

Second Wave - Coronavirus 'winks' at febrile minks but Canine sniffs it out!

TIOL - COB(WEB) - 737
NOV 12, 2020

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SEEMINGLY fond of rapidly-changing its epicenter, Coronavirus in its new **avatar**

of second wave is back in large parts of Northern Hemisphere. Having sown chaos and injected economic and political instability in many countries, it seems to have donned hats of many hues! For the Trump Administration its second wave was a ***fait accompli*** and that is why its containment was never made a key plank of his poll strategy! And shockingly, though close to 2.5 lakh Americans have lost lives since March with the caseload crossing 10 million-mark, Mr Trump's cockamamie approach to deal with the swelling devastation caused by the pandemic did not hurt him as much as Democrats may have projected prior to the polls!

For the President-elect Joe Biden, the handling of the pandemic was no less than a grim referendum against Mr Trump but it did not turn out to be so! Doubtless, it proved to be a kick in his teeth but certainly not a 'tooth-uprooting' kick! As per various surveys of issues impacting the mood of the voters, the pandemic accounted for barely 20% weightage. The most dominant issue that tilted legions of voters in favour of Mr Trump was the economic uprooting. Six out of 10 Americans who voted for Mr Trump are reported to have been swayed by his decision not to lockdown the economy

and protect the evaporating jobs for the common Americans. Most voters, writhing in acute pain of financial distress, believed Mr Trump who called his Democratic rival as 'Shutdown Candidate'! And the political race turned to be too precariously narrow!

Though message from America for political leaders in other parts of the world is not to shut down the economy as the 'Halloween-ed' face of financial misery is more scary for most than the fast-mutating Coronavirus! I am sure that such a clear-eyed message will not be overlooked in most developing countries like India

but the prosperous ones, swamped by the second wave, seem to have come to such a pass^{Ã©} that their hospitals and ICUs are once again almost-marooned by the abnormal rise in the caseloads! A good number of European countries once again lead the world in rates of fresh infection and rising death toll - **4000 daily deaths with close to three lakh fresh cases!**

Dejected and ashen-faced political heads in as many as 20 EU countries have announced that they have no choice but to shut down the economies. Curfews and lockdowns of myriad types have been enforced in Europe. Even Germany which had excelled many in its peer groups during the first wave as being the bellwether for model behaviour

to keep the virus at arm's length, is reported to be struggling. Its well-honed method of contact-tracing has come a cropper as against the abnormal rate of fresh cases! And most EU members blame the second wave to holiday-crazy travellers and sports buffs.

Even as European leaders appear to be bracing for disaster, Denmark has reported a 'mink variant' of mutated strand of the virus. Denmark has about 15 mn minks in its farms. Its farming is lucrative for luxury exports. Netherlands and Spain had earlier reported such infection. Danish authorities fear that the new variant has already infected dozens of citizens and the vaccine in the making worldwide may not be effective to cure the new variant. As a result, the Danish Prime Minister first decided to put the entire mink population to guillotine but the decision was later amended to cull only those which are infected and may infect humans. In the most affected State, the military personnel are reported to have gone for mass culling - very similar to the bird flu era! However, the Danish scientists are more concerned about a new variant called '**Cluster Five**'

which contains four mutations together. Lab tests have found that human antibodies which fight against popular variant of COVID-19 are not effective against Cluster Five!

As the furry beast is being culled in Denmark, its neighbouring country Finland has launched an innovative pilot program to raise a battalion of COVID-19-sniffing dogs to be deployed at airports and hospitals. During the trial run, voluntary canine tests have delivered stunning results within 10 seconds. UAE has also rolled out a similar pilot project at Dubai airport. The US is also planning a similar project. Researchers have underlined that the dogs have been used to detect cancer and other health problems in the past as changes in health do alter the way people smell! Initial findings have revealed that dogs are much better at spotting COVID-19 infection than PCR and antibody tests. They can also detect people who are not yet PCR positive and may turn so after a week!

Although humanity continues to be trampled by the rogue pathogen, a good news was reported by Pfizer - its vaccine has achieved 90% efficacy! The much-awaited piece of news skyrocketed through the roof the capital market indices across the world - all bottled energy in the bourses was uncorked to achieve new peaks! It is indeed a very good news but the first-generation vaccine pits the world against a thicket of distributional challenges. First, it has to be kept ultra cold. Secondly, it warrants two jabs within a gap of three weeks. Thirdly, it is still being tested on an ethnically varied groups and the trial is not yet over. The results are based on interim analysis. What the world needs is a vaccine kept closer to room temperature. Moreover, it is not yet clear whether this vaccine also prevents a vaccinated person from spreading the virus? What about its long-term effect? There are many questions which go unanswered at this stage. However, in the coming six months, many more such good news would be tumbling out of various labs and pharma companies and a day of annihilation of the contagion would also come soon!

Meanwhile, India seems to have reined in the virus albeit Delhi has not! Delhi's health infrastructure has been creaking with over 8000 new cases being reported. It is speculated that Delhi is caught in the vortex of the third wave of the virus. Whether it would also spread to other States and the graph of caseloads would once again shoot up, is to be seen in the coming weeks. It is being speculated that the virus spreads much faster in cold weather conditions. However, **there is no scientific evidence to suggest so.**

Transmission of infection in cold weather is faster perhaps because virus survives on surfaces and in the air for longer period and people tend to spend more time indoors. Thus it may be construed that it is the influence of weather on people's behaviour that may spread the virus rather than on the virus itself! Against this backdrop, I sincerely hope that India is not going to be caught in the surging storm of second wave as it would indeed be the head-spinning catastrophe for the limping-back economy!