



State action

Crux: Instead of dictating how States deal with the pandemic, the Centre must be a facilitator

Highlights:

1. India's national positivity rate, or the proportion of tested cases returning positive, is around 21%. Moreover, 533 of the 734 districts have reported positivity greater than 10%.
2. Couple that with the faltering vaccination drive, and the picture is far from pretty.
3. The oxygen crisis continues and the pandemic has now established itself in rural India in lethal proportions, with macabre reports of bodies surfacing in the Ganga in the stretch from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar.
4. All of these point to the fact that there is a very large pool of those infected and prone to infecting those around, bringing up the question of whether a national lockdown should be reimposed.

States are important:

1. No fewer than 18 States have imposed various grades of lockdown or curfews. Some only lay stress on shutting down marketplaces whereas others are more reminiscent of the curbs of March and April last year.
2. A 'national lockdown' at this stage has an only cosmetic value. India's economy was already in a nosedive before March 2020 and the sudden imposition wreaked havoc on the migrant workforce.
3. A lesson that has emerged from the pandemic is that States are best equipped to take care of themselves with the Centre doing its job best while acting as a facilitator.
4. Instead, the Centre must focus on distributing equitably across State's vaccines, oxygen tankers, testing kits and other critical medical equipment while also accounting for a potential third wave.

The science teaching and rationality India needs

Crux: The novel coronavirus crisis has fully revealed the price to be paid in the neglect of education and health.



Logic of avoidance

1. It is a rare school that gives children the task of going around noticing stagnant puddles formed during the rainy season containing visible mosquito larvae.
2. The standard textbook line of action is to spread kerosene on stagnant water. That is what municipal workers supposedly do, and that is what is taught in the lesson on the services that municipalities provide.
3. As the pedagogic calendar goes, once a lesson has been delivered and the test based on it taken, there is no reason to recall its content in the later parts of the year, except for the final examination.
4. So, if malaria, dengue and chikungunya persist during the long autumn and winter months, it is unlikely that a teacher will relate them to the lesson taught earlier on mosquito prevention.
5. Thus, while mosquitoes are avoidable, the diseases they cause to take on an inevitable character.

Things that we do at Home:

1. Before the advent of antibiotics, typhoid fever and jaundice were life-threatening, and especially in the case of children.
2. Doctors knew that it was possible to prevent both these diseases by avoiding contaminated water. And this could be done by boiling drinking water. But more usually, boiling of water only started after someone had been diagnosed as suffering from typhoid, or from jaundice.
3. In any case, boiling was cumbersome and expensive. Along with antibiotics, water purifying devices and bottled water have distanced us from the grim experiences associated with water-borne diseases prevalent before the 1970s.
4. Common diarrhoea is still a threat to the life and health of babies. Instead of preventing it by ensuring the supply of clean water in all geographical locations, India as a nation has ended up addressing the problem of drinking water by popularising personalised devices.

No public systems: The absence of public systems has proved costly both in health and in education.

1. The teaching of science from the primary levels was a major policy initiative taken in the early decades of Independence through which the welfare state hoped to create general awareness on crucial matters of disease prevention and health.
2. But the teaching of science is more than talking about science and telling students what ought to be done. In the case of boiling water, for example, it is



hardly enough to say that high temperatures kill microbes. To achieve the belief that it actually does, one needs to see microbes with one's own eyes.

3. For an overwhelming majority of children, our system of education fails to provide them with this kind of experience, even at the higher secondary level.
4. The idea that boiling purifies water remains a matter of giving the correct answer in the examination, rather than a belief based on evidence seen through a microscope.
5. This can hardly be described as a failure of education, because the seed of a capable public system was never sown, and, therefore, we could hardly expect a harvest. The novel coronavirus crisis has fully revealed the price that the neglect of education and health has wreaked.

Setback in Science:

1. India's education system, which was already impoverished, suffered severe cutbacks under the repeated waves of lopsided economic reforms.
2. New norms of public financing have undermined science teaching, robbing ordinary citizens of the intellectual resources they might have acquired during childhood.
3. But science teaching alone cannot create miracles. For science to mean anything, a rational social environment is needed. Moreover, for science to acquire meaning during school life, it is important that children grow up in an ethos where dissent and debate are encouraged.
4. It is obvious that the benefits of science and its teaching do not accrue when the democratic order, and the institutions on which it is based, are not in good health.

EdTech needs an ethics policy

CruX: The privacy of students who use EdTech apps for learning is at risk

Privacy risk:

1. The lack of a regulatory framework in India along the lines of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe could impinge on the privacy of students who now use educational technology (EdTech) apps for learning.
2. Since the onset of the pandemic, online education has replaced conventional classroom instruction. This has spawned several EdTech apps which have become popular.



3. Schools and colleges have been able to move their content delivery, engagement and evaluation from offline to online and ensure minimal academic disruption.
4. This exercise has forced teachers to become facilitators in learning rather than being content providers. The EdTech apps have the advantage of being able to customise learning to every student in the system.

Storing the smallest details

1. To perform the process of learning customisation, the apps collect large quantities of data from the learners through the gadgets that the students use. These data are analysed in minute detail to customise learning and design future versions of the app.
2. The latest mobile phones and hand-held devices have a range of sensors like GPS, gyroscope, accelerometer, magnetometer and biometric sensors apart from the camera and microphones.
3. These provide data about the learner's surroundings along with intimate data like the emotions and attitudes experienced and expressed via facial expressions and body temperature changes.
4. In short, the app and device have access to the private spaces of the learner that one would not normally have access to.

Minimal safeguards

1. In the EdTech industry, where investments are pouring in, researchers and app developers are being pushed to be as intrusive as possible. The privacy safeguards are either missing or minimal.
2. Children use these apps without a parent or adult supervision. The intrusion of privacy can happen unnoticed. The concept of informed consent is not meaningful since there are no proper primers to explain to stakeholders the intricacies in layperson terms.
3. Further, there is no option to stop using the app without some repercussions. Since India does not have protection equivalent to the GDPR, private data collected by an EdTech company can be misused or sold to other companies with no oversight or protection.
4. It is prudent to remember the 2014 study titled 'Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks, wherein Facebook manipulated the emotions of 7,00,000 users by changing the type of posts that were shown to the user.



Given these realities, it is necessary to formulate an ethics policy for EdTech companies through the active participation of educators, researchers, parents, learners and industry experts. Such a policy draft should be circulated both online and offline for discussions and criticism. Issues of fairness, safety, confidentiality and anonymity of the user would have to be dealt with. EdTech companies would have to be encouraged to comply in the interest of a healthier learning ecosystem.

A bullet train to hunger

CruX: The pandemic has highlighted the importance of expanding social security nets. The experience for the poor is a kind of syndemic: a juxtaposition of the healthcare crisis due to the pandemic and the daily precarity of having to deal with hunger and uncertainty about livelihoods.

The rural-urban divide

1. As per the State of Working India report 2021 of Azim Premji University, nearly half of formal salaried workers moved into informal work between late 2019 and late 2020 and the poorest 20% of the households lost their entire incomes in April and May 2020. Poverty rates in rural areas have increased by 15 percentage points (pp) and by 20 pp in urban areas.
2. A worse impact on the urban poor was also observed in other surveys. Hunger Watch survey focussed on understanding the hunger and livelihood situation among marginalised communities such as daily wage workers, single women households, people with disability, etc.
3. The differential impact on rural and urban populations came across in this as well. Incomes reduced by half/quarter for more than half the urban respondents while it was a little over one-third for rural respondents.
4. In summary, across 13 key parameters, urban respondents were 15 pp worse off compared to their rural counterparts. The conditions are worse when data are spliced by caste, religion and other special forms of vulnerability.
5. For instance, 60% of Muslims, 51% of Dalits, 58% of older persons without caregivers and 56% of single women-headed households went to bed without a meal at least once.
6. However, the uniformity of these numbers across surveys indicates the disproportionate impact faced by some of these more vulnerable communities.



Two important laws

1. Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population are entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains each month at subsidised prices.
2. Despite well-known exclusions from NFSA due to identification errors as well as using old population estimates, the additional measures announced by the Central government under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana after the national lockdown was restricted to only those already covered by the NFSA.
3. An additional entitlement of 5 kg of foodgrains per individual and 1 kg of pulses per household for free was given to those who hold Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards under the NFSA. AAY cardholders fall under the extremely poor category. This was discontinued in November.
4. Supplementary rations were available under various State schemes. In the HW survey, a higher proportion of respondents in rural areas (56%) had NFSA cards compared to urban areas (27%).
5. Similarly, as per official records, there was a 47% increase in person-days of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20 and a record 72 lakh households completed 100 days of work in one year.
6. The wider coverage of the public distribution system (PDS) and a promise for employment in rural areas have perhaps cushioned the blow to some extent compared to urban areas.

Relevance shown:

While still a long way to go, NFSA and MGNREGA have at least demonstrated the importance of expanding the social security nets. PDS entitlements are basic survival kits and fall far short of minimal nutritional requirements for a healthy society. As per conservative estimates, there are at least 33 crore poor households in India. If even the basic survival needs of these households are not ensured we are putting them into irredeemable levels of starvation and malnutrition.

Way Forward:

With over 100 million tonnes of food grain stocks in the Food Corporation of India warehouses (as of May 2021), not universalising rations at this stage is akin to taking a bullet train to hunger. The Central government must immediately expand the coverage and quantity under the NFSA for at least one year, increase MGNREGA entitlements to 200 days per household, initiate consultations for an

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urban employment programme and offer a wage compensation of ₹7,000 per poor household for the next few months.