

Marauder pandemic now heads beyond Goosebumps threshold!

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double-mutant and, also perhaps, triple-mutant, the second wave of the pandemic seems to have swung into 'endgame' mode for India! With the political leadership clearly demonstrating its inclination for poll and **Kumbh**

management in place of pandemic management, India long back deserted or got itself delinked from the world of science and humanitarian data projections of COVID-19 infections. Going by the ferocity of the new waves elsewhere in the world, many studies had projected a **tsunami**

-like contagion resulting in gory pile-ups of dead bodies unless timely measures were put in place in India. However, strangely and nail-bitingly, all such forewarnings were given an indecent burial while dusting up the final strategy! And the consequences are here for all to analyse the script of a horror movie unfolding naked dance of deaths on a daily basis.

India has consistently been scaling up new scary peaks - 3.8 lakh new cases with over 3600 fresh deaths in last 24 hours! Oof! There is no shelter for Indians to hide from the lunatic marauder the virus has turned into! Going by the abnormal spread and penetration of the pathogen, a stage seems to have come where

people living in posh multi-storey condominiums, bungalows, middle-class houses, slums or even makeshift houses on pavements can no longer afford to behave like Ostrich

. Given the projection of over five lakh cases by mid-May, the virus is literally going to chase uninfected people even to the periphery of their bedrooms and claim its 'meaty' victims!

Though the daily official data of fresh infections and fresh deaths are big enough to stir chills down one's spine but experts suggest that the Indian catastrophe is much bigger than what is being officially painted! The actual caseload could be anywhere between 10 or even 20 times higher and the number of deaths far too many to even imagine! Since States count a death as COVID-related only if it is preceded by a confirmed test report. Given the fact that the national testing efforts have fumbled and all big players in the private sector are woefully handicapped to meet the sudden spike in online demand for immediate testing, it is taking almost a week for home collection. Meanwhile, frail human skeletons tend to 'melt'!

I am witness to one such incident in TIOL backyard where my colleague developed initial cough and cold and even before the testing agency could send its representative, our colleague showed signs of gasping for oxygen. And given the 'carbonised' state of oxygen supply in the country, his co-morbidity did not permit him to stand on his two legs! And he simply perished even before anything our health infrastructure could do for him! If this is the scenario in our posh metros, one may not be blamed for making sketchy projections based on fragmented and rudimentary data collected from unconnected hinterlands across the country! Politics obviously plays a nasty role here as States ruled by different political parties have a vested interest to keep their official medical bulletin 'emaciated'!

Let me now move beyond the testing fiasco. Our visits to hospitals and oxygen suppliers depict a bone-chilling tale of horror. A serpentine queue of oxygen-seekers, a few riding posh sedan vehicles but each begging for a few ounces of life-supporting gas, first showcased the reality of the pandemic being a status-breaker in our society

! But it was a short-lived equality-sponsoring mirage! Deep-pockets soon broke away from the queue and trousered long cylinders, many in surplus, and sprinted back to their loved ones! Chafing at such distribution by less-moneyed did not matter as this is how free market forces behave when there is a crunch of a particular commodity in the market. Though the Centre has taken many measures to bolster the supply to the starved States by running Oxygen Express Service and even deploying IAF planes to airlift oxygen tankers but for thousands of lesser mortals parked in hospitals it was too late as their official status changed from oxygen seekers to funeral pyre claimants. Even in the crematoriums, long waiting and queues have been reported. As a stop-gap arrangement, pavements outside such funeral places are being converted to deal with piles of body bags!

Moving away from the gory nitty-gritty emerging from the theatre of actions on ground zero, India's vaccine strategy which once looked solid and on right track, is now a shambles! Shortages are now everywhere. The Centre, by February, had tied down supplies barely for three per cent of India's population. Serum Institute of India, the largest vax manufacturer in the world, has not been able to ramp up its production capacity for lack of funds or delayed access to funds. As a result, it has also defaulted in meeting its commitment to UK, EU and Covax. Anyway, whatever stocks are available today, rather than jabbing people based on age factor, a simple mid-course correction in strategy should be to identify 'superspreaders' who also constitute the necessary hands for keeping the wheels of economy moving.

Now that lakhs of migrant workers have moved back to UP, Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar and Assam and have also freighted the virus to rural villages, these States should be given extra supply from the Central quota to launch special drive to trace and jab them. And once the present wave loses steam and the workers once again roll up their baggage to go back to the cities, a sort of vaccine certificate indicating one dose or two doses should be made mandatory for their travel back or rejoining their workplaces.

Undoubtedly, India has fumbled and tumbled in dealing with the second wave and has also paid huge costs of excessive timidity in locking horns with the pathogen but everything is not yet lost. Mr Modi does command tremendous clout among the people. His party helms both the Houses of Parliament and runs most State Governments.

This is the moment for Mr Modi to make use of all his influence and take charge of the strategy to deal with the carnage which looks unstoppable today!

If key components of strategy are left to the States, they would essentially do politics which would in turn produce mendacious feeds for the media and that would finally further puncture the morale of the citizens in the mighty institutions India has built over the decades to protect people and their health! I am still hopeful of a bellyful good news if no more time is lost!

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