous movement, which will be continued until there is complete withdrawal."

THE SPEAKING TREND

A Little Bit Of Love

VIJAY KRISHNA DHARMAN

In the Ramayana, Shabari was a legendary old woman, a helper in an ashram run by Lord Rama. Her life was mundane and routine: cleaning, washing, sweeping, mopping, cooking for guests. Using her love, people doing such jobs hardly ever receive any appreciation. But she was different. She had a purpose. She had a reason. She had a goal. She had a mission. She had a vision. She had a dream. She had a hope. She had a faith. She had a belief. She had a conviction. She had a determination. She had a resolve. She had a will. She had a power. She had a strength. She had a courage. She had a bravery. She had a valor. She had a heroism. She had a greatness. She had a nobility. She had a dignity. She had a respect. She had a honor. She had a glory. She had a fame. She had a reputation. She had a status. She had a position. She had a rank. She had a title. She had a name. She had a legacy. She had a heritage. She had a tradition. She had a culture. She had a civilization. She had a society. She had a community. She had a nation. She had a world. She had a universe. She had a everything.

After many years, Rama, in search of his wife, Sita, came to the forest and happens to visit Shabari's ashram. Everyone is shocked and surprised to see Shabari. She was a big deal. She was a legend. She was a hero. She was a saint. She was a guru. She was a master. She was a teacher. She was a mentor. She was a guide. She was a friend. She was a family. She was a love. She was a life. She was a everything.

She decides to present Rama with the best of fruit, and bites a small piece to taste it. She finds that her guest goes to eat only the best. Rama asks them her name. She tells him her name is Shabari. She tells him her story. She tells him her life. She tells him her love. She tells him her faith. She tells him her belief. She tells him her conviction. She tells him her determination. She tells him her resolve. She tells him her will. She tells him her power. She tells him her strength. She tells him her courage. She tells him her bravery. She tells him her valor. She tells him her heroism. She tells him her greatness. She tells him her nobility. She tells him her dignity. She tells him her respect. She tells him her honor. She tells him her glory. She tells him her fame. She tells him her reputation. She tells him her status. She tells him her position. She tells him her rank. She tells him her title. She tells him her name. She tells him her legacy. She tells him her heritage. She tells him her tradition. She tells him her culture. She tells him her civilization. She tells him her society. She tells him her community. She tells him her nation. She tells him her world. She tells him her universe. She tells him her everything.

Chat Room

Tough Choices, Hard Decisions

APROPOS THE EDIT "Be Prepared for Tough Choices" (Jun 30) is a timely reminder that the world is full of tough choices and being ready for tough choices is the correct attitude to the nation. In fact, we are becoming more and more dependent on China for many essential products and raw material, including activities such as China's real estate and mobile phone components. Further, the Chinese have been investing heavily in India in various sectors. Such foreign portfolio investments would neither hurt the country's economy nor its sovereignty since these are purely financial transactions.

KRISHNAN KALRA
Gurgaon

Trigger-Appy Way to Punish

This refers to the new report "India Bans 59 Chinese Apps" (Jun 30) and the subsequent ban on 59 Chinese apps by the Government of India (Jun 30). This is a highly impactful decision since the use of these apps runs into millions.

Economically China is unlikely to be hurt much by the move. Further, the ban will lead to loss of jobs for many Indians. Meanwhile, experts say that the possibility of Chinese apps reappearing in new avatars cannot be ruled out. It will take time for India to apply the banned apps.

G DAVID MILTON
Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu

Who Donates, Friend or Foe?

Appros All In It Together for the Funds of If by Sanjaya Ram (Jun 30), the writer's belief in the importance of donations and its credentials are not material if an organisation gets FCRA clearance is grossly erroneous. Any entity indulging in national interests is 'non grata'. The basic principle of sovereignty and national integrity is overriding all other principle and regulations is a matter of course. Since India has been indulging in anti-India actions for a long time, therefore is the question of good intentions of the West Warriors eliciting clout from India?

RANJIV DUGGAL
Gurgaon

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editor@timesgroup.com

8 EDITORIAL



States hold the key

In Unlock 2, finely-tuned strategies for disease control and expansion of activity are needed

The Home Ministry's orders relaxing the lockdown in the Unlock 2 phase until July 31 provides for a wider resumption of activity in areas other than containment zones, while retaining, appropriately, the prohibition on mass gatherings. After the first phase of the national lockdown, the handling of the pandemic, crucially testing, tracing, quarantining and treating sicker patients to reduce infection spread and mortality, has come to depend on the capacity of individual States. India's current case total, including 3,47,326 people who recovered and 17,403 who died, is in excess of half-a-million. With no prediction for when COVID-19 could peak, the latest announcement casts a heavy responsibility on the States. They are, of course, empowered to impose additional restrictions outside containment zones without impeding inter- and intra-State movement of people and goods. Some of them have learnt that community-level monitoring of influenza-like fever and respiratory illness and testing in a focused manner shows higher positivity rates; good serological testing in containment zones would add insight on the overall state of infections. Such fine-tuning of strategies, together with access to testing where indicated, will be crucial in the unlock phases. States must also realise that more activity could bring more patients to hospitals, which are already stretched in terms of fatigued health staff and available beds. Targeted lockdowns for smaller areas, and measures to encourage healthy behaviour hold the key to lower the incidence of cases. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal with a large caseload have extended their lockdown until July 31, a period that should be used to distribute masks to all residents, and ensure that the message of face-covering and distancing leads to full compliance.

Getting infection spread under control early should make it possible for the Centre to put in place a good system to handle domestic emergency travel, and facilitate more inward and outbound movement of stranded individuals. Several senior citizens have been caught abroad with inadequate access to health care and drugs due to the pandemic, especially in the U.S. Workers too are trapped in many countries. Within India, regulations that do not aid working from home need to be modified: they treat electronic equipment as non-essential and unavailable from e-commerce channels because of delivery restrictions in some cities. Self-certification for bank accounts has become due in the new financial year and should be postponed or handled online. Though the Centre has extended the provision of free foodgrain to 80 crore people for five more months, the quantum of rations at five kilos of grain and one kilo of pulses falls short of what families need in a month. In coming weeks, these social imperatives need to be addressed, while undertaking the formidable task of halting the upward trajectory of infections and deaths.

Control, not delete

Despite privacy issues with many apps, linking them to national security concerns is puerile

Concerns to both data security and national sovereignty, the Indian government on June 29 announced it would block 59 widely used apps, most linked to Chinese companies. These include the popular video-sharing social networking app TikTok, a mobile browser called UC Browser, and a file-sharing app called SHAREit. What is common to all three is their wide user base in India, with each claiming more than 100 million monthly active users, and their origins in China. Explaining the ban, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology cited "the emergent nature of threats" posed by the apps and "information available" that they are engaged in activities "prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order". The apps, according to the Ministry, had been reported for "stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users' data in an unauthorized manner to servers which have locations outside India", which "impinges upon the sovereignty and integrity of India". From the perspective of data security and privacy, there is indeed a strong case to be made to more strictly regulate apps that handle vast amounts of user data. Such a move was surely long overdue.

But the government might have done the right thing for the wrong reasons. The timing of the move, coupled with the fact that it has chosen to block the apps outright, rather than ensure they were complying with the law, suggests the ban is less motivated by privacy concerns than about sending a message to China amid the tensions along the border. After all, privacy and data security concerns are not limited only to Chinese apps. Concerns about many of these apps are hardly new, and the move to block them comes after these apps had already amassed hundreds of millions of users in India. If sending a message about China is the motivation, the ban is more signalling than substance. It may help the government show the public it is taking China on, even if it will have no impact on deterring Chinese behaviour on the border, which will require a tough diplomatic and military response. The tensions on the border, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, have ignited a much-needed debate on India's economic dependencies on China. India remains reliant on Chinese products in several critical and strategically sensitive sectors, from semiconductors and active pharmaceutical ingredients to the telecom sector, where Chinese vendors are involved not only in India's 4G network but in on-going 5G trials as well. India faces tough choices going forward in dealing with its deep economic embrace of China. Hitting the delete button on social media and gaming apps barely scratches the surface of the problem.

In ending stand-off, magnanimity must prevail

India's border dispute with China calls for peaceful resolution, and has no place for moral outrage or military might



R. SUDARSHAN

India's oft-quoted mantra when it comes to international relations has been *susuhkani kutumbham* (the earth is our only family). It is not in India's DNA, so to speak, to demonise any country in its neighbourhood, including China, South Asia and South East Asia, all the way to Indonesia; that is because of long-standing civilisational ties. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke in Shanghai just five years ago, in 2015, he recounted to the Indian community living there how China's President Xi Jinping took him to his native village in Xian province and showed him the book written by the seventh century Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, whose travels connected the birthplaces of both leaders. This was symbolic, he said of the bond between India and China in terms of *aatmika* (soulful intimacy), *nikata* (closeness) and *bhaichara* (solidarity). There could not be more genuine and sincere affirmation of the spirit of friendship.

Keep a cool head

Presently, India is on the brink of regarding China as Enemy Number One. This has happened because of a bloody, hand-to-hand combat, without firearms, between Indian and Chinese soldiers in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, which left 20 Indian soldiers dead and many more wounded. It may never be known how many Chinese soldiers died or were injured. These deaths on the frontier are a tragic break in an admirable re-

cord of avoiding casualties on both sides, despite face-offs on numerous occasions, along a long frontier between India and China. Both sides have accepted that the border between the two countries must be settled by agreement for the sake of peace.

China has refused to recognise the McMahon line and the demarcation of boundaries done by the British colonial power. Pending a final settlement of the boundary, India and China signed the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, in 1993. Another similar agreement (Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas), signed in 1996 contains a specific clause related to the use of firearms by both sides: "Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within ten kilometres from the Line of Actual Control. This prohibition shall not apply to routine firing activities in small arms firing ranges."

Apparently, this provision was respected by both sides during the clash on June 15. Tragically, they fought much more barbarically, with nail-studded sticks, knives and stones, causing human suffering. This incident threatens unofficial partition of territories that has stood the good test of time: Aksai Chin is claimed by India, but China, de facto, rules; China claims Arunachal Pradesh, but India, constitutionally, rules.

Will it ever be possible to resolve the boundary dispute, which is at the root of the conflict? And if so, how? The dispute cannot be resolved by going to war. No war has permanent winners. No losers can



Aerial view of a border area

willingly accept defeat. The only way to resolve disputes, in post-nuclear times, is through negotiations, as equal powers, with mutual respect.

China's record

During his visit to India in April 1960, China's Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai made a proposal to settle the boundary dispute. It was rejected by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In hindsight, history must record that as a lost opportunity which has had tragic consequences.

Today, China regards itself as a superpower in the making, which implies that negotiation will be condescending, tantamount to "my way or the highway". The more China feels beleaguered, the more intransigent it is likely to be in negotiations to resolve the border dispute with India. China has flexed its muscle. It refused to recognise the authority of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The PCA rejected China's legal claims. It ruled that China had breached its obligations under the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea and Article 94 of UNCLOS concerning maritime safety, and that China violated international obligations. China has not paid any heed to international opinion that supports

unimpeded commerce, freedom of navigation, overflights, and peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea. The same hubris has made China more intolerant of infrastructure built by India, while it continues to build its own along that frontier.

Weighing in on the options

Should India counter China, fit for tat, by adopting a posture of aggression? Or should India redouble its diplomatic efforts to counter China's intransigence with the support from Japan, Australia, the United States, Russia, and other countries, including those disputing China's claims in the South China Sea?

What must matter to India is whatever is good for its people. Focusing on strengthening military might, when the economy is suffering and COVID-19 is taking its toll, will not be wise. Nor is it wise to call for a boycott of Chinese imports. Sanctions and boycotts are justifiable only when there is strong moral justification. Boycott of South Africa during the Apartheid period was justified and it served its purpose in hastening South Africa's turn to equality and democratic governance. Arguably, there is moral justification for sanctions against Israel if it expands its illegal settlements in the West Bank and Palestine territories. Moral outrage has been triggered by actions of regimes in South Africa and Israel. But India's border dispute with China calls for peaceful resolution, not moral outrage.

It is understandable, in the immediate aftermath of the sacrifice made by India's soldiers, that a nationalist ferment will come to fore. As has happened with other incidents when sovereignty seemed to have been transgressed, this one also will run its course. If India

boycotts goods from China, it will hurt itself more and barely make a dent in China's economic prospects. India is lauded as the pharmacy of the world because it is able to import essential raw materials from China. India's sports goods exports are likewise dependent on imports from China. The world buys Chinese goods because their quality and price are compelling. It has been reported that Steve Jobs wanted to change the iPhone screen barely three days before its formal launch. China's factory that assembled the phone for Apple mobilised its workforce to get the screens replaced in quick time. India should emulate China in its manufacturing practices and agility to adapt to international demand. There is little parity between India and China in trade terms. There is much more parity in military might, at present, compared to the 1960s.

The home watch

It is unfortunate that in many cities in India, people from the North-east, who have features resembling Chinese, have been ostracised. India must be on guard, in the aftermath of current tensions with China, not to unleash any kind of hostility against anyone, especially resident Chinese nationals. India must learn the hard lesson, which it did not in 1962, that warm and gushing expressions of friendship towards China will not stop hostilities, only pragmatic and shrewd diplomacy can do that. Oscillating to the opposite end and attacking China as the enemy is not wise.

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PCR testing is a double-edged sword

In order to avoid blind reliance on the result for COVID-19, clinical diagnosis by specific criteria should be popularised



M.S. SESHADRI & T. JACOB JOHN

The government has allowed SARS-CoV-2 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing in many government and private laboratories. In January there was one laboratory (National Institute of Virology, Pune) but today there are 1,000. Test validity depends on laboratory quality. Mechanisms to ensure internal quality control and external quality assessment are urgently required.

The boon and bane of PCR testing are in its capacity to amplify even one viral gene segment in the sample to generate a detectable signal – a positive test; it is a boon because it accurately detects the presence of virus but a bane because it is prone to false negative and false positive results.

Follow protocol

When a laboratory handles several samples, cross-contamination must be avoided. During sample preparation for testing, if even one gene segment falls into the tube from the laboratory environment, it will be amplified and the test will be positive – but, false positive. It points to the lack of meticulous attention to protocol while processing samples, some with and others

without the viral genes. A laboratory technician's proficiency is integral to quality assurance. In reliable laboratories, a positive result means that the person whose sample was tested was indeed infected. For reliability, only laboratories under quality assurance should do testing.

Ensure quality

Here is an example. A conscientious professional in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, scrupulously practising personal protective procedures, had to get the mandatory PCR test to get an e-pass for an important meeting in a neighbouring city. The authorised laboratory for voluntary testing, a private laboratory in another town, sent a technician to his house to collect a nasopharyngeal swab. Two days later he gets a "positive for COVID-19" test report.

The laboratory informed the health authorities who wanted him admitted in a COVID-19 quarantine centre, despite pleas for home isolation. With great difficulty he bought time for two days to get admitted in a reputed hospital for two tests on consecutive days, in the hospital's nationally accredited lab. You can guess the outcome. His personal anxiety and his family's anxiety, apart from the expenses incurred. Both tests were negative; he returned home, missed his meeting, and lost faith in the epidemic management system. Had he been admitted in a COVID-19 quarantine centre, he might have



A person in a blue protective suit and mask

been exposed to infected persons, the story turning tragic for no fault of his.

The first test result was false positive, which should not occur in any quality-assured laboratory. The selection of private laboratories has not been careful. There have been newspaper reports recently of a private laboratory in Amritsar turning out four false positive PCR results in as many days. After selection, quality checks of laboratories have been found to be woefully inadequate.

We wonder how many laboratories produce similar false positive results. How many of reported positive tests in asymptomatic subjects nationwide are false positives? And how many lead to a misfortune similar to that experienced by the gentleman in Vellore? There is urgent need to ensure quality assurance from all laboratories testing for the coronavirus infection. Erring laboratories must be disqualified at least until quality assurance is certified. A false negative PCR means that

a person with infection was missed by the test, but that is in the very nature of PCR. The viral load is lower in the throat than in the nasopharynx. Hence throat swabs are falsely negative in 60% of tests and nasopharyngeal swabs in 30%, according to published studies. An incorrectly taken nasal swab may miss the virus altogether and lead to a false negative test.

The relatively high frequency of false negative results leads to gross underestimation of the epidemic's magnitude. Moreover, traced contacts with false negative tests will not be quarantined but allowed to spread the virus, augmenting the epidemic. Doctors should not be misled by false negative tests when COVID-19 is clinically diagnosed with specific criteria. The patient must be treated as COVID-19, and the PCR repeated. Globally, many patients with COVID-19 pneumonia who are PCR negative on the first swab have typical appearances of COVID-19 in a chest x-ray or CT scan. They turn PCR positive on repeat testing. Missing a diagnosis of COVID-19 pneumonia just because of a negative PCR test is medical negligence.

Contrary to the pervasive misconception that PCR alone diagnoses COVID-19, it detects only virus infection, not the disease. Most of the media report PCR positive persons incorrectly as cases. In medical parlance, case is "patient with disease". PCR positive but asymptomatic subjects during contact tracing are infections, not cases. False PCR results highlight that blind faith in the laboratory test misleads the government, underestimates the real extent of spread and, at the individual level, it is a recipe for personal tragedy.

When a false positive result is suspected, the doctor should alert the authorities who in turn should get the subject re-tested in an accredited laboratory. In case of discrepancy, the laboratory concerned must be closed and checked for compliance with protocols and record-keeping. In order to avoid blind reliance on the PCR test result, clinical diagnosis by specific criteria, which is the only way to diagnose COVID-19, should be popularised among doctors. Whether or not a confirmatory PCR test is done depends on circumstances. During the rural wave of the epidemic, doctors should be confident to diagnose COVID-19 even without a PCR. If we fail to implement these correctly, we are rendering disservice to unsuspecting society and its members.

Terms and differences

Contrary to the pervasive misconception that PCR alone diagnoses COVID-19, it detects only virus infection, not the disease. Most of the media report PCR positive persons incorrectly as cases. In medical parlance, case is "patient with disease". PCR positive but asymptomatic subjects during contact tracing are infections, not cases. False PCR results highlight that blind faith in the laboratory test misleads the government, underestimates the real extent of spread and, at the individual level, it is a recipe for personal tragedy.

M.S. Seshadri is retired Professor of Medical Endocrinology, Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore and now Medical Director, Thirumalai Mission Hospital, Ranipet, Tamil Nadu. T. Jacob John is retired Professor of Clinical Virology, CMC, Vellore and now President of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Digital strike

It appears that the Government of India has suddenly woken up to the fact that 59 Chinese apps pose a threat to India's security and sovereignty (Page 1, "TikTok among 59 Apps banned by the Centre", June 30). The government has also not explained how these apps were considered to be "engaging in activities prejudicial to the security of the state and public order". It seems the government has acted in haste by pandering to "popular sentiments".

App bans are notoriously hard to execute. Usually, app firms upload their official version of their apps on the App Store and Play Store.

However, even when applications are taken down from these platforms, users will still be able to download their unofficial versions from the web. So, it would require Internet service providers to blacklist every host name and domain name associated with these apps. This poses further security threats and may be exploited by cyber criminals. A simple ban will not work. Since many of these apps are a part of routine life, relevant and similarly efficient alternatives are a must.

Awarding marks

The CBSE policy to choose in the case of students who have appeared in more than three subjects, the average of the marks obtained in three performing subjects to

be awarded in the subjects whose examinations have not been conducted, and, for students who have appeared in only three subjects, the average of the marks obtained in the best two performing subjects to be awarded in the subjects whose examinations have not been conducted, may not be fair for many students. In our case, the lockdown happened after the English, physics and chemistry exams (for the science stream). The marks obtained in these subjects have been practically no relation to marks and computers, the most scoring subjects for which the exams have been cancelled. Some students may be very good in physics/chemistry/biology while others may not be so. Hence, totally ignoring the performance of a student in

a specific subject and awarding marks on the basis of other subject does not seem to be justified. Therefore, the subject performance in maths, computers or other subjects that were supposed to have been held and were cancelled should also take into account the average marks obtained in the internal exams. A better way may be to: calculate the average of the best two of the last three internal exams conducted by school of the same subject for which marks are being awarded; make a comparison with the marks as in the present scheme (average of best two or three subjects); award the greater of the two. A re-exam is not a good option because there are around 250 schools abroad apart from the number of States in India. It

may not be conducive to hold exams on a wide scale. Second, students cannot be made to study the same course repeatedly for an indefinite period of time because they have to go to universities and move on.

Samir Sikka

State of Kerala

Custodial deaths This is not the first time we have come across custodial deaths in India, but the gruesome death of a father and his son in Sathankulam, Tamil Nadu has shaken India's conscience. One expects a proper inquiry monitored by the High Court. I am also reminded of the golden period when under the leadership of inspectors general of police in Tamil Nadu like E.V. Arul, S.M. Diaz and E.L. Stracey, the police were the real

friends of the people. Their 'Ungal Nanban' programmes were well-received. It is rare to find such officers today. THOMAS S. PERINASS, Chennai

Season to resume

The proposed restart to the 2020-21 football season is hard to fathom. 'Sport' page, "Hamilton eyes Schumacher's record", June 30). With most of Europe and parts of the U.S. scrambling to postpone the restart, it is not surprising a resurgence of the novel coronavirus, this move defies logic. It seems rather desperate to run the races without fans, behind closed doors, a paddock bereft of human contact. D.M. THOMAS PALOCCAREN, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

THE HINDU
WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2020

OPED 9

Utilise MGNREGA to the fullest capacity

The scheme should not be diluted in the name of the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan



The role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a lifeline for the working poor in rural India has been proved once again with the experience of the lockdown. In April and part of May, it was the absence of MGNREGA which accentuated rural distress. The Central government revised lockdown guidelines to allow MGNREGA work only from April 20, nearly a month after the nationwide lockdown was imposed, and released funds for it belatedly.

But once the money reached the States, the results are evident. Whereas the number of households who got work in April 2020 was the lowest in several years at \$5 lakh, in May the number went up to 2.05 crore. Till the third week of June, 2.84 crore households had got work, much higher when compared to the same months last year. With an average 23 days of work and a daily wage of ₹200, households who got work earned an average of ₹1,500 a month. Even though this is meagre, it shows the potential of MGNREGA to bring work and relief, provided it is further expanded.

The Central government released ₹38,000 crore for MGNREGA work, of which 70% has already been utilised. With the return of migrant workers to their home States and with substantial numbers having completed the quarantine period, the demand for work is bound to increase. The remaining ₹8,000 crore fund available to the States is clearly insufficient. It is therefore essential for the Central government to release the second tranche without delay.

Work provided to few
Even in these months where there has been a welcome increase in workers who got work, it is extremely disturbing that as many as 1.82 crore workers who demanded work were turned back. According to figures available on the Ministry's website, in this fiscal year, 8.07 crore



"The government must ensure the release of funds on an emergency basis," MGNREGA workers in Vilupuram district of Tamil Nadu. — B. JOTHIRAMALINGAM

workers demanded work, but work was provided only to 6.25 crore workers. Recently we heard the Prime Minister and the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister hardsell the record of employment provision in the State claiming that one crore jobs had been provided in a single day. This is certainly a novel interpretation of statistics. What is the nature of the work? Are they permanent jobs? Are they one-day jobs such as work on MGNREGA sites can be? In U.P., over one crore workers had applied for work under MGNREGA, but more than one third of them were turned back.

Similarly in Bihar, which also has a large number of returning migrant workers, 12 lakh workers of the 41 lakh workers who applied were turned back. In spite of a legal provision of unemployment allowance not a single rupee in compensation has been paid. Now that the monsoons have set in, this issue becomes all the more relevant. During the rainy season even though demand is high, work provision is low. It is therefore essential for the Central government to ensure that States are provided with the funds to pay unemployment allowance to all workers demanding

work. In this context of the need to strengthen MGNREGA, the announcement of the Central government's "new" scheme, the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan, to provide work to migrant workers in 116 selected districts, raises several questions. First, what is the criteria for selection? Why, for example, should the States of West Bengal and Chhattisgarh be omitted when reverse migration is particularly high in these States? Of the ₹4,794 crore spent between June 20 and June 28, Bihar received more than 50% of the fund. As noted earlier, Bihar has had a poor record of implementation of MGNREGA. The Bihar elections are scheduled for later this year. It will be a terrible travesty of justice if this scheme is designed to serve a narrow political purpose.

Second, according to the list of 25 kinds of work available under this "scheme" it is clear that almost every single one of them is already covered under the convergence programmes of MGNREGA. What is the new "skill mapping" required for this since this work is already covered under MGNREGA? The nature of the work is manual work, mainly construction

and earth work, including work to lay cables, ostensibly to take internet connections to rural areas. It is unstated but clear that this will benefit private telecom companies.

Most importantly, how will this new scheme impact the MGNREGA work in these selected districts? There is no clarity on this critical issue in the set of guidelines issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, the nodal Ministry for this scheme. Last year, under MGNREGA, in these 116 districts taken together, an average of just 43.7 workdays were created, which was lower than the national average of 50 days. This poor record of provision of work may have been one of the reasons for the higher rates of migration from these districts. Instead of new schemes why should MGNREGA not be expanded to give work to all workers? This is a legal right, whereas the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan has no such legal binding on the administration.

The scheme is primarily meant for migrant workers in those districts where their numbers are 25,000 or more. That means in these selected districts women who comprise a smaller percentage of migrant workers will be largely excluded. However, women in these districts had a high demand for work reflected in the fact that the average of women working in MGNREGA in these districts last year was 53.5%, which was higher than the average for the rest of India. So unless this work in 116 districts is in addition to MGNREGA, women will suffer.

Potential for MGNREGA
MGNREGA should not be diluted in the name of the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan. The potential for MGNREGA to provide relief to the suffering of rural India should be utilised to its fullest capacity. This will also require a removal of the restriction of only one person per household to make every individual eligible. The cap of 100 days should be removed to expand it to at least 200 days. Unemployment allowance should be guaranteed for all those turned away from work. And importantly, the government must ensure the release of funds on an emergency basis.

Brinda Karat is a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Polit Bureau and a former Rajya Sabha MP

Making trade more digitised

While different interventions have positively developed the port ecosystem, there are still gaps that need to be bridged



AFAQ HUSSAIN & NIKITA SINGLA

India's exports in April 2020 contracted by 60% year-on-year. There was a 37% fall in the twenty-foot equivalent units handled by the Jawaharlal Nehru Port in April 2020 as compared to April 2019. The steep decline in world trade lays bare the significance of a more digitised trading environment, with minimal manual touch points.

With the pandemic the slump in international trade is unpredictable. As countries slowly emerge out of this, new demand and supply chains will form, that will be located in countries that re-orient their existing trade structures.

Upgradation, digitisation, automation
Globally, digitisation of procedures and lower human intervention are the two major pillars that drive trade across borders. Post India's ratification of the Trade Facilitation Agreement of the World Trade Organization in April 2016, reforms focused on infrastructure upgradation, digitisation and automation. Schemes such as Direct Port Entry and Direct Port Delivery, and the Radio Frequency Identification system and Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade, were all aimed at reducing the time and cost of clearance of goods. The Port Community System was aimed at seamlessly integrating all maritime trade-related stakeholders on a single platform. And e-SANCHIT (e-Storage and computerised handling of indirect tax documents) was aimed at reducing human intervention.

These and other interventions speak of the government's focus on effective logistics and smooth export-import (EXIM) procedures at Indian borders. This resulted in continuous improvement in India's Ease of Doing Business ranking, particularly in the 'trading across borders' parameter on which it ranked 68 in 2020. With the current crisis, ports across India demand a greater leap in trade facilitation measures to expedite the movement, release and clearance of goods.

While different interventions of the government have positively developed the port ecosystem, there are still some gaps that need to be bridged. These are particularly with respect to the standardisation and coordination of processes across ports, and awareness and acceptability of new initiatives among the users which depends on the

adaptability and ease of linkage between multiple systems.

Gaps to be filled

Some of the delay in moving to a paperless trade ecosystem can be attributed to gaps in the effective implementation of digital platforms. First, shortcomings in the functionality of the system and technical glitches result in limited use of the system or parallel use of hard copy. For example, the absence of a shipping line delivery order in customs and terminal systems results in usage of hard copy for cargo movement. Second, lack of connectivity/message exchanges between different stakeholders' systems results in delayed cargo clearance. Third, there are many issues with respect to training and capacity building amongst the users, restricting the optimal utilisation of digital platforms.

Like in the rest of the world, in India too the operations of multiple stakeholders in the logistics and trade ecosystem including customs brokers, shipping lines, freight forwarders, transport operators, port custodians, container freight stations and border management authorities have been restricted. This indicates the need to further augment the digital infrastructure in the trade ecosystem. With trade volumes contracting and economic indicators shrinking, the present crisis presents an opportunity to develop new systems and enhance existing platforms while at the same time changing the attitude of stakeholders on the ground.

In the last two months, different guidelines have been issued by the government, focusing on measures to facilitate and expedite the clearance process so that it is more automated, online and paperless. While some immediate steps are needed to survive the crisis, it is imperative to work on a permanent road map which addresses some of the gaps highlighted. Enhanced integration of systems and coordination between them should ideally result in exchange of messages and sharing of input data between them on a real-time basis. Promoting use of a multi-stakeholder single platform like the Port Community System can streamline EXIM procedures, moving towards a digitally engaged and enhanced trading environment.

These efforts will be instrumental towards improving India's trading ecosystem and achieving the desired target of Ease of Doing Business (ranking under 50) set by the Prime Minister's Office. The more digitised our trade facilitation infrastructure, the more immune we will be to future disruptions.

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Reviving SAARC to deal with China

Deeper regional economic integration will help India

PRABHASH RANJAN

As India-China border tensions continue to fester, a hegemonic China, as part of its global expansionism, is chipping away at India's interests in South Asia. This should be a major cause for concern for New Delhi. China's proximity to Pakistan is well known. Nepal is moving closer to China for ideological and material reasons. China is wooing Bangladesh by offering tariff exemption for 97% of Bangladeshi products, and has intensified its ties with Sri Lanka through massive investments. According to a Brookings India study, most South Asian nations are now largely dependent on China for imports despite geographical proximity to India.

Reinvigorating SAARC

Several foreign policy experts argue that India's strategic dealing with China has to begin with South Asia. In this regard, it is important to reinvigorate SAARC, which has been in the doldrums since 2014. In the last few years, due to increasing animosity with Pakistan, India's political interest in SAARC dipped significantly. India has been trying hard to isolate Pakistan internationally for its role in promoting terrorism in India. However, BIMSTEC cannot replace SAARC for reasons such as lack of a common identity and history among all BIMSTEC members. Moreover, BIMSTEC's focus is on the Bay of Bengal region, thus making it an inappropriate forum to engage all South Asian nations.

One way to infuse life in SAARC is to revive the process of South Asian economic integration. South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world with intra-regional trade teetering at barely 5% of total South Asian trade, compared to 25% of intra-regional trade in the ASEAN region. While South Asian countries have signed trade treaties, the lack of political will and trust deficit has prevented any meaningful movement. According to the World Bank, trade in South Asia stands at \$23 billion of an estimated value of \$67 billion. In-

dia should take the lead and work with its neighbours to slash the tariff and non-tariff barriers. There's a need to resuscitate the negotiations on a SAARC investment treaty, pending since 2007. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, intra-ASEAN investment constitutes around 19% of the total investments in the region. The SAARC region can likewise benefit from higher intra-SAARC investment flows. Deeper regional economic integration will create greater interdependence with India acquiring the central role, which, in turn, would serve India's strategic interests too.

Domestic challenges

There are two major domestic challenges that India faces in revitalising SAARC. First, to reap political dividends at home, and for ideological reasons, there has been an unrelenting top-dressing of anti-Pakistan rhetoric and Islamophobia on the Indian soil. There's also a recurrent use of the 'Bangladeshi migrant' rhetoric. Such majoritarian politics influences foreign policy in undesirable ways. It dents India's soft power of being a liberal and secular democracy, which gives moral legitimacy to India's leadership in the region. This divisive domestic politics fuels an anti-India sentiment in India's neighbourhood.

Second, the economic vision of the Modi government remains convoluted. It's unclear what the slogans of *atma nirbharta* (self-reliance) and 'vocal for local' mean. The government's economic advisers contend that this does not mean autarky. On the other hand, the Prime Minister and his Ministers are stating that India needs to cut down its dependence on imports, thus signalling a return to the obsolete economic philosophy of import substitution. If this marks sliding back to protectionism, one is unsure if India will be interested in deepening South Asian economic integration.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi did well by reaching out to SAARC leaders earlier this year, but such flash-in-the-pans moments won't help without sustained engagement.

Prabhash Ranjan is Senior Assistant Professor of Law, South Asian University, New Delhi. Views are personal

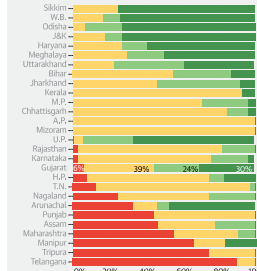


DATA POINT

The rural salve

The high levels of reverse migration recorded during the COVID-19-related lockdown led to a sudden surge in demand for work through MGNREGS in States where the bulk of the migrants returned. Sowing of kharif crops doubled this year following a massive increase in rural labour and an above average monsoon. These two factors led to levels of rural employment seen before the lockdown was imposed. **The Hindu Data Team**

DEMAND FOR WORK | The graph depicts the % of districts where the no. of households which demanded MGNREGS work tripled, doubled, increased significantly or reduced in FY21 compared to FY20. While the demand tripled in many districts in Punjab, Telangana and Maharashtra

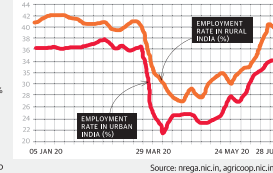


LAST WORD | The sudden rise in sowing, especially in cotton, has to be met with an equal increase in govt. procurement. If not, the glut in the market will cause prices to crash and profits to dwindle. Also, according to CME, though rural jobs have increased, due to excess supply of labour the wage rates will drop significantly. Thus, workers may earn less than they used to

SOWING SURGE | Farmers sowed 315,63 lakh hectares (LH) of kharif crops as of June 26, 127 LH more than the area usually covered by this time. In places such as Punjab, Maharashtra and Telangana, the demand for MGNREGS work was possibly muted due to a large increase in sowing

Crop	Area sown in FY21	Change over usual area	States with most increase in sowed area
Rice	37,71 LH	+5,66 LH	Punjab (+4 LH), U.P. (+2,6)
Pulses	19,4	+7,94	Maharashtra (+5,1), M.P. (+4,1), Telangana (+0,8)
Coarse cereals	48	+21,86	M.P. (+5,8), Maharashtra (+5,3), H.P. (+2,3)
Oil-seeds	83,3	+59,24	M.P. (+33,6), Maharashtra (+16,7), Telangana (+3,6)
Cotton	71,6	+32,46	Maharashtra (+14,9), Gujarat (+7), Telangana (+3,6)
Overall	315,63	+127,99	

BACK WITH JOBS | CME's data on employment rate show that the rural rate has bounced back to pre-COVID levels while the urban rate is still stuttering after a decent recovery following the unlock



Source: mega.nic.in, agropoc.nic.in, CME

The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 1, 1970

100 mini-supermarkets in Fourth Plan

Mr. Ujjal Singh, Governor of Tamil Nadu, said here to-day (Coimbatore, June 30) that there was a plan to start 100 mini-supermarkets at smaller centres in the State during the Fourth Plan period and that sanction had already been accorded for starting 17 such mini-supermarkets at taluk centres and towns. The Governor who was inaugurating the third anniversary of "Chintamani", the co-operative supermarket in Coimbatore, said that if the co-operative movement was to prosper along right lines and benefit the people at large, inefficiency and corruption should be stamped out. Special training must be imparted to employees of co-operative institutions in managerial skill, salesmanship and business techniques so that they could have a viable co-operative sector as an integral organisational part of the strategy for planned and rapid economic development of the country. Mr. Ujjal Singh said that the co-operative movement was based on the principle of a classless society where there would be no room for exploitation by those who were occupying positions of advantage.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 1, 1920

Mr. Gandhi: Letter to Viceroxy

Mr. Gandhi has sent the following letter (June 24, Bombay) to H.E. the Viceroxy: Your Excellency - As one who has enjoyed a certain measure of 'Your Excellency's confidence and one who claims to be a devoted well wisher of the British Empire, I owe it to Your Excellency and, through Your Excellency, to His Majesty's Ministers to explain my connection with, and my conduct to, the Khilafat question. At the very earliest stage of the war, even whilst I was in London, organising the Indian volunteer ambulance corps, I began to interest myself in the Khilafat question. I perceived how deeply moved the little Mussulman community in London was when Turkey decided to throw in her lot with Germany. On my arrival in India in January of 1915 I found the same anxiousness and earnestness among the Mussulmans with whom I came in contact. Their anxieties became intense when information about secret treaties leaked out. The Peace terms and Your Excellency's defence of them have given the Mussulmans of India a shock from which it will be difficult for them to recover. The terms violate Ministerial pledges and utterly disregard the Mussulman sentiment.

A 10-AGE



WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2020

Ban on apps good, but must calibrate this carefully

Vital that firms with Chinese investment, for instance, are not the next target as these firms have other investors too

IT'S EARLY days yet, but by all accounts, the move to ban 59 popular Chinese apps—like TikTok, Shouket, UC Browser, etc.—seems to be a well-thought-out move. While it is, though, odd that if some of these apps were clandestinely stealing Indian data, as has been alleged, why were they not banned earlier? Unlike the delays in clearing imports from China, or say an increase in import duties on Chinese imports which hurts Indian importers or manufacturers who use these inputs, the ban on the apps will hurt a lot less. Certainly, a ban on TikTok will hurt those artists who have made a career based on TikTok videos, but the ban is likely to hurt the Chinese more. Around 30% of TikTok's user-base, according to Reuters Breakingviews, which, in turn, cites Sensor Tower data, comes from India; cutting off this base will hit the valuation of its parent ByteDance. ByteDance is estimated to be worth around \$110 billion and also owns Hideo whose users are all from India. Bigo Live is a competitor to TikTok, a third of its users are Indian and its parent, Bigo, is worth around \$2 billion. Similarly, UC Browser has a 12-13% market share of the browser market in India, making it the second-largest way to access the internet after Google's Chrome.

Now that the action has been taken, however, it is vital to calibrate it. Any move to 'punish' China, in the absence of a balanced, state-like, almost certainly also aimed at the local audience, an audience which is increasingly baying for blood after the Chinese incursion. To that extent, the ban will help address some of the need for action 'by the government'. But, this is a double-edged sword since any move to place local opinion also runs the danger of stoking the demand for more action. The move to insist that goods be labelled according to their country of origin—on the GEM marketplace of the government as well as e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Flipkart—was, for instance, one that would only have inflamed passions. Apart from the fact that it is difficult to find out what the country of origin is for many products—is a Samsung or an Apple phone 'made' in India genuinely Indian if the parts come from overseas, including China?—it turns out that a large number of products sold online are Chinese in origin, at some point, this can lead to calls for stronger action.

The important thing, after the ban, is to prevent this from deteriorating into a more broad-based action against firms in which there is Chinese investment. Congress MP Manish Tewari, for instance, has tweeted to suggest favouritism by prime minister Narendra Modi since, as he says Alibaba has not been banned though it is a big investor in PayPal—Alibaba has invested \$860 million in Paytm, and \$500 million in Snapdeal—along with SoftBank and Foxconn—are Tencent's \$400 million in Ola, \$700 million in Flipkart, \$175 million in Hike Messenger, and \$145 million in Practo. Indeed, a research paper by Gateway House (<https://www.gatewayhouse.in/2020/06/29/indian-tech-startups/>) estimates China has invested \$4 billion in Indian tech startups, resulting in 18 of India's top 30 unicorns having Chinese funding. Equally, if the ban is to give Indian app developers a shot at capturing the market by developing as good or better substitutes, the government policy on startups has to be a lot more encouraging than it is at the moment.

Corona shadow on children

Kawasaki-like condition in infected children needs to be studied

TIL A FEW weeks back, it was believed that children and adolescents had been spared the worst manifestations of Covid-19—indeed, in May, the WHO, in a scientific brief, had spoken about limited data indicating this. But, in the same brief, it had also spoken up a few cases where the disease turned serious in children, and in an even smaller number, manifested as a Kawasaki-disease-like multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS). Kawasaki disease is a condition usually noted in children aged five years and below, in which the patient suffers from blood vessel developing inflammation brought about by, as is generally believed, an infection triggering an immune system hyper-drive. The disease is marked by symptoms like persistent high fever, rash, red eyes, etc.—symptoms common to other diseases like scarlet fever and juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. *Indian Express* recently reported cases of MIS in Mumbai. It has been reported in May, by hospitals in Europe and the US. While, in the majority of the cases in Europe and North America, laboratory tests had shown positive serology for Covid-19, in the Mumbai cases talked about in *Indian Express*, the children had tested negative for the virus. Given Kawasaki is believed to be triggered by an immunological *kamikaze* as a reaction to an infection, some experts believe that the viral load could have fallen to an extent where it doesn't get detected in a test even as the inflammatory syndrome becomes apparent. Indeed, a 2005 study published in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases* had found a strong association between Kawasaki disease and another coronavirus, the New Haven Human Coronavirus (HCoV-NH).

There is very little understanding of what triggers this MIS—indeed, as is the case with Covid-19 and its pathogen, SARS-CoV-2—and, hence, guarding against it could prove quite tricky. The WHO says treatment lines involving parenteral immunoglobulins and steroids have helped. But, understanding MIS, and indeed both Covid-19/SARS-CoV-2 and Kawasaki disease, there needs to be rigorous mapping of the syndrome and risk factors, which could then inform treatment and disease management better. With there being very little clarity on many factors—for instance, one observational study published in the *BMJ* talks about a high proportion of the affected children in Paris considered for the study having African ancestry—the need for standardised data on clinical presentations, severity, outcomes and epidemiology urgently needs to be collected.

In the meanwhile, it will be important to institute important safeguards for children and young adults—even though MIS seems to be quite rare at the moment, the SARS-CoV-2 seems to be presenting a wide range of pathologies—more so, given experts have voiced serious concerns about lasting coronary damage from inflammation in blood vessels. Against such a backdrop, India needs to collect targeted patient data—and this will mean more aggressive detection of infections—and collaborate with global research efforts. A lot of false decisions—on opening schools, parks & playgrounds, home isolation with infected family members, even on disease prevention in shelter homes and orphanages—could depend on what the risks are for children in the country.

Journalism INTERRUPTED

Prasar Bharati's threat to PTI over China-aggression related interviews seems to confuse journalistic prerogative for loyalty

PRASAR BHARATI'S THREAT to cancel its contract with news agency PTI over two interviews relating to the recent India-China stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is a symptom of an old malaise—confusing journalism with loyalty. While one interview, with Indian envoy in Beijing, created a controversy since the ambassador insisted that China should move back to its side of the LAC, contradicting his code of territory to the nation that India has ceded no territory to China, the other interview, with the Chinese envoy in New Delhi, was a plain vanilla one; indeed, the envoy admitted to Chinese casualties in the skirmish in Galwan Valley. What got Prasar Bharati so red was the Chinese embassy put a truncated version of the interview on its website. Immediately, Prasar Bharati questioned the loyalties of PTI, terminating its coverage not in the Beijing interview.

While some rudimentary, coarse sense can still be teased out of politicians calling for a ban on Chinese food to get back against China, the same can't be said for Prasar Bharati's irrational 'nationalism'. What it seems to be arguing goes against even the flimsiest understanding of the ethos of the journalism and the role the media is supposed to play. And, it is for such reasons—Prasar Bharati has for decades been successive ruling dispensations' fiefdom—that it has lost its credibility. There is a reason that other public broadcasters like BBC have done well, whereas Prasar Bharati, which was modelled on the same lines, has languished. Would the BBC be asked not to interview Taliban leaders or ISIS members, or to cancel contracts with UK wire services that do?

BANKING ON CHANGES

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN ALLEGED THAT SOME CO-OPERATIVE BANKS HAVE POLITICAL CLOUT. IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO SEE HOW THE NEW STRUCTURES CHANGE THE WAY BUSINESS IS DONE

Will expanded RBI oversight change cooperative banking?

THE RECENT ORDINANCE relating to cooperative banks, barring those which lend to farmers, has brought in a certain amount of euphoria. The ordinance gives regulatory oversight of these banks, essentially urban cooperative banks and multi-state cooperative banks, a push by putting in place a stronger RBI supervisory structure for them. The objective, as stated by the government, was to provide protection to the deposit holders.

Two things must be remembered. The first is that the Registrar of Cooperatives and RBI were both the regulators of these cooperative banks, and hence, the former does not lose its power which remains unchanged. Therefore, the two regulator model still holds. Second (and earlier, there was RBI oversight though not to the extent that is being spoken of today). Hence, it is not a case of saying that there was no oversight earlier that has been brought in today.

The PMC fiasco laid bare the problems with the cooperative structure. These banks had a different kind of risk from that of other commercial banks. Hence, while the PMC problem became an RBI problem, which had to be addressed, the fact remains that co-ops have many unique structures. Given the large number of such banks (urban and multi-state)—around 1,500—the regulatory pressure on RBI would be immense.

If one were to look at the structure of UCBs, in 2019, 1,544 of them, according to RBI, accounted for a balance sheet size of ₹6 lakh crore compared to the ₹16 lakh crore of commercial banks. Of this ₹5.8 lakh crore were deposits (₹1.29 lakh crore for commercial banks) and net worth of around ₹0.5 lakh crore (₹1.3 lakh crore). On the assets side, loans were at ₹3 lakh crore (₹97 lakh crore) and investments ₹1.57 lakh crore (₹43 lakh crore for commercial banks).



Chief Economist, CARE Ratings
Views are personal

Since 2015, the SLR requirements of UCBs have been reduced progressively in line with the prescription applicable to SCBs. Furthermore, since UCBs are governed by Basel 1 regulatory norms, the liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) requirement is not applicable to them. In terms of soundness based on CAMELS, RBI has classified 78% of them in the A and B categories. The capital adequacy ratio for them was 9% as they are not supposed to be included under Basel 3 with any capital conservation buffers or higher tier-1 capital; 96% of them had a CAR of over 9%. Gross NPA ratio was 7.1% in 2019, but was up to 10.5% in H1FY20 due to the large failures. As of 2019, return on assets was 0.74%, and the return on net worth was 8.66%. Hence, the overall picture is not bad, but for the fact that there have been failures. There have also been 132 mergers of UCBs in the last decade and a half.

How will things be different now? The RBI has always been covered under the deposit guarantee scheme, and hence, nothing much will change as deposits upto ₹5 lakh will be covered under the same. These banks can, however, now have access to capital in the form of both debt and equity after taking permission from RBI. Hence, the due diligence process

that has to be followed for raising either equity capital or bond will automatically ensure that they work towards maintaining a very good track record of performance, and, more importantly, governance. The ordinance also gives RBI the power to allow for mergers or amalgamations, and hence, if it is observed that some of them are too weak to survive on their own, action can be taken.

From the point of view of RBI, the challenge would be to regulate and supervise these 1,500-odd banks with the same rigour as followed for the commercial banks

The cooperative banks have a wide scope to expand their business, which is good for the financial system because this large pie of players has remained at the periphery for too long. They have a strong focus on the SME sector, which can benefit a lot. In 2019, 60% of their lending was for priority sector, and the two leading segments were MSMEs, with a share of 26.9%, and housing, with a share of 15.5%.

From the point of view of RBI, the challenge would be to regulate and supervise these 1,500-odd banks with the same rigour as followed for the commercial banks. It will also have a say in the appointment of key management positions just as it has for commercial banks, and it can seek changes in case the performance is not up to the mark. RBI can, in the public interest, supersede the management of a multi-state cooperative bank for up to five years and

appoint an administrator. If the bank is registered with the Registrar of Cooperative Societies of a state, the regulator will have to consult the state government concerned before issuing an order to supersede the board.

This will require expansion in staff to meet the requirement of maintaining high standards of governance, that are adhered to in the larger banking space. Less than 30% of the banks have total advances of above ₹500 crore. Over half have a credit size of less than ₹50 crore, which will make the job of supervision even more challenging. It can be expected that a certain degree of segregation would be called for initially where the bigger ones would be taken up on priority.

Also, looking at the future of the cooperative banking system, one can visualise a change coming in over a period of time. This large number of banks may not be sustainable, especially as the larger ones do take on the expansion path and are able to further diversify their asset portfolio and get into new spaces. This possibility cannot be ruled out and can lead to a wave of M&A activity as the smaller banks seek to leverage synergies and grow their books. Presently, the approach has been to remain niche players, and there has been limited activity in the past. The perimeter of activity has been defined, and the players work within these lines.

It has often also been alleged that the cooperative banks have a political clout, and it would be interesting to see how this new regulatory and supervisory structures change the way in which these banks conduct business. Logically, given the way some of the expansion and M&A activity takes place, it can only be expected that the governance practices would percolate into their functioning. But, getting this done could be one of the tougher challenges for the new regulatory architecture.

Covid brings US decline out in the open

Almost every systematic economic advantage possessed by the US is under threat. Unless there is a huge push to turn things around, the result could be decades of stagnating or even declining living standards



Blloomberg

THE US'S DECLINE started with little things. Americans got used to seeing their past-decade construction sites and didn't even think about why the workers weren't working, then wondered why skyscrapers and buildings took so long to finish. They got used to avoiding hospitals because of the unpredictable and enormous bills they would receive. They paid 6% real-estate commissions, never realising that Australians were paying 2%. They grumbled about high taxes and high health insurance premiums and porched roads, but rarely imagined what it would be like to live in a system that worked better.

When writers speak of the American decline, they are usually talking about international power—the rise of China and the waning of US hegemony and moral authority. To most Americans, those are distant and abstract things that have little or no impact on their daily lives. But, the decline in the general effectiveness of US institutions will impose increasing costs on Americans. And, if it eventually leads to a general loss of investor confidence in the country, the damage could be much greater.

The most immediate cost of US decline—and the most vivid demonstration—comes from the country's disastrous response to the coronavirus pandemic. Leadership failures were pervasive and catastrophic at every level—the president, agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration, and state and local leaders all fumbled the response to the greatest health threat in a century. As a result, the US is suffering a horrific surge of infections in states such as Arizona, Texas and Florida while states that were battered early on are still struggling. Countries such as Italy that are legendary for government dysfunction and were hit hard by the virus have crushed the curve of infection, while the US just sits

daily record for case growth and shows no sign of slowing down. This utter failure to suppress a disease that most other countries manage to contain will have real economic consequences for Americans, as fear of the virus drives people back into their homes and businesses suffer.

In addition to worrying about their jobs and livelihoods, Americans must now be subjected to months of images of Italians casually walking around on the streets while they cover in their houses. It is a painful and stark demonstration of national decline. Even more galling, the US's Covid failure means that its citizens can no longer travel freely around the world; even Europe plans to impose a travel ban on Americans.

But, the consequences of US decline will far outlast coronavirus. With its high housing costs, poor infrastructure and transit, endemic gun violence, police brutality and bitter political and racial divisions, the US will be a less appealing place for high-skilled workers to live. That means companies will find other countries in Europe, Asia and elsewhere a more attractive destination for investment, robbing the US of jobs, depressing wages and draining away the local spending that powers the service economy. That in turn will exacerbate some of the worst trends of US decline—less tax money means even more urban decay as infrastructure, education and social-welfare programmes are forced to make big cuts. Anti-immigration policies will throw away the country's most important source of skilled labour and weaken a university system already under tremendous pressure from state budget cuts.

Almost every systematic economic advantage possessed by the US is under threat. Unless there is a huge push to turn things around—to bring back immigrants, sustain research universities,

make housing cheaper, lower infrastructure costs, reform the police and restore competence to the civil service—the result could be decades of stagnating or even declining living standards.

And, the biggest danger might come later. The US has long enjoyed a so-called exorbitant privilege as the financial centre of the world, with the dollar as the lynchpin of the global financial system. That means the US has been able to borrow money cheaply, and Americans have been able to sustain their lifestyles through cheap imports. But, if enough investors—foreign and domestic—lose confidence in the US's general effectiveness as a country, that advantage will vanish.

If capital begins to abandon the US and the dollar in large amounts, the currency will crash and Americans will find themselves paying much more for everything from cars to televisions to gasoline to imported food. Interest rates will be raised in an attempt to lure back investors, and the country might undergo a period of stagflation worse than the 1970s. Large-scale unrest would undoubtedly result and—in the worst-case scenario—the US could collapse like Venezuela.

This is an outcome to be avoided at all costs. But, it is an outcome that is no longer out of the realm of possibility, thanks to the complacency, arrogance and misplaced priorities of US leaders and the deep and bitter divisions among US voters. If the US goes from rich, world-straddling colossus to floundering dysfunctional developing nation in just a few decades, it will be one of the most spectacular instances of civilizational decline in world history. Every mind in the country should be bent towards the task of reversing the decline and restoring national competence.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hike in fuel prices

While a whole country is going through the Covid-19 crisis and a standoff with China, the central government is increasing the prices of petrol and diesel on a daily basis for last 22 days. This has put more tension and burden on the common people across the country. The fact of the matter is that under the current situation at the border is more harassed than the previous regime, and are being targeted on various flimsy grounds. The Covid-19 lockdowns and wars have increased the fuel prices have broken the backbone of the people and the Indian economy, with a very serious war-like situation at the border is high time the people of India must prepare themselves for the worst period in the form of fear, frustration, tension, depression and anxiety which is going to affect Indians in coming months.

—Bhagwan Thadani, Pune

Curing Covid-19

Hyderabad-based vaccine manufacturer Bharat Biotech's, Covid-vaccine COVAXIN's successful entry into phase I & II human trials is a glad tidings. It is India's first vaccine candidate with DCGI's approval. A complete made in India vaccine. COVAXIN is an inactivated vaccine created from a strain of Covid causing SARS-CoV-2 infection, but with the ability to cause the disease even in a weakened form. They use the killed version of the germ that causes the disease. It builds the immune system mount an antibody response towards virus. The increasing cases every day is a matter of concern. The great hope to control the viral spread is always a vaccine. They protect humans from contracting infective diseases by supplying specific antibodies to neutralise the virus causing pathogens, while not making a person actually get sick from it.

—Ravi Teja Kathuripalli, Hyderabad

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