

COVID-19: Some Reflections

Gerard Rassendren and V. Basil Hans

Abstract: Covid-19 is the buzzword today. WHO is continuously monitoring and responding to this pandemic. Updates about Covid-19 are coming out daily. There are also many new buzzwords people are using when discussing this new virus – Social Distancing, Flatten the Curve, Self-quarantine, Isolation, Incubation Period, Community Spread, Herd Immunity, Pandemic, and National Emergency. There might be a global pandemic out there, but social media users still have time to slam jargon and buzzwords online. The virus is here. The threat is real. As the world responds to the Covid-19 pandemic, we face the challenge of an overabundance of information related to the virus. Some of this information may be false and potentially harmful. Inaccurate information spreads widely and at speed, making it more difficult for the public to identify verified facts and advice from trusted sources, such as their local health authority or WHO. This article gives some reflections on Covid-19 concerning some sectors of the economy.

Keywords: Covid-19, Hospitality industry, Labour, Pandemic.

Introduction

Pandemics throughout history can cause not only harm but also throw up challenges by forcing human beings to introspect on fundamental questions of existence. The phenomenon of the current Covid-19 pandemic is no different. At the physical plane, it is a zoonotic phenomenon which is a case of transmission of infection from animals to humans. In a way, this kind of event happens when the proportion between humans and animals get disturbed, that is to say when humans tend to live with too many animal species. This can happen only when humans erode into animal space. Simultaneously, this pandemic has also brought to the forefront issues concerning the way economics, science and technology have been trying to explain the world and the way they have influenced policymaking.

As the Covid-19 strain of the virus has been classified by the World Health Organisation as high transmission and moderate

virulence organism, the real challenge humans and policymakers are facing is the threat of its contagion. The infection can spread very fast, and if precautions are not taken can affect large sections of the population quickly. Significant sections of the population would have to be kept under institutional quarantine in dedicated health facilities, and critical cases with comorbidities will have to be given specialised attention as well as treatment. The strain on any national health system will be evident to all and quite significant. However, the exciting aspect of this pandemic is it exposed the policy lacuna in the design and laid bare the mistake policymakers and governments have committed in ignoring the health system for merely achieving high rates of growth in gross domestic product.

Cases of corona virus are on the rise across Africa. But in some countries, people don't believe the pandemic is real.

- White House corona virus advisor Dr Anthony Fauci said that convincing people who consider the corona virus to be “fake news” to get vaccinated against the disease could become an issue.
- Fauci said in a published interview with The New York Times that he was “stunned” people in certain parts of the country with devastating outbreaks still consider the pandemic to be fake.
- “Despite a quarter-million deaths, despite more than 11 million infections, despite 150,000 new infections a day, they don't believe it's real. That is a real problem,” Fauci said.

The unique structural features of SARS-CoV-2, the corona virus responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic, produce an extremely high infection rate and multi-organ secondary infections making this virus more dangerous and challenging for therapeutic interventions.

Although sharing the same human angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 receptor, SARS-CoV-2 is more selective for the human receptor and is, overall, far more infectious than SARS-CoV-1, the corona virus responsible for the 2002-2003 pandemic, which also originated in China. One of those unique features of SARS-CoV-2 is a furin polybasic cleavage site that facilitates membrane fusion between the virus and the human cell and is widely known for its ability to enhance pathogenicity and transmissibility but is not present

in any closely related bat corona viruses. The enhanced ability for membrane fusion may be a cause for the multi-organ infection observed in SARS-CoV-2 patients.

A new scientific study published on August 19, 2020, suggests that other structures in SARS-CoV-2, similar to those found in the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome corona virus (MERS-CoV), may also contribute to that alternate infection process.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented research worldwide. The impact on research in progress at the time of the pandemic, the importance and challenges of real-time pandemic research, and the importance of a paediatrician-scientist workforce are all highlighted by this epic pandemic. As we navigate through and beyond this pandemic, which will have a long-lasting impact on our world, including research and the biomedical research enterprise, it is important to recognise and address opportunities and strategies for, and challenges of research and strengthening the paediatrician-scientist workforce.

The first cases of what is now recognised as SARS-CoV-2 infection, termed Covid-19, were reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019 as cases of fatal pneumonia. By February 26, 2020, Covid-19 had been reported on all continents except Antarctica. As of May 4, 2020, 3.53 million cases and 248,169 deaths have been reported from 210 countries. (Weiner et al., 2020)

WHO is bringing the world's scientists and global health professionals together to accelerate the research and development process, and develop new norms and standards to contain the spread of the corona virus pandemic and help care for those affected.

India's first case of Covid-19 was reported on January 30, 2020 from Kerala and India's first death took place in Kalburgi, Karnataka on March 12, 2020. India detected 36,652 new Covid-19 cases in the 24 hours ending 8 am Saturday 5, 2020 taking the country's overall tally to over 96 lakh. Out of the total cases, active cases have further dropped to 4.09 lakh, and 90,58,822 people have recovered so far with almost 42,500 recoveries reported in the last 24 hours. With 512 new deaths, the toll mounted to 1,39,700.

Table 1
Monthly Growth of Covid-19 Cases and Deaths in India

Date	Cases	Deaths	Recovered	Active
30-01-20	1	0	-	-
01-02-20	2	0	-	-
01-03-20	5	0	-	-
01-04-20	1,397	58	-	-
01-05-20	34,863	1,154	9,068	24,641
01-06-20	189,963	5,397	112,963	71,603
01-07-20	585,792	17,410	347,836	220,546
01-08-20	1,697,054	36,551	1,095,647	564,856
01-09-20	3,687,939	65,435	2,837,377	785,127
01-10-20	6,310,267	98,708	5,270,007	941,552
01-11-20	8,229,322	122,642	7,542,905	563,775
01-12-20	9,499,710	138,159	8,931,798	429,753
01-01-21	10,303,409	149,205	9,901,929	252,275

Former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda has suggested that the cost of the Covid-19 vaccine is kept affordable and that the government even consider offering it free of cost for the economically vulnerable sections.

The JD(S) supremo made this suggestion at an all-party meeting with leaders of various political outfits and top union ministers, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic situation in the country (Express web desk 5 Dec 2020).

While in developed nations, governments are assembling initiatives to support resource distribution and vaccination efforts for their citizens, the world should not forget that many people are living in so many parts of the world that cannot rely on the assistance of their governments and will not have access to the necessary vaccine to combat Covid-19 (www.worldforgottenchildren.org, 2020).

The R&D Blueprint has been activated to accelerate diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics for this novel corona virus. The solidarity of all countries will be essential to ensure equitable access to Covid-19 health products.

Pandemic and Labour

National governments needed time to make preparations in the health machinery to manage this crisis. So, their first response was to impose a lockdown. This approach also had dual intent. By restricting significantly human movement and activity, the fond attempt was to see if the virus chain can be broken and so achieve some respite in its contagion effect. Restricting economic activity needs preparations to be made because economic production and exchange are going to be reduced and in many situations, suspended. This results in the release of labour away from production and exchange activities. In other words, it means the onset of a trail of unemployment. The most severely affected with respect to the uncertainty of employment was the temporary, contract and migrant worker section of the labour market, also called the 'gig economy'. It consists of a social segment of the community completely made up of part-time workers. In fact, by giving it a name and in some subtle way romanticising such temporariness in employment, phenomenological instability of livelihoods has been glorified.

The real economics that governs the propagation of this way of organising the economy is cost economising approach to choice behaviour. The drive to achieve such cost economies implies the tendency to expand the difference between cost and price, namely the profit margin without having to increase the price and face the challenges of market price competition. The question is how much of gain or profit and at whose cost, for these temporary or contract workers were the souls that kept urban locales functional as plumbers, electricians, cab drivers, domestic help, garbage collectors etc. The fact that large swathe of workers constituting this gig economy had to trudge back to their native homesteads in the rural hinterland of the Indian subcontinent reveals two facts. First, the state had not prepared to account for this social group in the economy when it undertook the exercise of imposing a lockdown to manage the health crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, it showed the fragility of an insatiable desire for gain or profit that pervaded the human mind wherein people, especially the privileged segment of the community, lost sight of their humanity and humaneness. Saving on costs and

choosing not to worry about the temporariness of employment of those whom they hire as if it was the choice of labour to participate in such an unstable labour market sounds rational but surely not reasonable especially for the sake of humanity. These migrant contract workers had to tread back on foot to their native homes as destitute with no employment, and consequently no income along with the threat of pandemic hovering around them. They were also exposed to the ruthless onslaught of the vagaries of the weather.

There is no authentic account of the number of lives that would have been lost on the wayside of the highways and the side of the railway track routes due to fatigue, disease, and exposure to heat, dust, wind and rain. Ironically and in a bad manner, the ruling dispensation at the Central government level as well as in some of the states were more occupied in making the condition of the labour even more unstable by using the general uncertainty everybody was suffering from and the situation of people's attention being more on safeguarding themselves from Covid infection, to reduce to zero several provisions in our labour laws that were in favour of the interests of the labourers. For example, the working hours were increased from 8 hours a day to 12 hours a day. There were even suggestions at the helm of policymaking to deactivate the labour laws for the ensuing three years in order to incentivise owners over the workers. The Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2020 waived off the 'standing order', related to labour retrenchment for all enterprises which employ less than 300 employees. The upper limit before this amendment was 100 workers and by raising it to 300 the state has given overwhelming power to employers - owners of many thousands of enterprises and a free hand in hiring and firing workers.

Further, the notice period for going on a legal strike has been made 60 days and such a length of time by sheer common sense makes conducting a strike almost impossible. Thirdly, the code bill also introduces a reskilling worker fund. However, the contribution to the fund rests with the employers. Implicitly, these three major amendments to the laws concerning labour can be interpreted as changes that dilute labour rights drastically and secondly the state is abandoning the worker to the mercy of the owner-employer. These

amendments are oppressive at a foundational level. It is as if the labour and the goods markets will never fail, especially due to the working of elements of market power. This idea has been very profoundly exposed by T. Sedlacek when he says, “the effort to maximise effectiveness at any cost, this strengthening of the economy at the expense of the human, reduces humans across the breadth of their humanity to being mere production units” (2011: 21). Labour cannot be treated as a mere unit of input in the production function in the same way one treats machinery and raw materials or intermediates. For the latter working conditions and security of employment does not matter (Stiglitz, 2002). What we have been witnessing is rationality superseding reasonableness and goodness.

Pandemic and the Hospitality Industry

Another sector that was drastically affected by the Pandemic was the hospitality industry especially in the cities which are business destinations like Mumbai, Bengaluru, and New Delhi and also places which are leisure destination like Goa and Jaipur. Again this is also an industry which employs a large number of contract workers. This industry was one of the major employers of the labour force from the ‘gig economy’. This industry has shrunk due to the pandemic and the lockdown policy adopted by the government. According to a JLL survey, more than half of the total respondents have had to allot 10 percent of their total hotels to serve as quarantine centres.

In the same way, about half of them have shut down 80 percent of their inventory. Now a hotel’s inventory is made up of raw food ingredients which are mainly agricultural products, products of animal husbandry and poultry, besides other types of products. All these are agro-based products. So, the reduction of a hotel’s inventory will also negatively affect the sale of agricultural products along with the many small businesses making up the storage and distribution chain of suppliers. On the average, most of the respondents foresee that to come back to their 2019 size of business operations, it would take 13 to 24 months.

27 percent of the hotel operators have been approached by hotel owners asking the former to take a deferment of management fees,

13 percent of the operator - respondents have chosen to postpone performance incentive-based management fees, and another 27 percent are pushing to a later time period all fixed system charges. On the average, 53 percent of the respondents to the JLL survey have deferred by six months opening of new hotel facilities. So there is an average of half year’s lull in any sort of expansion in the industry. All these imply not just a compression of the sector but also the presence of pessimistic forecasts in the mind of the entrepreneurs and operators in this industry. According to Keynes (1964), such pessimism can be a constraint for the resurrection of any degree of economic activity irrespective of the various stimuli that might be pumped into the system. As a result, much creativity is required at policy-making to stimulate a business sector back to its feet without compromising on the welfare of those who are dependent on it both as small feeder businesses as well as labour. What is needed is a much more holistic approach than just pump-priming the system with mere financial allocation and dilution of labour employment as well as service norms. Since many Covid related safety protocols have to be undertaken continuously, and as the number of customers using these hotels is unlikely to be as in the pre-Covid period but significantly less, the hospitality industry is surely going to face a spike in costs without commensurate revenue being expected. So assistance in terms of capital infusion is very critical, and especially most hotel operators would require working capital.

Environmental Debate

The most popular and dominant response of policymakers to the Covid-19 pandemic has been to impose a lockdown in places heavily affected by this outbreak. Imposing lockdowns have not been done by one or two nations, but it appears to have been the first policy decision taken by almost all governments when they have classified the outbreak as a national epidemic, and ultimately the WHO declared the situation to be a pandemic. The purpose is to mitigate the contagion of the Covid-19 infections in the communities where the outbreak has spread very rapidly.

A lockdown primarily means suspension and withdrawal of human movement and activity within a geographical region. On the

one side, this gives time for policymakers and those in power and authority to prepare the health system to manage the problem. At the same time, lockdowns fundamentally involved a decrease in human economic activities, especially fall in the road as well as air transport, reduction of factory activities and so on. It removes (temporarily) human presence and intervention in physical spaces. Given the powerful tendency among us humans to meddle with what is not fundamentally ours especially in terms of physical spaces meant for animals, flora and fauna and resources, many environmentalists claim that the lockdown has resulted in cleaner skies, clearer air, more hospitable water bodies with dolphins seen in the Italian coastline, and after almost half a century tortoises are seen in some parts of the eastern Indian coastline.

No doubt, these realities are seen in nature demonstrate the fact that man has encroached into domains of nature where humans are not supposed to be around. Putting it in another way, wild animals have not come where humans are, but humans have invaded physical spaces meant for wild animals and other species. A concomitant result has been the transmission of disease from animals to humans as is the case with corona virus presently, as the popular thinking about the origin of this pandemic goes. This idea has been stated very clearly by the UN's environment chief, Inger Anderson when he says, 'Nature is sending us a message with the corona virus pandemic'. As an extension of this, observation is another dominant environmentalism centric claim that the earth and nature are well and are breathing freely because man as well as human activities have been substantially withdrawn. Here, another angle also has to be borne in mind.

As immediate fallout, this is undoubtedly true if some of the changes in the context of nature are observed. Man indeed overstepped his space. I find that the main source of this problem is the science and education of economics. If one takes any textbook in economic principles read by almost all students, it will contain right at the very beginning three very important precepts. One, man's wants are unlimited. Second, resources to satisfy man's wants are limited and capable of more than one use. Third, man is a rational person. The problem with these three ideas is when we invert the logic, inverse

the reasoning from the third precept backwards. If a man is conceived as a rational being and by being a rational being can surely figure out that resources of this earth are limited with multiple uses, why is a man choosing to keep wants unlimited? This does not mean a man should not have needs. In nature every species has needs. Life in and through nature is an enveloping and embracing phenomenon, what can be called the circle of life, like the song by Elton John in the movie Lion King. So, the problem is not with needs but with ravenous wants and ravaging ambitions. So there is this emotive drive – To an extent an honest feeling too - Against the harmful implications of man's insatiable ambitions that seem to motivate the observation nature is healing, improving and fondly regaining its vitality with the withdrawal of man.

While this claim is doing popular rounds based on certain apparent facts, the premises of this claim needs to be interrogated. In the first instance to posit that nature is now doing well because man is not around implicitly holds the idea that man is not part of nature and there are two kinds of nature – One is nature with humans and another is non-human nature. It foregrounds a state of competitive existence between man and nature.

By this, it falls into the trap of a belief that due to the sixth sense bestowed on man as against other species, in nature, man is meant to dominate nature. Unfortunately one would be committing the same fallacy every well-meaning lover of the earth would want to avoid and possibly even erase. The second premise of the claim that things are better when a man is withdrawn from the circle of life (life here is everything in nature, for even mountains and tectonic plates move), is also to say that he is no more capable or having opportunities to make mistakes.

Here, a very critical matter has to be borne in mind in that, using the lockdown and other restrictions man's activity has only been temporarily halted. Attempts are being made to manage the severity of the economic fallout of these restrictions using technology. However, according to a famous classical economist David Ricardo (1817), even technology cannot completely offset the diminution of returns from suppression of economic activities. So these restrictions

have only suppressed economic and harmful materialistic urges and need not have essentially transformed them, although any well-meaning person would wish it to be so. Putting it in another way, the dominant environmentalist position tending to believe that when the man is withdrawn from normal life, he might have or possibly been forced to go through conversion and has ceased to have what is previously said ravaging ambitions have not accounted for such a pressing down or temporary exclusion from the consciousness of these urges. So, both the premises of the current popular environmentalism centric claim are weak and erroneous.

Man and nature cannot be visualised as compartmentalised entities. The truths, realities and experiences of man and nature cannot be isolated from each other, cannot be made to be portrayed as a kind of competition but are intricately interconnected with each other. Man is not apart from nature but a part of nature. Man is also species as other species in nature. At this juncture, the words of one of the founders of our nation, Jawaharlal Nehru is very relevant, and it goes thus, 'Peace is said to be indivisible, so is freedom, so is prosperity now and so also is a disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.' (Indian National Congress, 2016) The environmental degradation and the consequences we are in this generation experiencing are the results of man's misuse of nature because Homo sapiens have erred by believing in the so-called natural right to dominate nature. However, rectifying this thought process cannot be done by claiming that nature is better off without man being around because this thinking falls back into the same error of positioning man against nature. Instead, the thought paradigm should move towards man along with nature, man as one with nature, man as one of nature. In conclusion, the basic premise must shift from competitive existence to cooperative existence, from rivalrous existence to co-existence. (Rassendren & Hans, 2020a)

Some Ethical Reflections

What can be seen is the shift in the nature of statistical information that has become critical and also attracts public attention - from mutual funds unit prices or share prices or commodity futures

statistics to information about how much of actual stocks of natural food products, grown by our farmers are available. Ironically the location of this information about fresh and natural food stocks was an agricultural cooperative, a form of socialisation of production as well as supply, not with a hypermarket chain. Let us not fail to notice the cognitive shift of focus in the substance of the statistics we look out for and the institutional source of those statistics. Given the disruption in the Rabi crop harvest due to the Covid-19 crisis, it has become imperative to ensure that the Kharif harvest is not disrupted for otherwise, a food shortage pandemic along with a health pandemic would just span out. Well, do not fail to miss out that this summer our Alphonso mangoes need not necessarily be exported, for borders are closed in today's world. We can have our mangoes for ourselves at some reasonable price.

To us, his present and impending reality pricks my conscience for it raises moral-ethical questions - where was I when my farmers had crop failure, committed suicide, died of starvation and malnutrition, suffered from inadequate and insufficient quality medical care due to lack of primary health care centres when the anganwadis were facing supply shocks, when their minimum support prices were treated with policy ad hocism, when rural employment guarantee schemes were nothing more than a passing reference in election manifestos and corporate bailouts took centre stage, when their lands were forcibly acquired for different ways of the corporatisation of the national economy when the men of the rural households migrated to the cities to become cab drivers, waiters, small-time cooks, employees of food caterers serving for the big fat Indian wedding. In other words, where was I when ultimately they were being denied their basic right to a reasonable livelihood?

In the light of the lockdown, one of the grievous challenges we are facing is the uncertainty of large numbers of migrant workers with hardly any capacity to manage crisis trudging back to their homes in the rural hinterland also called as reverse migration. These souls kept affluent urban locales and homes functional as plumbers, constructions workers, domestic helps, plumbers, garbage collectors etc., and their average income was not even a full Rs. 150 a day. The loss

of even this income for them is a double catastrophe along with a harmful micro-organism. The moral question that crops up here is why did they have to migrate in the first place? While abiding by the rules of a lockdown is to protect oneself, it also includes protecting others in the community. If the notion that protecting all includes protecting oneself too had dominated our thinking it would have been possible to have mitigated rural-urban migration initially by making rural occupations gainful and this, in turn, would have further softened the problem of reverse migration which had turned to be both a human problem and a health hazard, for now, there was a twin need - to be saved from disease and to be saved from starvation.

Another angle about the present migrant worker crisis besides the labour market in general in the country as well as in many parts of the world is the organised large scale diminution of security of employment by the propagation of the new labour market institutional dynamic called contract work. This dynamic lead to the evolution of the 'gig-economy' made up of the social class of part-time workers. The core situation of a part-time worker is the absence of consistent and regular tenure of employment. Putting it another way an employee is not sure whether one's current job will be available tomorrow. Why did the labour force and the labour market witness this structural change? One can trivialise the response by claiming it to be an outcome of the competition. The real issues are who the actual competitors are and who is fighting the market competition for whom. This is again an ethical issue because someone is being used for someone else. This is also true of return migrants from overseas. Many are stranded in foreign soil with their visas having expired or nullified by the host nation. Even in this situation, the ultra-rich expatriates are willing to pay extra to return in private jets trying to circumvent the government organised the repatriation process. Labour was being used to fight the competition for profit.

While profit itself is not wrong, the ethical challenge comes out when we ask how much of profit. Here, it is appropriate to look at the logic of profit in economics. Economics as a body of thinking has given very high recognition to the idea of economising, that is trimming down, but it has also positioned this idea only with the

proportion of the cost, not with the proportion of profit. All economics textbooks will propagate cost economies, not profit economisation. It has always preached cost minimisation to achieve profit maximisation but never profit minimisation to ensure equitable shares for no one can be paid more than what has been turned out.

Given the current Covid-19 pandemic which has crippled almost the entire world, spanning 195 plus countries all of whom are facing resource constraints and facing challenges to manage it because borders are shut down, a popular argument that can come out is the claim that the evolving world will be a world of isolationism. This might be true to an extent, in fact, a very probable future reality. But it will also be a world centred on domestic and local economies. For example, many members of the US legislature have begun to lobby for paradigm shifts in the production and procurement processes. It is to shift the focus from foreign supply chains to domestic supply chains. White House trade advisor Peter Navarro is pressurising Donald Trump to reduce US dependence on foreign pharmaceuticals and gradually bring the manufacturing into US soil.

These lines of thinking mean we do not have to be throwing goods from all around the world all around our homes, neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities. Even elastic when stretched beyond limits snaps and so is the case with extended supply chains. Conversely shorter supply chains are more robust and also more manageable because there are manageable numbers of decision points. Let us not forget the human mind has its limits no matter whatever may be the acclaimed power of our gadgets. Let us think from within. How many of us use all the applications and apps in our android cell phones. The answer almost all of us would give is very few are used and then why to have so much clutter in a handheld instrument. This is the same difference between overstretched long supply chains versus more robust short supply chains. Putting it in another way the local has more vigour and firmness than the global because it will be formed by strong local socio-cultural ties. That is to say, self-sufficiency is more potent than unfettered diversity or variety in goods of consumption and use.

A second approach is related to the installations we need. The fundamental question is, what should be the nature of our infrastructure? The ethical question within this primary interrogation is for whom is our infrastructure? Let us turn these questions into an examination of conscience. Given the lockdown that has almost stranded motorised travel what is the relevance of toll gates and fast tags. No doubt good roadways and other forms of transportation are necessary but for what purposes. Is our mobility meeting our requirements or making our consumption more mobile? Are we not making the same error of overstretching both the demand and supply chain-related to normal material consumption choices? This means our approach to infrastructure has to shift from consumption to social infrastructure. Some examples of social infrastructure are health systems that have the capacity in excess of demand so that it can handle a crisis whenever it takes place, comprehensive primary health provisioning so that the largest number is reasonably healthy, educational arrangements that educate in the basic sciences, languages and the arts in a relatively universal manner and so on. The physical infrastructure that is created must account more for these than propagating unwarranted forms of consumption.

Finally, as said in the very beginning one's consumption portfolio is now dominated by food, fruits and medicines. What kind of goods are these? Do they meet our needs, or do they satisfy our desires? Anyone with common sense can make the distinction. The moral-ethical consequence of this crisis is, assuming we are reasonable creatures still, man will have to learn to live according to his needs rather than pander to his desires and value those who contribute to fulfilling our material needs rather than those who meet our material impulses. (Rassendren & Hans, 2020b)

Post-Covid Times

Covid-19 will remain part of our lives until its vaccine becomes available. In the view of this uncertainty, different ideas to move on with life are being devised by assimilating the new ways (masks, sanitiser pockets, etc.) with the old ways of living. It is perhaps too soon to ask, 'how life is going to look like post Covid-19' but it is a given that life before and after Covid-19 would not be the same.

This pandemic has forced us to witness life in a very unusual way. Trains and flights that were not even suspended during the two world wars have been 'kept on hold', and countries were forced to go into a lockdown. Migrant workers in India were left with no choice but to walk for hundreds of kilometres to their home states. Most of us have started to live our lives, assuming that the freshly bought bag of cereal might have recently been touched by an infected person and make sure to sanitise it. 'Assumptions' about the virus are part of our lives now and reinforce the precautionary behaviour that is slowly becoming a part of our everyday behavioural repertoire. Being a psychologist, the most important aspect that I have observed is people's yearning for 'normalcy', their desire to go back to 'pre-Covid-19 normal' times. But is going back possible?

Our ways of existing socially have changed during the crisis. Humans, being highly social, tend to belong to groups, but they can no longer 'physically' enforce their relationship with the group by gathering together in one place. We can only maintain our social lives 'from a distance'. The various celebrations have been stalled completely whereas others, including the weddings and funerals, are being live-streamed. More significantly, our relationship with our selves has undergone a transition. The thought that we could be the carriers of infection, and the associated fear of passing it onto the loved ones, has forced some of us to become 'hyper-vigilant' all the time.

We cannot say with certainty when we will be entering post-Covid times, but there are certain questions that we could pose right now in order to try to comprehend whether they will resemble pre-Covid times. The first important question is about the sentiments of people. Though we all bask in the comfort of the memories of the 'normal' times, will we be able to become the same people as we were before the viral outbreak? Will this pandemic not leave an indelible mark on people's lives? Would we be able to shake hands as freely as we used to before? What about large gatherings? How easy would it be for us to go to a wedding or a funeral without once thinking about the possibility of contracting the infection? The thought of shared physical space is unnerving.

The second pertinent question focuses on the temporal and emotional gaps that the pandemic has created in our lives. The pandemic has created a temporal gap, i.e., the year 2020 seems to be slipping through our hands. Those who were about to be married or who were getting ready to move to another country or to study abroad have been pushed into a dark hole of confusion and uncertainty. Most likely, post Covid-19 times will be spent resolving these confusions. When we look back at the year 2020 in the future, will these confusions and anxieties still not be remembered as part of the lived experience of this year? Will this feeling of a ‘lack of something’ that engulfs us now not revisit us?

The memory of this time forms the third important question. Will this memory of having witnessed the phase in which more than 300 thousand people died not remain with us forever? Will we be able to erase the memory of being inundated with the reports of an ice rink being converted into a temporary morgue in Spain or of the heaps of dead bodies in a makeshift morgue in New York?

The fourth and the last question is about the gruelling dilemmas that the pandemic has put us through. Whether a 65-year-old or a younger one should get the ventilator. We have been forced to bear witness to heart-wrenching moral conflicts. In some circumstances, the value of life has been ascertained based on age, and those seen to be of lesser value have been kept bereft of the life-saving equipment and, allowed to slowly die.

It seems as though we might not be able to go back to the pre Covid-19 normal, but we should certainly be able to move into the ‘new normal’ informed by what we have learnt and experienced. Adapting to the future may not be easy, but if we are receptive, it may not be too hard. Making the masks a part of our wardrobe is, perhaps, a positive step towards welcoming the new normal, accepting it and weaving it into our lives so intricately that it is effortlessly absorbed into our everyday.

Alexander Pope, in his poem *An Essay on Man* (1733) wrote, “hope springs eternal in the human breast” (Epistle 1) which means that even in the most adverse situations, humans find a reason to be

Table 2: Covid cases as on January 6, 2021 (all India)

No.	State/UT	Cases	Active	Deaths	Cured
1	Maharastra	1,954,553	51,969	49,825	1852759
2	Karnataka	924,137	9,196	12,124	902817
3	Andra Pradesh	883,876	2,896	7,125	873855
4	Tamil Nadu	823,181	7,665	12,188	803328
5	Kerala	790,883	65,252	3,210	722421
6	Delhi	628,352	4,481	10,625	613246
7	Uttar Pradesh	590,340	11,939	8,442	569959
8	West Bengal	557,252	8,868	9,863	538521
9	Orissa	330,921	1,973	1,940	327008
10	Rajasthan	311,111	7,698	2,723	300690
11	Telangana	288,410	4,982	1,556	281872
12	Chhattisgarh	285,586	9,109	3,447	273030
13	Haryana	263,887	2,672	2,934	258281
14	Bihar	255,097	4,157	1,420	249520
15	Gujarat	249,246	8,494	4,329	236423
16	Madya Pradesh	246,048	8,516	3,670	233862
17	Assam	216,251	3,213	1,049	211989
18	Punjab	166,770	3,517	5,349	157904
19	Jammu & Kashmir	121,227	3,016	1,884	116327
20	Jharkhand	115,241	1,682	1,030	112529
21	Uttarakhand	91,281	5,768	1,515	83998
22	Himachal Pradesh	55,470	2,442	924	52104
23	Goa	51,135	930	739	49466
24	Pondicherry	38,164	366	633	37165
25	Tripura	33,265	127	382	32756
26	Manipur	28,206	1,108	356	26742
27	Chandigarh	18,322	897	297	17128
28	Arunachal Pradesh	16,461	709	55	15697
29	Meghalaya	12,511	534	122	11855
30	Nagaland	11,508	713	67	10728
31	Ladakh	9,045	821	122	8102
32	Sikkim	5,237	462	117	4658
33	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	4,783	75	61	4647
34	Mizoram	3,977	189	6	3782
35	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	3,361	40	2	3319
	Total	10,385,095	236476	150,131	9,998,488

Source: <https://www.medtalks.in/live-corona-counter-india>

hopeful. Even while we have been trapped within the four walls of our homes, the outside world has come closer through technology. Knowledge is being disseminated across the world through webinars and online lectures. The world has come together to fight these adverse times by working incessantly on the vaccine for the infection. Our healthcare workers and other frontline workers, engaged in essential services, are trying to keep our lives going. The new normal will be a modified version of pre-Covid times with added responsibilities of social distancing and recognition of essential services.

In the Buddhist tradition, a beautiful ‘sand mandala’ is created and destroyed at the end. The destruction of it symbolises the ephemeral nature of material life and why humans should not cling to it. Like the sand mandala, the previous ‘normal’ should also not be attached to. It is time for us to accept the change and emerge stronger, embracing the ‘new normal’ that awaits us (Tripathi, 2020).

Is there a vaccine for Covid-19? Not yet. Many potential vaccines for Covid-19 are being studied, and several large clinical trials may report results later this year. If a vaccine is proven safe and effective, it must be approved by national regulators, manufactured to exacting standards, and distributed. WHO is working with partners around the world to help coordinate key steps in this process. Once a safe and effective vaccine is available, WHO will work to facilitate equitable access for the billions of people who will need it.

Distributing the vaccines in India’s first mass adult vaccination drive might prove to be a daunting task. It will require expansion of India’s existing cold chain capacity at a break-neck speed, especially in some of the more densely populated parts of the country, where such infrastructure is severely limited. It will also require addressing gaps in India’s existing vaccine distribution network, which a health ministry report flagged a couple of years ago. It may be possible to administer 550-600 million doses only over the course of 2021, given the bottlenecks in India’s cold chain infrastructure. India currently has about 27,000 cold chain points, 76,000 cold chain equipment, 700 reefer vans, 55,000 cold chain handlers, and 2.5 million health workers as part of its vaccine logistics network.

To meet the target for the first phase of the Covid-19 vaccination drive, the public sector distribution capacity will need to be expanded 2-3 times. Augmenting this capacity is not the only challenge. Gaps in the existing supply chain are an equally big challenge. (Shahidi & Rampal, 2020)

Conclusion

We don’t yet know exactly when a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine will be ready for distribution, but we estimate that it could be in early to mid-2021. Before Covid-19 vaccines can be delivered, several important challenges must be overcome:

The vaccines must be proven safe and effective in large (phase III) clinical trials. Many potential vaccines for Covid-19 are being studied, and some of the large clinical trials may report results in late 2020 or early 2021.

A series of independent reviews of the efficacy and safety evidence is required, including regulatory review and approval in the country where the vaccine is manufactured, before WHO considers a vaccine product for prequalification. Part of this process also involves the Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety.

An external panel of experts convened by WHO, called SAGE, will analyse the results from clinical trials and along with evidence on the disease, age groups affected risk factors for disease, and other information, they will recommend whether and how the vaccines should be used. Officials in individual countries will decide whether to approve the vaccines for national use and develop policies for how to use the vaccines in their country based on the WHO recommendations.

The vaccines must be manufactured in large quantities, which will be a major and unprecedented challenge – all the while continuing to produce all the other important life-saving vaccines already in use.

As a final step, vaccines will be distributed through a complex logistical process, with rigorous stock management and temperature control.

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Authors: Gerard Joseph Marie Rassendren is Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Christ (Deemed to be University) Bangalore. E-mail: gerard.rassendren@christuniversity.in

V. Basil Hans is Associate Professor & Head, Department of Economics, St Aloysius Evening College, Mangalore. E-mail: vhans2011@gmail.com
