



The global epidemic of alternative truths

GS IV: Ethics - in Private and Public Relationships

Truth: Absolute or Relative

Truth is often regarded as a metaphysical construct, though it has a more pragmatic dimension as a process of accurately recording perceptions, and ensuring they become part of an agreed social record. The latter understanding is serviceable in a practical sense but opens the door to a certain troubling relativism. Perceptions are moulded by culture, and observation statements are conditioned by language.

The U.S. and social fractures

Earlier in the year, as the novel coronavirus pandemic began its lethal spread across the United States, the political leadership sought salvation in denial and then in the division. The worst-hit, at least in the early phase of the pandemic, were people of the minorities and lower-income groups, unable by their very identity to impose a serious punishment on political delinquency.

Truth and politics

Truth and politics had always been “on rather bad terms with each other” and “truthfulness” was never counted “among the political virtues”. This was a reality with a profound bearing on the practice of politics, since “facts and events”, the outcome of the collective life of humanity, was the “very texture of the political realm”.

James Madison, one among seven “founding fathers” of the U.S. Constitution, said about governments, that finally, they all “rest on opinion”. Yet, an individual’s opinion tended to be “timid and cautious” in its expression. Numbers could be a guarantee of strength, though not of authenticity. There is no wisdom in crowds — like all forms of power, majoritarianism could threaten the truth.

The role of social media

Since the events of 2016 — notably the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s election as the U.S. President — social media has come in for intense scrutiny for its ability to create bubbles of political misinformation.

Digital Constituency

India, a social milieu with its own modes of sorting by class, caste and community, affords new means of campaigning and exercising political power



through connectivity. Customary deliberative processes have been dispensed with: Parliament sessions conclude without the Question Hour and consultative meetings across party lines over significant legislative initiatives have been scrapped. Political leaders, beginning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking from high pedestals but rarely put themselves under scrutiny in media conferences or interviews.

Mains:

1. What is Post-truth Politics? Define the role played by social media in this. Explain how social media is detrimental to Democracy.

Stepping out of the shadow of India's malnutrition

GS III: Issues relating to Poverty and Hunger.

Context: This year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the United Nations World Food Programme, which should bring some of the focus back on these pressing issues of undernourishment and hunger in India.

Global reports, measures

Two recent reports — the annual report on “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020” by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and the 2020 Hunger report, “Better Nutrition, Better Tomorrow” by the Bread for the World Institute – document staggering facts about Indian food insecurity and malnutrition.

Reduction in Poverty but not in Malnutrition

1. These two reports indicate India to be one of the most food-insecure countries, with the highest rates of stunting and wasting among other South Asian countries.
2. The reduction in poverty has been substantial going by official estimates available till 2011-12. However, malnutrition has not declined as much as the decline has occurred in terms of poverty. On the contrary, the reduction is found to be much lower than in neighbouring China, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Rising food insecurity

Estimates indicate that between 2014-16, about 29.1% of the total population was food insecure, which rose up to 32.9% in 2017-19. In terms of absolute number,



about 375 million of the total population was moderately or severely food insecure in 2014, which went to about 450 million in 2019.

Crucial elements excluded

Despite the National Food Security Act – 2013 ensuring every citizen “access to adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices”, two crucial elements that still got left out are the non-inclusion of nutritious food items such as pulses and exclusion of potential beneficiaries.

Bleak Future

1. Because of this, there is little to disagree that the current COVID-19 pandemic would make the situation worse in general, more so for vulnerable groups.
2. Though States have temporarily expanded their coverage in the wake of the crisis, the problem of malnutrition is likely to deepen in the coming years with rising unemployment and the deep economic slump.

Way Forward

Hence, a major shift in policy has to encompass the immediate universalisation of the Public Distribution System which should definitely not be temporary in nature, along with the distribution of quality food items and innovative interventions such as the setting up of community kitchens among other things. The need of the hour remains the right utilisation and expansion of existing programmes to ensure that we arrest at least some part of this burgeoning malnutrition in the country.

Tech tact

GS II: India and its Neighborhood- Relations.

India's decision on Tuesday to block another 43 Chinese mobile applications hardly comes as a surprise. Since June, following an escalation of tensions with China at the border, India has blocked over 250 Chinese mobile apps, a bunch at a time, on the grounds that they have been engaging in activities “which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, the security of the state and public order”.

Chinese Protest

1. China, not for the first time either, has charged India with using national security as an excuse to target Chinese apps.



2. China crying discrimination is ironical — its version of the Internet is tightly controlled and heavily censored, and has been so for years. There may not be much to argue against decisions made on the grounds of national security.

Rationale:

1. In the short run, it may be useful for India to use its vast market for Internet services as a leverage in its attempts to keep China in check at the border.
2. Indian app alternatives may also find the much-needed space to grow now, and initial reports indicate as much.

But there are a few risks with this approach, especially given India's global ambitions in technology.

1. First, this approach runs the risk of triggering an unconventional battle between the two countries in the larger technology realm, if not in the larger business space.
2. China, being an important player in the technology global supply chain, will be hard, if not impossible, to sideline.
3. Second, there is a risk that moves such as blocking apps would be perceived adversely by global investors and Internet companies.
4. While it is true that there has been some push back against Chinese companies and technology globally, India must stick to a rules-based approach in regulating the Internet.
5. There is a need to implement the long-pending data protection law. It is also important to engage with the ecosystem and provide clarity on these issues as India has to win the technology battle as well.

A vial half full

GS II: Government Policies and Interventions for Development in various sectors and issues arising out of their Design and Implementation.

Some volunteers, who were supposed to get two doses of Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine a month apart, got only half the required dose in one of the injections. Intriguingly, the data suggested that the efficacy was 90% in the half/dose-full dose sub-group than the 62% in the regular full-dose group.



Half-dose opportunity

1. The company is reportedly looking at an additional trial to properly test the half-dose/full-dose regime.
2. A reduced dosage turning out to significantly improve efficacy could mean that more vaccines can be made and distributed to the world quickly.
3. India is among those countries that are dependent on the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine because some of those doses will be administered to a high-priority group of 30 crore people already identified by the government.

Prime Boost and Unknowns

1. Vaccine makers and immunologists are aware of the 'prime-boost' technique where a limited dose of a vaccine is administered that prepares the immune system and a later shot then improves the overall production of protective antibodies.
2. The results could even cause other vaccine manufacturers to test similar strategies. However, sober reflection leads to the ineluctable conclusion that this might not be one of the 'lucky accidents' of science lore.
3. The fraction of people who got the reduced doses were under 55, and so it is not known if the dosage works for people in the older, more vulnerable group who have already been included in the high priority groups of several countries including India.
4. Also, the number of volunteers who got the accidental dose were statistically insignificant to draw the conclusion of increased protection. Though the overall assessment that the vaccine works, and is safe, holds, the events cloud trust in the process of scientific public communication.

Haste and Opacity

Companies that are otherwise jostling to prematurely announce vaccine results before scientific publication are opaque about full public disclosure. This when they have already been given a free pass in terms of accelerated regulatory processes, combining results from early trials and guaranteed government procurement. Haste and opacity will only delay the availability of a safe and efficacious vaccine as India prepares for possibly the largest immunisation programme in history.