

World sitting on vent of Pandemic 'Volcano'! Is Next one knocking? *Ou IÃ IÃ !*

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Coronavirus continues to be on 'double steroid' - Delta and Lambda! There is no marked abatement in its quirky potential to torpedo human lives and cause pile-ups of economic wreckage! The coronavirus seismograph clearly reveals that tremors and earthquakes are not going anywhere so soon! And whatever economic boom is being flossed today may cave in to several fault lines which may soon emerge to roil the global economy. And it is not a *mea culpa* for being overly pessimistic! What lies beneath the socio-economic surface across the world is deep gloom!

Even after 18 months of frenzied policy and dumb-downed scientific response, the virus continues to clock close to five lakh new cases and over 7000 fresh deaths on a daily basis! And mind it, it is apparently the lull period for the bellicose virus which is spitting venom only in a select few geographies such as Russia, Indonesia, South Africa and a large part of Latin America. Its next petrifying tide may envelope a large part of the world by September! Oh so near? How are global vaccination programmes progressing? The messy and fractured world has indeed been doing its 'tamped down' best but it has thus far jabbed only about 12% of the world population - 94 Crore fully vaccinated and 342 Crore given single dose! Humanity does not stand even a dumb chance to firewall another round of genocide!

Unarguably, the COVID-19 is the Chernobyl moment for the 21st century! It is not because of the nuclear transmission of the contagion but more because it has clearly shown us the swingeingly grave threat to our health and wellbeing. It has rudely proven to us that how perishable and brittle our world is! It has, in its gangbusters' style, exposed the gaping holes in our domestic and international health systems and also the global political leadership which willy-nilly deserted the ship of globalisation when it was definitely needed the most!

By all standards, the pandemic is a global disaster. And, our scientists are of firm belief that it was preventable! Had the global political leaders not diluted their trust in the virtues of multilateralism to deal with this scourge, the global scenario would undoubtedly have been not so much downbeat! *Ou IÃ IÃ*

! Yes, a good amount of time has been lost but everything is not yet lost! The High-Level Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response(IPPPR) which was set up by the G20 in January 2021, has noted in its report, submitted to the elite group at its Venice meeting last week: ***Prime Ministers, Presidents and heads of international and regional bodies must now urgently accept their responsibility to transform the way in which the world prepares for and responds to global health threats. If not now, then when, it has asked.***

The IPPPR report has underlined that the world has seen as many as 13 major infectious outbreaks in the last two decades such as Nipah, SARS-1, H1N1 Influenza, MERS, Ebola, Chikungunya, Zika and now COVID-19. Based on estimates by Meta-biota, the Report adds, there will be 40 lakhs expected deaths in the next decade from the three pathogen groups - Influenza, epidemic coronaviruses and viral haemorrhagic fever

- almost equal to the present global death toll of over 40 lakhs. Acute respiratory pathogens such as a deadly strain of influenza, pose particular global risks in the modern age. Such infections are transmitted via respiratory droplets. With today's transportation infrastructure, they may move rapidly across geographies. COVID-19 is neither the first nor the last health emergency the world will face. Several scientists have projected that humanity will face a pandemic at least once every five years from here on!

And this is just one optimistic scenario! The reality can be far worse!

The Report forewarns that the next major pandemic may visit at any time. Even if it comes only 10 or 20 years from now, the costs to governments will still be 10 to 25 times the cumulative additional investments in prevention and preparedness over the years in the present value terms! Going by such a prognosis, the world is indeed sitting on the vent of an active volcano! And the world's collective political leadership is required to rise above their geopolitical fissures and act like a scalded cat!

Commenting on the global response to COVID-19 outbreak, the Report highlights that the alert system was too glacial - and too meek, too!

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the WHO was under-powered. That is why its audit of China's initial 'calculated' response turned out to be a 'Fraudit'! Efforts of its expert panel

to track down the origin of the virus ran into sand! The tardy global response has exacerbated inequalities, given 18% spike in the global hunger and the global leadership was conspicuous by its absence. COVID-19 has indeed been a grim wake-up call. The global leaders are now required to commit to clear targets, additional resources, new measures and strong leadership to prepare for the future. I sincerely hope that it is not going to be a case of - You can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink!

The IPPPR Report is very emphatic in its observation that averting the next major pandemic is the restless race of the decade - and a race measured in days and weeks

when an outbreak does emerge. The world has the scientific, technological and financial muscles to drastically lessen the risk of a pandemic, and the colossal human, social and economic costs it brings. The report has urged that great progress in pandemic prevention, preparedness and response is within reach in the next five years. All it entails are bold national, regional and global investments and actions in normal times and also capacity to respond with speed and force in the event of an emerging pandemic threat.

The Report has egged on the G20 leaders to urgently build a global genomic and epidemiological surveillance system, combining pre-existing and new nodes of domain expertise at the global, regional and country levels, with the WHO at the epicentre. The present architecture of Global Preparedness Monitoring Board is not tailored for the purpose to prevent a major pandemic. It stresses the point that the solution rests not in creating new institutions, but in introducing a new mechanism of global governance and establishing a tightly networked system of responsibility and accountability among existing institutions. All such efforts would require low-and-middle-income countries to uncomplainingly enhance their health spending by at least one more per cent of GDP over the next five years.

Sequestering the health spending would be likened to fouling one's own nest! At the international-level, there is a need for commitment of at least USD 75 billion over the next five years. There is no time for jousting and geopolitical kerfuffle! The sum being pleaded by the experts is derisory if we reckon the present costs to the global economy - Over USD 10 trillion till date and over USD 22 trillion by 2025 as per IMF latest studies!

Where will this money be spent? The Report has enlisted measures like creating a globally networked surveillance and research to stymie emerging infectious diseases; to build resilient national systems to fortify a critical foundation for pandemic preparedness; supply of medical counter-measures and tools; global governance to ensure that the system is tightly coordinated, properly funded and with clear accountability for outcome and empower the International Financial Institutions(IFIs) to boldly support the global outcomes. The IFIs like the World Bank and the IMF are not structured to address global threats favourably. They are to be especially mandated to fund such efforts but not at the cost of other priority goals. The High-Level Panel has also bigged up the creation of a new Global Health Threats Board

which would assemble all Finance and Health Ministers and International Organisations to provide systemic financial oversight and also coordination of international efforts to mitigate pandemic threats.

Reacting to the recommendations of the Report, the G20 official press communique states that the forum has taken note of them and are committed to work together, and with IFIs and partners like WHO, to develop proposals for sustainable financing to strengthen future pandemic preparedness and response. It also tasked experts from their Ministries of Finance and Health to follow up with concrete proposals to be presented at the next meeting in October.

The G20 response is timely and heart-gladdening. The political leaders deserve kudos for quickly learning from their cardinal mistakes and resolving to put in place a sort of early warning system for future pandemic (See [Cob\(Web\)-764](#)) and create institutional response to nix future threats in the making.

I personally feel that the High-Level Panel has been a bit conservative in asking for only USD 75 billion over the next five years. Ideally, it should be over USD 150 bn to quicken the process of creating the new bodies as the next pandemic, as per various studies, may be barely a few weeks or months away

! A good example is the State of Kerala which has been fighting ravenous COVID-19 virus tooth and nail and has unfortunately been struck by the Zika virus last week. Let's not rule out a scenario where the world continues to battle out the COVID-19 pathogen and may also be forced to confront a parallel outbreak of one of the possible three threats underlined by the Independent Panel of global experts! This is perhaps last chance for the global political leaders not to act penny wise and pound foolish! Need to dial up temperature for cohesive thinking! Time to blow the whistle on geopolitical differences! And even after such crystal-clear forewarnings about the next pandemic if some large countries like China are averse to close cooperation and transparency in sharing information, they do qualify to be bracketed as what Germans often describe as '**Backpfeifengesicht**' (a face badly in need of a slap)!