



## Rapid failures

Significant error rates for COVID-19 antibody testing kits underscore the need for caution

Rapid testing kits that State governments have been using to detect antibodies to the novel coronavirus have proved unreliable, making the shift to normal life after the lockdown ends on May 3 more difficult. Governments around the world have been looking for an accurate blood test that can tell people if they have immunity through past COVID-19 infection, and can therefore return to their duties to kickstart the economy. While the diagnostic RT-PCR test to confirm the presence of the virus using a nasal swab in a laboratory setting is considered reliable, attempts to design a rapid test that uses a blood sample to find antibodies after past infection have thrown up errors in as much as a third of cases: a study in the U.K. showed that they were high on specificity – accurate in cases that they found to be antibody positive. But they still missed about 30% of positive cases, showing low sensitivity. This is the phenomenon worrying India, which has imported several hundred thousand rapid testing kits, and its experience is shared by the U.S., U.K., Spain and other countries. Rajasthan had laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 positive cases not being detected by rapid testing kits. Several States have independently ordered thousands of kits, mainly from China, and are in a quandary.

The ICMR has advised States, to whom it distributed kits, that they could be used for surveillance testing, rather than to make medically important decisions. Narrowing down the test to reliable methods is the challenge, and the WHO along with its collaborating centres is working to identify them. The results will be crucial and all countries, including the U.S. White House Coronavirus Task Force, are looking at serosurveillance, the process that will determine the status of the population on COVID-19. An exit from lockdown and other public health measures depend on such testing. India should remain focused on identifying tests that work well. This requires close integration with efforts launched by diagnostics regulators in the U.S., Europe and China who have used emergency provisions to allow early use of kits; the kits themselves are under evaluation. There are reports indicating that some vendors of rapid testing devices in China have run afoul of regulators in that country since they have no prior expertise in the field. Making purchase decisions, therefore, calls for rigorous review. In the immediate context, the message should go out to States that rapid tests cannot substitute for RT-PCR to diagnose infection. It is by no means clear that antibodies developed in response to COVID-19 provide long-term protection against reinfection. Yet, a good test to certify a large section of the population as having developed immunity seems to be a promising tool to reopen the economy with some confidence.

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## Protection for protectors

Healthcare workers should be allowed to work in an environment free of violence and abuse

Since the first case of novel coronavirus infection in India was reported in end-January, many healthcare workers have been subjected to abuse and violence in the line of duty. Most of the attacks have been on healthcare personnel sent to localities to collect samples from people who are suspected to have been infected or have come in contact with those who have tested positive for the virus. Some doctors returning home from duty have been prevented from entering their homes and, in some cases, even asked to vacate their premises. While such acts have been widely condemned, nothing much changed on the ground. The dastardly act of a few people in Chennai who not only attacked healthcare workers but also prevented a decent burial of a neurosurgeon who died of COVID-19 complications on April 19 shook the nation's conscience. Though belated, the Union Cabinet's decision to promulgate an ordinance to amend the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 to make acts of violence against medical personnel a cognisable and non-bailable offence and also provide compensation in case of injury or damage or loss to property is thus commendable.

Very often, the abuse and violence against healthcare workers after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country has been due to fear and ignorance. The communal colour given to the COVID-19 epidemic after the large religious congregation was held in mid-March by the Tablighi Jamaat in Nizamuddin, Delhi initially led many in the community to avoid coming forward to get tested. In many cases, the fear of stigma and isolation resulted in attacks on healthcare workers who had gone to collect samples from those who were part of this congregation. In other instances, the wrong messaging that getting infected by the virus meant certain death, in order to achieve maximum compliance with the shutdown, unwittingly led to a fear psychosis. Negative messaging, especially of the kind that induces fear and stigma, has always been counterproductive, as seen in the early days of the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign in the country. Awareness-building exercises became easier and more effective when negative messaging and stereotyping about HIV/AIDS was shunned. Doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers who are forced to work long hours treating patients infected with the highly infectious virus, and even when protective gear in the form of gloves, face mask and personal protective equipment are scarce, need more empathy, compassion, unmitigated support and cooperation from the society. Symbolic gestures such as clapping hands and lighting candles in recognition of their selfless service during these trying times do not bolster their morale as much as understanding and support does.

# The COVID-19 paradox in South Asia

It is surprising that the region has far fewer infections and deaths compared with North America and Western Europe



DEEPAK NAYYAR

The oldest and largest democracies in the world are often compared. This time is different. The first person tested positive for COVID-19 on January 21 in the United States and on January 30 in India. Roughly three months later, on April 20, the total number of infections was 7,23,605 in the U.S. and 17,265 in India, accounting for 31.2% and 0.75% of the world total, while the number of COVID-19 deaths was 34,203 in the U.S. and 543 in India, making up 21.7% and 0.33% of the world total. The share of the two countries in world population, by contrast, is about 4% and 18%, respectively.

### A puzzling situation

It is even more surprising that a comparison with South Asia – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – yields similar results. In Nepal too, it was in late January that the first person tested positive for COVID-19, though it was end-February or early-March in the other countries. On April 20, South Asia, with a share of 23.4% in world population, accounted for 1.25% of infections and 0.5% of COVID-19 deaths in the world.

Before the pandemic, it would have been impossible to predict, let alone imagine, such a reality. Income per capita in South Asia is just 16% that of the world, and a mere 4% of that in industrialised countries. One-third of the world's poor live in South Asia, so absolute poverty is high and nutrition levels are low. Population density in the

subcontinent is among the highest in the world. The poor, who live cheek by jowl in urban slums and in cramped spaces in rural areas, are most susceptible to a virus that is contagious. Public health systems and facilities are perhaps the worst in the world.

The outcome, then, is puzzling, if not paradoxical. Compared with North America, Western Europe and East Asia, or their own population size, the number of infections and deaths in South Asia is far lower. Of course, it is plausible to argue that, unlike those parts of the world, South Asian countries are in the early stages where community transmission has not gathered momentum. An explosive growth in infection numbers could yet surface later, or in a second round. But it is simply not possible to assess probabilities or make predictions. However, evidence available so far does suggest some flattening of the curve in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Infection numbers in Maldives and Nepal are in double-digits and Bhutan's infection numbers are in single digits.

### Two possible explanations

How can we explain this situation in which, so far, South Asia has fared better than many other parts of the world? Past experience of the Spanish influenza in 1918, when India accounted for 18-20 million of the estimated 50 million deaths in the world, or conventional thinking even now, would have led to the opposite conclusion. There are two possible explanations.

First, the reality might be much worse than the statistics suggest because the total number of infections is almost certainly underestimated, as testing has been nowhere near enough, given the scarcity of testing kits and the mas-



REUTERS

sive size of populations. Improved statistics might change the numbers but cannot transform the above asymmetry emerging from the above comparisons.

Second, the lockdowns imposed by governments in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, which started in the last week of March and continue until April 27 or longer, have clearly made a difference. The lockdown in India, straddling its vast geography, is perhaps among the most stringent in the world. The common purpose was to break the chain of transmission through physical distancing, which has two dimensions. For one, it confined people to their homes. But this created physical distancing only for the privileged living in homes that have spaces and doors. It was impossible for people in urban slums in mega-cities, where migrant workers lived in cramped spaces, often as many as 10 to a room. For another, it meant that people could not move within cities or across States. Migrant workers could not return to their villages, and citizens or foreigners who might carry the virus could not come from abroad. It did strangle potential chains of community transmission, reducing the geographical spread of the virus through contagion, and flattening the curve compared with what it would have been without a lockdown.

This obvious explanation is necessary but not sufficient because

other countries which have imposed lockdowns, say in Western Europe, with public health systems that are far superior, have not managed to slow down the phenomenal spread in the number of infections as much. The impact of diseases can and does differ across countries, possibly attributable to differences in cultures, immunities, or even climates. I am not an epidemiologist or a virologist. But as a social scientist, it is possible to observe an association of attributes.

### A possible hypothesis

It has been suggested that countries which have mandatory BCG vaccinations against tuberculosis are less susceptible to COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. Compare, for example, the Iberian Peninsula countries, Spain and Portugal. On April 20, the former had around 1,96,000 infections and 20,500 deaths, whereas the latter 20,200 infections and 700 deaths. Is it only a coincidence that BCG vaccinations are mandatory in Portugal but not in Spain, or that the U.S. and Italy, both ravaged by COVID-19, never had universal BCG vaccination programmes? Obviously, it is only scientific investigation that can establish cause and effect.

But the BCG vaccine seems to have a stimulating effect on the immune system that goes well beyond tuberculosis. For that reason, perhaps, some countries are running trials of BCG against COVID-19, or thinking of it as a means of protecting health workers. Similarly, countries are buying hydroxychloroquine in large quantities for health workers and for treatment of COVID-19 patients. In South Asian countries, universal BCG vaccination is mandatory, while immune systems of people have a

lifelong exposure to malaria. These could provide possible explanations for the relatively limited spread of COVID-19 in South Asia so far.

### Lives and livelihoods

Obviously, lockdowns have also mitigated the spread. In doing so, they have saved lives, but at the same time, they have also taken away livelihoods. In South Asian countries, almost 90% of the workforce is made up of the self-employed, casual labour on daily wages, and informal workers without any social protection. The lockdowns have meant that hundreds of millions of people who have lost their jobs, hence incomes, have been deprived of their livelihoods, imposing a disproportionate burden on the poor and those who survive just above the poverty line. For them, the trade-off between getting sick and going hungry is no choice. Livelihoods are an imperative for preserving lives.

The problem will not vanish after lockdowns are lifted. Economies that have been shut down for six weeks or longer will be close to collapse. In the short-run, it will be a matter of survival for households and firms and stabilisation for the economy. Economic growth will be zero or negative this year. In the medium-term, it will be about recovery. That will take time. Rapid economic growth in the past 25 years had enabled South Asian countries to bring about a significant reduction in absolute poverty, even though it was associated with rising inequality. Alas, absolute poverty will increase once again, while economic inequality will rise further.

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# Fishing in troubled waters during a pandemic

As China seeks to restore its credibility, creating tensions in the South China Sea should be the least of its priorities



HARSH V. PANT & PREMESHA SAHA

Even as several countries struggle to cope with the challenges posed by COVID-19, Beijing's military moves in the contested South China Sea continue to take place unabated. In recent days, China has conducted military drills and deployed large-scale military assets to the maritime area, while officially celebrating strides made in exploiting disputed energy resources in the sea.

### Strategy for expansion

The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported early this month that a Chinese Coast Guard vessel "rammed and sunk" a Vietnamese fishing boat carrying eight Vietnamese fishermen in the Parcel Islands in the South China Sea. It maintained that this violates "Vietnam's sovereignty over the Parcel Islands, causes property losses and endangers the lives, safety and legitimate interests of the Vietnamese fishermen". It underlined that Chinese actions "also run counter to agreements reached by Hanoi and Beijing's leaders and the proposed Code of

Conduct that would govern all interested parties in the South China Sea dispute." The Vietnamese government lodged a diplomatic protest with China's embassy in Hanoi, requesting the Chinese side to investigate the incident, strictly discipline the officers aboard the Chinese vessel aforementioned, prevent the recurrence of similar actions, and make adequate compensation for the losses of the Vietnamese fishermen.

There have been incidents involving Chinese fishing vessels and the Chinese Coast Guard with Indonesian fishing vessels in waters around the Natuna Sea as well. In February, Chinese fishing boats flanked by Chinese Coast Guard vessels dropped their trawl nets yet again. China's illegal fishing near the Natuna Sea carries global consequences, reminding regional governments of Beijing's expanding claims to the South China Sea through which one-third of the world's maritime trade flows.

Besides these incidents, there were satellite images showing a Chinese military plane landing on Kagitingan Reef in the West Philippine Sea in late March. There are also reports that China recently opened a research station on Kagitingan and Zamora Reef, also in the West Philippine Sea, to gather data on the ecology, geology, and environment in the Spratlys.

It seems as though the COVID-19 outbreak in China did little to di-



NYT

minish the country's strategy of regional expansion. Routine operations of transport aircraft in the South China Sea indicate that the Chinese military is hardly affected by the country's health crisis.

Other claimant countries such as the Philippines have condemned the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing vessel. The Foreign Ministry of the Philippines issued a statement that said, "Such incidents undermine relations between Southeast Asian nations and Beijing." Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department also published a statement, "We call on the PRC to remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic, and to stop exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea." These encroachments and advances by China in the South China Sea not only dampen China's image globally, and affect its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours, but also raise questions on why it continues its assertiveness in the disputed waters

when most of the claimant states are having to contend with the challenges posed by COVID-19.

### Window of opportunity

While a military policy of expansion in the neighbourhood can be one way of shoring up the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party, which has been bruised by its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is also a response to what many in the party would view as a rare window of opportunity as the U.S. is grappling with the pandemic. American ties with Vietnam have been on an upward trajectory in recent times. Vietnam has been an ardent supporter of the U.S.'s freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) carried out in the South China Sea. China has always taken a strong stand against these FONOPS of the U.S. It has flexed its muscles to match up to these operations. In that direction, China also recently conducted anti-submarine drills in the disputed areas soon after the Pentagon deployed the U.S.-guided missile destroyer USS McCampbell in a FONOPS in the South China Sea before the pandemic hit the U.S. mainland with full force.

At present, Vietnam is the chair of the ASEAN and will be presiding over the discussions on the Code of Conduct which has been a work in progress for long. Vietnam has always been in favour of non-claimant countries or external players

having an active voice and calling out China for its growing assertiveness in these contested waters. Among all the claimant countries, Vietnam has always taken a strong stand against Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Unlike the Philippines, which has changed its stance quite often with respect to Chinese activities in the South China Sea, and Indonesia, which recognised the Chinese threat in the Natuna Sea rather late, Vietnam has held a firm stand against the China. Even with regard to its COVID-19 response, Vietnam was the first country in the ASEAN to suspend all flights to and from China as early as February. Hence, China has always kept a watch on Vietnamese manoeuvres in the South China Sea dispute.

As China seeks to restore its global credibility, creating tensions in the South China Sea should be the least of its priorities. A more generous China during a global pandemic might go a long way in ensuring its global ascent. But that's a hope that has been belied many a times in the past and it's unlikely that the Chinese Communist Party would let go of its regional security agenda of expansion.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Open in phases

We should be cautious about opening up several sectors at one go in the first week of May ("Most sectors will be open by May 3, says Sanjeev Sanyal", April 23). Every day we have about 1,000 new positive COVID-19 cases in the country. Mumbai, the beehive of economic activity, is a big hotspot, as are some other cities. We should be guarded in opening up the remaining sectors of the economy and do this over phases. Every industry, big or small, should be allowed to function only at a third of its capacity, probably in shifts. Wearing masks and practising physical distancing should be made

mandatory.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,  
Hyderabad

### Important, albeit late

The Prime Minister's call for unity is important, but it has come rather late ("Script of unity", April 23). A particular community has received a lot of hatred online for "spreading" the virus. Some TV channels continue to portray members of that community as more dangerous than the virus itself. The ruling party's IT wing and cadres are relentless in their attacks on them. This hatred towards members of one community will affect Indians working abroad, especially in countries like

the UAE. As the editorial points out, the call for unity should translate into action.

G.B. SIVANADAM,  
Coimbatore

### The new normal

It looks like the situation won't be safe for a long time ("There may be no going back", April 23). It is important to understand that we were not asked to practise physical distancing or stay at home to cure society of COVID-19; these measures were taken to only slow the spread of the virus so that our healthcare system wouldn't be overwhelmed. For the most part, India has done that. But when we emerge slowly from the lockdown, the virus could spread faster.

We need to make our healthcare system more robust to handle the load, not mislead ourselves over the outcome of this lockdown period.

NAGARAJAMANI M.V.,  
Hyderabad

While we have to accept that things will take a long time to return to some semblance of normalcy, there is a silver lining. The air quality in many places has improved. With fewer people going to work over the next few weeks or months, traffic will greatly reduce. Other infectious diseases might also reduce due to greater awareness about personal hygiene. This pandemic will teach us to be kinder, more resilient

and patient. We should take this opportunity to think about how we can redesign our lifestyle to have a more peaceful co-existence with nature.

P. VENKAT,  
Chennai

### Offers post-retirement

Not only must justice be done; it must also be seen to be done ("Pre-retirement judgments and post-retirement jobs", April 23). Hence, irrespective of the judgments made, it should be made a practice for the serving judges not to accept any government assignments post-retirement. Also, judges should not accept any assignments with any political party whose case

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they handled at any point. However, I do not subscribe to the view that judges must get as pension their last drawn salary. Judges need not be pampered post-retirement and can save for the future. Being legal professionals, they can earn additional money, if needed. I also think that other constitutional functionaries like Governors, Speakers, Election Commissioners and CAGs should also not accept political and government posts after retirement.

B.C. UNNIKRISHNAN NAIR,  
Kuthiathode

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