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## A poorly thought-out package for the poor

The Rs 1.7 lakh crore package announced by the government to mitigate the distress and hardship caused by the ongoing 21-day lockdown is aimed at a large population consisting of many segments. It has within its ambit women, farmers, MGNREGA workers, pensioners and many others. Women Jan Dhan account holders, women Ujjwala beneficiaries and women self-help groups are all included. These are all sections of people who are directly affected by the lockdown and who need support. But the benefits may have been targeted too narrowly so that the same set of beneficiaries might be getting most benefits while many others who are equally deserving may be left out. Those who do not have bank accounts or ration cards also need support and succour.

The package is in two parts—cash transfers to be made to the beneficiaries through banks and supply of essentials like rice, wheat and pulses through the public distribution system (PDS). The free rations will take some days to be distributed, and even the cash transfers are at least five days away as they will only be made on or after April 1. The payouts may even be seen as too late and too little. A day under lockdown is longer than a normal day, and so sustaining themselves for a week may be difficult for many. MGNREGA workers will get only Rs 20 more per day and the farmers' Rs 2,000 is only an advanced payment. The PDS is inefficient or riddled with corruption in most states, and so the supply of essentials through them will not be easy. The government will have to ensure that the supplies actually reach the needy. There is also the danger of beneficiaries thronging ration shops, defeating the purpose of the lockdown. The authorities should give their thought to this aspect also.

**Plan should have been implemented before lockdown**

Demands had been made to the government two weeks ago to draw on the overflowing food grain buffer stocks and distribute them among the people, in anticipation of the present situation. But the government has taken so much time to make a plan. In fact, even the lockdown could have been better planned and implemented. It should have enabled migrant workers to go home and PDS shops to distribute food to the poor before the lockdown. The challenge now is to implement the package effectively all over the country. It is a national task, with the burden mostly on the states, though Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her deputy Anurag Thakur, who announced the package, avoidably described it as a sign of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's large-heartedness and 'ashirwad'.

in various global initiatives and institutions. American self-absorption has assumed unprecedented levels now. Not only has the Trump administration turned its backs on even its European allies, it was too late in helping its own people. Trump's strategy was focused on name-calling and scapegoating, as when he called the coronavirus the 'Chinese virus.' That does not make for world leadership. It is true that Covid-19 originated in China. China's initial handling of the outbreak was inept and flawed; whistleblowers were arrested in an attempt to downplay the crisis. Its government was opaque and disingenuous on facts and figures. But after some initial floundering, the Xi Jinping government got its act together. Hospitals and isolation facilities were built at remarkable speed and quarantines and lockdowns were imposed. They were often harsh. However, several weeks later, with the domestic situation improving, China is reaching out to others. At a time of grave uncertainty and crisis, the world needs strong leadership, and this China is providing through its global outreach. Many are criticising this outreach as a public relations exercise aimed at improving its image, which it might well be. But this exercise is helping other countries in a positive way. China's use of soft power to win friends and influence is neither to be scoffed at nor taken lightly by either the US or others that have pretensions to global leadership.

## China, the new moral power?

With the magnitude of China's Covid-19 crisis declining—the number of new domestic infections has fallen in recent weeks and no new cases of community transmission have been reported over the past week—the Chinese government is now turning its attention to supporting the efforts of other countries struggling with the pandemic. It has offered to share its expertise and experience in fighting the virus with India. China is sending plane loads of testing kits, masks, ventilators and medicines as well as health professionals to dozens of countries. These include poor and developing countries like Liberia and Cambodia as well as economic powerhouses and G-8 members like Italy and France. NATO and EU members, who in the past would have turned to Washington for help are now looking to Beijing for support. China is reshaping the global order. If the Belt and Road Initiative signalled Chinese global economic heft, with the coronavirus pandemic, China is positioning itself as the world's new humanitarian superpower. And even as it does so, US President Donald Trump is twiddling his thumbs. China's rise is being facilitated by Trump's abdication of a responsible and empathetic leadership role in the current global health crisis. His 'America First' policy saw the US downsize its participation



**Beijing is aiding other countries' in Covid-19 fight**

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The State Board for Wildlife was subverted and wildlife laws violated to clear the project that will destroy the Western Ghats

PRAVEEN BHARGAV

In an unprecedented development, flouting key tenets of the Constitution and the law on wildlife, Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa appears to have pulverised the State Board for Wildlife and cleared the ecologically disastrous Hubballi-Ankola railway line in a hurriedly convened meeting. While the ecological ramifications are widely known, it is important to unravel the bumpy path that the proposal has traversed.

The genesis of this project goes back to 1998 when the railway ministry sanctioned a broad gauge line to connect Hubballi to the coastal town of Ankola. A report of South-Western Railway cited an increase in the movement of iron ore to the west coast as justification for approval. However, the project was evaluated by statutory authorities and the Forest Advisory Committee which concluded in May 2004 that "The construction of the proposed new railway track from Hubli to Ankola for transporting mainly iron ore has not much justification. On the other hand, this will simply be a tragedy on the prime forests of Western Ghats... and irreversible effect on fragile ecosystem of Western Ghats".

Subsequently, in August 2015, the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) recommended to the Supreme Court that "...this Hon'ble Court may consider directing the MoEF not to reconsider/ approve the proposal for diversion of 965 ha of forest land (subsequently revised to 720 ha and then to 667 ha)... for construction of the new Hubli-Ankola Broad Gauge railway line and which was earlier rejected on merit by the MoEF."

In August 2018, a three-member committee comprising officers of the Ministry of Environment and the Wildlife Institute of India conducted a detailed site inspection. The committee concluded that: "i) It is reiterated that extremely fragile ecosystems of the Western Ghats will not be able to sustain or buffer impacts... ii) The original rationale behind laying the proposed Hubballi-Ankola Railway track does not appear to be quite valid as of today since the mining and export of iron ore from the region

is almost nil...v) Mitigation is not a panacea that will overcome all ill-effects of developmental projects...the Committee does not recommend implementing the project considering its wider ecological ramifications... and recommends its complete abatement."

Notwithstanding all these, elements of the construction lobby, with deep political links across party lines, tenaciously pursued the project clearance, which was deliberated at a meeting of the State Board for Wildlife in January 2019. Due to strong opposition from some non-official members, clever bureaucrats quickly got the decision "deferred," only to get it listed again. At a meeting on March 17, it came up for a debate and was again met



with stiff opposition, leading to yet another deferment.

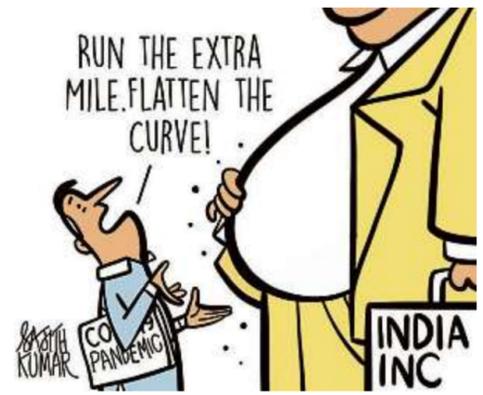
Three days later, another meeting of the State Board for Wildlife was hurriedly convened with this single point agenda, leading to the clearance of the railway line. The manner in which the state government is pursuing this ecologically disastrous project raises several legal and procedural questions.

First, it must be emphasized that the State Board for Wildlife is a Statutory Committee constituted under Section 6 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Only those officials holding positions prescribed in the Act are eligible to be members, in addition to 13 non-official members. The Chief Minister, who is the chairperson of the Board, invited some of his cabinet colleagues and an MLA with no expertise in wildlife. This is a clear violation of Rule 9 of the State Board for Wildlife Rules, 2006, which specifically provides for the chairperson to invite only such persons who have experience in wildlife conservation. Such persons are also duty bound to act as per the objects of the law, which is to protect

## HUBBALLI-ANKOLA RAIL LINE

# A legal fiasco

## TO BE PRECISE



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# Cornering the coronavirus

India needs large-scale testing immediately, and investments in the public health system

SHREELATA RAO SESHADRI AND PRASANNA SALIGRAM

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has been diligently reporting the spread of the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) cases on its website, providing a daily update on the number of cases by state and Union Territory, those cured and the deaths. On Thursday morning, it showed that there were 602 cases in India (and it rose to 649 by the afternoon, as per news reports), across 26 states and UTs.

The first case of Covid-19 in India was reported on January 30, 2020, in a person who had travelled back to the country from Wuhan, China – the origin of the pandemic. The following weeks were fairly quiet, with single cases being reported. Until March 6, there were 30 cases identified across the country. Since then there has been a steady rise in cases.

There are those who take comfort in the low count – 600-plus cases in a country of 1.3 billion people! Surely, the shutting down of schools and colleges and malls and everything else under the lockdown must be an over-reaction! There are fantastic notions doing the rounds that somehow Indians are immune to the virus, with no evidence to back that claim.

One reason for the low number of known cases is the low level of testing: there are 50-plus testing centres for the whole country, and less than 20,000 people have been tested so far. The testing criteria are also narrow: if you are displaying some of the symptoms (cough, cold, fever) and if you have returned from a foreign country, or if you have pneumonia. This flies in the face of what we already know: that infected people can be asymptomatic and yet spreading the infection. For comparison, China had tested some 3.2 lakh people in just its Guangdong province by February 28. Even the US, which has faced severe criticism on this front, has conducted over 1 lakh tests so far. Testing is the only way to prevent, detect and arrest community spread.

Under the circumstances, it is premature to presume that community spread is not already a reality in India – we simply don't have the data to back such a claim. It is more a prayer than a presumption, because if the coronavirus were to spread through our crowded urban neighbourhoods and poorly served rural hamlets, the ill-equipped and under-resourced Indian public health system will be the most spectacular victim of the pandemic.



The chronic under-funding of the health sector in India is well-known. Stagnating at around 1.2% of GDP, healthcare (both out-patient and inpatient) is largely financed by people out of their own pockets. The government has recently launched Ayushman Bharat, which aims to cover the costs of curative, hospital-based services for millions of people below the poverty line. This is necessary, since catastrophic illness is a major cause of poverty. Even without a looming epidemic, it was estimated that about 55 million people got pushed below the poverty line due to health expenditures (2012); 38 million fell into poverty due to the cost of medicines alone. However, if insurance for catastrophic illness, and that too at secondary/tertiary level, is expanded while neglecting primary preventive care, we face a grim scenario.

What we need urgently is to make 'Health for All' not just a slogan but a reality. A basic requirement for this is a strong public health network, with a sufficient number of full-time trained and equipped health workers who could undertake preventive actions (including health education), early detection, testing and self-quarantine if necessary so that such epidemics could be contained and dealt with at low human and systems cost.

Additionally, dealing with Covid-19 has had to enlist other departments: airport authorities (for screening passengers), police (for contact tracing) and so on. Clearly, we have to recognize the inadequacy of a siloed, medical approach to public health and move beyond it with 'inter-sectoral collaboration' and society-wide approaches. An important part of this would be to bring the private sector fully on board. Stringent reporting mechanisms need to be in place so that cases which present themselves in private facilities do not fall through the cracks. Most dangerous are those who lack access to a credible public health system and cannot afford private healthcare: by delaying seeking care, they might go unnoticed and contribute to community spread.

Simple, cheap measures that prevent early onset of serious diseases are underfunded. If we instead focus on funding quarantine facilities, respirators and high-end equipment at secondary and tertiary hospitals to deal with the most critical cases, we have already lost the battle. Not that they are not required – they are. But not at the cost of robust primary preventive care. Emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic should be used as opportunities for systemic strengthening, not just for crisis management.

(The writers are professor and guest faculty, respectively, at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# The next unicorn

Can you imagine the inconspicuous horn to be melodious? I have an idea

C N MADHUSUDAN

I arrived in Bengaluru yesterday and borrowed my sister's car to go to my yoga class. By the time I finished and started driving back, the traffic had built up. The red light was testing everyone's patience. A barrage of horns began, initiated by a bus driver three vehicles behind me. I have a reputation in the family that I drive like a taxi driver – I couldn't let them down. So, I joined in the honking fray. A few seconds later, I realized that I was not making any difference – my car had a silent horn!

I was impressed that my sister had the car's horn disabled. Perhaps she

had read about the Pavlovian project that the Mumbai police had implemented. The higher the decibel level at a traffic light, the longer the light would stay red!

For most countries, car designers strive to bring the highest audio quality and create an ideal listening venue for symphonies, musicals and such. Noise cancellation is central to their thinking. The Indian market throws a unique challenge to them. Indian drivers rely on their horns to communicate with other drivers, pedestrians, animals and to just say hi!

The experience of driving a car with a silent horn was novel to me and quite unique. It was like being on mute on a conference call where everyone else was talking. What a contradiction – horns that produce no sound. Disruptive as it allows the driver to communicate – express anger, frustra-

tion, happiness, support for a cause ... without inflicting any sound terrorism on fellow roadies. Road hugging apartments, offices and homes would welcome the chance to suffer in silence.

New product ideas bubbled up inside me. How about a very low frequency horn operating just under the human hearing frequency that could be programmed based on your cultural or religious leanings? Just download a tune, mantra, chant or whatever else and you can make the roads more conducive to calmness and meditation. Less irritation, less stress and less road rage. Boards that said, "No Horns Please" could be simply repurposed to say, "Horns Please". All the angels and venture capitalists in Bengaluru would compete to fund this startup. Surely, they have all been victims of noise pollution. Surely, this can be the next unicorn!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Lockdown and the police's responsibility

Not only India, but the whole world is suffering because of the spread of the coronavirus. Our central and state government have been handling the spread well until now. India took strong steps to take control of the circumstance as the Prime Minister announced 21-day lockdown all over the country. He clarified later on that all medical shops including hospital, clinics, laboratories, banks and grocery shops would remain open in an attempt to subdue any panic.

But how must one reach these shops when the police

### Care for the elderly

In these terrible days of the pandemic, as unprecedented events have held the people in a grip of panic and as the country has gone into lockdown, our senior citizens might be scared of the current atmosphere. It is our duty to take care of the mental and physical health of the elderly. We must at least for their sake not to flout orders and step onto the streets. If senior citizens live alone, we can volunteer to buy groceries for them or help them in any way that we can. **M Pradyu, Kannur**

### Stop racist attacks

It is shocking that when the whole world is affected by a pandemic, some people are carrying out racist

attacks on people from the North East and hurting their dignity. Recently, a young woman from Manipur, in Delhi's Vijay Nagar locality was called "Corona" by her colleague. The incident occurred in Kolkata and Pune as well. The prejudice that the pandemic has brought out against those from North East has been deeply disturbing, unfortunate and unacceptable. Perpetrators of such prejudices must be booked by the police. Anyone who practices in discriminatory and racist behaviour is acting unconstitutionally. Racism is unacceptable in our composite culture, it creates social stigma. **Dr Harsh Wardhan, Patna**

### Take action

Some private schools and colleg-

es going on with the process of admission of students for the next academic year despite directions from the department to wait for further orders for admissions. The concerned officials should then initiate action against those flouting rules. The government should also publicise these measures among students and parents seeking admission that the process has been stalled until further notice. Otherwise, schools will continue to flout regulations, and parents and students will wallow in their worry. **A K Shariff, Mysuru**

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