

Centre-State rift won't help in resolving crises

Great power comes with great responsibility. It is an obligation of the Centre to refrain from bypassing the elected leadership while dealing with States. Two recent developments have raised concern that the Centre wants to give instructions to officials functioning under elected State regimes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held two virtual meetings with district magistrates and State officials to review the COVID-19 situation. Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal held a virtual meeting to discuss the National Education Policy, and related matters such as the conduct of Class XII examinations with State Secretaries in charge of education. While such meetings may help the Prime Minister or any Union Minister get some feedback from the field across India, it is quite unusual for leaders in the central political executive to bypass their counterparts in the States. The Tamil Nadu Minister for School Education, Anbil Mahesh Poyyamozhi, took the right stand by not deputing any official to represent the State in Mr. Pokhriyal's virtual interaction. The idea was not to boycott the meeting, but to say the Minister ought to have been included in a discussion on the NEP. If the Prime Minister belongs to one party, and the officials addressed are from a State run by another, there is bound to be resentment that the elected representatives of the State are being bypassed. In the present case, it is true that the Centre has a major role in the pandemic response. The Disaster Management Act has been invoked to specify guidelines on lockdowns, restrictions and relaxations and to ensure smooth medical supplies. However, it would be in the larger interest of the country if events and discussions are held in such a way that the political structures at the State are not seen to be undermined. Only together can we stand in these difficult times.



NAVKARAN SINGH SANDHU EXPLAINS HOW NO COUNTRY IS SAFE UNTIL EVERY COUNTRY IS SAFE

Let's talk about vaccine inequality

Although it's easier said than done, it still is our best bet. When Coronavirus rattled the world back in January 2020, the whole world went into panic mode. By the end of the year, as we had millions of cases and watched thousands succumb to the virus, we also witnessed the signing of numerous bilateral deals between various governments and vaccine manufacturing companies to procure their share of the vaccine shots.

This is exactly where the problem began. While the rich countries with their billions of dollars ordered and procured millions of doses in advance, the poorer nations were left to wait in line. According to experts, by the beginning of 2021, the developed G7 countries had already procured vaccine shots for every 1 of 3 of their citizens which translates to nearly 33% of their population whereas the poorer nations could barely manage to acquire merely 1 vaccine shot for every 100 of their citizens at a staggering rate of only 1% of their population. Yeah, you read that right. And this right here, is Vaccine Inequality.

How the rich failed the poor

The so-called "first-world countries", the developed and the civilised ones have shamelessly taken to hoarding and grabbing the maximum they can. So much so that some of the African countries won't get any vaccine up until 2024! The differences are glaring and the numbers are astonishing. While the USA has vaccinated 44% of its population already by May 2021, Kenya has been able to provide for only 1.6% of its population. While Canada has outrageously ordered vaccines that can provide for more than 10 times of its population, more than 30 poor world countries haven't been able to get even one shot as of now! By September, 2021, Israel will have all its citizens vaccinated and conversely, Nigeria would struggle even to give its frontline workers 2 shots each. According to Tedros Ghebreyesus,



the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 39 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines had been administered in at least 49 higher-income countries, while a meagre 25 doses had been administered in one of the lowest-income countries.

If all this wasn't enough, the developed countries have also refused to let go of patents of the vaccines for the developing or low-income countries to make for their own. It shouldn't come as a surprise that when the whole world was locked down and most of the small and medium businesses faced a crunch, the big pharmaceutical companies raked in huge profits and look at all-time high stock prices.

The disgraceful and deplorable "vaccine grab" by the rich countries, controlled by capitalists and rich pharmas is only helping the pandemic last longer. And the longer it will take to vaccinate enough global population, the severer the virus will become as is apparent from what's happening in India.

Where did India go wrong?

From getting vaccines from other countries to producing its own, India did fairly

well. In fact, India administers the highest number of vaccines in a single day. But due to its huge population, it's still not enough! By May 2021, India has been able to fully vaccinate only 1.8% of its population. Also, the shortfall problem is now coming to the fore as more and more people become eligible to get the shot but not everyone is getting it.

And this brings us to the Vaccine Inequality within the country: between the haves and the have nots. While private hospitals are providing vaccine shots (plus a nice counselling session on a fancy couch) for as much as Rs 1200, the government centres where this vaccine is free, run out of these shots every other day. The poor and lower-middle-class line up outside government vaccination centres every day but return empty-handed even after waiting for hours, mostly standing in long queues in 35°C. The dirty Indian politics doesn't help either and the states ruled by the opposition parties fare even worse here. The step motherly treatment is evident from the fact that Punjab, Rajasthan, Maharashtra have all signalled their inability to vaccinate the 18-45 age group because of the severe shortage in the number of

available doses.

The way forward

It's a shame how these rich countries have failed the poor ones. How they've refused to do anything more than what keeps their "image or reputation".

The developed world needs to understand that the virus, if left to spread and mutate even in the remotest corner of the world; will surely knock on their doors sooner than later. Unlike these countries, the virus will not differentiate between the rich and the poor with its severity and its mutations. They also need to apprehend that their selfish modus operandi of "Every country for its own" will not work in case of a Global Pandemic.

The COVAX initiative of WHO, which is a desperate but laudable attempt for equitable distribution of the vaccine, has put up a mechanism to get these vaccines to the countries in the low-income bracket. The initiative has been joined by more than 140 countries including the developed ones and has started disbursing the vaccines to the needy. The mechanism loosely aims to be the "Robinhood": take from the rich and give to the poor. But for it to make a real impact, the first world countries need to throw some major weight behind the COVAX with more than just words or money. The Biden administration of the USA with its proposal to back the waivers on the vaccines offers some hope for people of "the third world" countries. Also, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) needs to step up and waiver any patents that can hurt the cause.

The only solution to a pandemic is either to eradicate the virus or vaccinate enough people to create a Herd. It's high time these countries start acting on the lessons of "Humanity" they so often preach.

The only way we can have some hope that the inevitable third wave is not as deadly as the current one is to get enough people vaccinated. And we need to ACT NOW!

Views are personal

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

ON WHATSAPP PRIVACY POLICY AND NEED FOR DATA PROTECTION LAWS

- IT'S AN AVOIDABLE INTERVENTION**
The Centre's recent notice to messaging service provider WhatsApp to withdraw its updated privacy policy is an avoidable intervention into what is a legitimate business decision.
- MAKING MONEY WHATSAPP'S RIGHT**
The company's privacy updates are designed to make the business interactions that take place on its platform easier while also personalising ads on Facebook. That is how it will have to make its money.
- THERE MUSTN'T BE DISCRIMINATION**
India's Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) has made a charge that WhatsApp has discriminated against its Indian users. The allegations are genuine in so many ways.
- SINGLING OUT ISN'T PROFESSIONAL**
WhatsApp has reportedly said in its affidavit that it is being singled out, and that its policy is not different from those of private apps such as Google, BigBasket, Koo, as well as Aarogya Setu, Bhim, etc.
- DATA PROTECTION REMAINS CRUCIAL**
A fitful approach to issues concerning the WhatsApp user may do more harm to India's approach to data protection and freedom than anything else.



VENU RAJAMONY ON WHY LOCKDOWNS SHOULD BE IMPOSED ONLY AFTER ADEQUATE PREPARATIONS

In Kerala, a humane lockdown is in place

At a time when several States are already under one form of lockdown or another, it seems facile to debate whether there should be a national lockdown or not. Indians are witness to never-before-seen sights of bodies floating in the Ganges, drought of medical oxygen, collapsing health infrastructure, a faltering vaccination drive, and the pandemic stretching its tentacles rapidly into rural areas.

With a national positivity rate of about 20% and over 4,000 daily deaths, India must do what it needs to do — a national lockdown if unavoidable; if not, regional lockdowns/micro-containment zones. It should, however, ensure that the implementation of any lockdown is humane and protects the interests of those likely to be worst affected. Lockdowns should be imposed only after adequate preparation and planning, involving experts. Moreover, adequate notice should be given to the affected people so that they have enough time to prepare themselves.

The lockdown in Kerala offers some important lessons. Realising that night curfews and weekend lockdowns were insufficient to halt the rapid rise in infections, a complete lockdown from May 8 to 16 was announced on May 6. This provided the State with about two days to prepare for the event as compared to the national lockdown imposed last year with a four-hour notice.

From the beginning of the pandemic last year, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan took command and was the main face of the government's response. Through daily press briefings, he provided detailed information on the rate of infections and fatalities; the availability of beds, ICUs, oxygen and vaccines; as well as measures taken to deal with



the crisis. This paid handsome dividends in the recently concluded Assembly elections for the Left Democratic Front. The people liked the idea of a strong leader presiding over their interests and acting as a guardian in a time of crisis. Assured now of a second term, Mr. Vijayan has provided a smooth continuum in leadership and decision-making. He has continued his daily press briefings and communicated the gravity of the situation with facts and figures, steps being taken by the government, and the need for the public to cooperate.

The response to the second wave at the national level and in Delhi has been marked by confusion, conflicting authorities, lack of transparency and no clear assumption of responsibility or willingness to answer uncomfortable questions. People have been forced to use personal networks to scrounge for oxygen and beds in hospitals. In refreshing contrast, in Kerala, there is clarity on

where the buck stops. Most Chief Ministers value their engagement with the media and are open and accessible. It is, however, not known how many of them engage with the media on the COVID-19 issue as intensely as Mr. Vijayan does and that too on a daily basis. The Prime Minister, Home Minister and Health Minister as well as Chief Ministers of the worst-affected States would be well advised to follow suit and see transparency as an important part of the COVID-19 response toolkit. A direct, open and proactive approach in this regard would go a long way in building popular trust and confidence that the crisis can be overcome.

Volunteers pack food for COVID-19 patients at a community kitchen during COVID-induced lockdown, in Kozhikode, Kerala on May 10, 2021.

A commendable aspect of the current lockdown in Kerala has been a clear articulation of the principle that no one in the State should suffer from hunger or lack of medical attention. To this end, food kits are being delivered to homes. Community kitchens and Janakeeya hotels (people's hotels) have been opened. First-level treatment centres and second-level treatment centres have been set up to ensure that patients are screened and treated appropriate to their symptoms. Only the most serious cases reach the district and speciality COVID-19 hospitals. Domiciliary care centres have also been created to provide shelter, food and treatment to those who do not have the space at home to be quarantined. In private hospitals, 50% of the beds have been declared as COVID-19 beds. Focused efforts are underway to assure migrant workers that they need not flee to their hometowns in panic because of the lockdown. Communications in Hindi

have been issued, clarifying that they will be provided food as well as vaccination.

Similar to the 'Mumbai model', beds are allotted through centralised control rooms in each district. These rooms also monitor requirements of oxygen and ambulances. Orders have been issued pegging the cost of RT-PCR testing and treatment charges in private hospitals at a reasonable level. The Kerala High Court has stepped in to supervise the government's response. It has dismissed challenges from private labs to the reduction of charges and in response to a PIL, approved a rate card for hospitals prepared by the government. Coming down on private hospitals, the court pointed out how shocked it was at the usurious charges levied by some for the simplest of services.

Having empowered local bodies and devolved finances to them long before the crisis, elected officials at the grassroots level are Kerala's first line of defence in the fight against COVID-19. Panchayat members and municipal councillors, irrespective of their political affiliations, function as foot soldiers. They look out for fresh infections amongst their constituents, motivate people to get vaccinated, supervise the implementation of the lockdown and ensure the supply of medicines and provisions to those in need. Commendably, the Opposition led by the Congress has called upon everyone to work together. Leaders from both the Opposition and ruling party have been setting up help desks, providing ambulances and organising food packets.

Venu Rajamony is former Ambassador of India to the Netherlands and former Press Secretary to President Pranab Mukherjee

LETTERBOX

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BOOKS: REVIEW

New book takes critical look at judicial system

Delay in justice delivery as in case of Aarushi Talwar's murder is a sad reflection on both judiciary and the society, argues Rajesh Talwar, a legal officer with the UN and author of a book on this Noida teenager who was found dead on this day 13 years ago.

"A fast-track court alone doesn't help. We need more sensitive and competent judges to deal with certain kinds of cases," he says.

In his book "The Killing of Aarushi and the Murder of Justice", he cites the need for far better expert opinion, and a better quality of judge to assess that opinion and other evidence. The Aarushi murder case is yet to be solved.

Talwar shares how medical experts on behalf of the prosecution were completely self-contradictory and extraordinarily foolish, how the so-called experts were not aware of completely normal gynaecological occurrence and how all the evidence was destroyed by the investigators themselves.

According to Talwar, what such cases and the ones that follow tell about the judiciary is really its crumbling state, where the only real debate possible is whether the justice system is going to collapse, or has already collapsed.

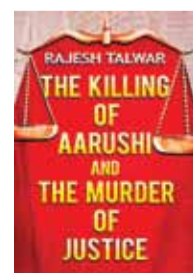
"What it tells about the society is that our leaders do not do forward planning even on extremely important issues, be it in respect of coronavirus or justice delivery,"

Delays in the justice delivery system as in case of Aarushi murder make the falsely accused such as the Talwars as well as victims suffer much more, the book says

he says.

He argues that this whole business of appointing a fast-track court is nothing else but "sleight of hand".

It soothes the public, says Talwar, adding "Every time there is an Aarushi, a Nirbhaya, a Jessica Lal, or a Priyadarshini Mattoo case, there is a hue and cry and



The Killing of Aarushi and the Murder of Justice By Rajesh Talwar; Kalpaz Publications; 184 pages; Free Kindle edition on Amazon

the government orders the case to be set on the fast-track rails." He is of the opinion that justice for women will not improve till the time there is an overall improvement in justice. "And that will not happen till such time that we have a massive increase in investment in the justice system."

Talwar also cites lack of proper database management and tracking as a reason behind increase in crime against women.

"Among rapists, it is the paedophiles who are known to be repeat offenders. A few months after the charges against the accused paedophile or rapist are

drawn up, the man will be out on bail, and he will remain on bail for possibly a decade, during which period his name cannot be on any database because he has not yet been convicted," he says.

As a result of the delays in the judicial system, these paedophile rapists roam completely free, during long periods of delayed justice continuing to live wherever they want, possibly in an area full of young children playing in the park for instance, and preying on any other young child, being now better trained on how to avoid detection as a result of their court and jail experiences, he adds.

Delays in the justice delivery system as in case of Aarushi murder make the falsely accused such as the Talwars as well as victims suffer much more, he says.

"There is no closure. It's terrible to think of the torture the Talwars underwent. The Supreme Court verdict still hangs over their head," he adds.

THE FINANCIAL WORLD

RNI NO. DELENG/2011/38860
PRINTED & PUBLISHED BY SWINDER BAJWA
ON BEHALF OF FW MEDIA
PRINTED AT JAGJIT PUBLISHING CO. PVT LTD
D-12, INDUSTRIAL AREA, PHASE-1, MOHALI,
PUNJAB 160059

PRINTER & PUBLISHER SWINDER BAJWA
OWNER : FW MEDIA
PUBLISHED AT: BUILDING NO-23, NEHRU PLACE
NEW DELHI 110019; PHONE: 9888040061

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(*RESPONSIBLE FOR SELECTION OF NEWS UNDER THE PRB ACT)



TAUKTAE

DEPARTS AS ANOTHER CYCLONE COMES IN

THE STATES ALONG THE WESTERN COAST HAVE MUCH TO LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF THEIR COUNTERPARTS ON THE EAST — BOTH IN TERMS OF SUCCESSES AND FAILURES. THEY NEED TO INVEST IN MORE CYCLONE SHELTERS. CONVERSATIONS MUST BE INITIATED ON WAYS TO FACTOR IN CLIMATE-RELATED VAGARIES WHILE PLANNING CONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES CLOSE TO THE COAST

DOMINICK RODRIGUES

Cyclone Tauktae stormed its way through several states of India on a rampage that left many cities devastated in its wake with trails of uprooted trees, fallen dwellings and floods — all amidst a population already reeling under deadly effects of the covid-19 pandemic.

However, even as the population struggled to recover from the stormy battering, the Indian Meteorological Department announced on May 19 the likelihood of another cyclone hitting India on May 26-27 — but on India's East Coast this time. A low pressure area forming over north Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal on May 22 was likely to intensify gradually into a cyclonic storm to move northwest to reach the Bengal and Odisha coasts by May 26 evening, the IMD stated.

Meanwhile, Cyclone Tauktae had wound its way up the western coastline — often moving inlandwards along several states like Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra.

Cyclone Tauktae's aftermath

witnessed Prime Minister Narendra Modi doing an aerial survey of affected areas in Gujarat and announcing assistance of Rs 1,000 crore for immediate relief work in the state. He announced an ex-gratia of Rs. 2 lakh to the next of kin of the deceased and Rs. 50,000 to the seriously injured in the States of Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the UTs of Daman and Diu, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli.

"Let the panchnama be completed first," Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray said while assuring immediate and adequate compensation for those adversely affected and also promising to carry out a 360-degree SWOT framework analysis of the actual devastation caused by Cyclone Tauktae.

Thackeray held a review meeting in Ratnagiri on the Konkan Coast following a day-long tour of the cyclone-hit regions in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts — including Rajapur and Ratnigiri talukas which bore the severe brunt of the cyclone's fury.

In Goa, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant announced Rs four lakh compensation — to families of those who lost their lives in cyclone Tauktae — including the mother of a 34-year-old woman Mali Patil

The improvement in the country's weather alert system since the super cyclones in Gujarat and Odisha in the closing years of the last century resulted in significant reduction in the loss of lives

who died in Anjuna village after a coconut tree fell on her.

Sawant declared the loss of power infrastructure in the cyclone at Rs 40 crore, besides 135 houses being damaged. Low tension lines spanning 55 kms length, high tension lines covering 42 kms, and 58 distribution transformers were totally damaged — affecting 70% of Goa's power supply network, where 1,500 electricity poles were bent and around 1,000 broken with almost all villages totally without power supply.

While humanity was affected, the cyclone took its toll also on the marine environment. The aftermath of Cyclone Tauktae (meaning "Gecko") witnessed environmental groups like Terra Conscious lending a helping hand to Goa and other states, which resulted in the rescue of a juvenile Hawksbill Sea turtle — reported by Kayah & Katya Coelho from Baga beach. The turtle is undergoing treatment provided by Reefwatch & the state Forest Department.

The network was also informed of a young Spinner dolphin that washed up dead in Patnem beach and a necropsy was performed by Reefwatch under the guidance of the Goa Forest Department, Puja Mitra, Founder, Terra Conscious, stated, adding that the network has witnessed over 400 incidents being reported to it since June 2017 - 2021.

"Goa is home to a wide diversity of marine wildlife species, many of whom are protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act of India, 1972. These include the Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin & the Finless Porpoise, which are residential in Goa's coastal waters. We also have regular nesting of the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle as well as coral reefs at Grande Island offshore from Vasco."

"Goa also experiences frequent stranding incidents of marine species across its tiny coastline. A stranded animal such as a dolphin, sea turtle or sea bird may be dead or alive when it lands on a beach. They should only be handled by trained persons who have been given permission by the state Forest Department, (who is the custodian of all wildlife in the state) to do so."

To monitor Goa's coastline and respond to marine wildlife stranding incidents, the Goa State Forest Department in collaboration with Terra Conscious, IUCN India & Drishti Marine (lifesaving service) established a voluntary marine stranding response network in Goa in 2017.

"The lifeguards of Drishti Marine, Goa are the first responders of the network and training/coordination is provided by Terra Conscious. All rescue, treatment, necropsies etc are handled by the forest department,"

The government and NGOs have warned the public against touching any dead or injured marine creature stranded on the beach. "If you see a dead or injured marine animal on the beach: Please do not handle the animal yourself. There is a risk of zoonosis disease transfer and you may also end up injuring the animal further; All species of whales, dolphins, porpoises and sea turtles in India are given the highest protection in India under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act of India, 1972. Handling them without forest department permission is a criminal offense. Hence please do not attempt to handle them on your own. Always report a stranded animal to the nearest lifeguard tower or call the Forest Department."

In Maharashtra, 10 coastal districts were affected while 19 people and 11 cattle were killed, 81 structures fully damaged, 13,021 structures partially damaged in cyclone-related incidents, besides 13,425 people evacuated to safety, according to disaster management authority officials. In Gujarat, around 79 people lost their lives in cyclone Tauktae-related incidents with Amreli district being worst-affected with 45 deaths.

TISS Researcher Amita Bhide said an odd fact going unnoticed in the cyclone rampage is marine waste — majority of which is often dumped carelessly by humans on the seas — being washed ashore in greater volumes and putting pressure on the municipalities cleaning manpower, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic keeping volunteers away.

Another strange fact is the horticulture crop being hit in the Konkan coastal region including Maharashtra, where the famed "Alphonso" breed of mango is grown. "The Alphonso mangoes are ripening at this time and the cyclone fury has impacted the financial benefits of these farmers, besides also the Cashewnut crop growers," she said.

"This (Cyclone Tauktae) was not a natural cyclone," Prof.



Venkatray Nayak, marine biologist from Karnataka University, noted while poring through data of cyclonic storms occurring since 1900 in India. "Many boats and agricultural lands in Karnataka were damaged in the storm as saltwater surged into the fields affecting crops. However, the cyclone came as a boon to fisherfolk as post-cyclone effects included seawater nutrients increasing and drawing fish in greater numbers shorewards to ensure a good catch."

"The aftermath of a cyclone in 1974/75 highlighted the need for a Coastal Management Plan to prevent such natural disasters and, in 1991, the Coastal Zone Regulations Environmental Act was passed declaring 200 metres above high tide

area as 'No Development Zone.' However, despite urging the Government in this regard, even today it's not properly implemented but rather being modified for tourism and, as a result, lots of money is spent on the environment's recovery from damage."

"Earlier, sand dunes and mangroves were natural barriers against the encroaching seas and inclement weather, but today they are seen destroyed in many places. Maharashtra however has identified in Thane and Mumbai some mangroves as forests and protected them by clubbing them under the Forests, CRZ and Biodiversity Acts."

"Cyclones occur when ocean waters evaporate in the bright sunlight, creating a 'vacuum'

(low pressure area or Depression) several kms-long to form clouds and whirlpools, where wind enters the ocean and form waves that head off in the low pressure direction landwards."

"Cyclone Tauktae is a rare phenomenon as it occurred too early (in summer) instead of near-monsoon time and there are possibilities of this happening in future. We attribute such unnatural disasters to climate change, global warming. The Arabian Sea is a small waterbody, compared to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. So cyclone's Tauktae's effects should have been lesser than what happened now. Also, despite the IMD predicting the cyclone, the fishermen ventured into the sea on the Government's watch."

