



An uneven uptick

GST revenue trends indicate the recovery is neither smooth nor fast

With gross revenues of ₹1.12-lakh crore in August, the GST has now yielded over ₹1-lakh crore a month for almost a full year. The only blip in the past 11 months came in June, when takings fell below ₹93,000 crore in the aftermath of the second COVID-19 wave that compelled mobility restrictions across States. Those curbs have been progressively easing up – just as they were a year ago when the country saw a phased unlocking from the national lockdown. Compared to those lows, the August collections are 30% higher and also 14% above the pre-pandemic levels of 2019-20, though one must remember India's growth had stuttered sharply that year. While revenues from domestic transactions were up 27%, key industrial States saw faster growth, including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. Going forward, the Government expects such 'robust' GST revenues to persist. Most economists agree that may be the case, unless the fears of a third wave come true, triggering lockdowns.

But it is unclear if the economy is recovering 'fast' in tandem with the easing out of COVID-related restrictions. The GST collected in August pertains largely to economic activity in July and the mobility restrictions in most States had been eased further that month compared to June, including in the southern States. GST e-way bills generated in July surged to an average of 2.1 million from 1.8 million in June. Yet, on a sequential basis, GST revenues in August are almost 4% lower than the ₹1.16-lakh crore collected in July. This recovery appears choppy rather than 'fast'. Similarly, the Government's claims of higher compliance levels reiterated over the past several months need to be matched with accompanying numbers. At the start of the GST regime four years ago, it had 6.6 million taxpayers. On GST Day this July, the Finance Minister said this had risen to 12.8 million. But how many of them are filing returns each month is no longer known since the Government stopped disclosing that number from February 2021. This makes it virtually impossible to distil the effects of compliance and growth on GST revenues. Deviating from standard data points spikes suspicions about what they strive to hide. The Government would do well to restore and enhance its quality of data disclosures – even State-wise revenues have been selectively shared recently. As the Reserve Bank of India Governor has highlighted, the economy is still delicately poised – manufacturing recovery has stumbled in August, services remain stressed, exports stay strong but have slipped on a month-on-month basis just like GST collections. There is surely a need to talk things up when the chips are down, but ultimately only facts and figures can invest words with meaning.

Ending the forever

The U.S. might not find it easy to resist the impulse to remake other nations

President Joe Biden has mounted a stiff defence of his position on pulling American troops and civilians out of Kabul, an operation widely regarded as botched and disastrous, vowing that the era of meddling in the politics of other nations had ended. His comments came in the context of sharp criticism of an evidently poorly planned exit, coterminous with deadly terror attacks near Kabul airport. Since the withdrawal, U.S. polls suggest that nearly twice as many people disapproved of his management of the end of the long war as those who approved, that 56% of surveyed individuals disapproved of his performance on foreign policy, and his overall job approval rating had hit a new low of 44%. When the poll statistic of 71% of Americans believing that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan was a failure is taken together with Mr. Biden's promise to eschew the regime change paradigm in foreign policy, it begs the question of whether such a new era of U.S. non-interventionism is possible or likely. The answer depends on the extent to which the U.S. believes it can manage the forces of international terrorism from afar, sans boots on the ground. That also partly depends on the strategic role of Pakistan, China, and Russia in the South Asia region. Neither sets of factors inspires hope that the messy troop pull-out was anything other than one step in another round of the classic historical cycles in Afghanistan, of foreign occupation, 'regime change', abandonment and lapse into lawlessness, orthodoxy, and flirtations with terror outfits in the neighbourhood.

The U.S. has a rich history of shaping or toppling foreign governments and seeking to influence forces made abroad that had an impact on American shores. In the early 20th century, the centre of gravity of such clandestine operations was in the North American hemisphere, and it included the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama. In the post-Second World War and post-Cold War periods, it included the likes of Iran, Indonesia, and Venezuela, including alleged interference in the elections of Italy, the Philippines and Japan. With a foreign policy elite and intelligence community deeply inured to habitually meddling in the politics of other nations for at least a century, the odds that Mr. Biden will be the leader to turn their heads from this preoccupation are low. It is true that ever since the advent of his predecessor, Donald Trump, the U.S. has been on an inexorable path towards a more inward-focused paradigm of policymaking, putting "America First" and reconsidering if not rejecting certain elements of the rules-based international order. But in America, historically, the clarion call for nativist populism has always coexisted to an extent with the temptation to meddle abroad. The impulses of the Biden administration may, therefore, only lead to a temporary lull in this disturbing trend.

Certainly not the end of the road for the U.S.

Even if the Afghan exit was disastrous for various reasons, to declare it as the demise of America is a misreading



T.P. SREENIVASAN

The future of Afghanistan is yet to be determined, but the debate has abruptly shifted to the future of the United States after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. This may be the first time in history that a ruler is sought to be punished for ending a war of 20 years. "Pax Americana died in Kabul," a strategic thinker declares. This is a watershed moment that will bring down the curtain on the West's long ascendancy, he predicts. Others say that the damage can be limited if U.S. President Joe Biden resigns. Some U.S. Congressmen have submitted a questionnaire to Mr. Biden raising such issues as the Taliban acquiring nuclear weapons. Mercifully, there is no significant opinion that the U.S. should not have withdrawn its troops or that the U.S. should reoccupy Afghanistan. "The U.S. has done the right thing in the wrong way," says another learned commentator.

Defining event

To understand the present plight of the U.S., we need to go back to the terrorist bombing of 9/11, which was a game-changing global experience. It transformed the geopolitics of the world, which was determined by the size of the nuclear arsenals of the nuclear weapon states. The most powerful country in the world, which had the capacity to destroy the world many times over, became powerless before a few terrorists, who had only knives and forks as weapons. In one clean swoop, the theories of the balance of power, mu-

tually assured destruction and nuclear weapons superiority went up in smoke with the Twin Towers of New York. Once the responsibility of the attack was traced to Osama bin Laden and the terrorists in Afghanistan, it was imperative for the U.S. to retaliate by overthrowing the Taliban regime and hunting out and killing bin Laden.

Benefits of the U.S. presence

The U.S. accomplished its mission within a short period but it was not able to withdraw because the Afghanistan government was unable to withstand the onslaught of the Taliban and other terrorist groups. Even neighbouring countries, including India, were strongly in favour of continuing the American presence. Pakistan played a double game – of being a partner on the one hand and an adversary on the other. It was not a matter of the Americans imposing themselves, but being invited to provide a certain stability for Afghanistan. The result of their presence was the prevalence of relative peace in the region except that Pakistan fattened the Taliban with American largesse. In the process, the troops in Afghanistan protected the homeland and the Americans, because the Taliban and other groups were kept engaged in Afghanistan territory.

At this moment, when American failures at the time of withdrawal dominate the news, it is worth recalling that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan had succeeded in containing the dangers of terrorism for two decades. Considering that terrorism has endured in the broader West Asia/Middle East and the attacks and victims worldwide are three to five times higher annually than in 2001 (9/11), the benefits of the American presence should not be underestimated, even though the cost was high in terms of American money and



We should also remember that the clear mandate given to Mr. Biden was to clean up the Augean stables left behind by his predecessor, President Donald Trump, and how the world as a whole and a majority of the U.S. citizens heaved a sigh of relief that the U.S. finally had a predictable, steady and experienced leader to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic and racism in the country and to recover its position in the centre of the world that the Chinese were hoping to grab. Mr. Biden moved in earnest to return to the Paris Agreement (climate), resume the dialogue on the Iran nuclear deal and to reassure America's traditional allies that the U.S. would stand by them. He gave a clear signal to China and Russia that no confrontation would be tolerated, but cooperation, wherever possible, will be pursued.

The Afghan exit

Withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan was yet another unfinished agenda he had inherited and what he did was merely to follow up the agreement reached with the Taliban and announce a deadline, in the expectation that the Afghan forces trained and equipped by the Americans and the Kabul government would step into the vacuum. As Mr. Biden pointed out, the decision about Afghanistan was not just about Afghanistan. It was about "ending an

era of major military operations to remake other countries". But the series of events that happened till the end of August 2021 completely wiped out what should have been the good ending of a partly successful war on terror.

Even if the exit became a disaster because of the wrong calculations on the part of the military advisers – who stand condemned by the retired flag officers for the tragic and avoidable debacle – to declare it as the end of the road for Mr. Biden and the United States is unfair and graceless. History is replete with events of extreme folly by rulers who survived because of the many other mitigating factors in their favour. By those standards, the Biden presidency has every reason to survive.

The decisiveness with which he has handled the debris of the exit should receive approbation. As a true Commander-in-Chief, he stood by his Generals and took the blame. He has not even been provoked to attack the Taliban or to criticise the Afghan forces for their betrayal of their patrons. In fact, he went out of his way to announce that the Taliban was helpful in facilitating the evacuation, which was completed before the deadline. Interestingly, it was Mr. Biden who set the August 31 deadline, which was turned into an ultimatum by the Taliban.

Many commentators have argued that the Kabul fiasco was worse than Vietnam, Tehran, 9/11, Iraq and COVID-19 because the details of the other disastrous developments had lost their sharpness with the passage of time. Whatever may have been the horrors of those events, no President was held accountable for them and removed.

In the case of U.S. President Gerald Ford, 59% of the people said that he deserved none of the blame at all. Only 2% held him res-

ponsible, though he lost the elections in 1976. President Ronald Reagan's misadventure in Lebanon was criticised by 60% Americans in 1984, but he won the election later that year. There were reasons for these Presidents to continue to serve the nation, taking the reverses in certain areas in their stride. As of now, there is no alternative to President Biden to lead the country, after his having learnt a bitter lesson from the Afghan experience. A CNN commentator remarked that the withdrawal may hurt him in the midterm in 2022 and presidential election in 2024. "They could just as easily have no impact at all."

No setting sun

Even more unfortunate is the conclusion that the U.S. itself lost its place in the world on account of its failure to have a sagacious leader or a competent Commander-in-Chief. A superpower does not sink or rise on account of a single leader. It is still the most powerful economic and military power around which the whole constellation of the world rotates. In fact, the world has a stake in ensuring that a democratic nation leads the world rather than an expansionist dictatorship which has no public opinion to restrain it. The free world has a responsibility to maintain the American leadership of the world till a wiser and more benign alternative is found.

Much has been written about a post-American world for some years now. But it looks that the demise of America, as Mark Twain said about the reports of his own death, is greatly exaggerated.

T.P. Sreenivasan, IFS 1967, is Former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA. He is also Chairman, Academic Council, Director, NSS Academy of Civil Services, and Director General, Kerala International Centre

Estimating the deaths due to COVID-19 in Chennai

Undercounting of deaths due to COVID-19 in the city is age dependent – and also more during the second wave

T.S. GANESAN, R. RAJARAMAN & R. SHANKAR

India is slowly recovering from the second wave of SARS-CoV-2. It is still uncertain whether a third wave will happen, and if so, with what intensity. Assessing how many people actually died from COVID-19 can help governments and the health-care sector prepare their treatment strategies effectively.

When it comes to evaluating fatalities, the Indian Council of Medical Research has issued clear guidelines as to what constitutes a COVID-19 related death. Despite this, it is evident that there is an undercounting of deaths in India due to a variety of reasons. Even in rich countries, undercounting has been observed based on international analyses of "excess deaths". This reflects the "real world" problems of acquiring perfect data during a public health crisis.

Given that this is the case, there is no shame for either the Government of India or the State governments to admit that the reported number of deaths due to COVID-19 is much less than the actual numbers.

To estimate the actual numbers is far more honourable given the magnitude of the crisis and the precision of planning required to overcome it. In this article, we concentrate on estimating COVID-19 fatalities in Chennai and to what extent the southern metropolis falls prey to "undercounting" COVID-19 deaths that plagues India, and the world, currently. This adds to the previously published articles in this newspaper.

Estimation for Chennai

To estimate the "excess deaths" during the period of the pandemic requires accurate baseline data of deaths in the previous years. For Chennai, we consider the available

data on the daily total all cause deaths (ACD) during 2015-19 (the basic source is the Chennai Corporation - <https://bit.ly/3yFzEb2>). During this period the ACD steadily increased by about 1,850 per year (3% per year). The projected population of Chennai also increased at roughly the same rate. Hence, our estimate of the expected total ACD, if the pandemic had not occurred, assumes that this steady increase in the ACD would have continued in 2020-21.

We have only been able to extract the age-dependent ACD for 2018-19. Since the age dependence of the increasing trend cannot reliably be extracted from data that just spans two years, the simple average of ACD from 2018 to 2019 is used as the baseline for the age-stratified ACD.

Examination of the ACD during the pandemic from January 2020 until June 2021, as compared to the baseline of ACD from 2015 to 2019, reveals two clear observations. First, there is reduction in mortality prior to the lockdown in the first wave and also during the intermediate period between the two waves (Table 1). There could be many reasons for this. As of now, we have no reliable data to ascribe causes and the dip in mortality during these periods remains unexplained. Second, there is an increase in ACD during the first and second wave of reported deaths due to COVID-19 in Chennai.

The pandemic and ACD

Broadly, when the reported mortality due to COVID-19 was low, there was a reduction in ACD, and the converse when it was high. It is reasonable to conclude based on this data, that the pandemic had two opposing effects on the ACD. On the one hand, the ACD increased due to those who died due to COVID-19. On the other, it also de-

Age stratified deaths and COVID-19 | Difference in all cause mortality and that due to COVID-19

Period	Date	Reported COVID-19 deaths	Excess deaths (I)	Undercounting Ratio (I)	Excess deaths (II)	Undercounting Ratio (II)
Pre-Lockdown	Jan 1, 2020 - Mar 22, 2020	0	-1008	-	-378	-
Post lockdown and pre-first wave	Mar 23, 2020 - Apr 23, 2020	4	-1025	-	-635	-
First wave	Apr 24, 2020 - Dec 31, 2020	4,001	7,768	1.9	9,881	2.5
Intermediate Period	Jan 1, 2021 - Mar 15, 2021	176	-503	-	-3	-
Second wave (ongoing)	Mar 16, 2021 - May 31, 2021	2,901	19,091	6.6	19,360	6.7
Full period	Mar 22, 2020 - May 31, 2021	7,082	24,322	3.4	29,176	4.1

The undercounting factors defined as (excess deaths)/(reported COVID-19 deaths) are tabulated above for the different stages of the pandemic in Chennai. A negative value of the excess deaths means that the number of recorded deaths during that period was less than the number expected from the baseline data. | **Method-I:** Baseline calculated from ACD of 2015 to 2019 including yearly increase in deaths | **Method-II:** Baseline calculated from ACD of 2018 to 2019 using simple average

creased due to the deaths due to other causes (OCD) reducing due to lockdown effects. At the moment the reasons for this duality are not clear. The only way this issue can be resolved is by conducting a verbal autopsy with the families of the deceased. This has not been performed systematically in Chennai. In the absence of this confirmed data, the undercounting factors are defined to be (excess deaths)/(reported COVID-19 deaths).

The results on the approximate undercounting factor for Chennai, defined above during the different periods of the pandemic, are shown (Figure and Table 1). These undercounting factors are probably underestimates. This is because our estimated number of deaths during the pandemic period inferred from the pre-pandemic data on ACD does not account for the probable reduction in OCD due to the lockdown effects. It is clear that the undercounting of the deaths was much more in the second wave as compared to the first one.

The age dependence of excess deaths and undercounting ratio are shown (Figure). The ACD in the "juveniles" (0-17 years) and

"young adults" (18-44 years) are reduced throughout the pandemic period (deficit deaths) except for the young adults during the second wave. The undercounting ratio in the first wave increases with age but the trend is not discernible during the second wave.

Among the elderly

It has also been reported that the mortality rate due to COVID-19 among the elderly was significantly less than that of the international data.

However, this analysis of data from Chennai indicates that, this may simply be a consequence of the fact that the undercounting factor of the deceased among the elderly is much more than that of the younger age group during the first wave. The reasons for this undercounting are not clear just now. This will only be known after a thorough examination of the causes of death in the future.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there has been an undercounting that requires detailed quantitative analysis. Understanding the severity of this viral infection is important to devise effective policy for the immediate future.

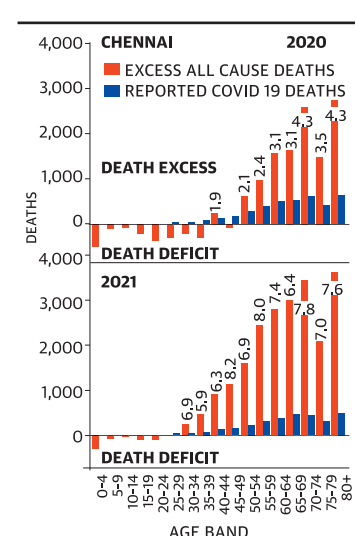


Figure. Age stratified excess/deficit all cause deaths and reported COVID-19 deaths during 2020 and 2021. Undercounting factors of each age group are also given.

T.S. Ganesan is Professor, Medical Oncology and Clinical Research, Cancer Institute (WIA), Chennai. R. Rajaraman is Professor, Homi Bhabha National Institute, Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research, Kalpakkam. R. Shankar is Honorary Professor, The Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai. The views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

'Communal content'

The observation by the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, Supreme Court of India, that "everything in this country is shown with a communal angle by a section of media" is apt (Page 1, September 3). This is making the life of the minorities difficult by defaming almost all they do. However, the problem is just a speck as almost every aspect of life, from

education, politics, administrative machinery to history of the nation is being coloured. That 'secularism' is a structure of the Constitution must not be forgotten.

K. MUHAMMED ISMAIL,
Koduvally, Kozhikode, Kerala

■ All right-thinking people will share the concern expressed by the CJJ. Television watching is a task as certain channels can be

found spewing venom in every sentence. The anchors in some news channels are predisposed or conditioned to present a slanted view of events. Journalists are supposed to be politically neutral and speak the truth to power, rather than 'bend' and 'crawl' to get on the right side of the powers that be. One often wonders whether they are independent journalists or party and government staff. Some

channels try to strike a balance between communalism and secularism to maximise viewership! Much of our success as a great civilisation hinges on how well we resolve the crisis of secularism.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

A diverse India

The salient feature of India is its diversity. There are many

Indias within India. The India we see in Ashapoorna Devi's great novels is not the one we see in Mahasweta Devi's works. And in Baby Halder's autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary*, we can see an India we have seen nowhere. Perumal Murugan depicts yet another India. It is really surprising and shocking to see the removal of diverse expressions/narratives from the syllabus of Delhi

University which was approved unanimously by the teachers by an oversight committee which has nothing to do with literature or syllabus formation. We butcher democracy by removing diverse narratives here. And criticise the Taliban for their undemocratic deeds!

SUKUMARAN C.V.,
Kongad, Palakkad, Kerala