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Isolate big cities but don't just stop there

Govt must ensure health guidelines are properly enforced

IT'S reassuring to know that despite a lower Covid-19 positivity rate in recent days, the authorities are not lowering their guard yet. That's the message we are being given as the government plans to isolate big cities with higher transmission rates from the rest of the country as an attempt to disrupt the spread of the coronavirus. That means, no public transport including buses will be allowed to enter or leave these cities. However, they will be allowed to operate within the city perimeters. As part of that plan, the cabinet secretary on Monday made two important announcements: the ongoing nationwide restrictions have been extended until May 16—that is, until after the Eid holiday—and intra-district public transport has been allowed to run starting May 6. But train and inland water transport will remain suspended as before.

The question, however, is whether these directives will be enough to stop the flow of homebound travellers during the Eid holiday. Eid holidays are typically times when the largest exodus of people takes place, and the trend hasn't stopped even during the pandemic. People have been found to resort to ingenious methods to bypass movement restrictions and they may well do so this time, too, unless the government adopts equally ingenious methods to prevent them. Failure to do so can be costly, as we already know from previous occasions, as the virus spread far and wide along with them. Another persistent thorn in the side of the authorities has been people's reluctance to follow health guidelines. The recent increase in people's movement following a slackening of the "lockdown" and large gatherings seen at markets and shopping malls, which were reopened on April 25, may eat away all the gains of the planned district-wise lockdown.

While the idea of boxing the virus in may seem like a right decision, enforcing the lockdown will be the challenge. It will not contain the virus unless the authorities adopt and strictly enforce supporting measures, such as a zero-tolerance policy for violations of all guidelines, penalising violations, largescale testing and tracing, sufficient aid interventions for the poor and informal workers so they can stay indoors, etc. Also, with so little testing in the country (only 14,158 samples were tested on May 2), there is always the risk that both the public and policymakers will be misguided by incorrect data leading to unwise choices and decisions. This must be addressed. Let's admit it: what we have now is nowhere near a lockdown, but we can forgo a lockdown if the government can just ensure judicious planning and effective enforcement in whatever guise it chooses to do so.

Press freedom is in danger

Without it, democracy cannot exist

ONE essential element of any democracy, universally acknowledged throughout the ages, is a free press. But sadly, in Bangladesh, press freedom is becoming increasingly more restrictive and is diminishing. Just in the month leading up to World Press Freedom Day (May 3), five journalists were sued under the Digital Security Act, according to one voluntary research outfit. A total of 24 journalists were sued under different laws in April, with most of the cases being filed by ruling party lawmakers or their men.

According to the UK-based rights organisation Article 19, a total of 631 incidences of attacks on journalists and human rights defenders took place in 2020, in which a total of 265 journalists were attacked. As a result, the rights organisation expressed serious "concerns about the rising numbers of cases against journalists and online communicators under the DSA" and the "overall lack of security and protection of journalists" and others in Bangladesh.

Over the past year, journalists who have risked their lives to cover the pandemic and expose corruption in important government aid programmes have been relentlessly harassed for their service to society, particularly using the draconian DSA. As a result, Bangladesh saw one of the highest numbers of press freedom violations linked to the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region—during a period when press freedom across the world seemed to have suffered a serious blow—according to data from the International Press Institute (IPI). And this trend has been observed to be perpetrated mostly by "authoritarian and illiberal-minded" regimes, according to the IPI.

Despite the protections guaranteed by Article 39 of our constitution to freedom of thinking and conscience as well as the freedom of speech and expression of all citizens—which essentially also ensures freedom of press—the failure of the state to ensure these rights are protected is a grave travesty. In fact, in many cases of violations of these rights, the state has been implicated, either directly or indirectly, which is even more concerning.

Despite these realities, or perhaps even more so because of them, now is the time when we must all raise our voices to reclaim this most precious right of ours—the right to free speech. And as an extension of that, the right to free press. The importance of these rights in our eternal search for the truth, which is the only guiding beacon any civilised society has at its disposal, has to be recognised.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Accountability for lawmakers

The example recently set by Thai people, that even an incumbent prime minister can be fined swiftly for violating a law, is quite remarkable. Following Thailand's steps would help eradicate the sense of impunity that is unabashedly enjoyed by some of the unscrupulous state actors in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it would also strengthen the faith of our people in law and order.

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India's Covid 19 catastrophe: The cost of complacency

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

LAST year, in February-March, a lot of experts had said that India will be the worst-affected country, there will be tsunami of cases. They predicted two million deaths in the country.

But India moved ahead with a proactive public participation," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed on January 28, 2021, not too many months ago. Modi boasted his success on a world stage, claiming that India has proven every prediction wrong about the potential impacts of Covid-19 on the country. The gloating was not concealed. Addressing the World Economic Forum's Davos Dialogue, Narendra Modi said, "Today, India is among countries that have succeeded in saving the maximum lives. The country, which comprises of 18 percent of the world's population, has saved the world from disaster by bringing the situation under control." To humbly say that "we" have succeeded in averting a catastrophe, or cautiously say that the dire predictions have not come to pass is one thing—but to be gleeful is another. Modi's tone and posture were clearly triumphant. In early March, he continued the victory lap, saying that India would serve as "the world's pharmacy," as it was rolling out vaccines for developing nations. His cabinet members proclaimed that India has entered the "endgame" of the pandemic.

India's official death toll surpassed 218,000 on Sunday, a figure which is by all accounts an undercount; experts have suggested that the death toll could be ten times higher than the official count. India's Health Ministry reported 401,993 new infections on Saturday—a global record—and the total infections are expected to surpass 20 million by Monday. Indeed, any global epidemic can wreak havoc in any country. Ill-prepared nations, especially those who neglected their healthcare systems for decades, paid a high price in the first wave of the pandemic in early 2020. Inept leadership, disregard of experts' suggestions, and unwillingness to acknowledge the

pandemic itself have caused unnecessary deaths in many countries, the US being the most obvious example. But more than a year after the first wave of the pandemic, and repeated warnings about an imminent second deadly wave, the lack of preparedness of the Modi government is shocking. It only demonstrates the lack of respect for human life.

Instead of ensuring that lives are saved, Modi and his ilk decided to let their scyphants cheer at political rallies

Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. He asked officials to seize the property of people who, according to the official version, are "spreading rumours".

For the ruling BJP, setting up hospitals and clinics to provide care became secondary to encouraging millions to attend a pilgrimage, which has contributed to the spread of the virus. A country which produces the largest numbers of vaccines in the world managed to have only two percent of its

irresponsible to declare a victory but it essentially created a situation which pushed thousands to peril. Although upon being pressed by internationally acclaimed journalist Christiane Amanpour, the ruling BJP spokesperson Narendra Taneja acknowledged that responsibility for the devastating situation belongs "first and foremost" to the government, there is still an effort to suggest that others should take responsibilities, too, and that there was an absence of a warning. Nothing is farther from the truth. But the most important question is whether anyone will be held accountable for the unnecessary deaths of thousands of people.

Now, for weeks, the pyres have been burning in Delhi and elsewhere, oxygen has become the scarcest commodity, and the healthcare system has crumbled; yet there is no plan in sight to bring the situation under control. The spokesperson for the BJP expressed hope that India will soon overcome the pandemic. His optimism is not contagious, but the virus is. When and how India will be able to turn the tide are open questions. One can only hope that the current surge will not be a repeat of the last pandemic a century ago. During the 1918-19 pandemic, 60 percent of all deaths worldwide occurred in India. At that time, it was the deliberate mismanagement of the colonial British powers which was to be blamed. Who will take the responsibility now?

The world has stepped up to help India face the catastrophe; medical supplies have begun to pour in. The US has decided to resume supplies of raw materials for the vaccine to India. Expectedly, things will improve. The heartbreaking pictures of mass cremations will disappear from the media, but sufferings and slow deaths will continue in the years to come. Malnutrition, long-term health impacts of the coronavirus, the loss of livelihoods—all will remain for years to come, too. At least 75 million people have become poor because of the pandemic in 2020, and the second wave will have devastating effects on them and millions of others. How will India face the impending crisis is a question we cannot wait to ask until all the funeral pyres stop burning.

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A man runs past the burning funeral pyres of those who died from the coronavirus during a mass cremation, at a crematorium in New Delhi, April 26.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ADNAN ABIDI

and hold elections to improve their political fortunes. Modi's exuberant tweet that he has not seen so many people after an election rally was a reminder of Donald Trump's election rallies ahead of the November 2020 election, but more importantly, of his complete disregard for the consequences of such rallies. Clamping down on the press and social media have been prioritised by the incumbent over providing oxygen to millions. The Indian government ordered Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to take down posts criticising the government for mishandling the situation. The Covid-19 pandemic is now matched with the threat of persecution by the government, as demonstrated in the statement of the

own people be fully vaccinated while it embarked on vaccine-diplomacy to extend its sphere of influence in the region and beyond. Building an image of the leader became more important than saving the lives of its citizens, a hallmark of an authoritarian ruler. The penchant for spectacle triumphed prudence and compassion.

The message from the government, even when the surge began in March, was loud and clear: we have defeated Covid-19. It was heard by Indians across the country—they went on to have a "normal" life, enjoyed the IPL cricket matches, and had expected that the government would deliver the vaccine when needed. It was not only

Bengali (sub)nationalism trumps Hindu nationalism



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

BANGLA nijer meyer kachei thaaklo (Bengal has stayed with its own daughter). When Trinamool Congress (TMC) came out with the slogan "Bangla nijer meykay chai" in February, it could not have

been more prophetic.

Mamata Banerjee may have lost her own electoral battle in Nandigram constituency, but she won the war in Bengal for her party Trinamool Congress, single-handedly—a remarkable landslide victory to stop the mighty electoral machine of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. The sweep and extent of TMC's win, which matched its performance in the previous assembly poll five years ago, was unexpected even to Mamata, who said as much in her first press conference post-victory. Although Mamata lost the poll in Nandigram to her former protegee Suwendu Adhikari, it will not prevent her from returning to the Chief Minister's chair immediately. All she has to do is face fresh by-elections within six months of becoming the CM.

The elections were held in five states but the most watched-for election was, of course, West Bengal—considered by the BJP as the "final frontier" in its unending quest for expanding its footprint in all the states. Bengal remained elusive for the saffron party, although it has reasons to be satisfied with the substantial gains made in West Bengal, moving up from just three seats in the previous assembly poll in 2016 to 75 this time and claiming the space of the principal opposition force in the state's political landscape, dislodging the decimated Congress and the Left. Its hold on most parts of north Bengal remained intact; Modi's visit to the Mata's shrine in Orakandi, Bangladesh on March 27 helped the BJP win seats in Bangaon in North 24 Parganas district. However, it did not work in Barrackpore, nor in Barasat and neighbouring Kolkata. Another important reason why the BJP could not hold on to its 2019 general elections momentum was its failure this time to win a seat in Howrah, Hooghly and East and West Bardhaman districts, despite the party's top leadership's intensive electioneering there. Besides, the adivasis in Jhargram and parts of West Medinipur did not favour the saffron party in the assembly polls this time as much as they had done in the 2019

general elections.

The Bengal political landscape is set to don a new look with the demise of the Congress-Left alliance, which failed to win a single seat this time after winning 77 seats in 2016. This is the first time that the Bengal legislative assembly will not have a single representative of either the Congress or the Left, which had between them ruled the state for 64 years. What should be more worrying for the Left and the Congress is that the BJP made

The BJP's appetite for capturing power in Bengal was fuelled by its impressive show in the parliamentary polls in 2019, when it stunned all by bagging 18 of the total of 42 Lok Sabha seats. The party wanted to build on that performance in the just-concluded assembly elections, but could not do it. The nearly two percent dip in the BJP's vote share of 40.6 percent (recorded in 2019) and the five percent rise in the Trinamool Congress' vote share this time (from 43.6 percent in 2019) was



A woman poses after voting in the assembly elections in West Bengal.

PHOTO: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

inroads into their traditional strongholds in Malda, Murshidabad, Baharampur and South 24 Parganas, topping the former from numero uno or second positions.

How did Mamata pull off this feat? Despite the baggage of anti-incumbency set against her uninterrupted decade-long rule, she got certain things right from the get-go. With a blend of welfare schemes, promised doles and Bengali sub-nationalism and a catchy jingle "khela hobey", Mamata plunged into the electoral war to take on the BJP's Hindu nationalism narrative, which frequently flagged the issues of the Citizenship Amendment Act and illegal immigration into Bengal from Bangladesh. Moving in a wheel chair with a plastered leg for most part of the long-drawn polls (nearly 50 days) after being attacked in Nandigram, she has clearly landed on her feet on the day it mattered the most. Her Bengali sub-nationalism was also aimed at countering one of BJP's main weapons of attacking the Trinamool Congress on the issues of corruption and nepotism.

the decisive swing that saw the saffron party stop well short of the three-figure mark in seat tally and pushed it to the rank of a distant second. Two factors are behind this; the total consolidation of votes of Muslims, who make up 27 percent of Bengal's total electorate, and an overwhelming chunk of the anti-BJP votes in the Congress-Left camp going to Trinamool Congress. In fact, Mamata had during electioneering appealed to people in the traditional bastions of the Congress and the Left, in places like Malda and Murshidabad, not to waste their votes and instead back her party to stop the BJP.

The BJP projected the battle for Bengal as a battle between Modi and Mamata. The BJP's performance in Bengal exposed its failure to produce a credible chief ministerial candidate of its own to match Mamata's charisma, and the limitations of its policy of inorganic growth by engineering defections in other parties and swelling its own rank and file.

In the run up to the assembly polls, the BJP lured several leaders from the TMC and

put them forward as its own candidates but all of them were defeated barring four, including high-profile Suwendu Adhikari who won against Mamata in Nandigram. The lack of a chief ministerial candidate stuck with the saffron outfit, despite Modi and Shah repeatedly stressing that a person born and brought up in Bengal would be the Chief Minister if BJP is voted to power. That there is no substitute to grooming its own local level leadership should be the big lesson for BJP in Bengal. The results in Bengal also drove home the view that BJP has failed to enter the psyche of the Bengali urban class. The party failed to win a single of the 16 assembly seats in Kolkata.

The victory of Mamata, India's only woman Chief Minister now, has established her in a league of her own and has major implications for India's national politics ahead of fresh general elections, due in 2024. By successfully resisting the surge of the BJP's election charge in Bengal and with the Congress in steady decline, Mamata can again reclaim her status as a glue around which anti-Modi forces can gather in the run-up to the 2024 elections. This was a role Mamata unsuccessfully tried to take on in the run-up to the 2019 general elections.

Mamata has proved that that the BJP is not an unstoppable force and can be defeated by a strong-rooted regional leader. A debilitated Congress and the victory of the Left in Kerala, of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and of Trinamool Congress in Bengal, has thrown up the possibility of a clutch of powerful regional parties coalescing to counter the BJP. However, doubts remain as to the viability of such an anti-BJP coalition without the help of any party, other than the Congress, with a pan-India presence. The biggest drawback of the regional outfits is that none of them have an appeal to voters beyond the borders of their respective states, as was demonstrated by the BJP's improved show in the 2019 general elections.

However, having lost the assembly polls in Bengal, which elects 42 Lok Sabha members, the third highest after Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Maharashtra, pressure will grow on the BJP to retain its hold on Uttar Pradesh, where fresh assembly elections are due in April 2022. A good show in the 2017 UP assembly polls was at the heart of BJP's parliamentary elections in 2019.

Bengal has historically been the cradle of Indian socio-cultural renaissance. Will the state assembly poll lead to a new dawn in India's overall political scenario?

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