Optimising the fall

Despite falling COVID-19 cases, India must focus on improving vaccination and treatment

There is reason for optimism in India's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily new coronavirus cases have dipped to a nine-month low. There were 10,929 new cases reported in the previous 24 hours on Saturday morning. Though the latest numbers on Monday show a slight rise at 11,451, the key cause for optimism is that the country's active case load stood at 1,46,950 cases which was a 262-day low, according to the Health Ministry. The active cases were 0.43% of the total caseload and the lowest since the pandemic began in March 2020. The last few times daily cases went below 10,000 were on February 8, February 1, and before that on the January 25. Saturday's numbers bring the country's overall tally to 3.37 crore. Optimism however is a double-edged sword. The numbers may be at February levels but it should not be forgotten that India was hit by a lethal second wave – led by a dominating Delta variant – that saw daily cases climb to as many as 4,00,000 a day and excess deaths in several States many multiples of what was being reported by the Government.

Globally too, infections have not plateaued. The daily caseload has fallen by nearly a third since September but the virus continues to infect 50 million people every three months. On Monday, the world crossed a milestone of 25 crore cases since the pandemic began. However, the major difference between February and November is vaccination. About 74 crore first doses of the vaccine have been administered, which translates to 56% of the population. Close to 34 crore second doses have been administered which works out to a quarter of the population being fully inoculated. Coupled with results from serology surveys from States that show that many more have been exposed to the virus than official numbers indicate, this gives confidence that while the virus will continue to spread and infect, a smaller proportion of those infected will be seriously ill. The future demand for vaccination may depend more on adoption in children, or on the demand for booster shots from people worried about waning immunity. That the pall of fear has dimmed is apparent in the queues in airports, the crowds in tourist destinations and the rejuvenation in several indices of trade and economic activity. Whether all this socialisation – and the opening of schools in-person – will mean a surge in the coming months remains to be seen. The Government, while continuing to improve the last mile delivery of vaccines must not let up on advocating caution to avoid another wave of infections. It must continue to facilitate the upgrade of hospital infrastructure in every district; it should also shore up stocks of promising antivirals and ensure that vaccine companies increase supplies in line with their commitments.

The wall in front

Rahul Dravid will be expected to fetch India ICC trophies in his role as coach

Rahul Dravid's appointment as coach of the senior men's Indian cricket team had an air of inevitability about it. This was a natural progression for the former India captain, who, after his retirement in 2012, dabbled in commentary before slipping into the mentor-cum-coach template. He guided the India under-19 squad, the 'A' team and helmed the National Cricket Academy in his hometown Bengaluru. It was all building up to the Indian squad's coach's seat, which was falling vacant following incumbent Ravi Shastri's contract winding to a close at the culmination of the current ICC Twenty20 World Cup in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, much like his steady batting that earned him the moniker 'The Wall', Dravid was in no hurry. He prefers the measured step and it is a trait that defined him right from his school days to the time he became one among the sport's greatest batters, putting a heavy price on his wicket. A rounded personality, equally at ease on the ground or in the company of books, Dravid was always the team-man. He even donned wicket-keeping gloves in One Day Internationals just to lend balance to the playing eleven. He comes with the weight of great stature, the warmth of goodwill, and the pressure of expectations. This is not an easy position in a country where everyone has an opinion on everything about cricket.

Dravid the player batted with an in-the-trenches resolve defining his forays on the pitch. He was a remarkable close-in fielder too, an attribute that gets lost under his avalanche of runs. He remained an assertive captain and his act of declaring the Indian innings during the 2004 Multan Test against Pakistan, while Sachin Tendulkar neared his double century, remains one of the strongest team-first-records-later diktat ever issued in the annals of Indian cricketing history. But back then as a player or captain, Dravid was in control, but as a coach, his role is about getting the present skipper and the outfit ready for a contest besides finessing strategy. This is about transferring knowledge and hoping that his wards would deliver. It is tough, and in the past, men of pedigree such as Kapil Dev, Greg Chappell and Anil Kumble had a mixed run while evolving as the coach. India may have suffered a blip during the ICC T20 World Cup in the UAE, and yet this is a core-unit that has done well in the previous months, both at home and overseas. Seen in that light, Dravid inherits the right mix. Yet, there are missing links. Recently, India has not won any significant ICC silverware while the triumphs in 1983, 2007 and 2011 seem distant. This should offer enough food for thought while the 48-year-old dons the coach's hat.

Breaking down the hype around Metaverse

Its commodification in the hands of one corporation could be detrimental to the Web 3.0 decentralisation movement

KAIF SIDDIQUI & SHIFA QURESHI

The race between technology companies to build the 'metaverse' has officially started. On October 28, 2021, Facebook Inc. announced that it was restructuring and assuming the corporate name, Meta Platforms Inc., announcing that 'from now on, we're going to be metaverse-first, not Facebook-first'. 'Metaverse' is a broad term encompassing interconnected 3D virtual worlds made possible through advancements in technologies such as augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchains, originating from Neal Stephenson's 1992 speculative science fiction novel, *Snow Crash*.

The metaverse space
Web 3.0 is the name given to the next generation of Internet architecture that will supposedly be free from the centralisation that is a part of today's Web 2.0 Internet systems, which are largely controlled by tech giants such as Google, Facebook and Amazon. Web 3.0 proponents advocate the use of technologies such as blockchains and tokens to create a decentralised Internet for online interaction and online payments, and a hypothetical metaverse run on these platforms could be a good example of what an ideal future digital environment could look like; hence the push for an 'Open Metaverse' by some organisations.

In an ideal world, the metaverse would be a truly open and inclusive space for empowerment, expression and exploration. However, these are not likely to be the corporation's goals in the world we live in. If the corporation's previous products are anything to go by, the aim is likely to get to the next level of commodification of human interaction, where every single action, down to the tiniest levels, is tracked and surveilled for profits, and designed in a way to maximise data collection and keep the user coming back for more.

Facebook/Meta is not the only company that has been pushing for the idea of the metaverse to become a reality lately; although the branding exercise that has just begun will likely make millions believe so. The chosen name reflects an attempt to associate the idea of the metaverse with one particular corporation and turn it into a household name. Other companies that have similar metaverse-building goals, such as Epic Games, now face a huge disadvantage.

However, the metaverse in the hands of one corporation would surely be detrimental to the entire Web 3.0 decentralisation movement. Competitors are likely to pop up with their own versions of the technology, leading to a number of 'Closed' metaverses, which would basically be the Web 2.0 system all over again. Oligopolies or monopolies in something as revolutionary as the metaverse space is a cause for concern and competition law regulators might have to look into them someday.

What could be on offer
What kind of economic systems would exist in Facebook/Meta's metaverse? Interoperability, or the ability to seamlessly transfer data between different virtual worlds is being promised, which allows for rich social and economic possibilities. One phrase that has been regularly coming up is the 'creator economy' that will become a reality in the metaverse thanks to the popularity of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) over the past year. NFTs will allow proof of ownership of digital assets, for example, virtual goods, paintings and memorabilia. However, the most common criticism of NFTs is that they are an attempt to create value and scarcity where there should not be – that they are nothing more than another new avenue for capitalist expansion. The arguments are that nothing in the virtual world is actually scarce, and any scarcity is actually by design. Artificially created scarcity helps drive profits and moneymaking. The debate continues. Metaverses have great potential to revolutionise fields such as education and health care, but as long as they are run purely from a profit motive, the benefits would likely be lesser.

Virtual economies might also develop around the customisation of metaverse 'avatars'. Recent whistle-blower revelations have unveiled that the corporation was well aware of the psychological effects Instagram was having on teenagers. One can therefore assume that metaverse 'avatars' will be the new version of showing off glamorous social media profiles – both masking who the person really is behind-the-scenes, perpetuating narcissism, mental health issues and insecurities.

Regulatory concerns
Privacy and security are, of course, significant concerns, and indeed, Facebook/Meta has acknowledged this, declaring its commitment to creating secure platforms. Yet, rampant health and biometric data collection are expected to continue in the metaverse, as real world identities will be more connected to the system than ever before. Data breaches and theft, thus, could prove even costlier. While Web 3.0 systems are supposed to give more power to users over their personal data, it still remains to be seen if corporations such as Facebook/Meta will follow Web 3.0 standards or come up with their own standards in closed corporate metaverses. Cybercrimes could also take on new forms in these new virtual worlds.

Facebook's role in promoting violent and hateful content to drive user engagement has been well documented. If left unregulated, something similar could happen on an even larger scale in immersive virtual worlds, through targeted advertising and propaganda. The corporation cannot be trusted to moderate its platforms properly if it goes against their economic incentives, as has been proven time and time again. Regulators need to step in right from the start when it comes to the metaverse, following a precautionary rather than a permissive approach instead of taking too long and allowing certain problematic and dangerous practices to get entrenched and difficult to deal with. The tussle between lawmakers around the world and Facebook still continues today.

Finally, metaverses will bring up challenging questions of jurisdiction and governance. In the distant future, virtual worlds could even someday grow into alternatives to the nation state itself, as the rise of blockchain-based DAOs (decentralized autonomous organisations) seems to suggest. Big Tech firms already have GDPs higher than several small countries – if they all get to operate full virtual worlds of their own, it could necessitate large-scale rethinking of the very foundations of technology law.

Real world costs, impact
The metaverse, as it is promised, will combine the technologies of cloud computing, big data, advanced AI systems, AR/VR, blockchains, NFTs and much more. Each of these technologies requires tremendous processing power and, consequently, would lead to a great cost in terms of the environment. The level of resource extraction required to run such a huge system smoothly is too gigantic to comprehend. And that is not even taking into account the exploitation of millions of underpaid workers upon which a lot of the critical infrastructure and supply chains of Big Tech depend. This stark reality behind our everyday conveniences is unknown to many, and this could only intensify with a corporate project as huge as the metaverse. Ultimately, a corporation is beholden to its investors and not to the public at large. With the metaverse, possibilities are aplenty. But so are the dangers.

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A vital cog in Bongaigaon's response to malnutrition

Project Sampoorna's success in reducing child malnutrition is a model that can be easily implemented anywhere

M.S. LAKSHMI PRIYA

'Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food'. This statement is often attributed to Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, and quite literally sums up Project Sampoorna which was conceptualised and successfully implemented in Bongaigaon district of Assam.

An interlink
The project has resulted in the reduction of malnutrition in children using near zero economic investment. Sampoorna is in tandem with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and those set by the UN Secretary General António Guterres in the Food Systems Summit (September 2021) including the need to have food systems and social protection that support resilience and food security. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also had identified health and nutrition as priority areas and reiterated the need for a 'Kuposhan mukt Bharat' (Malnutrition Free India) while launching the Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN Abhiyaan) (National Nutrition Mission) in 2017-18.

It was during Poshan Maah (Nutrition Month) in September 2020 that 2,416 children were identified to be malnourished in the lush green Brahmaputra valley district of Bongaigaon. The National Family Health Survey (NHFS)-5 has documented that the number of children under five who are stunted, wasted, underweight and the number of anaemic women and children in the district are higher than the national average – anaemia being a major determinant of maternal and child health.

These were corroborated by Project Saubhagya that was designed to reduce the maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate of the district. A real time data sheet is updated by field-level doctors as and when a high risk pregnancy is identified, which is then followed up till safe delivery. The project has yielded encouraging results; maternal deaths for six months (April 1, 2020 to September 30, 2020 compared to April 1, 2021 to September 30, 2021) have fallen from 16 to three and infant deaths from 130 to 63.

Addressing child nutrition
The highest risk factor for high risk pregnancy is anaemia which is usually nutritional. The vicious cycle of a malnourished child growing into an unhealthy adolescent, and then further into an anaemic pregnant young woman giving birth to an asphyxiated low birth weight baby; this baby then faced possible developmental delays, only to grow into a malnourished child; and this child who struggles further for nutrition and appropriate care while the world around her barely makes ends meet is the one that sucks in all possibilities of a healthy society.

This portrays the worst-case scenarios, but truth is indeed stranger than fiction. In order to break out of this vicious cycle, the low-hanging fruit had to be targeted – children's nutrition.

Malnutrition, patriarchy
Bongaigaon has 1,116 Anganwadis with a total of 63,041 children below five. The massive exercise of plotting their weights and heights in World Health Organization growth charts revealed a total of 2,416 malnourished children; 246 cases of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and 2,170 instances of Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM).

District Nutritional Rehabilitation Centres, or NRCs, usually have up to 20 beds; and a monthly intake of 200 SAM children is not practical. Also, parents of the children who are admitted forgo their daily wages (which to an extent is compensated by the Government) and abandon their farmlands for 10 days. Back home, siblings of the SAM child are not taken care of and may become malnourished. The treated child could also slip back to a SAM state after being discharged and if not cared for.

We needed to innovate now. Based on the success of the community-based COVID-19 management model (Project Mili Juli), we launched Project Sampoorna targeting the mothers of SAM/MAM children, the tagline being 'Empowered Mothers, Healthy Children'. In addition, we identified the mother of a healthy child of the same Anganwadi Centre (AWC) and paired her with the target mother; they would be 'Buddy Mothers' (2,416 pairs). They were usually neighbours and shared similar socio-economic backgrounds. The pairs were given diet charts to indicate the daily food intake of their children; they would have discussions about this on all Tuesdays at the AWC. Local practices related to nutrition would also be discussed.

The major hindrance to the project was patriarchy. Mothers had to be empowered financially for sustained results. Therefore, they were enrolled in Self Help Groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). By the end of three months, 74.3% of mothers were enrolled in SHGs; by the end of six months, enrollment went up to 75.6% and by the end of a year, it was 90%. Meanwhile, we arranged for 100 millilitres of milk and an egg on alternate days for all 2,416 children for the first three months, giving time for their mothers to stabilise themselves in the newly found jobs. The large hearted people of Bongaigaon adopted Anganwadis and filled the tiny stomachs with the much needed proteins and their hearts with love.

A sea change
After three months of Project Sampoorna, out of 246 SAM children, 27 (11%) continued to be SAM, 28 (11.4%) improved to MAM and a whooping 189 (76.8%) became normal. Out of 2,170 MAM children, 12 (0.6%) deteriorated to SAM, 132 (6.08%) stayed MAM and an unbelievable 2,015 (92.8%) became normal. The best was yet to come. Milk and eggs were stopped after three months but we continued to follow up to see how our Buddy Mothers Model and Women Empowerment Model were working. Mothers had done what institutions could not do for years. By March 2021, 84.96% of SAM children and 97.3% MAM children were normal; and by September 2021, 92.3% SAM and 98.9% MAM children were normal. Project Sampoorna had stood the test of time. Children who had not improved were checked and treated by doctors under the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK). UNICEF, IIT Guwahati, Tezpur University and the Social Welfare Department lent their support in periodic course correction.

Project Sampoorna had prevented at least 1,200 children from becoming malnourished over the last year. The National Nutrition Mission and the State government recognised our project in the 'Innovation Category'. The Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sharma, has written an encouraging message for the project report which will be released soon. The model can easily be implemented anywhere in the world. We believe children everywhere have the right to stay healthy, and hope that the vicious cycle is broken sooner rather than later.

Dr. M.S. Lakshmi Priya, District Collector, Bongaigaon district, Assam, is a medical doctor turned IAS officer (2014 batch), from Kerala. The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chennai and flooding
There is a "social media forward" that goes this way: "The story of a mega city is this. January to October: water scarcity; November and December: water scares the city." This sums up how Chennai and the monsoon are. The biggest issue most residents face is water logging (Tamil Nadu, Pages 1-4, November 8). One of the important reasons for flooding is the poor maintenance of roads. There is also the collection of garbage and plastic waste that ends up clogging water drains and channels. The Chennai Corporation should address these priority areas. The services of ex-service men and NGOs

can be sought. There needs to be a panel of experts to look into the state of the city before the rains.
VENUGOPALAN S.,
Chennai

■ While the State administration led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has initiated timely relief measures, the significance of long-term solutions aimed at building a climate/disaster-resilient infrastructure cannot be lost sight of. Adoption of a zero-tolerance policy toward encroachments of the city's wetlands and indiscriminate dumping of waste in drains brooks no delay.
M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

■ That such a great city is left reeling after heavy rain is sobering. I had a great chance to live in Chennai for 12 years, and flooding during this time of the year is not something new. When it rains, a sense of helplessness prevails.
For a coastal city with wetlands and marshes, booming real estate activities and encroachments are factors to look into. The world is facing climate change and the administrators of Chennai must realise that it is time for concrete and practical steps to alleviate the suffering the people face.
The sewerage lines and waterways created in North Chennai during the British Raj are great examples of visionary steps before today's authorities.
JAYASEKHARAN V.P.,
Payyanur, Kannur, Kerala

■ One wonders why various governments in Tamil Nadu have not been able to solve the problem of flooding and the draining of rain water. Crores of rupees are reported to have been spent on the construction of storm drains, but the problem has never been fixed. Don't we have efficient engineers and experts to offer a permanent solution to the perplexing problem of almost the entire city getting flooded during the rainy season?
N. RAMACHANDRAN,
Chennai

The UAPA chill
The draconian provisions of the UAPA do result in the prolonged violations of the fundamental rights of many of "the accused" (Editorial page, November 8).
But one must add that it would be no exaggeration to say that the law and order agencies and at times the government in question sometimes fail to understand the law. The political class, irrespective of ideology, needs waking up to the nuances of the UAPA provisions in the absence of which social and student activists, political rivals and journalists and poets and priests who do not conform to the views of the governing class will continue to be at the receiving end.
ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,
Kandassankadavu, Kerala

India's campaign ends
The bowling coach's reasoning is nothing short of an excuse (Sport page, November 8). The IPL was the most ideal platform for preparation just before the World Cup. Except for Pakistan, members of the other teams have participated in the IPL and have had no complaints. One mistake was not playing R. Ashwin from the beginning. By and large, there were mistakes on and off the field.
V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu