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Nipah amidst a pandemic

Quick development of vaccines for tropical infections is a success of the coronavirus era

India is far from being anywhere near the finish line with regard to the coronavirus pandemic, even as fears of a Nipah virus outbreak have surfaced in Kerala with one confirmed death in Kozhikode. While confirmed cases of the viral infection have been reported several times since 2001 in West Bengal and Kerala, it was the outbreak in 2018, in Kozhikode, that made headlines after 17 deaths and 18 confirmed cases, underlining the high infection-associated fatality. Outbreaks fanned by exotic viruses are not foreign to India: a glance at the weekly reports compiled by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme shows the diversity of viral or bacterial outbreaks that flash by with barely a mention, unless they threaten India's metropolises as outbreaks of dengue, H1N1, chikungunya or malaria sometimes do. However, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic also draws attention to significant outbreaks that preceded it. Nipah in Kozhikode and Malappuram was the first outbreak where terms such as 'contact tracing', 'RT PCR', 'antigen test', and 'PPE kits' became part of the ordinary discourse in Kerala. The State's public health system, earlier commended only for quality primary health care, earned appreciation for its ability to establish links between the infected and their contacts and to isolate them to prevent further spread.

There are now established protocols – at the national level – for the three key aspects of a potential pandemic: infection control, treatment and vaccination. When a contagion hits, the world now understands what can and cannot be controlled within each geographic region's context. It is these lessons from the coronavirus pandemic that must inform future outbreaks. It had become routine for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, at intervals, to report outbreaks of 'mystery fevers', when they were often easily diagnosable infections that were just a competent, accessible laboratory test away. Thus, while there is no knowing if the latest Nipah outbreak in India will peter out like in 2019 or be worse than in 2018, India must be heartened that the potential of an outbreak evokes national concern and an anticipatory response unlike the earlier and purely reactive approach. A standardised treatment for Nipah continues to be elusive and a spike in cases could spell disaster given the high mortality rate. However, some studies suggest that vaccines developed for the coronavirus, if adequately tweaked, may prove effective against the Nipah virus too. Another potential candidate vaccine is in early human trials. Because vaccination continues to be the best bet against the disease, the very fact that global attention and capital no longer need to be coaxed to developing vaccines for tropical infections is itself a key difference in how the world approaches outbreaks in the coronavirus era.

Making them pay

A law to regulate app store operators is key to check Big Tech's monopolising nature

South Korea's newest legislation, dubbed the 'anti-Google' law, is something that Indian lawmakers should consider emulating. Last week, its Parliament passed an amendment to its Telecommunications Business Act with the aim of preventing app store operators, such as Google and Apple, from forcing app developers to use their in-store payment systems, for which they charge exorbitantly. The new law is also a check on the unfair use of market position. With digital commerce becoming ubiquitous, and with the Googles and the Apples controlling this experience through their platforms, it has become imperative for government laws to regulate them. South Korea happens to be the first off the block. But a lot of other jurisdictions are not far behind. Australia, which only recently brought in a law to make Internet platforms pay media companies for displaying their content, is now reportedly thinking of bringing digital payment services such as Apple Pay, Google Pay and WeChat Pay under its regulatory ambit. The European Union's draft law seeks to make these large platform companies, "gatekeepers" as it refers to them, comply with a set of dos and don'ts that gives the smaller companies a fair chance. The EU proposal is also centred around customers having more choice.

But that is not all. In the U.S., last month, three Senators brought in a Bill much along the same lines. Introduced by Democrats Richard Blumenthal, Amy Klobuchar, and Republican Marsha Blackburn, it aims "To promote competition and reduce gatekeeper power in the app economy, increase choice, improve quality, and reduce costs for consumers." All this is happening in the backdrop of the pending verdict in the well-known case in which Epic Games, the company behind 'Fortnite', sued Apple on this very issue. The legal move was triggered after Apple ousted Epic from its platform for putting up its own payment system, bypassing Apple's. The app store operators are clearly on the back foot the world over. In India too, the angst of app developers has been evident in recent times. According to a report, Apple is facing an antitrust challenge in India from a Rajasthan-based non-profit called 'Together We Fight Society' on this issue. It remains to be seen if the regulator, the Competition Commission of India, orders an investigation. Last year, it started investigations into similar allegations against Google. A law to regulate app store operators is not a drastic departure from this government's thinking on such issues. Only recently, it promoted the setting up of the Open Network for Digital Commerce to "democratise e-commerce" and "to provide alternatives to proprietary e-commerce sites". The challenge, however, is to protect the smaller sellers and developers without undermining the ecosystem for technological innovation.

Do not surrender the peace in Afghanistan

As Panjshir falls, international and regional powers must realise their need to act more responsibly

RADHA KUMAR

The fall of Panjshir in Afghanistan has highlighted the seamy side of an unspoken international consensus since August 12, that the Afghan war has ended and the task now is to see what sort of government the Taliban form.

Acting on this consensus, international and regional powers simply watched while the Taliban attacked the Panjshir valley, where resistance forces (*picture*) had assembled under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh. Mr. Massoud and Mr. Saleh were in negotiations with the Taliban for an inclusive government, but the Taliban used the talks time to surround Panjshir and cut off supplies, electricity and communications to the valley. Then they announced that talks had broken down and began a military assault, using weaponry that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization supplied to the Afghan National Army. Much of Panjshir has now fallen and Mr. Massoud and Mr. Saleh are in hiding. Fahim Dashti, the resistance front's spokesperson and a leading civil society actor, was killed.

Responsibility redoubles

With the fall of Panjshir all but complete, international and regional actors might feel there is little to be done. On the contrary, their responsibility to protect lives is redoubled by their inaction thus far. How much longer will we watch while the young and hopeful of the past 20 years are thrown to the wolves, group by group, individual by individual?

The resistance forces represent the more liberal elements of Afghanistan. Many of them worked in the Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani administrations, including the Afghan army; others were in independent civil society organisations, including the free media. They support women's rights to education and public participation, elections and the orderly transfer of power, even independent human rights monitoring. They are Afghan nationalists who believe that Afghanistan should have sovereign good relations with all of its neighbours without being drawn into any of their hostilities. They deserve our support, not our indifference.

The Taliban pledged at Doha that they would not take Afghanistan by force. By and large, they succeeded in simply walking in, though there were areas such as Herat, in which the Afghan army fought and lost because the U.S. did not provide air support, despite being in place to do so. At the time, events were so rapid that the lack of U.S. response might be forgiven (by some). But the war over Panjshir unfolded over two weeks, and there was time and enough to react. What we saw, instead, was the international community – in particular, the U.S., the European Union, the United Kingdom and other democracies – averting its eyes.

Need for a red line

Here is where the international community can and must draw a red line. They should announce sanctions until the Taliban resume talks with Mr. Massoud and Mr. Saleh, as well as progress in talks with Mr. Karzai and Dr. Abdullah. They can push for a United Nations monitoring force to ensure that humanitarian aid is allowed into the Panjshir valley, along with restored services, as demanded by Afghan clerics and women's groups. They can require that Panjshir be treated as a safe zone until negotiations yield the inclusive government that the Taliban

AFP

promised. They can say that they will not deal with any Taliban government that does not abide by these conditions.

During the novel coronavirus pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on warring parties across the world to ceasefire. That call was not forcefully repeated for Afghanistan. The UN has called an emergency meeting for humanitarian aid, on September 13. But did the Secretary-General, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, even discuss the cessation of attacks on Panjshir, or restoration of its services, when he visited the Taliban a few days ago? Or will the September 13 meeting end in a meek acceptance that the Taliban's war gains – which only soared following U.S. President Joe Biden's announcement of full withdrawal by August 31 – can set the terms for peace?

In most other conflicts in which the international community has intervened – whether militarily or through mediation – the victors have not been allowed to set the terms for peace. In both Bosnia and Kosovo, all sides had to accept some form of decentralisation and minority protection; as did the warring parties in Sudan.

Government formation

The key now is the Taliban's government formation. Reportedly, the group has announced the first members of a Taliban-only 'interim' administration, to allow for further 'changes and reforms', according to Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid. Since it is highly unlikely that further 'changes and reforms' will involve an expanded administration with non-Taliban members in any meaningful number, that will put paid to the promise of an inclusive government. Yet, an inclusive government will benefit the Taliban too: it would allow them to plead inability to give sanctuary to their erstwhile partners. Without that restraint, there will be little to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a sanctuary for al Qaeda, the Jaish-e-Mohamed, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), *et al.*, whose members have already arrived in Afghanistan.

There is leverage

International and regional powers can still attempt to prevent such an outcome by announcing sanctions on the Taliban until an inclusive government is formed, without which financial aid will not flow and Afghan assets will not be de-frozen. Friends of the Taliban – foremost Pakistan, but also Qatar, China, Iran, Russia and Turkey – need to impress on Taliban leaders that an inclusive government, which accommodates regional and non-Taliban political leaders, is the best and speediest route to international recognition and the stabilisation of their rule.

The international community is currently behaving as if it has next to no leverage. That is not true. Financial and humanitarian aid and recognition of a Taliban government are important not only to the Taliban but even more so to their supporters. Pakistan is looking to increased financial aid for the Afghan refugees it hosts, not to mention strategic importance as the key channel to the Taliban. China and Russia might think twice about cosying up to the Taliban if the rest of the international community sanction them. Iran has already called on the Taliban to hold elections. Qatar has invested years in bringing the Taliban to negotiate. They, too, are in a position to impose conditions, since they provide the first pillars of support for the Taliban. Regional powers, especially Afghanistan's neighbours, have leverage too. They closed their borders against the refugee influx, but without open borders Afghan trade cannot resume.

Moreover, a hold on financial aid and assets need not, indeed must not, prevent the humanitarian aid that Afghanistan so direly needs. Donors can insist that aid will be delivered by the UN and other accredited aid agencies, and not through the Taliban.

Leaders can act

It is not only the international community that has failed Afghanistan, for the second time. It is also civil society. Apart from women's groups, few of us, whether in the U.S., Europe, West Asia/the Middle East or Asia, petitioned our governments to act with determination to protect our civil society kin in Afghanistan. It is still not too late to urge our political leaders to hold fast on an inclusive government. As then President Karzai found, regional political leaders are key to any government stability in the country.

If it was a costly mistake to exclude the Taliban at the 2001 Bonn conference, it will be an equally costly, if not costlier mistake, to exclude the non-Taliban groups that were powerful in Afghanistan until the Taliban walk-in of a few weeks ago.

After all, the Taliban did not achieve a military victory. They are in Afghanistan again because the U.S., NATO and the Ghani government left. Surrendering the conflict does not and should not mean surrendering the peace.

Radha Kumar is a writer and policy analyst

The economic reforms — looking back to look ahead

The fundamentals need to be set right with a focus on human capital, technology readiness and productivity

D.N. GUPTA

The crisis caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic in the country and at global level has led to a debate about fresh thinking and new approaches to manage the economy and the future of humanity. Globally, it has underscored the need for policies to enable resilience in the economy and ensure a robust health system, together with research and development. In India, various efforts are under way to enhance economic growth.

A critical reading of reforms

History matters in the complex economic system. So, it is important to briefly look at the economic reforms of the last 30 years. Evidence shows that the economic reforms which were launched in a major way in 1991 – and from time to time, subsequent interjections for liberalisation of economy and trade – have enabled some credible gains for the country. Over a period of 30 years, burgeoning foreign exchange reserves, sustained manufacturing contribution in GDP, increased share in global exports (from a mere 0.6% in the early 1990s to 1.8%), robust information and communication technology software exports, and sustained economic growth in the range of 6%-8% are clear hallmarks of success.

The economic reforms, so far, have been more focussed on the technical nature of the economy than the system, process and people. As a result, quite a few primary drivers of the economy – human capital, technology readiness, labour productivity, disposable income, capital expenditure, process innovation in setting up businesses, and institutional capacity – have not got enough recognition. In the context of a global competitive environment, some basic issues deserve close examination.

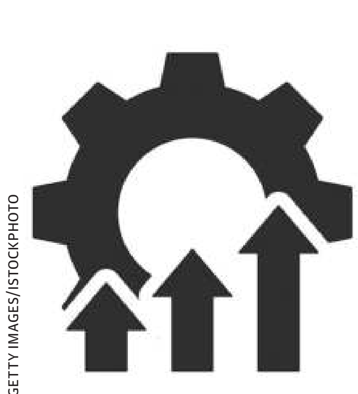
The human resource capital (HRC) formation, a good determinant of labour productivity, has been found wanting over the entire period of reforms. The lack of quality education, low skilled manpower and inadequacies in basic health care have resulted in low HRC. The HRC rank for India stands at 103; Sri Lanka is at 70, China at 34, and South Korea at 27, as brought out by the Global Human Capital Report, 2017.

As indicated in the World Bank database on GDP for 2019, the low per capita GDP in India, at \$2,104 (at \$6,997 in PPP terms, ranked 125th globally) against the world average of \$11,429 (at \$17,678 in PPP terms) has direct links to low per capita family income. Closely linked, the report by Deloitte (Global Manufacturing Competitiveness Index in 2016) reflects that the hourly wages in India have been \$1.7; they are \$38, \$24, \$20.7 and \$3.3 for the United States, Japan, South Korea, and China, respectively. Low wages have a direct bearing on the disposable income of families and leave little room for the majority of households to have enough disposable income to purchase consumer durables or industrial products, affecting demand.

Low research and development expenditure at 0.8% of GDP, *vis-à-vis* higher value for other fast emerging economies such as South Korea (4.5%), China (2.1%) and Taiwan (3.3%), is resulting in lower capacity for innovation in technologies and reduced 'technology readiness', especially for manufacturing.

Labour productivity

The lack of HRC and low technology readiness have impacted labour productivity adversely. In India,



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labour productivity in manufacturing is less than 10% of the advanced economies including Germany and South Korea, and is about 40% of China, as reflected in a World Bank publication of 2018, *The Future of Manufacturing-Led Development*. Low productivity has unfavourable consequences for competitiveness, manufacturing growth, exports and economic growth.

In addition, due to a lack of capital expenditure and institutional capacity, and inefficiency in business service processes, there are difficulties in acquiring land for businesses, in efficient utilisation of economic infrastructure, and in providing business services, leading to a long time and more cost in setting up enterprises, resulting in a loss of creative energy of entrepreneurs.

The fundamental deficiencies, as highlighted above, are at the heart of the problem. For years, the economy has been hit internally due to low consumer demand as a result of low household incomes as well as externally on account of lesser competitiveness and inadequacies in integration with global supply chains for trade. A Business as Usual (BAU) approach is resulting in diminishing returns.

Paradigm shift

In order to drive the economy, there needs to be fresh thinking to address the underlying issues comprehensively in an integrated manner. The new reforms will require a distinct departure. The approach should be systemic and address structural issues – HRC, skills, research and development (R&D), land management and institutional capacity. The focus should be on quality of business services, technology readiness, labour productivity and per capita income.

First, to attract large investment in manufacturing and advanced services, at a basic level, investment in human capital and technology is a prerequisite. Raising HRC by way of enhanced public sector outlay to 8% of GDP, from current about 5%, for education, skill development (including for advanced technologies) and public health, is another first step. The reports (by McKinsey and the World Economic Forum) on advanced manufacturing suggest that Industry 4.0 will be defined by new technologies such as robotics, 3-D printing, artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of things (IoT), etc., which could usher in rapid changes of a higher order up to 10X or more in speed, scale and scope; technology obsolescence will be much faster than ever before. Consequently, efforts for technology readiness are very essential to stay competitive. It demands enhancing public research and development expenditure to 2% of GDP over the next three years.

There is a need to work on strategies to enhance per capita income by more wages for workers through higher skills and enhancing minimum wages, besides improving the social security net. This calls for a concerted calibrated approach through collaborative efforts of government, industry and workers' unions. On the issue of increased cost of labour, it can be compensated by higher productivity, some tax-benefits in the initial period of wage reforms especially for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, besides reducing transaction costs in business and improving infrastructure utilisation efficiency.

Systemic approach

Using insights from the work of Nobel laureate (1993) Douglass C. North on the role of institutions in advancing the economy in a country, it is necessary to build the capacity of public institutions to create a good environment for business and industry. The process of reforms is as important as the content. Policy reforms should lay an emphasis on process innovation and promote a business-centric approach to implementing pre-determined service quality levels (SQLs), to create a friendly ecosystem by having a state-of-the-art plug-and-play model for new enterprises, and for efficient internal supply chain management to integrate with the global supply chain.

Finally, largely absent in the 1990s, apart from rapid globalisation and rising aspirations, the future of the economy should be particularly viewed in the backdrop of a significant and irreversible shift in terms of a reliance on the global supply chain as a result of the knowledge-intensive nature of businesses and exponential effects caused by advanced technologies under Industry 4.0, since the 2010s. Therefore, the strategies adopted since the 1990s till now may not ensure adequate returns, and call for innovative approaches in public policymaking.

In sum, it necessitates a systemic approach – encompassing interconnected basic factors of the economic system – for policy reforms for setting the economic fundamentals right, in order to unlock creativity and innovation in the economic system, raise the total factor productivity (TFP), or a measure of productive efficiency, and to achieve higher growth.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The 'right to sit'

At a time when labour laws are flouted by the so-called guardian of labour rights (the central government), in favour of employers and the corporate sector, the introduction of a Bill in the Tamil Nadu Assembly recognising the worker's 'right to sit', following the Kerala lead, is a step forward (Tamil Nadu, September 7). It was more than a decade ago that Vasanthabalan made a film, *Angadi Theru*, to portray the sufferings of workers in textile showrooms. The labour force cannot and should not be undermined.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

Media landscape

Social media has transformed the way consumers receive information. Over the years, it has increasingly become the channel of choice for information, yet it fosters fake news (OpEd page, September 7). There is little doubt that those who need reliable information will still pay for quality journalism. Social media is definitely not journalism and can never replace journalism.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

▪ That a large section of Indians is hungry for authentic journalism is evident from the growth of online news portals. The distrust with the mainstream media comes with 'moral preaching' that goes as reporting. Journalists should eschew any pretence of making unflinching decisions between right and wrong.

DEEPAK DENNY,
Thiruvananthapuram