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STAYING ALERT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON MONITORING NON-COVID-19 DISEASES

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP), the backbone of India's disease monitoring network, is responsible for alerting the Centre and the wider world, on a weekly basis, about the emergence of disease outbreaks, a surge in novel pathogens, the rate of spread and remedial action taken. On average, there are 30-40 such alerts. However, the advent of COVID-19 appears to have veiled the country from any other disease. For one, the latest weekly report available on the IDSP website is from Week 12 (March 16-22). It records a mere six outbreaks/disease alerts across the country. In the same week last year, there were 17 alerts; in 2018, there were 28; and in 2017, there were 45. In Week 11 this year, there were 28 alerts, 12 of which were for COVID-19 and these corresponded to the 110 cases of the disease that were reported in that week of March from when the disease escalated.

One way to understand this situation is that once COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and a lockdown imposed, the IDSP too went into a 'new normal'. With movement at a standstill, hospitals shut, and only testing and treatment for COVID-19 available at government healthcare facilities, the reporting of other diseases suffered. The neglect of other diseases has been independently borne out, for instance, by a reduction in the notifications of fresh tuberculosis infections and a general decline in claims under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme. The other explanation is that akin to a decline in deaths from accidents, the lockdown has contributed to a decline in transmission of contagious diseases. Many of the outbreaks that are routinely reported involve pathogens contracted from contaminated water or those airborne that spread through social interaction. While the reasons for the decline could be deliberated upon, what is unacceptable is the lack of public updates since March 12. The pandemic has taught the world that no modelling can quite forecast the spread of disease and an affliction that may seem under control one week can quickly be threatening the next week. If the country has, as a policy, decided to 'unlock' and restore pre-pandemic routines, then this should also apply to routine surveillance for other diseases. The IDSP also faces a manpower crunch and, mirroring the experience of public health facilities in other countries, is trying to recruit in the middle of a pandemic. It's debatable how useful this would be to improve COVID-19 surveillance, but it is essential in improving overall surveillance as well as providing timely updates to the public and international health agencies. The pandemic needs serious focus, but India cannot afford to ignore other killers.

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PREVENTING FUTURE PANDEMICS: CURB CLIMATE CHANGE AND PROTECT ENVIRONMENT, SAYS UN REPORT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Undeterred: Health workers wearing PPE suits arrive for check-ups at a containment zone in Malvani despite heavy rain on July 5, 2020. | Photo Credit: PTI

Land degradation, wildlife exploitation, intensive farming and climate change are driving the rise in diseases that, like the coronavirus, are passed from animals to humans, United Nations experts said on Monday.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) jointly identified seven trends responsible for such diseases, known as zoonotic, calling on governments to take steps to stop future pandemics.

These are:

"The science is clear that if we keep exploiting wildlife and destroying our ecosystems, then we can expect to see a steady stream of these diseases jumping from animals to humans in the years ahead," said UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen. "Pandemics are devastating to our lives and our economies, and as we have seen over the past months, it is the poorest and the most vulnerable who suffer the most. To prevent future outbreaks, we must become much more deliberate about protecting our natural environment."

How pandemics begin

About 60% of known infectious diseases in humans and 75% of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, she said, largely due to the increased interaction between humans, animals and the environment.

The new coronavirus, which is most likely to have originated in bats, has infected more than 11 million people and killed over half a million people globally, according to the Johns Hopkins University.

But it is just one in a growing number of diseases including Ebola, MERS, West Nile fever, Zika, SARS and Rift Valley fever that have jumped from animal hosts into the human population in recent years, said the report.

Around two million people, mostly in developing nations, die from neglected zoonotic diseases every year. These outbreaks not only cause severe illness and deaths, but also result in major economic losses for some of the world's poorest.

In the last two decades alone, zoonotic diseases have caused economic losses of more than $100 billion. This does not include the cost of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to reach $9 trillion over the next few years, said the report.

Also read: Kerala's battle against zoonotic diseases

Most efforts to control zoonotic diseases have been reactive rather than proactive, say experts. They want governments to invest in public health, farm sustainability, end over-exploitation of wildlife and reduce climate change.

Restructuring our food system for a healthy world

Africa — home to a large portion of the worlds remaining intact rainforests as well as fast-growing human population — is at high risk of the increased emergence of zoonotic diseases - but could also provide solutions, said experts.

"The situation on the continent today is ripe for intensifying existing zoonotic diseases and facilitating the emergence and spread of new ones," said ILRI Director General Jimmy Smith. "But with their experiences with Ebola and other emerging diseases, African countries are demonstrating proactive ways to manage disease outbreaks."

He said some African nations had adopted a "One Health" approach - uniting public health, veterinary and environmental expertise which can help to identify and treat outbreaks in animals before they pass to humans.

The experts urged governments to provide incentives for sustainable land use and animal husbandry and to develop strategies for producing food that do not rely on the destruction of habitats and biodiversity.

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Six DNA vaccines show promise in animals

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THE HINDU EXPLAINS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The story so far: On Monday, July 6, 239 scientists from 32 countries put their signatures on an open letter that said COVID-19 is also transmitted via aerosols. Titled *It is Time to Address Airborne Transmission of COVID-19*, and addressed to the World Health Organization (WHO), they said there was enough evidence to show that viruses are released during exhalation, talking, and coughing as micro droplets small enough to remain aloft and pose a risk of exposure at distances beyond 1-2 metres from someone who is infected (over the 3 feet–6 feet recommended for physical distancing between people to avoid transmission).

The scientists, led by Lidia Morawska of the International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health, WHO Collaborating Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, appealed to "the medical community and the relevant national and international bodies to recognise the potential for airborne spread of COVID-19. There is significant potential for inhalation exposure to viruses in microscopic respiratory droplets (microdroplets) at short to medium distances (up to several metres, or room scale), and we are advocating for the use of preventive measures to mitigate this route of airborne transmission."

Also read | Indoor airborne spread of coronavirus possible, says WHO

The letter came at a time when most public health organisations, including WHO, do not "recognise airborne transmission except for aerosol-generating procedures performed in healthcare settings."

Responding to the letter, in *Oxford Academic — Clinical Infectious Diseases*, Dr. Benedetta Allegranzi, WHO's technical lead for infection prevention and control, was cited in media reports on Tuesday as saying, "there was evidence emerging of airborne transmission of the coronavirus, but that it was not definitive."

She went on to say that the "… possibility of airborne transmission in public settings — especially in very specific conditions, crowded, closed, poorly ventilated settings that have been described, cannot be ruled out." She added, "However, the evidence needs to be gathered and interpreted, and we continue to support this."

In common understanding, aerosols are minute particles that are expelled under pressure, as in the case of fine mist from a jar of perfume, or a can of roach repellent. However, aerosol is a term used to broadly refer to particles suspended in the air; they could include fine dust, mist, or smoke. In the context of transmission of viruses, as in this case, aerosols are read as micro droplets, much smaller (5 microns or lesser) than respiratory droplets, and take a longer time to drop to the floor. They will be expelled by people breathing, laughing or singing, as against respiratory droplets that are expelled with forceful acts such as sneezing or coughing. As per the open letter, "at typical indoor air velocities [5], a 5 micron droplet will travel tens of metres, much greater than the scale of a typical room, while settling from a height of 1.5 m to the floor."

Also read | India 'watching' WHO alert on airborne spread of coronavirus

As they remain suspended in the air for longer, an individual who is COVID-19 positive is likely to infect people standing even at a distance of 1-2 m in a small, poorly ventilated room. "This poses the risk that people sharing such environments can potentially inhale these viruses, resulting in infection and disease," the signatories endorsed.

That respiratory droplets transmit COVID-19 infection has dominated the discourse from nearly the beginning of the epidemic, and has guided the path that interventions have taken thus far, including wearing masks, keeping distance, and hand washing routines.

In its response, WHO did say that there was need to watch the area for possible exposure to aerosols causing the infection, but insisted that the evidence was not yet entirely compelling, except in health-care settings where aerosol emission is common.

The bar of proof has been set high for aerosol transmission; even the scientific reluctance to accept this theory has been couched in belief that it would trigger widespread panic in the community.

A Reuters report cited Jose-Luis Jimenez, a chemist at the University of Colorado Boulder who signed the paper, trying to explain the historical reluctance to accept the notion of aerosol transmission."If people hear airborne, healthcare workers will refuse to go to the hospital," he said. Or people will buy up all the highly protective N95 respirator masks, "and there will be none left for developing countries".

It says: "Airborne transmission appears to be the only plausible explanation for several superspreading events investigated which occurred under such conditions… and others where recommended precautions related to direct droplet transmissions were followed."

Further, the letter says, "It is understood that there is not as yet universal acceptance of airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2; but in our collective assessment there is more than enough supporting evidence so that the precautionary principle should apply. In order to control the pandemic, pending the availability of a vaccine, all routes of transmission must be interrupted."

The signatories agreed that "the evidence is admittedly incomplete for all the steps in COVID-19 micro droplet transmission," but pointed out that it is "similarly incomplete for the large droplet and fomite modes of transmission." Further they advanced the point of view that "airborne transmission mechanism operates in parallel with the large droplet and fomite routes, that are now the basis of guidance".

They relied heavily on several retrospective studies conducted after the SARS-CoV-1 epidemic, demonstrating that airborne transmission was the most likely mechanism explaining the spatial pattern of infections. "Retrospective analysis has shown the same for SARS-CoV-2," the letter said. "In particular, a study in their review of records from a Chinese restaurant, observed no evidence of direct or indirect contact between the three parties. In their review of video records from the restaurant, they observed no evidence of direct or indirect contact between the three parties."

Earlier, a letter in *The New England Journal of Medicine,* titled "Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1" (https://bit.ly/2Zkoo5a), suggested that SARS-CoV-2 remained viable in aerosols for up to three hours, but the generation was done via a high-powered machine that is unlikely to be replicated in real-life situations.

The signatories of the letter said many studies conducted on the spread of other viruses, including respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus, and influenza, show that *viable* airborne viruses can be exhaled and/or detected in the indoor environment of infected patients. "This poses the risk that people sharing such environments can potentially inhale these viruses, resulting in infection and disease. There is every reason to expect that SARS-CoV-2 behaves similarly, and that transmission via airborne micro droplets is an important pathway."

Says Prof. T. Jacob John, retired Professor of Clinical Virology, Christian Medical College, Vellore, "The airborne aerosol transmission theory is rather hyped up, in my opinion." And yet, he says, in closed spaces without ventilation where people tend to crowd around, one must take precautions. Wearing the mask at all times, even indoors, if others are present in the circumstances as described in the open letter, would be recommended, he adds.

As WHO waits for more robust evidence on the principle of aerosol transmission, the authors are pushing only to address every possible pathway to slow down the transmission of COVID-19. Providing sufficient and effective ventilation as far as possible in public buildings, schools and hospitals, avoiding overcrowding in public buildings and transportation systems are recommended, besides, supplementing general ventilation with airborne infection controls such as local exhaust, high efficiency air filtration, and germicidal ultraviolet lights.

The authors, recommending a zero-tolerance approach to COVID-19 transmission, add: "The measures we propose offer more benefits than potential downsides, even if they can only be partially implemented."

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The ingredients are powdered and mixed with water, then boiled to make a decoction of one-fourth of its initial volume.

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UNEXPOSED PEOPLE MAY HAVE COVID-19-SPECIFIC MEMORY T CELLS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Origin: The immunity might arise from exposure to 'common cold' corona- viruses.

At least five studies (one of which has been published in *Cell* and the remaining are pre-prints yet to be peer-reviewed) have shown that people unexposed to and not infected with novel coronavirus may still exhibit T cell responses specific to this virus. An overwhelming percentage of adults are exposed to four different coronaviruses that cause common cold. It is thought that SARS-CoV-2-specific T cell responses seen in healthy people might arise from memory T cells derived from exposure to 'common cold' coronaviruses.

The studies found 20-50% of healthy people display novel coronavirus-specific memory T cells. Whether the presence of pre-existing immunity from memory T cells offers clinical relevance — to protect or even harm people — when exposed to novel coronavirus is not known. The healthy people studied were those tested prior to the pandemic or have not been infected with novel coronavirus. A few studies used peripheral blood mononuclear cells and plasma samples collected from healthy donors years before the coronavirus outbreak occurred in Wuhan.

"Pre-existing T cell immunity to SARS-CoV-2 could be relevant because it could influence COVID-19 disease severity. It is plausible that people with a high level of pre-existing memory CD4+ T cells that recognize novel coronavirus could mount a faster and stronger immune response upon exposure to the virus and thereby limit disease severity," notes a Comment published in *Nature Reviews Immunology.* Alessandro Sette and Shane Crotty from La Jolla Institute for Immunology, La Jolla, say that T cells could "potentially facilitate an increased and more rapid neutralizing antibody response" against the virus.

One of the ways of ascertaining the role of pre-existing immunity in protecting against SARS-CoV-2 virus is by measuring such immunity and correlating with infection and severity of disease in such people when they are exposed to the virus.

The relationship between infections by common cold coronavirus and age is not well established and so, too, the immunity caused by infections by the four coronaviruses that cause the common cold. This becomes particularly important as children do not show severe symptoms, while older people often do. "The reasons for both are unclear," they write.

"These considerations underline how multiple variables may be involved in potential pre-existing partial immunity to COVID-19", they say. They also caution that it is important to "avoid over-generalizations or conclusions in the absence of data".

There is a possibility that pre-existing T cell memory might influence vaccination outcomes. Pre-existing immunity could help elicit better immune responses against novel coronavirus, and these responses can manifest faster. Meanwhile, pre-existing immunity could be mistaken as enhanced efficacy of the vaccine in eliciting immune responses.

This could be particularly confusing in Phase-1 trials where the vaccine is tested on a small group of healthy participants. "This could be avoided by considering pre-existing immunity as a variable in trial design. Thus, we recommend measuring pre-existing immunity in all COVID-19 vaccine phase I clinical trials," they write.

This could also have drawbacks. For instance, the pre-existing immunity can reduce the immune responses that the vaccine causes through a mechanism called the "original antigenic sin". It can also lead to antibody-mediated disease enhancement, where antibodies present at sub-neutralising concentrations can actually augment virus infection and cause more severe disease. This is seen in chikungunya and dengue. In the Philippines, post vaccination with a dengue vaccine, people with no prior infection with the virus came down with severe illness when they were later exposed to the virus.

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GOVT MAY STEP IN TO LIMIT TECH DOMINANCE OVER ONLINE DATA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

A government-appointed panel, headed by former Infosys Ltd vice chairman Kris Gopalakrishnan, has called for a new law to regulate the sharing, commercial use and privacy of non-personal information.

The nine-member panel suggested appointing a regulator to oversee how such data is shared for sovereign, welfare, regulatory and competition uses, with a mandate to ensure that individual privacy is protected and the legitimacy of a request to seek data is strictly evaluated.

The committee has sought feedback from interested parties by 13 August.

"The non-personal data authority should be tasked with enabling legitimate sharing requests and requirements, and with regulating and supervising corresponding data sharing arrangements involving data businesses, data trustees and data trusts," the draft report of the committee said.

Recognizing the need to use data to provide a level-playing field for new companies, the committee said that global tech companies such as Google, Uber and Amazon collect user data and mine content to make better decisions, giving them an advantage.

"A combination of a first-mover advantage for these large data-driven platforms and businesses, with the sizable network effect and enormous data that they have collected over the years, has left many new entrants and startups being squeezed and faced with significant entry barriers, the draft report said.

"This may be the right time to set out rules to regulate the data ecosystem (which includes data collection, analysis, sharing, distribution of gains, destruction, etc.) to provide certainty for existing businesses and provide incentives for new business creation, as well as to release enormous untapped social and public value from data."

Prasanto K. Roy, a policy expert, said that while competitive barriers need to be removed to spur innovation, a sweeping law that forces companies to share data could hurt more companies than just the internet giants.

"It would hurt new startups seeking funding, because investors would hesitate to invest in building up customer data as it may have to be shared with competitors," Roy said.

Non-personal data is information that cannot identify a person and can be details such as weather conditions, data from sensors and public infrastructure. It also includes data, which was initially personal, but was later made anonymous, according to the definition in the draft document.

It said that non-personal data can also be sensitive, if it is related to national security or strategic interests, confidential business information or if it is anonymized data that has a risk of being re-identified.

"So, would Uber want to share anonymized hourly passenger traffic to indicate the busiest

routes to benefit competing startups, with no compensation? The report suggests that data can be requested from businesses and government by government, citizens, startups, private firms, non-profit. That would be really worrying for firms who have invested hundreds of millions to set up the networks and apps that capture that data," said Roy.

The draft suggested that the owner of the data should provide consent for anonymization and usage of this data by others.

It also provided technology-related guidelines for digitally implementing the recommended rules and regulations around data sharing.

The committee that was set up last year includes Debjani Ghosh, president of Nasscom; Neeta Verma, director general, National Informatics Centre, and Ponnurangam Kumaraguru, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi member.

The development comes months after the ministry of electronics and information technology framed a draft personal data protection bill, which is currently being discussed by a joint select committee of both houses—Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha—after which it shall be debated in Parliament.

The proposed personal data protection law deals mainly with personal data, leaving out details pertaining to non-personal data.

The draft report on non-personal data is the first step to deal with such sensitive data and will ensure that there is required governance and controls in place for sharing sensitive information, said Mini Gupta, partner at EY.

"However, mandatory data sharing can be a contentious issue, and there is a need for a framework such that if a company needs to share data, then required secure mechanisms are in place," Gupta said.

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GOOGLE LAUNCHES $10 BILLION DIGITIZATION FUND IN INDIA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

BENGALURU: Internet giant Google on Monday launched the Google for India Digitization Fund with a commitment to invest 75,000 crore (approximately $10 billion) over the next 5-7 years towards digitizing the Indian economy.

The fund will be deployed to accelerate Google's efforts through a mix of equity investments, partnerships, operations, infrastructure, and ecosystem investments, Sundar Pichai, CEO, Google and Alphabet said.

The fund will focus on enabling affordable access to the internet and information for Indians in their own language, building new products and services relevant to India's unique needs, empowering small and medium businesses in their digital transformation, and leveraging technology and artificial intelligence (AI) for social good, including digital literacy, outbreak predictions, and support for rural economies.

India is setting global standards on digital payments, Pichai said. "Building products for India first has helped us build better products."

Digital revolution presents an opportunity to build the future of India, said Sanjay Gupta, country manager and vice president, Google India.

"With 500 million active internet users in India, our aim is to get to the next 500 million users," Gupta said.

"This morning, had an extremely fruitful interaction with @sundarpichai. We spoke on a wide range of subjects, particularly leveraging the power of technology to transform the lives of India's farmers, youngsters and entrepreneurs," Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted ahead of the Google for Indian 2020 event held virtually.

In response, Pichai tweeted, "We are very optimistic about your vision for Digital India and excited to continue our work towards it."

Over the last six years, Google said it has consistently invested in building helpful products and services that extend the full potential of the internet and making helpful for the people of India.

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SETTLE THE PRINCIPLES OF DATA SHARING FIRST

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

The Kris Gopalakrishnan report on the regulation of non-personal data opens up a debate on information as a public good. Regulate it, but don't let arbitrary authority ruin the idea

This is the era of big data, a phase of our existence in which almost anything that has a brush with an electronic interface or sensor finds itself in cyberspace, if not stored in some other digital form for retrieval. By one brave count, the world generates over 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day. Much of it is useless, as our social media feeds would attest, but a significant chunk of it is highly valuable, with its value rising in line with the sophistication of tools designed to analyse it for actionable purposes, commercial or otherwise. Data does not need to be either big or personal for it to be highly sought after. Indeed, internet successes owe some of their fortunes to treasure troves of data that can yield market patterns, traffic predictions, epidemic risks and much more. Early movers in various spheres of online activity often have so much of it stored that rivals cannot catch up. Given the virtual potential for limitless growth and so-called "network effects", this is a space predisposed to monopoly power even without gigantic data reserves being put into play. Would it not be better if at least some data were treated as a public good, allowing its open use by startups, do-gooders and government bodies? Such questions had arisen even before a Centre-appointed panel, headed by Infosys co-founder Kris Gopalakrishnan, submitted its draft report on the regulation of non-personal data in India. Today, they call for a debate.

For regulatory purposes, "non-personal data" is defined as that which is either devoid of people's details or anonymized to prevent individual identification. The panel has proposed a new data authority to regulate just this kind of data. It has also outlined the need of a framework that would require companies to share its databanks with others to help the country catalyse business innovation, bolster India's startup ecosystem, and help governments and local authorities frame data-enriched public policies. All these aims are commendable. Given the rising role of information in every field of human endeavour, it does not take much to conclude that freely available data—with sufficient privacy safeguards—would have multiple positive externalities. The report's emphasis on the pre-emption of data monopolies is especially noteworthy in a country whose multitudes have only just begun to go online, an emergence that has attracted investors with huge sums of capital to deploy. Yet, there are challenges of implementation that must be overcome while adopting such ideas.

For one, what data a private entity can be forced to disclose must follow a commonly accepted set of principles. It would not work for a data authority to arbitrarily force companies to part with knowledge painstakingly acquired for their business, often with large sums invested to acquire it. Also, if parting with data blunts their strategic edge over competitors, they would probably appeal against such a disclosure in court. And, if enterprises fear that their confidential learnings could be appropriated by an intrusive data authority, then the cause of innovation would actually be set back. However, such problems could yet be tackled. A clear set of guidelines could be set down that specify what sort of data qualifies as a public good and must be kept open to all. For other kinds of data, maybe a market mechanism could evolve that lets various parties bid for privately held information. Big data does deserve regulation. But it needs to be done with clarity.

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MODI EXHORTS YOUTH TO SKILL, RESKILL AND UPSKILL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said the youth should skill, reskill and upskill themselves to remain relevant in the rapidly changing business environment and market conditions, which were impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Speaking on the occasion of the World Youth Skills Day and the fifth anniversary of "Skill India Mission", Mr. Modi said the mission — launched exactly five years ago — had led to the creation of vast infrastructure for skilling, reskilling and upskilling and enhancing opportunities for access to employment, both locally and globally.

Kaushal Kendras

Under the programme, hundreds of PM Kaushal Kendras had been set up and capacity of the ITI ecosystem increased. More than five crore youth were skilled.

Referring to a portal launched recently for mapping the skilled employees and employers, the Prime Minister said it would help the skilled workers, including the migrant workers who had returned to their homes, to access jobs easily and the employers to contact skilled employees at the click of a mouse. Skills of migrant workers would also help in changing the local economy.

"Skill is something which we gift to ourselves, which grows with experience. Skill is timeless, it keeps getting better with time. Skill is unique, it makes you different from others. Skill is a treasure that nobody can take away. And, skill is self-reliance, it not only makes one employable but also self-employable," the Prime Minister said.

He said a natural inclination to acquire new skills provided new energy and encouragement in one's life.

Distinguishing between "knowledge" and "skill", the Prime Minister said knowing how a cycle ran was "knowledge", while actually being able to ride a cycle was a "skill".

Mr. Modi highlighted the potential to capitalise on skilling opportunities, giving example of the healthcare sector where Indian skilled manpower could supplement the global demand.

He said there was a need to map such opportunities and align Indian standards with those of other countries.

Skill is self-reliance, it not only makes one employable, but also self- employable

Narendra Modi

Prime Minister

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END

FOR EQUAL TREATMENT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE SUPREME COURT EXTENDING BENEFITS TO THE DISABLED

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Persons with Disability including Mentally Ill People - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

In holding that people suffering from disability are entitled to the same benefits and relaxations as candidates belonging to the Scheduled Castes, the Supreme Court has recognised the travails of the disabled in accessing education or employment, regardless of their social status. Even though drawn from all sections of society, those suffering from the several categories of disability recognised by law have always been an under-privileged and under-represented section, a fact noticed in official studies in the past. Recently, the top court ruled that the Delhi High Court had correctly decided in 2012 that "people suffering from disabilities are also socially backward, and are therefore, at the very least, entitled to the same benefits as given to the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes candidates". Therefore, it took the view that when SC/ST candidates get a relaxation of a certain percentage of marks to qualify for admission, the same relaxation shall apply to disabled candidates too. In the 2012 case before the High Court, a university had allowed a 10% concession in the minimum eligibility requirement for SC/ST candidates, and 5% concession for disabled applicants. The High Court ruled against this differential treatment, terming it discriminatory. The larger principle behind this was that without imparting proper education to those suffering from disabilities, "there cannot be any meaningful enforcement of their rights" both under the Constitution and the then prevailing 1995 legislation on providing equal opportunities to the disabled and protecting their rights. It can only be more applicable, now that a fresh law that aims for a greater transformative effect, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, is in place.

A counterpoint to the idea of eliminating the distinction between the disabled and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes may arise from those questioning the attempt to equate physical or mental disability with the social disability and experience of untouchability suffered by marginalised sections for centuries. For instance, the social background of disabled persons from a traditionally privileged community may gave them an advantage over those suffering from historical social disability. However, this may not always be the case. The Delhi High Court had cited the abysmally low literacy and employment rates among persons with disabilities. Educational indicators captured in the 2001 Census showed that illiteracy among the disabled was much higher than the general population figure. The share of disabled children out of school was quite higher than other major social categories. The 2001 Census put the illiteracy rate among the disabled at 51%. There was similar evidence of their inadequate representation in employment too. The 2016 law sought to address this by raising the quota for the disabled from 3% to 5% and envisaging incentives for the private sector to hire them too. It is vital that this is fully given effect to so that this significant segment of the population is not left out of social and economic advancement.

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JAL JEEVAN MISSION: ONE LAKH TAP CONNECTIONS PROVIDED DAILY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

Jal Jeevan Mission was launched in August 2019 and in 7 months of 2019-20, around 84.83 lakh rural households were provided with tap connections. Further, amidst CoVID-19 pandemic, since Unlock-1, **about 45 lakh tap connections have been provided so far in the year 2020-21**. Thus, **daily about 1 lakh households are being provided with tap connections**, which indicates the 'Speed'. For ensuring transparency, every asset created is being geo-tagged and connections are being linked with the 'Aadhar' of the 'head of the household'.

A dashboard indicating the progress of the Mission, up to the district level, has been created and is available at Ministry's website.

After the mission came into being, States were requested to undertake a revalidation exercise of baseline data, as per which there are 19.04 Crore rural households in the country, out of which 3.23 Crore households are already provided tap connections. Remaining 15.81 Crore households are to be provided with tap connections. Thus, the objective is to cover approx. 16 Crore households in a time-bound manner while ensuring the functionality of already provided connections. This means 3.2 Crore households to be covered every year i.e. approx. 88,000 tap connections to be provided on daily basis. With this goal in mind, States/ UTs are working hard to provide tap connection to every rural household. In this endeavour, **States like Bihar, Telangana, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh lead with excellent performance**.

In 2020-21, a sum of **Rs. 23,500 Crore has been allocated for the implementation of JJM.** At present, more than Rs. 8,000 Crore of Central fund is available with the States/ UTs for the implementation of the Mission. Besides this, in 2020-21, **50% of 15th Finance Commission grants to Rural Local Bodies, i.e. Rs. 30,375 Crore have also been earmarked for water supply and sanitation**. 50% of this amount has been released to States on 15 July, 2020. This will help in better planning, implementation, management, operation and maintenance of drinking water supply systems in villages so as people continue to get potable water on regular and long-term basis.

The mission is exploring partnerships with reputed national and international agencies including UN agencies, NGOs/ CBOs, CSR organizations, trusts, foundations, etc. The Government hopes that water will turn into the next people's movement and will become everyone's business, a transformational change for the sector which has hitherto been seen as only a public sector responsibility. To make water everyone's business, mission strives to build partnerships and work together with various institutions/ individuals to achieve drinking water security for all.

The Ministry of Jal Shakti has been implementing Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) in partnership with the States with an aim to provide potable water in adequate quantity of prescribed quality on regular and long-term basis through tap connections to every rural household in the country by 2024. The mission was announced by the Prime Minister on 15th August, 2019, for which the operational guidelines were released on 25th December, 2019.

All out efforts are being made by the National Mission under Ministry of Jal Shakti to handhold the States/ UTs for its implementation. Intensive village-wise analysis was taken up during March-May, 2020, based on which the action plans of the States were firmed up. Union Minister,

Jal Shakti is also holding regular meetings with Chief Ministers/ Lieutenant Governors of States and UTs for expeditious implementation of the mission. States have planned 100% Functional Household Tap Connection (FHTC) coverage in villages, blocks and districts and ultimately saturating the States to become 'Har Ghar Jal Rajya'.

Various States/ UTs have committed to achieve the goal of the Mission well before 2024. In 2021, Bihar, Goa, Puducherry and Telangana have planned for complete saturation; similarly in 2022, States/ UTs of Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Meghalaya, Punjab, Sikkim and Uttar Pradesh. While Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Chhattisgarh have planned for 100% coverage in 2023, States like Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and West Bengal have planned for 2024.

The objective of the Mission is universal coverage and emphasis is on the principle of 'equity and inclusiveness' i.e. every family in the village gets tap water connection in their household and 'none is left behind'. Accordingly, States are giving priority to SC/ ST majority populated villages, aspirational districts, villages in drought prone and desert areas and quality-affected habitations.

Special focus is given to the districts affected with Japanese Encephalitis/ Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (JE-AES) which is one of the reasons behind infant mortality in the affected districts. As on date, 3.01 Crore households are there in 61 JE/ AES endemic districts of 5 States of Assam, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Out of this, 27.32 lakh (9%) households have FHTCs and remaining 2.74 crore households (91%) are to be provided with FHTCs under JJM.

Potable water supply to water quality-affected habitations is a top priority under JJM as the ill effects of Flurosis and Arsenicosis is to be reduced. In the light of interim order of National Green Tribunal, States have to ensure piped water supply to all households in Arsenic and Fluoride affected habitations before December, 2020.

Being a decentralized programme, Village Water & Sanitation Committees (VWSCs)/ Paani Samiti as sub-committee of Gram Panchayat, with minimum 50% women members, are being formed at village level which is responsible for preparing the Village Action Plans (VAPs) considering the water-sources development, supply, grey-water management and operation and maintenance. JJM also aims at the capacity building of members of Gram Panchayat and/ or its sub-committee, so as to generate 'responsive' and 'responsible' leadership at village who can manage, plan, operate and maintain in-village water supply infrastructure and many States have already started imparting online training to Paani Samiti members.

Under JJM, emphasis is given on convergence planning at the lowest level i.e. village/ Gram Panchayat, for source strengthening, water harvesting, aquifer recharge, water treatment and grey-water management, etc., for which dovetailing of resources takes place from MGNREGS, 15th Finance Commission Grants for PRIs, SBM (G), District Mineral Development Fund, CSR funds, Local Area Development funds, etc.

'Skilling' of villagers on masonary, plumbing, electrical-aspects, motor-repairing, etc. are also given impetus under JJM. Looking at this potential to engage skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled labourers, JJM is also a part of Garib Kalyan Rozgar Yojana (GKRA) wherein efforts are being made to provide employment to migrant labourers by creating public infrastructure. The tentative plan is to take up work in about 25,000 villages spread across 6 States under implementation.

Monitoring quality of water supplied through drinking water testing laboratories is an important

aspect and lot of emphasis is given on strengthening these labs and getting them accredited by NABL. States are to open water quality laboratory facilities to general public, so that village women can come and test the quality of water supplied to their household.

Communities are being enabled to take up surveillance for quality of water-supplied, for which in villages by training five villagers, preferably women, is encouraged so that water supplied in villages could be tested locally. The idea is to make it a reliable and trustworthy arrangement of potable supply.

Every source needs to be tested once for chemical parameters and twice for bacteriological contamination (pre and post monsoon) in a year as a part of water quality monitoring.

In line with the clarion call of the Prime Minister to ensure 'ease of living' in rural areas by providing facilities like financial inclusion, houses, road, clean fuel, electricity, toilets, the Jal Jeevan Mission is providing drinking water in every rural household, which will go a long way in improving the lives of rural population. The Mission will also reduce the drudgery of women and girls on whom the primary responsibility of fetching water is vested with.

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APS/PK

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APS/PK

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ENGLISH RENDERING OF PM'S ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

Namaskar!

Greetings to my young friends!

My greetings to all the youngsters on the occasion of World Youth Skills Day!

This day is dedicated to your skills. The greatest power of the youth or the millennial generation of the 21st century is their skill and their ability to acquire skills.

Friends,

This crisis of Corona has changed the nature of job as well as the world-culture. And the ever-changing new technology has also influenced the same. Looking at the new work-culture and the new nature of job, our youth are increasingly acquiring new skills.

Well friends, many people ask me, that in today's time, businesses and markets change so fast that they do not understand how to retain their relevance. In this time of Corona crisis, this question has become even more crucial.

Friends,

I always give that one answer to this question. The mantra to stay relevant is- skill, re-skill and up-skill. Skill means you learn a new skill. For example, you learnt to make a chair with a piece of wood. That was your skill. You also increased the price of that piece of wood; so value addition is done. But in order to maintain these prices, something new has to be added everyday i.e. new style or new designs etc. One making has to keep learning new things for the same. And the meaning of learning something new is re-skill. And to expand that skill further is called up-skill. Like, from making small furniture if you start designing the whole office, then it is up-skill. Knowing, understanding, and following this mantra of skill, re-skill and up-skill is very important in the lives of all of us.

By the way, when I talk about skill, I always remember a person about whom one of my old acquaintances used to tell me, albeit I did not know him personally. He was not very educated, but his hand-writing was very good. Over a period of time, he added more new styles to his hand- writing, i.e. he re-skilled himself. People started reaching out to him because of his skills. People used to ask him to write invitation

cards during special occasions. Later he re-skilled and up-skilled himself! He started writing in many more languages after learning some more languages. And in this way, his business grew over time. People started coming to him to get their work done very frequently. A skill that grew out of hobbies also became a medium of livelihood and respect.

Friends,

Skill is something which we gift to ourselves, which grows with experience. Skill is timeless; it keeps getting better with time. Skill is unique; it makes you different from others. Skill is a treasure that nobody can take away. And, skill is self-reliance; it not only makes one employable but also self-employable. This power of skill, can take a person to greater heights.

Friends,

A true character of a successful person is that he never lets go off any chance to enhance his skill. Moreover, he keeps looking for new opportunities. If you do not have any interest towards skill, if there is no desire to learn anything new, then it puts a halt to life. It feels like a hindrance. In a way, that person makes his personality a burden. And it becomes a burden not only for us, but also for our relatives. On the other hand, interest towards a skill gives a new strength and a fresh enthusiasm to live. Skill is not just a means of earning bread and butter. We need hope and enthusiasm to live and skill becomes our driving force. It brings a new inspiration to us. It brings a new zeal! And age doesn't matter. Whether you are young or old, if you are learning new skills, the enthusiasm for life will never reduce.

Friends,

Everyone must have had some experience of the power of skills. Today, while talking to you, I am reminded of one incident. And it was the time when I used to work as a volunteer in the tribal belt during my youth days. I used to work with some organizations. So once, we had to go out with the people of one of the organizations by their jeep. But the jeep did not start in the morning. Now everyone tried a lot to start the jeep; they pushed it and did everything, but the jeep did not start. At around 7 or 8 o'clock, a mechanic was called. He came and did something and fixed it in 2 minutes. Then we asked him the fee; he said Rs 20. At that time, the value of 20 rupees was a lot. But one of our companions said, "Brother, it was just 2 minutes of work and you are asking for Rs 20?" His answer inspires me even today and creates an impact in my mind. The illiterate mechanic said, "Sir, I am not taking Rs 20 for 2 minutes but for the skill that I have gained while working for 20 years. The experience that I have acquired over the years costs Rs 20." I believe this is the strength of skill.

Skill makes an impact not only on your work but also on your talent and influence.

And friends,

It is very important to understand one more thing here. Some people are always confused about knowledge and skill, or create confusion regarding the same. I always give a small example to such people. You can read books, watch videos on YouTube about how to ride a bicycle; how to sit on a bicycle; how the bicycle works; which how each parts function, how to hold the handle; how to put a brake. This is all knowledge. But there is no guarantee that you will be able to ride a cycle because you have this knowledge. In reality, skill is required to help you with cycling. You gradually learn yourself to cycle. And then you enjoy riding a bicycle. You keep going and there is no problem. As soon as you have learnt this art, you acquire a skill or talent. You never have to apply your mind the next time.

And it is very important to understand this difference at every level ranging from the society to governance. Today, India is progressing by understanding the difference between both knowledge and skills. Five years ago, on this day, Skill India Mission was launched with this idea. The aim was to ensure that the youth could acquire skills along with knowledge. For this, hundreds of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Kendras were set up across the country. The number of ITIs was increased and lakhs of new seats were added. During this period, skill development of more than 5 crore people has been done. And this campaign continues unhindered.

Friends,

In today's rapidly changing world, lakhs of skilled people are needed in many sectors. There is a huge potential especially in healthcare services. Realizing this, the Ministry of Skill Development has now started mapping the opportunities being created around the world. We are trying to ensure that the youth of India can get right and accurate information about the needs of other countries; or about countries where new doors of opportunities are opening in the healthcare sector; or about the kind of demand being created in a particular service sector. Information related to these things will now be available to the youth of India at a rapid pace.

Now take the example of Merchant Navy. The whole world including India is in great need of sailors. We have a coast line of 7500 kilometres. A large number of our youngsters are familiar with sea and the coastal conditions. If we work towards enhancing the skill in this field, then we can produce and provide lakhs of expert sailors to the world, and can also strengthen the coastal economy of our country.

Due to the mapping, the work for giving such information will become easier. Apart from this, a portal of skill mapping of workers has also been started in the country four-five days ago. This portal will play a vital role in mapping skilled people and

skilled workers. With this, employers will be able to reach the skill-mapped workers in one click. The workers who have recently moved from cities to their villages, in particular, will benefit the most. You must have also seen how the people, who have reached the villages with a special skill set, have started rejuvenating the villages. Some are painting the school; some are building houses with new designs. Every kind of skill, small or big, will become the greatest strength of a self-reliant India.

I once again congratulate the youth of the country on World Youth Skills Day.

And the world is gripped with pandemic. So it is my duty to keep repeating the same thing again and again. And not only me, but you too must keep repeating it. And what is that thing? First of all I would like you to be healthy. Secondly, I want you all to keep following the 'do gaz doori' or social distancing. Do not forget to wear a mask. Keep explaining to the people to quit the habit of spitting. And always remember the mantra for which we have gathered here today. No matter how educated you are, no matter how many degrees you have, the skill should also be constantly enhanced and upgraded. One should constantly prepare himself for new skills. You will start enjoying your life. You will enjoy getting new opportunities in life. And I am sure that you will enhance the strength of your hands, your fingers, your heart and mind by one skill and will move ahead and will help the country to progress.

Thanks a lot!

Best wishes to you!

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VRRK/AKP/AK

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Friends,

I always give that one answer to this question. The mantra to stay relevant is- skill, re-skill and up-skill. Skill means you learn a new skill. For example, you learnt to make a chair with a piece of wood. That was your skill. You also increased the price of that piece of wood; so value addition is done. But in order to maintain these prices, something new has to be added everyday i.e. new style or new designs etc. One making has to keep learning new things for the same. And the meaning of learning something new is re-skill. And to expand that skill further is called up-skill. Like, from making small furniture if you start designing the whole office, then it is up-skill. Knowing, understanding, and following this mantra of skill, re-skill and up-skill is very important in the lives of all of us.

By the way, when I talk about skill, I always remember a person about whom one of my old acquaintances used to tell me, albeit I did not know him personally. He was not very educated, but his hand-writing was very good. Over a period of time, he added more new styles to his hand- writing, i.e. he re-skilled himself. People started reaching out to him because of his skills. People used to ask him to write invitation cards during special occasions. Later he re-skilled and up-skilled himself! He started writing in many more languages after learning some more languages. And in this way, his business grew over time. People started coming to him to get their work done very frequently. A skill that grew out of hobbies also became a medium of livelihood and respect.

Friends,

Skill is something which we gift to ourselves, which grows with experience. Skill is timeless; it keeps getting better with time. Skill is unique; it makes you different from others. Skill is a treasure that nobody can take away. And, skill is self-reliance; it not only makes one employable but also self-employable. This power of skill, can take a person to greater heights.

Friends,

A true character of a successful person is that he never lets go off any chance to enhance his skill. Moreover, he keeps looking for new opportunities. If you do not have any interest towards skill, if there is no desire to learn anything new, then it puts a halt to life. It feels like a hindrance. In a way, that person makes his personality a

burden. And it becomes a burden not only for us, but also for our relatives. On the other hand, interest towards a skill gives a new strength and a fresh enthusiasm to live. Skill is not just a means of earning bread and butter. We need hope and enthusiasm to live and skill becomes our driving force. It brings a new inspiration to us. It brings a new zeal! And age doesn't matter. Whether you are young or old, if you are learning new skills, the enthusiasm for life will never reduce.

Friends,

Everyone must have had some experience of the power of skills. Today, while talking to you, I am reminded of one incident. And it was the time when I used to work as a volunteer in the tribal belt during my youth days. I used to work with some organizations. So once, we had to go out with the people of one of the organizations by their jeep. But the jeep did not start in the morning. Now everyone tried a lot to start the jeep; they pushed it and did everything, but the jeep did not start. At around 7 or 8 o'clock, a mechanic was called. He came and did something and fixed it in 2 minutes. Then we asked him the fee; he said Rs 20. At that time, the value of 20 rupees was a lot. But one of our companions said, "Brother, it was just 2 minutes of work and you are asking for Rs 20?" His answer inspires me even today and creates an impact in my mind. The illiterate mechanic said, "Sir, I am not taking Rs 20 for 2 minutes but for the skill that I have gained while working for 20 years. The experience that I have acquired over the years costs Rs 20." I believe this is the strength of skill. Skill makes an impact not only on your work but also on your talent and influence.

And friends,

It is very important to understand one more thing here. Some people are always confused about knowledge and skill, or create confusion regarding the same. I always give a small example to such people. You can read books, watch videos on YouTube about how to ride a bicycle; how to sit on a bicycle; how the bicycle works; which how each parts function, how to hold the handle; how to put a brake. This is all knowledge. But there is no guarantee that you will be able to ride a cycle because you have this knowledge. In reality, skill is required to help you with cycling. You gradually learn yourself to cycle. And then you enjoy riding a bicycle. You keep going and there is no problem. As soon as you have learnt this art, you acquire a skill or talent. You never have to apply your mind the next time.

And it is very important to understand this difference at every level ranging from the society to governance. Today, India is progressing by understanding the difference between both knowledge and skills. Five years ago, on this day, Skill India Mission was launched with this idea. The aim was to ensure that the youth could acquire skills along with knowledge. For this, hundreds of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Kendras were set up across the country. The number of ITIs was increased and lakhs of new seats were added. During this period, skill development of more than 5 crore people

has been done. And this campaign continues unhindered.

Friends,

In today's rapidly changing world, lakhs of skilled people are needed in many sectors. There is a huge potential especially in healthcare services. Realizing this, the Ministry of Skill Development has now started mapping the opportunities being created around the world. We are trying to ensure that the youth of India can get right and accurate information about the needs of other countries; or about countries where new doors of opportunities are opening in the healthcare sector; or about the kind of demand being created in a particular service sector. Information related to these things will now be available to the youth of India at a rapid pace.

Now take the example of Merchant Navy. The whole world including India is in great need of sailors. We have a coast line of 7500 kilometres. A large number of our youngsters are familiar with sea and the coastal conditions. If we work towards enhancing the skill in this field, then we can produce and provide lakhs of expert sailors to the world, and can also strengthen the coastal economy of our country.

Due to the mapping, the work for giving such information will become easier. Apart from this, a portal of skill mapping of workers has also been started in the country four-five days ago. This portal will play a vital role in mapping skilled people and skilled workers. With this, employers will be able to reach the skill-mapped workers in one click. The workers who have recently moved from cities to their villages, in particular, will benefit the most. You must have also seen how the people, who have reached the villages with a special skill set, have started rejuvenating the villages. Some are painting the school; some are building houses with new designs. Every kind of skill, small or big, will become the greatest strength of a self-reliant India.

I once again congratulate the youth of the country on World Youth Skills Day.

And the world is gripped with pandemic. So it is my duty to keep repeating the same thing again and again. And not only me, but you too must keep repeating it. And what is that thing? First of all I would like you to be healthy. Secondly, I want you all to keep following the 'do gaz doori' or social distancing. Do not forget to wear a mask. Keep explaining to the people to quit the habit of spitting. And always remember the mantra for which we have gathered here today. No matter how educated you are, no matter how many degrees you have, the skill should also be constantly enhanced and upgraded. One should constantly prepare himself for new skills. You will start enjoying your life. You will enjoy getting new opportunities in life. And I am sure that you will enhance the strength of your hands, your fingers, your heart and mind by one skill and will move ahead and will help the country to progress.

Thanks a lot!

Best wishes to you!

***

VRRK/AKP/AK

END

STUDY FINDS EVIDENCE OF VERTICAL TRANSMISSION OF CORONAVIRUS ACROSS THE PLACENTA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Route of spread: From the mother's blood, the virus causes placental infection and inflammation, gets into the neonate's blood. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Transmission through droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces seem to be the major routes of novel coronavirus spread. The World Health Organization recently acknowledged that "short-range aerosol transmission" of the virus "cannot be ruled out" in specific indoor locations which are crowded, inadequately ventilated and where exposure to the infected person is over a prolonged period of time. Now, a study has found evidence that confirms vertical transmission of SARS-CoV-2 virus from the mother to the foetus. The route of infection is through the womb *(in utero)* well before the onset of labour and delivery of the baby.

About half-a-dozen studies published in medical journals have already suggested vertical transmission as a possible route but have not been able to provide strong evidence about the route of spread — transplacental or transcervical — of the virus from the mother to the child. These studies could not confirm the transmission route because samples of placenta, amniotic fluid and blood of the mother and the newborn were not collected and tested in every mother–infant pair.

For instance, in a study published recently in the journal *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal),* only the placenta and nasopharyngeal swab samples of the mother were tested for the virus. Though nasopharyngeal swab samples of the newborn collected on the day of birth and on two other days, plasma and stool samples tested positive for the virus, the researchers did not collect and test the cord blood. Hence the researchers classified it a "probable" case of congenital route of vertical transmission.

In contrast, the results published recently in *Nature Communications* involving one mother–newborn pair provide strong evidence of "confirmed" vertical transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus through the "transplacental" route.

Studying how the virus reaches the foetus, the researchers of the *Nature Communications* paper led by Daniele De Luca from Paris Saclay University, France, found that the virus first occurs in the mother's blood and later causes placental infection and inflammation. The virus then gets into the blood of the neonate following placental infection. The neonate also showed clinical manifestation of COVID-19 in terms of neurological signs and symptoms.

The mother aged 23 years, at 35 weeks of gestation, was admitted to the hospital in March with symptoms of coronavirus infection. Real-time PCR detected the presence of two genes (E and S) of the virus in the blood and in nasopharyngeal and vaginal swab samples.

To check for vertical transmission, the researchers first collected clear amniotic fluid prior to rupture of membranes. The amniotic fluid tested positive for two genes of the virus. The baby was delivered through caesarean section to avoid infection during normal childbirth; caesarean delivery is routinely done in the case of HIV positive mothers to cut the risk of vertical transmission.

To confirm infection in the newborn, the researchers collected blood and bronchoalveolar lavage samples soon after birth and tested them for the virus. Both samples tested positive. They also collected nasopharyngeal and rectal swab samples at three time points — one hour after birth, and three and 18 days of postnatal age. These too tested positive for the virus, confirming infection with SARS-CoV-2.

The amount of virus in different tissues both in the mother and newborn varied. "Viral load was much higher in placental tissue, than in amniotic fluid and maternal or neonatal blood," they write. In the case of the newborn, the nasopharyngeal sample collected on day three after birth had higher viral load, while the blood contained the least amount of the virus.

"Our findings confirm that transplacental transmission is indeed possible in the last weeks of pregnancy, although we cannot exclude a possible transmission and foetal consequences earlier during the pregnancy," they write.

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CENTRE AIMS TO MAKE EDUCATION BETTER FOR SCS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

UGC advises colleges and universities to ascertain and rectify the educational shortcomings among SC students

NEW DELHI : The Union government aims to assess more than five million students from scheduled castes (SCs) and make "direct and specific" intervention for improving their education outcome.

Higher education regulator University Grants Commission (UGC) has advised colleges and universities to ascertain and rectify, once universities open, the educational shortcomings among SC students, who comprise 14.9% of the higher education students' population. More than 37 million students are pursuing higher studies across verticals, of which about 5.5 million are from the SC community, according to official data.

The UGC letter follows the advise of the ministries of human resource development, and social justice and empowerment. *Mint* has seen a copy of the letter written by UGC secretary Rajnish Jain.

The social justice ministry said it is important to have a specific programme for SC students, even as it monitors the use of SC welfare funds.

"There shall be specific and direct intervention for the welfare… based on their needs and deprivation and an academic support programme may be launched in all higher educational institutions. Under this, the student's academic deficiencies may be identified through a well-designed test and an academic support programme may be devised in accordance with the actual requirement," the UGC said.

The enrolment ratio of students for higher education in India is 26.3%, while for SC students it is at 23%. The performance of SC students in competitive exams is a little less than that of other backward classes (OBCs) and the unreserved categories. Among the top 50 candidates for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test in 2019, 43 were from the unreserved category, while seven were from OBC.

The UGC urged colleges and universities to launch academic support programmes of two-six months for addressing the academic deficiencies of SC students in accordance with their actual requirement.

"SCs form an important political constituent. Besides, a direct and specific intervention by universities will better the situation," said a government official, requesting anonymity.

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A NEW TRYST WITH DESTINY: BIRTH OF A DATA DEMOCRACY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

In the 'data democracy', data will be harvested for public and personal good

Last week, the committee headed by former Infosys vice chairman Kris Gopalakrishnan submitted its findings, arguing for a separate law to regulate the commercial use of non-personal data. Two years ago, an expert group headed by former Supreme Court judge B.N. Srikrishna had similarly argued for legislation to regulate the use of personal information by data-mining companies.

The principle behind both is the same: data generated by the public has to be protected and cannot be harvested for free—as it is at present.

While the effort to carve out a law for protecting personal data is a work in progress—at the moment it is still making its way through Parliament—the Union government is yet to articulate its view on the findings of the Gopalakrishnan committee. Together, they provide the legal architecture to protect the data privacy of both an individual and the society as a collective.

The recommendations of both panels are hugely significant as they are critical in defining the digital future of India—one in which the individual will be the centre. It will be a never-before event.

Already a third of the population is using smartphones—which has 10x power when generating data. This segment will only grow exponentially creating probably the largest market for data in the world.

Undoubtedly, after 73 years, another tryst with destiny is on the cards; this time to mark the heralding of a 'data democracy'. One accorded political power and the other is designed to deliver economic empowerment. A circumstance in which data will be harvested for public and personal wealth creation.

If successful, it will provide an entirely new template to the world, in general, and developing countries, desperately trying to raise their people out of poverty, in particular. It is what Nandan Nilekani, the former head of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and chairman of Infosys, describes so succinctly: Indians are economically poor but data-rich. What Nilekani is arguing is that an individual's data in India is far more valuable than their current material worth (of about $2,000 per capita); this mismatch in potential and reality is what provides an opportunity for an individual to monetize their data.

As Nilekani described in a recent interview with *Mint*, the building blocks for a scalable model to harvest this mass of data as Indians rapidly expand their digital footprint—especially in the aftermath of covid-19 and the fillip to contactless behaviour—are already in place.

First, Aadhaar provided the idea of a unique identity to over 1 billion people in India. Second, this was paired with an inter-operable payments mechanism, such as the Unified Payments Interface, or UPI, to give a new definition to financial transactions.

The third block in this stack is consent to use personal data. The missing sauce is privacy protection—the legal architecture for which has been spelt out by the two expert committees mentioned above.

Once this is in place, individual consent will be a precondition for companies to mine the data. At the moment, we tend to view the only use of data to be to fatten the bottom line of platforms such as Google and Facebook—which harvest this personal data, mostly without consent, to establish a behavioural matrix to sell or promote products and causes.

In the data democracy envisioned for India, individuals and companies can leverage their data for unprecedented public and personal good.

Take for example the micro, small and medium scale enterprises (MSMEs); most banks are loath to lend to them as these entities have little or no collateral to offer as security. There is a knowledge asymmetry, which prevents banks, wired to think linearly, from harvesting their digital footprint—which will show the company is due receivables—to secure working capital funding.

Now MSMEs can deploy data empowerment by consenting to a financial intermediary mining its digital history and monetise its receivables in the form of short-term credit.

Clearly, the promise of a data democracy is infinite. The onus is on the politicians to fast track the privacy law protecting and regulating the use of personal and non-personal data.

Food for thought on the eve of India's 74th Independence Day.

Anil Padmanabhan is managing editor of Mint *and writes every week on the intersection of politics and economics.*

Comments are welcome at anil.p@livemint.com

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WHY A SEPARATE ANTI-TORTURE LAW?

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Human Rights and NHRC

A banner condemning the killing of Jayaraj and Benicks hangs near the Kamaraj statue in Sattankulam. | Photo Credit: A. SHAIKMOHIDEEN

The alleged torture of a father-son duo in Sattankulam town in Tamil Nadu has once again given rise to the demand for a separate law against torture. It is therefore essential to examine whether the existing law is inadequate to deter incidents of custodial torture.

Torture is not defined in the Indian Penal Code, but the definitions of 'hurt' and 'grievous hurt' are clearly laid down. Though the definition of 'hurt' does not include mental torture, Indian courts have included psychic torture, environmental coercion, tiring interrogative prolixity, and overbearing and intimidatory methods, among others, in the ambit of torture. Voluntarily causing hurt and grievous hurt to extort confession are also provided in the Code with enhanced punishment. Under the Code of Criminal Procedure, a judicial magistrate inquires into every custodial death.

Also read | Sattankulam custodial deaths — When protectors turn perpetrators

The National Human Rights Commission has laid down specific guidelines for conducting autopsy under the eyes of the camera. The Supreme Court judgment in *DK Basu v. State of West Bengal* was a turning point in the evolving jurisprudence on custodial torture. The Court's decision in *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa* made sure that the state could no longer escape liability in public law and had to be compelled to pay compensation. Similarly, the Court has held in many cases that policemen found guilty of custodial death should be given the death penalty. Therefore, there is neither a dearth of precedents nor any deficiency in the existing law.

However, a fresh draft of the Prevention of Torture Bill was released in 2017 for seeking suggestions from various stakeholders. The Bill was not only vague but also very harsh for the police to discharge its responsibilities without fear of prosecution and persecution. It was inconsistent with the existing provisions of law. It included 'severe or prolonged pain or suffering' as a form of torture but that was left undefined.

The proposed quantum of punishment was too harsh. Though the 262nd Law Commission Report recommended that the death penalty be abolished except in cases of 'terrorism-related offences', the Bill provided for the death penalty for custodial deaths. While most countries have deleted or are deleting the death penalty from their statute books, for India to enact fresh legislation with the death penalty as the ultimate form of punishment shows its continuing passive mindset towards human life.

In the Bill, the proposed registration of every complaint of torture as an FIR and blanket denial of anticipatory bail to an accused public servant was not reasonable. The bail can be refused in appropriate cases, but excluding an investigating officer, struggling every day to meet the challenges of emerging crime, from availing such an opportunity shall be no less than putting him on the highest pedestal of mistrust. Overall, the proposed Bill was not a reformative one. It was vague, harsh and retributive in nature.

Also read | Acting against torture

In 2017, the Central government admitted in the Supreme Court that it was seriously considering

the [273rd Report of the Law Commission](#) that [recommended ratification](#) of the [U.N. Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment (CAT)](#). CAT was signed by India, but is yet to be ratified. However, except for minor discrepancies, the prevalent law in India is adequate and well in tune with the provisions of CAT.

Retired Supreme Court Justice Deepak Gupta said that we first need to implement the law as we have it. "The investigations, the prosecutions are not fair; these must be rectified first,"he said. He exhorted that the police need to be trained better. The temptation to use third-degree methods must be replaced with scientific skills. Thus, the need of the hour is to strike at the root cause of the problem and implement recommendations of various commissions to bring in necessary reforms.

R.K. Vij is a senior IPS officer of Chhattisgarh. Views are personal

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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INDIA'S CASE FATALITY RATE (CFR) FALLS BELOW 2.5% FOR THE FIRST TIME

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The focused efforts of Centre and State/UT governments on efficient clinical management of hospitalized cases have ensured that India's Case Fatality Rate has fallen below 2.5%. With effective Containment Strategy, aggressive testing and standardized clinical management protocols based on holistic Standard of Care approach, the Case Fatality Rate has significantly dipped. **The Case Fatality Rate is progressively falling and currently, it is 2.49%.** India has one of the lowest fatality rates in the world.

Under the guidance of the Centre, the State/UT governments have ramped up the testing and hospital infrastructure by combining public and private sector efforts. Many States have conducted the population surveys to map and identify the vulnerable population like the elderly, pregnant women and those with co-morbidities. This, with the help of technological solutions like Mobile Apps, has ensured keeping the high-risk population under continuous observation, thus aiding early identification, timely clinical treatment and reducing fatalities. At the ground level, frontline health workers like ASHAs and ANMs have done a commendable job of managing the migrant population and to enhance awareness at the community level. **As a result, there are 29 States and UTs with CFR lower than the India average. 5 States and UTs have a CFR of Zero. 14 States and UTs have a CFR of less than 1%.** This shows commendable work done by Public Health Apparatus of the country.

Name of State / UT	Case fatality rate (%)	Name of State / UT	Case fatality rate (%)
Manipur	0.00		
Himachal Pradesh	0.75		
Nagaland	0.00		
Bihar	0.83		
Sikkim	0.00		

Jharkhand

0.86

Mizoram

0.00

Telangana

0.93

A&N Islands

0.00

Uttarakhand

1.22

Ladakh (UT)

0.09

Andhra Pradesh

1.31

Tripura

0.19

Haryana

1.35

Assam

0.23

Tamil Nadu

1.45

Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu

0.33

Puducherry

1.48

Kerala

0.34

Chandigarh

1.71

Chhattisgarh

0.46

J&K (UT)

1.79

Arunachal Pradesh

0.46

Rajasthan

1.94

Meghalaya

0.48

Karnataka

2.08

Odisha

0.51

Uttar Pradesh

2.36

Goa

0.60

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TOUGH, NEW E-COMMERCE RULES KICK IN NEXT WEEK

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Consumer Rights in India

Details of importers have to be published for goods sold through e-commerce sites.

The e-commerce portals will have to set up a robust consumer redressal mechanism as part of the rules under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, that come into force on Monday, Consumer Affairs Minister Ram Vilas Paswan said.

The Consumer Protection (E-commerce) Rules, 2020, which fall under the Consumer Protection Act, will be notified within a few days, Mr. Paswan said at a press conference held via video-conference.

The e-commerce entities will have to provide every detail relating to return, refund, exchange, warranty and guarantee, delivery and shipment, modes of payment, grievance redressal mechanism, payment methods, security of payment methods, charge-back options and so on.

"They will also have to mention the country of origin which are necessary for enabling the consumer to make an informed decision at the pre-purchase stage on its platform," he said.

The e-commerce platforms also have to acknowledge the receipt of any consumer complaint within 48 hours and redress the complaint within one month from the date of receipt under this Act. And will also have to appoint a grievance officer for consumer grievance redressal.

These rules, Mr. Paswan said, are mandatory and not merely advisories as issued earlier. This is the first time that such detailed rules have been published by the Government of India for e-commerce entities.

Mentioning the country of origin is equally essential. "Where an e-commerce entity offers imported goods or services for sale, it shall mention the name and details of any importer from whom it has purchased such goods or services, or who may be a seller on its platform," the draft rules say.

Under the rules, sellers cannot refuse to take back goods or withdraw services or refuse refunds, if such goods or services are defective, deficient, delivered late, or if they do not meet the description on the platform. The rules also prohibit the e-commerce companies from manipulating the price of the goods or services to gain unreasonable profit through unjustified prices.

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END

MORE THAN A CRISIS, A CHANCE TO REBUILD HEALTH CARE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

On July 10, the Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, acknowledged the success of Mumbai's densely populated Dharavi slum in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru are among India's major metropolitan agglomerations and are also the current foci of the pandemic within the country. This points to both the speed and the scale of the epidemic moving within densely populated areas as well as success in the way sustained municipal efforts and community participation can together blunt the spread of the virus. The case of Dharavi is an example.

Also read: Coronavirus | Dharavi turns the corner with steep decline in COVID-19 cases

On the previous day, nearly 100 days after the first 14-hour janata curfew day on March 22, the Minister of Health highlighted how 49 districts out of the 733 in India accounted for 80% of the nearly eight lakh cases, with eight States accounting for 90% of all the incident cases. Since then, the overall case numbers have moved steadily past the million mark and India is now third in global case standings. Despite this position, and the daily accretion of new infections that are upwards of 30,000 in the past few days, the distribution of cases also presents itself as the world's biggest opportunity to intervene and blunt the global toll of the epidemic.

Taking the given numbers at face value, there are on average roughly 250 cases per district in about 700 districts; many of these districts may be closer to having no cases, while others may be at a significantly higher incidence. Be that as they may be, the low numbers in a large number of districts present officials the opportunity of stemming the epidemic and preventing morbidity, mortality and economic distress in a significant way.

Full package on coronavirus

The first step towards this would be to disaggregate the COVID-19 tracking mechanisms and the national level tables and graphs that are updated daily. Instead, there should be 733 district-level versions, where each one is updated and reported on a daily basis, at the district level. State and national summaries are important but are not as critical as ensuring the accuracy and timeliness of district-level tracking. The first output of such disaggregation will be to see, with great relief, the number of districts with extremely small or no incidence numbers. In order that they retain their low incidence status, such districts should be supported with all comprehensive testing kits and contact tracing know-how. The earlier scheme of designating districts as green, yellow and red will be strengthened with this disaggregated reporting.

A significant step in this direction would be to encourage District Magistrates (as they are already empowered), to use the full range of social support schemes available in support of the District Health Officer and team, to be able to prevent anyone from facing situations of hunger or economic distress. In addressing an epidemic, if better household nutrition and income outcomes can be obtained, then these would be a huge win — this has been an aim but on this, there has been widely variable achievement.

The testing capacity in the district can be scaled up dramatically by coopting the science departments of every college and university. Thus, chemistry and zoology-allied departments

such as microbiology and biochemistry can lend their laboratory services to carry out basic polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based tests. This will require administrative imagination and collaboration from the Indian Council of Medical Research, the Department of Biotechnology as well as the University Grants Commission. Such a step can create the equivalent of the rush, as seen in the late 1990s, for information technology/computer training among students for better job prospects. Despite all the current uncertainty, one thing is certain — health care will be a reliable career opportunity (from the laboratory to the bedside, and all points in between and beyond). Not using emerging talents in educational institutions in tier 2 and tier 3 towns in many districts in India would be a wasted opportunity, both in terms of training and nurturing ambitions.

For those who point to the complexity of current testing protocols, and difficulty in coopting college-level infrastructure and staff, it would be good to look at rapid innovations that have been surfacing within the past 12 weeks globally. It will not be very long before testing could become a self-administered process. One has to look at recent insights into using saliva as the start point for testing rather than using a nasopharyngeal swab for sampling.

Increased testing is not only necessary, indeed, it will be the single biggest contributor to stemming the tide of morbidity and mortality in India and the rest of the world. Wherever testing has been constrained, incidence rates have risen. Epidemics are not to be treated as law and order situations with policing. Lockdowns, without on-demand testing, are administratively easy-to-administer exercises. But they are harsh, with possibilities of multiple collateral damage at the community and economy levels.

Freely available, quality assured testing, even without lockdowns, can achieve far more — they inspire confidence among the population, encourage early treatment seeking behaviour, and at a public health level, enable the understanding of disease dynamics within the community. Imaginatively expanding testing by coopting all colleges and technical institutions (till individual level test kits become available) represents the best opportunity to prevent the epidemic from becoming a surge in over 80% of the Indian population.

Besides providing opportunities in the health-care and biotechnological spheres for young minds, the emphasis should also be to encourage innovators and entrepreneurs to bring out and scale up their products without making compromises on the standards or rigor of evidence needed for regulatory and manufacturing approval. India is the pharmacy to the world, and with a coordinated effort, the COVID-19 crisis can provide the Y2K equivalent for India's biotech and biopharmaceutical enterprises. At the moment, the world is increasingly looking at personalised diagnostics and therapeutics.

If with a positive test report, COVID-19 positive individuals were able to monitor their own oxygenation status at home, along with basic fever management medicines, and based on predetermined cutoffs, were able to seek and obtain care at oxygen equipped care facilities, we would both be building on expanding the network of monitoring exponentially, and addressing morbidity earlier in its course. This requires two bold administrative leaps: ensure every positive diagnosis report is also delivered along with a pulse oximeter and phone number to call and report status on; and ensure that there would be enough oxygen-equipped beds in every nook and corner of the country.

Both are industry-supporting leaps. The availability of oxygen and its measurement in individuals have health and economic impacts, and the earlier both are made at significant scale, the better the outcome for a large number of individuals who just need additional oxygen support to make it to the other side of a COVID-19 illness.

For the roughly 3% to 5% of people who will need more than oxygen support, we need to ensure

that our doctors, nurses, laboratory personnel and floor workers in hospitals are protected with everything they deserve — personal protective equipment to safety at home, and salaries on time. In tandem, critical engagement from Indian biopharmaceutical and biotech companies should be encouraged to produce validated and affordable antiviral drugs and monoclonal antibodies.

India's general health-care spending has been far below optimal. But if innovations to help manage the current crisis are suitably capitalised on, they can enable India to move far ahead in health-care delivery and related outcomes. COVID-19 is both a crisis and an opportunity for health-care reform as well as understanding the interplay of health outcomes with social and economic support interventions, and limitations of law enforcement in managing epidemics.

Dr. Bobby John is an advocate for global health and the Editor of the Journal of Development Policy & Practice

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CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT, 2019 COMES INTO FORCE FROM TODAY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Consumer Rights in India

The Consumer Protection Act,2019 comes in to force from today i.e. 20th July 2020. While briefing the media about the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 through video conference here today, the Union Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution Shri Ram Vilas Paswan said that this new Act will empower consumers and help them in protecting their rights through its various notified Rules and provisions like Consumer Protection Councils, Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions, Mediation, Product Liability and punishment for manufacture or sale of products containing adulterant / spurious goods.

He said that the Act includes establishment of the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) to promote, protect and enforce the rights of consumers. The CCPA will be empowered to conduct investigations into violations of consumer rights and institute complaints / prosecution, order recall of unsafe goods and services, order discontinuance of unfair trade practices and misleading advertisements, impose penalties on manufacturers/endorsers/publishers of misleading advertisements.Shri Paswan further said that the rules for prevention of unfair trade practice by e-commerce platforms will also be covered under this Act. The gazette notification for establishment of the Central Consumer Protection Authority and rules for prevention of unfair trade practice in e-commerce are under publication.

Shri Paswan further said under this act every e-commerce entity is required to provide information relating to return, refund, exchange, warranty and guarantee, delivery and shipment, modes of payment, grievance redressal mechanism, payment methods, security of payment methods, charge-back options, etc. including country of origin which are necessary for enabling the consumer to make an informed decision at the pre-purchase stage on its platform. He said that e-commerce platforms have to acknowledge the receipt of any consumer complaint within forty-eight hours and redress the complaint within one month from the date of receipt under this Act. He further added that the New Act introduces the concept of product liability and brings within its scope, the product manufacturer, product service provider and product seller, for any claim for compensation.

Shri Paswan further informed that the new Act provides for simplifying the consumer dispute adjudication process in the consumer commissions, which include, among others, empowerment of the State and District Commissions to review their own orders, enabling a consumer to file complaints electronically and file complaints in consumer Commissions that have jurisdiction over the place of his residence, videoconferencing for hearing and deemed admissibility of complaints if the question of admissibility is not decided within the specified period of 21 days.

The Minister said an Alternate Dispute Resolution mechanism of Mediation has been provided in the new Act. This will simplify the adjudication process. A complaint will be referred by a Consumer Commission for mediation, wherever scope for early settlement exists and parties agree for it. Mediation will be held in the Mediation Cells to be established under the aegis of the Consumer Commissions. There will be no appeal against settlement through mediation.

He said, as per the Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission Rules, there will be no fee for filing cases upto Rs. 5 lakh. There are provisions for filing complaints electronically, credit of amount due to unidentifiable consumers to Consumer Welfare Fund (CWF). The State

Commissions will furnish information to Central Government on a quarterly basis on vacancies, disposal, pendency of cases and other matters.

Shri Paswan further informed that the New Act also introduces the concept of product liability and brings within its scope, the product manufacturer, product service provider and product seller, for any claim for compensation. The Act provides for punishment by a competent court for manufacture or sale of adulterant/spurious goods. The court may, in case of first conviction, suspend any licence issued to the person for a period of up to two years, and in case of second or subsequent conviction, cancel the licence.

Under this new Act, besides general rules, there are Central Consumer Protection Council Rules, Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission Rules, Appointment of President & Members in State/District Commission Rules, Mediation Rules, Model Rules and E-Commerce Rules and Consumer Commission Procedure Regulations, Mediation Regulations and Administrative control over State Commission & District Commission Regulations.

Shri Paswan said that the Central Consumer Protection Council Rulesare provided for constitution of the Central Consumer Protection Council, an advisory body on consumer issues, headed by the Union Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution with the Minister of State as Vice Chairperson and 34 other members from different fields. The Council, which has a three-year tenure, will have Minister-in-charge of consumer affairs from two States from each region- North, South, East, West, and NER. There is also provision for having working groups from amongst the members for specific tasks.

In his concluding remarks, Shri Paswan said that in earlier Consumer Protection Act, 1986a single point access to justice was given, which is also time consuming. The new act has been introduced after many amendments to provide protection to buyers not only from traditional sellers but also from the new e-commerce retailers/platforms. He said that this Act will prove a significant tool in protecting consumer rights in the country.

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UNION HRD MINISTER LAUNCHES MANODARPAN INITIATIVE OF MINISTRY OF HRD TO PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT TO STUDENTS FOR THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Union HRD Minister, Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' launched the MANODARPAN initiative of HRD Ministry to provide psychosocial support to students for their Mental Health and Well-being in New Delhi today. Minister of State for HRD, Shri Sanjay Dhotre also graced the occasion. Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Shri Amit Khare; Secretary, School Education and Literacy Smt Anita Karwal and senior officials of the Ministry were present on the occasion. Smt Anita Karwal made a detailed presentation about the initiative at the event.

As part of MANODARPAN initiative, Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' launched a National Toll-free Helpline (8448440632), a special special web page of MANODARPAN on the portal of HRD Ministry, and a Handbook on MANODARPAN.

Speaking on the occasion, the Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' said that COVID -19 is understandably a challenging time for everyone around the world. This Global pandemic is not only a serious medical concern, but also brings mixed emotions and psycho-social stress for all. With specific focus on children and adolescents, there are emerging mental health concerns that are often reported in such situations. Children and adolescents may be more vulnerable and may experience heightened level of stress, anxiety and fearfulness, along with a range of other emotional and behavioural issues.

Shri Pokhriyal informed that the HRD Ministry has felt that while it is important to focus on continuing education on the academic front, the mental well-being of the students also needs to be given equal importance. So, Ministry has taken an initiative, named, '**MANODARPAN**'

covering a wide range of activities to provide Psychosocial Support to students for their Mental Health & Well-being during the COVID outbreak and beyond. He further informed that a Working Group, having experts from the fields of education, mental health and psychosocial issues as its members, has been set up to monitor and promote the mental health issues and concerns of students and to facilitate providing of support to address the mental health and psychosocial aspects during and after COVID-19 lockdown, through conselling services, online resources and helpline.

The Minister informed that the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, launched the ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT ABHIYAN and, the MANODARPAN initiative has been included in it, as a part of strengthening human capital and increasing productivity and efficient reform and initiatives for the Education sector.

He further stated that a Web-page named '**MANODARPAN**- Psychosocial Support for Mental alth & Well-being during the COVID outbreak and beyond' has since been created on the Web-site of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The Web-page contains advisory, practical tips, posters, podcasts, videos, do's and don'ts for psychosocial support, FAQs and online query system. A National Toll-free lpline (8448440632) has also been set up. This unique helpline shall be managed by a pool of experienced counselors/ Psychologists and other mental health professionals and will continue beyond the COVID-19 situation. Through this helpline tele-counselling will be provided to the students to address their mental health and psychosocial issues.

While addressing the participants Shri Dhotre said that the pandemic has affected children as well as adults psychlogically and emotionally. In such a climate, we need organised and institutionalized help. He said that the mental health has a reciprocal relationship with the well-being and productivity of a society and its members. Hence, it is essential for the well-being and functioning of individuals in such a climate we should also come forward as a more cohesive and mutually interdependent society. He also said, the MANODARPAN initiative has been included in the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan as part of a strengthening and empowering the human capital to increase productivity and efficiency through reforms and initiatives in the education sector.

He further added, the resources mobilized through the MANODARPAN initiative are envisaged to facilitate a sustainable psychological support system for students, families and teachers, and will be a great utility even in the post-corona times with proactive and preventive mental health and well-being services integrated into the mainstream of learning processes.

The following components are included in the MANODARPAN initiative:

For Manodarpan website, click the link: http://manodarpan.mhrd.gov.in/

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END

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Vector illustration of graduate hat.

Much of the discourse on resuming higher education during the pandemic revolves around home-based learning — more specifically, the tools to deliver home-based learning. The merits and demerits of online learning and, in some measures, of broadcast-based learning, are being debated. There is a sense of heightened anxiousness and urgency to find solutions to tide over the pandemic-induced crisis.

This is not to suggest that the anxiety and urgency are misplaced. But instead of getting bogged down by the challenges of identifying the best solutions to provide an inclusive and affordable home-based education, we can think of the enormous possibilities presented by the pandemic to the education sector.

Comment | The many structural flaws in India's higher education system

There are three ideal learning outcomes of higher education. The first is to provide knowledge in the relevant discipline to the students. Second, since higher education students are on the verge of joining the workforce, it is expected that their education will also impart them with the skills needed for their jobs/enterprises. Finally, students are expected to play a constructive role in shaping the society and the world at large using the values and ideals of a modern, progressive society; the teaching-learning process is expected to mould their character accordingly.

We should reflect on how many of India's higher learning institutions, and the students within them, are able to fulfil any or all of these ideal learning outcomes. The reality is that apart from a handful of institutions in the technology, management and liberal arts streams, and a small number of extremely self-motivated students, a vast majority of other students just meander through college and acquire a degree.

That there is a huge gulf between the curriculum taught in the colleges and actual job requirements is universally known. It is common to hear even the brightest of students mention that they learnt more on the job than through their curriculum in college. If this is indeed the universal reality, why should we bestow so much importance on a syllabus? Why is there such enormous pressure on the higher education system to complete every bit of that syllabus within a prescribed time? And why do we take such massive efforts to evaluate students' knowledge of that syllabus through exams? Why not completely re-evaluate the syllabus every now and then? Why not have substantive industrial internships, while retaining only a very basic outline of essential concepts? The evaluation too can be a mix of regular assignments, performance in the internship as rated both by the industry and the college, and a light, home-based proctored exam. The time saved in attending regular classes in the institution can be compensated for by spending time on the development of skills and prosocial attitudes and values that will help the student lead an enriching life. This component can again be a guided teaching process using videos, films and books.

In charts | The state of higher education in India

India is uniquely positioned in the world today to benefit from its demographic dividend. Yet, in many contexts, it has been pointed out that this dividend can actually turn into a liability since those in the population bracket that are ready to join the workforce have practically no skills or

knowledge that add to their employability. The higher education sector has multiple stakeholders (and multiple vested interests). In normal times, maintaining the status quo or implementing incremental and marginal reforms was all one could hope for. The pandemic has opened the doors for ushering in massive, bold and transformational reforms. As John Lewis said, "If not now, then when?"

Jayesh Ranjan is an IAS officer in the Telangana government and the officiating Vice-Chancellor of the Jawaharlal Nehru Technology University, Hyderabad. Views are personal

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PEOPLE AT LARGE MUST WORK TOGETHER TO STAMP OUT CORRUPTION FROM INDIA: VICE PRESIDENT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Peoples' Participation-Role of Civil Society in Governance

The Vice President today termed corruption as the major malaise affecting the growth and development of the country and called upon the government, civil society and the people at large to work together to stamp out the menace of corruption from the nation. He was addressing the gathering after unveiling the statue of Babasaheb Dr B R Ambedkar at premises of office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in New Delhi today.

Recalling the words of former President, A P J Abdul Kalam, Shri Naidu emphasized that teachers, apart from parents, play an important role in shaping students' characters and building a value-based society.

Paying rich tributes to Dr Ambedkar, the Vice President said that he was a multi-faceted genius—a visionary statesman, philosopher, towering intellectual, eminent jurist, economist, writer, social reformer and a humanist par excellence.

Observing that India had one of the most robust Constitutions in the world, Shri Naidu lauded the stellar contribution made by Dr Ambedkar in drafting the Constitution and the pioneering role he played in guiding the nation at a critical juncture.

The Vice President said that to this day, our constitution remains a sacred book and a guiding beacon on all matters and asked every citizen of the country to strive to ensure that the sanctity of our Constitution is upheld at all times and never violated.

Observing that Dr Ambedkar was the messiah of the oppressed, the Vice President said that all through his life, he strongly believed in gender equality and emancipation of women through education and strove to dismantle the caste barriers and ensure equality for all people.

"The purpose of installing his statue is to remind us the ideals of this great man and to see that present and future generations remember his teachings which are guiding principles for everyone of us", he said.

Applauding the CAG for being a strong and credible institution, the Vice President credited the framers of our Constitution, particularly Dr Ambedkar for ensuring independence and wide mandate to the CAG. He added that the core values of the CAG—independence, objectivity, integrity, reliability, professional excellence, transparency and positive approach—drew inspiration from the life and work of Dr Ambedkar. He called accountability, transparency & good governance as very essential for the democracy.

The Vice President credited the reports of the CAG and the consequent deliberations in the committees of the legislatures for having led to various changes in the regulatory framework, governance structures and delivery mechanism of the government, ensuring economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.

Shri Naidu also complimented the CAG for acquiring an excellent reputation amongst the international community of Supreme Audit Institutions (SAI) and for its endeavour to become a fully paperless office by 2022.

Earlier, the Comptroller & Auditor General, Mr. Rajiv Mehrishi welcomed the gathering and the Deputy CAG, Ms. Anita Pattanayak proposed words of thanks.

Following is the full text of the speech –

Dr. Ambedkar was a man of many parts with interests and skill in several fields. His eclecticism is reflected in his books such as 'Problems of the Rupee: its origin and its solution and 'Evolution of provincial finance in British India' and show his command over economics and finance. Similarly, his books 'Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development' and 'The Annihilation of Caste' reflect his deep understanding of Indian sociological realities.

Dr. Ambedkar left an indelible imprint on the sands of time and his thoughts are relevant for all times. Indeed, he was the messiah of the oppressed and all through his life, he strove to dismantle the caste barriers and ensure equality for all people. He strongly believed in gender equality and emancipation of women through education. He famously said: : "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life."

His vision contributed towards the formulation of water and industrial policies in the country.

Today, we are in the hallowed premises of the CAG, which has been mandated by the Constitution of India to promote accountability, transparency and good governance through high quality auditing and accounting and provide independent assurance to our stakeholders, the Legislature, the Executive and the Public, that public funds are being used efficiently and for the intended purposes.

Although the history of the audit department is almost 160 years old, it was the Constitution of the newly formed independent Republic of India which proved catalytic in transforming this organization of the colonial era into the CAG of India as an independent pillar of Indian Parliamentary democracy.

Today CAG is a strong and credible institution and the credit for this must go to the framers of our Constitution, particularly to Dr Ambedkar, who had the vision to ensure independence and wide mandate to the CAG.

During the deliberations of the of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, Babasaheb had very famously said ; I am of the opinion that this dignitary or officer is probably the most important officer in the Constitution of India. He is the one man who is going to see that the expenses voted by Parliament are not exceeded, or varied from what has been laid down by Parliament in the Appropriation Act. If this functionary is to carry out the duties—and his duties, I submit, are far more important than the duties even of the Judiciary—he should have been certainly as independent as the Judiciary".

Babasaheb's life and work have inspired the entire nation and it is heartening to see that the core values of the CAG—independence, objectivity, integrity, reliability, professional excellence, transparency and positive approach—draw inspiration from his life and work.

Today the CAG has evolved as an enabler to Balasaheb's vision that not only ensures public financial accountability but also acts as a friend, philosopher and guide of the executive. Many reports of the CAG and the consequent deliberations in the committees of the legislatures have led to various changes in the regulatory framework, governance structures and delivery mechanism of the government, thereby ensuring economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.

Dear Sisters and brothers,

Corruption is a major malaise affecting the growth and development of the country. It must be the endeavor of all the stakeholders—the government, civil society and the people at large—to collectively stamp out this menace. Here, I would like to refresh everyone's memory by quoting the late President, Shri APJ Abdul Kalam, who had said: "If a country is to be corruption free and become a nation of beautiful minds, I strongly feel there are three key societal members who can make a difference. They are the father, the mother and the teacher".

Apart from parents, teachers are looked upon as role models by children and they play an important role in shaping students' characters and building a value-based society. Many years ago, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, had observed: "Education which does not mould character is absolutely worthless".

While the Constitution reflected the vision of Dr Ambedkar and its framers gave us one of the best living documents, it is for every Indian, be it an ordinary citizen or a person occupying high constitutional post, to ensure that the sanctity of our Constitution is upheld at all times and never violated. Otherwise, it will be tantamount to betraying the trust and faith of the founding fathers.

It will be apt to recall the sagacious words of Dr.Ambedkar, who had said : "However good a constitution may be, if those who are implementing it are not good, it will prove to be bad. However bad a constitution may be, if those implementing it are good, it will prove to be good".

For all the citizens of India, the Constitution remains a sacred book and a guiding

beacon on all matters. We should salute the constitution-framers for their vision and statesmanship in giving us a constitution that laid a strong foundation for our parliamentary democracy and stood the test of times.

Before concluding, let me compliment CAG for acquiring an excellent reputation amongst the international community of Supreme Audit Institutions, known as SAIs. I also appreciate the aim of CAG to become fully paperless office by 2022. I was immensely pleased to know that CAG has started a lecture series named as 'Dr B R Ambedkar Lecture Series' where eminent personalities are called upon to deliver lectures on emerging topics.

And now, with the installation of this statue of Babasaheb, I am sure it will go a long way in inspiring and guiding the work of the institution of the CAG of India. May, Babasaheb, as always, be the guiding light!

Thank you. Jai Hind!"

*****

VRRK/MS/MSY/DP

The Vice President today termed corruption as the major malaise affecting the growth and development of the country and called upon the government, civil society and the people at large to work together to stamp out the menace of corruption from the nation. He was addressing the gathering after unveiling the statue of Babasaheb Dr B R Ambedkar at premises of office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in New Delhi today.

Recalling the words of former President, A P J Abdul Kalam, Shri Naidu emphasized that teachers, apart from parents, play an important role in shaping students' characters and building a value-based society.

Paying rich tributes to Dr Ambedkar, the Vice President said that he was a multi-faceted genius—a visionary statesman, philosopher, towering intellectual, eminent jurist, economist, writer, social reformer and a humanist par excellence.

Observing that India had one of the most robust Constitutions in the world, Shri Naidu lauded the stellar contribution made by Dr Ambedkar in drafting the Constitution and the pioneering role he played in guiding the nation at a critical juncture.

The Vice President said that to this day, our constitution remains a sacred book and a guiding beacon on all matters and asked every citizen of the country to strive to ensure that the sanctity of our Constitution is upheld at all times and never violated.

Observing that Dr Ambedkar was the messiah of the oppressed, the Vice President said that all through his life, he strongly believed in gender equality and emancipation of women through education and strove to dismantle the caste barriers and ensure equality for all people.

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END

INDIA'S POOR RISK FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS AS SCHOOLS GO DIGITAL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The coronavirus has pushed schools all over the world to go online as new waves of infections keep emerging. In India, a country where the gaps in access to education and the Internet were already vast, poor families are struggling to stay the course.

Shirin Riyaz Shah, 15, attends a small private school in Mumbai. There's one smart-phone between her and her four siblings over which they sit through Zoom lessons and submit homework via WhatsApp. Their schedules don't blend neatly and there's a constant tussle over the phone.

Data is especially precious because money, always tight, is now in even shorter supply as the pandemic stretches her family's single income. Her father is a tailor and for now, movement restrictions mean he's mostly home. When that changes so will the children's access to his phone.

And digital classrooms make the process of learning harder.

"In class we can raise our hands over and over again and it isn't a problem," said Shah by phone. "We can ask teachers to pause in a class and then ask them to repeat. But in a video call if two or three students do this then time will run out."

The [pandemic](#) has led to the "biggest global education emergency of our lifetime," according to a report by the Save The Children Fund. Globally, lockdowns enforced to stop the virus's spread have put 91% of learners out of school. Out of these, the poorest and most marginalized children are at highest risk of never returning to the classroom.

In India, where the government spends about 3% of the nation's gross domestic product on education and only half the population has access to the Internet, 320 million students have already been affected, according to Save The Children Fund.

The spokesperson for India's Ministry for Human Resource Development and the secretary of the School Education and Literacy department did not respond to an email and or phone calls asking for comment.

Unfamiliar Technology

"You have one side of the population that's so used to tech, it's like a second language to them," said Shreya Tobias, a volunteer with Teach for India, a non-governmental organization, who educates fourth grade children. Many of her students have never used phones before, and their parents themselves don't know enough to help. "These kids don't have that. Tech is confusing for them."

The majority of her students have seen their parents lose jobs as a result of the economic distress caused by India's protracted lockdown. She lost contact with some when they were forced to return to their villages.

Instead of innovating, governments and schools have gone for the easiest option available, said

Shantha Sinha, founder of the research institute Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation and the former head of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. "It's showing a lack of sensitivity."

Governments must allocate funds to local village councils and encourage solutions from the bottom up, Sinha said. "They should allow people to come together, they should say, 'Come up with an innovation, we will support you.'"

Scaling Up

Several rights groups and NGOs have taken this approach -- from reading rooms to distributing books directly to homes -- attempting to fill the gaps left by online education. A village in Jharkhand has seen widespread fame for its use of loudspeakers perched on trees through which children can listen to classes. But these initiatives need to be scaled up quickly, experts say.

Despite the challenges, many teachers and students hold on to hope.

Tobias believes her students will return to classes once lockdowns are fully lifted. "After having worked in this system for a while, I've realized that it takes a lot of effort to get your child into a school, to begin with," she says. "The parents are quite invested."

And 15-year-old Shah is worried but determined.

"This is my aim, and this is my responsibility," she said. "I will not let my future goals be disrupted by anything."

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ARMS AND THE WOMEN: ON GENDER BARRIER IN INDIAN ARMY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

A glass ceiling was shattered on Thursday when the Ministry of Defence issued a formal letter granting permanent commission to women officers in the Indian Army. The uphill battle to break a gender stereotype and provide equal opportunities for women in the Army had to be fought right up to the highest level, in the Supreme Court. Even so, the MoD's Government Sanction Letter specifying the grant of permanent commission to Short Service Commission (SSC) women officers in all the 10 streams in which they presently serve is a cause for celebration. It will go a long way in ending a prejudice associated with the Army. True, the fight was far from easy. It was long and protracted, as the government initially glossed over a Delhi High Court ruling in the litigants' favour 10 years ago. Then in the Supreme Court, just what the litigants were up against became clear from the views of the government. A written note to the Court pointed at "physiological limitations" of women officers, saying that these were great challenges for women officers to meet the exigencies of service. In February, the Supreme Court read the government the riot act, asking it to abide by its own policy on granting permanent commission to women in the SSC and giving them command postings in all services other than combat.

The misogyny was called out in a 54-page judgment. The Supreme Court noted that women officers of the Indian Army had brought laurels to the force. "The time has come for a realisation that women officers in the Army are not adjuncts to a male dominated establishment whose presence must be 'tolerated' within narrow confines," it said. The Army is often seen as the preserve of men, but enough women have fought heroic battles to bust that myth, from Rani of Jhansi in the past to Squadron Leader Minty Agarwal of the Indian Air Force, who last year "was part of the team that guided Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman during the Balakot airstrike carried out by the IAF". The irony is that of the 40,825 officers serving in the Army, a mere 1,653 are women, as the top court noted. The overall percentage of women at all levels of the armed forces needs to be increased. To usher in a change in a regressive mindset, which mirrors society, a lot more must be done on gender sensitisation. Elsewhere in the world, in countries such as the United States and Israel, women are allowed in active combat. Here, the Supreme Court had to forcefully nudge the government to make women's role in the Army more inclusive. A gender barrier may have fallen, but the war against inequity is far from over.

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Suresh Nambath

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IT'S TIME INDIA PAID REPARATIONS TO ITS DALITS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

India as a nation owes a huge debt to Dalits — upon whose backs its civilisational columns have been raised. Dalit talent, skill and stamina make India one of the most desirable places for outsiders, including the British. Various art forms, literature, music, poetry originate from the Dalit, Adivasi and Shudra worlds. In their inventive genius and performative zeal, the Dalits have hymned and hummed to the rhythms of their tragedies, preserved their culture amidst the torture of untouchability.

They have cried and prayed, protested and fought back. In all of this, they have paved the path for new forms of sensorial experiences.

Almost all the 'classical' Indian art forms have Dalit origins. There are examples of Dalit art being stolen and Brahminised. And to stop the Dalits from reclaiming the same, they were barred from practising and participating in many of the arts.

This eliminated any competitive edge that Dalit talent might have posed. That is why, even today, many classical art events are bereft of Dalit participation.

Even in other innovations, the Dalits have helped science flourish and rationalism take precedence. In their spiritual practices and prayers, the belief in the Almighty is rooted in the essence of enlightenment.

How then do we reconcile our past mistakes of murdering the Dalit existence so as to remedy the situation for future work?

One possible way is to think about reparations, "making amends for the wrongs one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged". It is one of the means to correct the past and on-going injustices. Reparations can be categorised in three broad types:

Moral reparation: Acknowledgement of past mistakes and seeking forgiveness to establish a healing process for the wounded souls and traumatised minds.

Spiritual reparation: Giving leadership and respect to communities whose attempts at spirituality were declared a crime.

Conditional reparation: This is a reparation in the form of money and material reimbursements. It flows from the social and economic factors that stole the land, labour and value of an entire community.

Reparations are an international demand of colonised countries. The Lancet Commission on Reparations was set up at Harvard's Medical School to examine the "moral, legal, economic, historical, and political evidence for various global claims to reparations and redistributive justice". Alongside the African Americans, Roma, Caribbean Slavery, victims of India's caste system were also given a hearing. The Indian case was presented by the economists Sukhadeo Thorat and Amit Thorat.

Reparation facilitates an occasion for the country to come together to reflect on the enormous weight of unpaid labour by the Dalits, who put their sweat and blood to raise the nation's

economy, from farm to industries. The soul of the country continues to be torn. To stitch it back we need redistributive justice and reparations to piece it together. Redistributive justice in the form of land redistribution and taking into account the toil of Dalit women's wombs.

In the fiestas of protests and justice movements, the Dalits have not yet come around demanding reparations. It is a chance to show a mirror to the society that continues to see anti-Dalit violence and hatred due to its own intrinsic insecurities.

These insecurities have been built over generations. Reparations are an opportunity for us to come together as a nation and help rebuild the broken promise that Independence held out.

Each institution in this country is implicit in this crime of Dalit violence. This has easily transfused into the structures that hold this country together.

Representation through reservation is just one way to render justice to the oppressed castes whose labour and dignity were reduced to nothing by the ruling castes of India.

As a nation, we need to be able to grieve collectively to overcome. This country can mourn for the victims of the Nazi genocide, even the victims of the India-Pakistan Partition, but it becomes hard as stone at the mere mention of atrocities against Dalits.

To change this blatant apathy, we need to start anew. The constitutional promises through reservations and land reforms were one of the few ways for us to get together. But these remain hotly contested. Reparation is one of the most viable ways to secure justice for all.

Suraj Yengde, author of Caste Matters, curates the fortnightly 'Dalitality' column

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END

THE HINDU EXPLAINS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The story so far: To estimate the extent of infection in the community, scientists at the National Centre for Disease Control (formerly National Institute for Communicable Diseases), a Health Ministry body tasked with monitoring epidemics, conducted a district-wise serological survey across Delhi from June 27 to July 10. Preliminary findings showed that 23.48% of Delhi's population had been exposed to the virus and that a large number of those infected were asymptomatic.

Unlike the real time RT-PCR (reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction) tests or antigen tests that scan for the presence of the coronavirus in the body, the sero-prevalence survey was designed to look for the presence of antibodies, produced in response to the coronavirus, in the blood. On an average, antibodies can be detected five days after an infection sets in. The coronavirus, in general, diminishes after 21 days. Antibodies, for a host of other viral infections, are normally expected to linger for many months and confer protection against fresh infections by the same virus. However, it is still too early in the evolution of SARS-CoV-2 to know how long the antibodies will last.

Also read | Delhi's COVID-19 sero-prevalence study: significant proportion of population still vulnerable

According to health experts, because the actual virus withers away quickly, many of those infected show mild symptoms. Antigen and PCR tests are often cumbersome to be widely deployed in the field and are not always the best way to estimate the spread of the virus. After the Indian Council of Medical Research led a multi-institutional study in May to estimate national sero-prevalence using the Kavach-ELISA antibody-detection kit, developed and tested in India, the government decided to do a similar study across Delhi. In June, the city was grappling with a high number of cases and several parts of the city were locked into containment zones.

Nearly 22,000 samples were collected from 11 districts. It emerged that on average, 23.48% of Delhi had been exposed to the virus. A large number of those infected were asymptomatic. Like in all statistical surveys, extrapolating the results from a sliver of a population to an entire city comes with its own caveats. Generally, those who commission such surveys report their findings in a peer-reviewed journal and detail, for instance, how accurate the test was in picking up infections and the error margins in extrapolating the results to a population. No such details were made available, so the announcement that nearly a quarter of Delhi's 20 million population had been exposed to the virus is at best only suggestive.

A lot of the samples were collected from Delhi's densest pockets so the extent of variation of infection in less populated parts of Delhi is not known. The Delhi government has said it will keep repeating these surveys at periodic intervals to gauge the spread of the infection. The survey found that nearly eight of the 11 districts had a sero-prevalence exceeding 20%. To the Delhi government, the fact that after six months of the global pandemic there was a 23% spread was indicative of the effect of lockdown and containment zone management. But the government also cautioned that the survey showed 77% of the population to be vulnerable to the infection; therefore, measures such as masks, hygiene, social distancing ought to be strictly adhered to.

Also read | Survey on antibodies against COVID-19 to be conducted every month: Delhi Health Minister

Another way to look at serology surveys is to compare the number of RT-PCR positive cases and the number of those who were infected as per their antibody profiles. Thus assuming that 50 lakh (or 25% as per this survey) were infected and comparing that to only about 100,000 who were confirmed positive, it appears that a PCR test caught only about 1 in 50 who are infected by the virus. This undermines claims by the Delhi government of its ability to contain infection spread. However, missing a sizeable proportion of those infected by the coronavirus is par for the course given that it spreads rapidly and leaves a large proportion of those afflicted with only mild (and frequently unreported) symptoms.

While it is routine in epidemiology to deploy antibody tests to estimate the prevalence of a disease, the sheer speed of the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the global nature of the disease have complicated the matter. Generally, they take a while to develop and are tested in the field before being deployed in large numbers. This is done to rule out errors such as the test marking the wrong antibodies, or an inappropriate sample that does not represent a population being chosen. Such problems hindered an early plan by the ICMR to use China-manufactured antibody kits in April and May to gauge infection spread. The ICMR is still to publish details of its May serosurvey that estimated 0.73% of the population in 63 surveyed districts to be infected. For COVID-19, the reliability of such surveys still rests on nascent science.

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THE HINDU EXPLAINS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The story so far: Ever since cases of 'reinfection' — people who had tested negative for COVID-19 testing positive again after a while — emerged in early January, the question of latency of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is being hotly debated. The first such cases emerged in the east (China, South Korea) where scientists were puzzled over why or how individuals who had tested negative twice for the virus, had, after a few weeks or months, tested positive, the second time around albeit with milder symptoms. A latent infection is when the virus in the body is dormant and does not replicate within the host. It however possesses the capacity to be reactivated at some point, causing a flare-up of the disease much later.

A latent viral infection is an infection that is inactive or dormant, authors Sergey Sheleg and Alexey Vasilevsky write in an article in the *Global Journal of Infectious Diseases and Clinical Research*. "As opposed to active infections, where a virus is actively replicating and potentially causing symptoms, latent (or persistent; but not chronic) infections are essentially static which last the life of the host and occur when the primary infection is not cleared by the adaptive immune response," they explain. Examples are Herpes simplex viruses type 1 and 2, varicella-zoster virus, HIV, Epstein-Barr virus (human herpesvirus 4), and cytomegalovirus. They are known to cause typical latent infections in humans, Sheleg and Vasilevsky add.

Data | When are COVID-19 patients most likely to infect others?

They go on to explain that "latent viral infections can be reactivated into a lytic form (the replication of a viral genome). The ability to move back and forth from latent to lytic infections helps the virus spread from infected individuals to uninfected individuals".

Ryan McNamara, a research associate at the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, University of North Carolina, in a long tweet thread sought to explain the difference between the types of viral infections. Tweeting from @Ryan_Mac_Phd, he says: Viruses fall into two broad categories: chronic and acute; while a chronic virus will infect its host for extended periods of time, often through the lifetime of the host. An acute infecting virus, such as influenza and rotavirus, is cleared from the body after a few days or weeks.

"A chronic virus can go into latency. This is when a virus is present within a cell, but not actively producing more infectious virus particles. For example, when a herpes virus infects a cell, its genome can remain in that cell as long as that cell is alive," Dr. McNamara says.

The reactivation to the lytic state, when the production of new virus particles occurs, he calls an 'intentional strategy by the virus to promote its survival'. A perfect example of this would be chickenpox, caused by the human herpesvirus 3 — after infection, "the body responds and the virus goes into latency. Decades later, it can re-activate, resulting in shingles". What causes reactivation is not very clear in this case. According to him, HIV can also go into latency after infection. It integrates itself into the host chromatin (a substance within the chromosome), and can reactivate upon stimulation such as inflammation induced by co-infecting pathogens. This can lead to uncontrolled HIV replication and clinical AIDS.

Also read | Scientists break down three stages of infection, suggest individualised treatment for patients

Sheleg and Vasilevsky have recorded South Korean officials reporting that nearly 100 people

thought to be cured of the novel coronavirus have tested positive for COVID-19 again. According to Jeong Eun-Kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the COVID-19 virus may have "reactivated" in the patients rather than them becoming re-infected.

In Chennai too, last week, the civic body recorded a couple of cases of patients who had recovered from COVID-19 testing positive again after a span of time.

Also read | Tamil Nadu reports second COVID-19 case

Prof. T. Jacob John, an eminent Vellore-based virologist, says: "None of the observations conclusively proves a second infection. In each one of these cases, there is sufficient reason to suspect that it is one infection, with negative results in between. While the RT- PCR [reverse transcription/polymerase chain reaction] tests are considered to be the gold standard for testing, all tests are not 100% accurate. False positives and false negative results are expected to occur. Patients are known to test negative, then positive, and negative again, in subsequent tests performed even within days."

Dr. McNamara explains the concept of "limit of detection" of a virus, here. This is the threshold where a virus can be detected. A negative SARS-CoV-2 test does not mean zero infection; it means no detectable infection."

Prof. John clarifies that another issue is that many viruses can survive at the mucosal level in spite of immunity. "A classical example is the polio virus, which, like SARS-CoV-2, is also a positive sense, single strand RNA (ribonucleic acid). While immunity kicks in two weeks after infection, viral shedding can continue for up to 10 weeks, in spite of very high antibody levels. Why this happens has not been explained by anybody, so far. And, in polio, if a stool test came back negative in between and then tested positive, we don't take it as a second infection, it is a continuous infection." He further found with lab tests that the host harbours an "antibody-bound virus that is non-infective".

Also read | Recovered patient tests positive again in Himachal

He goes on to add: "If second infections were sufficiently common we would have picked it up by now. But it is possible that some people have specific problems with immunity against this virus. In that case, it must be investigated further."

Dr. McNamara explains: "It's entirely possible to have detectable, then non-detectable, and then detectable SARS-CoV-2 virus because of the limit of detection of our current testing. Also, a SARS-CoV-2 test doesn't necessarily mean there is infectious virus. Testing for SARS-CoV-2 RNA on surfaces can yield a positive result, but that simply means that there is some SARS-CoV-2 RNA present, it doesn't necessarily mean the RNA is intact, or that the RNA is inside an infectious particle. So, fragmented RNA can actually yield a positive result."

Korea Biomedical Review (koreabiomed.com) reported in April that the country's Central Clinical Committee for Emerging Disease Control had said the reason 263 Koreans tested positive after recovery from the new coronavirus seemed to have been not because they contracted the virus again; rather, remaining virus fragments were detected in them.

Also read | No hard scientific evidence showing there are less virulent strains, says virologist Malik Peiris

Globally, it is now accepted that clinical signs are sufficient to commence treatment for COVID-19, even before an RT-PCR test is done. Also, cessation of symptoms is said to signal that a

person has recovered. Unless someone has been critically ill, it is no longer necessary for the patient to test negative twice for COVID-19 to be declared cured, or sent home.

"We do know that finding cases is now largely determined by testing in India. But the experience of other nations has shown that we could do the same with clinical diagnosis too, they did not suffer the consequences of that," Prof. John adds.

While 100% protection is not possible, he insists that ultimately, the use of masks and physical distance is going to be the only deterrence for transmission.

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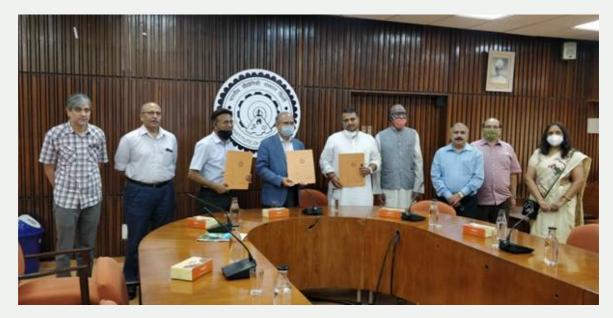
TRIFED SIGNS MOU WITH IIT, DELHI FOR UNNAT BHARAT ABHIYAN (UBA)

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

As one of the key organizations committed to the welfare and growth of the tribal people, TRIFED under Ministry of Tribal Affairs continues to forge ahead in its endeavour to bring the tribal people towards mainstream development. In addition to its ongoing initiatives and programme implementations, TRIFED has now entered into a partnership with IIT Delhi for the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA), a flagship national programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

To cement and formalise this partnership, a tripartite MOU was signed between TRIFED, IIT Delhi(on behalf of the UBA, as the National Coordinating Institute) and Vijnana Bharati (VIBHA, a Swadeshi Science Movement) at IIT, Delhi yesterday. Tribal entrepreneurs under TRIFED's Van Dhan programme will now be able to get access to the expertise of the entire network of 2600 + academic and research institutions under Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA).

Together with IIT Delhi, the "National Coordinating Institute (NCI)" for **Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA)"** **,**TRIFED envisages promoting Tribal Livelihoods and Income generating programmes through synergistic collaboration among the concerned Ministries, District Administration, local Panchayat Raj Institutes (PRIs), Voluntary Organisations, other stakeholders, as well as the other participating institutions. In particular, this partnership can help promote enhancing livelihoods through the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras established under the Van Dhan Yojana.

Speaking about the significance of this agreement and the pivotal role it will play in tribal development, Shri Pravir Krishna, Managing Director TRIFED said, "TRIFED was actively working on convergences with various ministries for "Skill development for Tribal Livelihoods".It is important to ensure "round the year income earning opportunity" for tribals by engaging them in a variety of economic activities ranging from agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, Medicinal & Aromatic plants etc, going beyond Minor Forest Produces. The synergies with Institutions of National Importance like IIT Delhi will be crucial in our Mission to serve the Tribal cause, as we can leverage the huge network of academic and research institutions across the country under Unnat Bharat Abhyan, the MHRD flagship programme."

With the partnership with IIT Delhi and Unnat Bharat Abhyan, these tribal forest dwellers engaged in Minor Forest Produces will get an exposure to newer processing technologies, product innovation, mentorship, transformational digital systems and handholding. The MoU opens gates for the best of brains in the country to attend to the problems of sustainable tribal livelihoods.

Also speaking on the occasion, Shri V Ramgopal Rao, Director, IIT, Delhi said: "IIT is consciously working towards connecting with the society, in multiple ways. For example, we have these immersion programmes, where we are trying to put our faculty members and students in places where there are real problems, whether it is working in hospitals, working in villages, or in industry. That is how they can identify the problems and use the resources available on campus to develop solutions." The partnership is therefore an opportunity for the brilliant minds to be presented with the right set of real problems that they can help address.

The IIT Delhi-TRIFED partnership will also benefit from the expertise and experience of Vijnana Bharati (VIBHA), a science Movement with Swadeshi spirit which aims to create awareness about the significant development of science and technology in India through ages and its relevance in present context and working towards achieving self-reliance of Bharat in all walks of life using Science and Technology. VIBHA will map and reach out to various stakeholders for convergence with the focus to strengthen Van Dhan Yojna (VDY), through its local chapters. VIBHA will help in gathering and passing critical information on needs and possible intervention to TRIFED, UBA and tribal communities. Tribal beneficiaries engaged in Van DhanYojana will also take advantage of Tech4Seva information ERP portal (CSIR-UBA-VIBHA), which is an initiative for Technology Outreach as an Enabler for Inclusive and Sustainable Developmental to mobilise the creative abilities of technology providers to develop scientific, affordable and sustainable solutions to various issues identified at the grassroots level.

Facilitation for transfer of already available technologies to Van Dhan beneficiaries, including low cost processing technology for value-addition of MFPs like decorators, drying machines relating to the various Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) will also be part of this association.

TRIFED is implementing the Van Dhan Yojana (VDY), a programme for value addition, branding and marketing of MFPs by establishing Van Dhan Kendras of around 300 tribal members each across the country to facilitate creation of sustainable livelihoods for the forest-based tribal gatherers. In a typical Van Dhan Kendra, the tribal beneficiaries are expected to create an enterprise, which would be involved in all related aspects from collection of forest produce, training of tribal beneficiaries, value-addition and processing, and packaging.

The Van Dhan Vikas Kendras emerged as a source of employment generation for tribal gatherers and forest dwellers and the home-bound tribal artisans. So far, 1205 Tribal Enterprises spread across 18500 SHGs have been established to provide employment opportunities to 3.6 lakh tribal gatherers and 18000 Self-help groups in 22 States. To ensure that the momentum gained over the past few months does not fizzle out, during the current financial year, TRIFED plans to sanction more Van Dhan Kendras so as to reach 3000 VDVKs.

The Van Dhan Yojana, along with the MSP for MFP component of the same scheme, offers a comprehensive development package for tribals promoting employment and incomes and entrepreneurship. With the successful implementation of this partnership which will benefit the tribal people and many more upcoming initiatives in the pipeline, TRIFED hopes to accelerate the complete transformation of tribal lives and livelihoods across the country by reinvigorating the flagging economic condition of the tribal population.

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) is a flagship national programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, envisioning the transformational change in rural development processes by leveraging knowledge institutions to help build the architecture of an Inclusive India. https://unnatbharatabhiyan.gov.in/index#network. The Unnat Bharat Abhiyan Cell at IIT, Delhi consists of an Advisory Committee, an Executive Committee and a Core Working Group consisting of about 40 faculty members drawn from various departments and centres of the institute. The Centre for Rural Development Technology (CRDT) as well as the RuTAG group of IIT Delhi are fully participating in the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan activities. It has also identified a few rural clusters for direct intervention and is in the process of networking with various participating institutions and voluntary organizations.

Centre for Rural Development and Technology at IIT Delhi is one of the renowned academic units established in 1979. The centre functions as an outreach centre to address challenges faced by rural communities and to improve their quality of life. The Centre is supported by over 20 eminent faculty members, 6 post-doctoral researchers and over 100 research scholars who are highly committed towards holistic rural development. Faculty members and research teams at CRDT work in various areas for improving living conditions and generating livelihood through synergy of Science and Technology interventions and Traditional Knowledge. The Centre has to its credit more than 300 high impact publications, reports and articles, 25 patents and 2

start-ups.

Under Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA), IIT Delhi has brought together a robust structural network with a large number of nodal institutions (Academic and research institutions like IITs, NITs, DST, DBT, ICAR, ICMR, MGIRI CSIR laboratories, ISRO, DRDO and defence laboratories, and BARC etc), Community Organizations (NGOs, PRIs & ULBs and other community-based organisations), CSR conscious corporates. Presently, the UBA network has 44 Regional Coordinating Institutes (RCIs) which are the solution facilitators, with 13 Subject Expert Groups (SEGs) & Specific Experts Advisors and 2600+ Participating Institutes (PIs) to build capacities and connect to the solution seekers i.e. the tribal communities.

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HOW DO PEOPLE CATCH CORONAVIRUS? WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The modus operandi is becoming clearer. For the most part, SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19, spreads by close personal contact via tiny particles emitted when an infected person coughs, sneezes, speaks, sings -- or even just breathes normally. These can infect another person by falling into an eye, nose or mouth, by being inhaled or getting stuck on a hand and transferred to one of these entry sites. Here's an explanation of the established route of contagion and other pathways under investigation.

Respiratory Droplets

These spatters of virus-laden liquid of varying sizes, expelled from an infected person in a turbulent gas cloud, are thought to be the main route.

The warm, moist atmosphere within the gas cloud delays evaporation, while airflow helps propel the payload of pathogen-bearing droplets further than if they were outside a cloud. A cough can disperse virus particles 4-to-5 meters (13-16 feet) and a sneeze can project them as far as 8 meters away, depending on humidity and temperature. Infection could occur if the droplets drift into the nose, mouth or eye of someone nearby.

Droplets can contaminate surfaces when they settle, creating what's called a "fomite." Although less likely, transmission could occur when a hand touches a fomite, such as a doorknob or utensil, and then comes in contact with the mouth, nose or eyes.

Patients may harbor potentially infectious SARS-CoV-2 virus in their saliva, stool, and urine as long as 15 days after falling ill, researchers in South Korea showed in a study of five patients in July. Spending at least 15 minutes in close contact (being within 1.8 meters) with an infected person, and spending even briefer periods with someone who is coughing or sneezing, are associated with higher risk for transmission.

The virus can be highly stable in favorable environments, lingering for weeks in near-freezing temperatures. At room temperature, it can survive as long as 24 hours on cardboard, 48 hours on stainless steel, and 72 hours on plastic, one study found. Standard disinfection kills it though.

Public health authorities recommend people wash their hands frequently, avoid close contact for prolonged periods with those outside their household, and forgo shaking hands, hugging and kissing for now. For households with a suspected or confirmed case of infection, doctors suggest keeping that person separated from others as much as possible and cleaning and disinfecting "high-touch surfaces" in common areas -- such as switches, tables and remotes -- daily. Where members of the public are crowded together, such as on buses and subways, numerous health authorities across the world are telling people to cover their faces. If medical masks are in short supply, many suggest using home-made versions.

Tiny Aerosolized Particles

The tiniest particles emitted from an infected person may be carried aloft in gas clouds tens of meters from where they started. Indoor and closed environments without adequate ventilation and air-filtration enable these microdroplets to float longer, while their small size increases their

odds of being inhaled, causing a potentially more severe infection. Evidence for airborne transmission is still emerging, however, and incomplete.

Researchers who aerosolized SARS-CoV-2 intentionally found active virus can float in the air for as long as 3 hours. The World Health Organization said the experiment didn't reflect normal coughing or clinical settings, but later acknowledged the possibility of airborne transmission can't be ruled out.

Meat processing plants have been the site of outbreaks around the world. Researchers in Germany showed in July that cold and stale air conditions enabled virus particles from an infected worker to travel more than 8 meters, spreading to several others.

Intensive care units are especially hazardous because of procedures known to generate aerosols. These include tracheotomies, inserting and removing airway tubes used for mechanical ventilation, and blowing air into patients' noses using a nasal cannula. The risk of infection is reduced when patients are treated in a negative pressure room in which the air is changed at least 12 times an hour.

Others studies found particles of the virus in the air and on surfaces of rooms where patients were receiving care and in adjacent hallways. In some cases, such particles weren't capable of causing an infection. In one study, researchers who examined air samples in two hospitals in China raised the theoretical concern that aerosols could arise from surfaces contaminated by droplets, for instance when hospital workers shed their masks and gowns, or when floors were cleaned. These risks are one reason medical workers who deal with suspected or confirmed Covid-19 patients are directed to wear face masks, specifically the more protective type known as N95 respirators, and dispose of them carefully.

Food or Water

The WHO has said it's "highly unlikely" that people could contract Covid-19 through food or food packaging; authorities in the U.S. have concurred. Still, the WHO recommends people who handle food practice good hygiene, including frequently cleaning and disinfecting work surfaces, to minimize the risk of contamination. In epidemic areas, Chinese health officials recommended drinking boiled water, avoiding eating raw food, washing hands frequently and preventing water and food from being contaminated by patients. According to U.S. officials, the coronavirus has not been detected in municipal drinking water supplies. Conventional treatment methods that use filtration and disinfection should remove or inactivate the virus.

Animals

SARS-CoV-2 is thought to have originated in bats and spread to humans via a yet-to-be identified intermediate mammalian host. Almost two dozen animal species are known to be susceptible to infection, and there have been numerous reports of infected people transmitting the virus to their pet cats and dogs, to farm animals and even to lions and tigers at the Bronx Zoo. Instances of people catching SARS-CoV-2 from animals, however, are extremely rare. At least two people probably caught it from minks -- semi-aquatic, carnivorous mammals raised for their soft pelts -- in the Netherlands, where outbreaks occurred on about a dozen farms. Still, health authorities say there's no evidence that animals play a significant role in spreading the virus, and consider the risk of them doing so to be low.

Fecal-to-Oral

Another possible route of transmission arises when infected people improperly wash their hands

after using the toilet, and then touch surfaces that others come in contact with. Some patients have been found to have viable virus particles in their stool. The WHO has said that the fecal-to-oral route does not appear to be a significant pathway for the novel coronavirus. To the extent it is a means of transmission, sanitizing bathrooms, food-preparation and serving areas could help slow the virus, in addition to regular hand-washing.

Mother-to-Child

After the infection appeared in babies born to mothers with the disease in China, the possibility was raised that the virus could be passed in utero. Subsequent studies reached different conclusions. One looked at nine infected women who gave birth to uninfected babies. No virus was detected in amniotic fluid, cord blood, the babies' throats or in breast milk, suggesting that transmission from mother to child occurs through respiratory droplets. However, doctors in China reported on the case of a mother with Covid-19 whose baby had elevated antibody levels two hours after birth. That suggests the baby was infected in utero, since the antibodies aren't transferred to the fetus via the placenta and usually don't appear until three to seven days after infection.

This story has been published from a wire agency feed without modifications to the text. Only the headline has been changed.

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