

Covid-19 variants from India spreading across Nepal

Bangladesh could be next if we are not careful!

ACCORDING to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Nepal is now being overwhelmed by a surge in Covid-19 infections as India's outbreak spreads across South Asia. Nepal is currently recording 57 times as many cases as it did only a month ago, with a testing positivity rate of 44 percent. Nepalese towns near the Indian border are already struggling to cope with the increasing number of people showing symptoms of Covid-19. And the Red Cross has warned that the horrific scenes being witnessed in India could very well be a preview of what lies ahead for Nepal, should it fail to contain the virus quickly.

India accounted for nearly half the cases reported worldwide last week. On May 5, the World Health Organization said that Covid-19 deaths in South Asia rose by a record of 3,780 during the previous 24 hours. The mutated variants spreading across India seem to be more contagious, with those infected experiencing severe symptoms. Over the past weeks, India's healthcare system has been completely overwhelmed by the number of Covid-19 patients. States in India and national government agencies are scrambling to provide oxygen to hospitals across the country, as patients are dying in record numbers every day from the disease and due to a lack of oxygen supply.

In spite of that, scientists are still warning that the worst may not be over for India and that its government should prepare for a third wave of the virus. That means that we, too, must act. Besides constantly shoring up the healthcare sector, the government should also focus on guarding our borders against the disease. Already the mutated virus seems to have spread across boundaries from India to Nepal, as confirmed by the Red Cross. Therefore, the government must take all necessary measures to ensure that this spread caused by new variants does not spill into Bangladesh, which will be cataclysmic.

Unfortunately, every day people are coming and goods-laden truck drivers are entering Bangladesh from India. It's time the government organised a special drive to monitor them and ensure they are not spreading the virus. This will mean enforcing the quarantine even more strictly for those coming from India and ensuring that those who have tested positive do not leave the hospitals at the border until they are fully recovered. Already we have reports of a number of Covid positive individuals coming in from India, escaping a hospital in Jashore and then being readmitted after being apprehended by police. What about the people they came into contact with while they were out of the hospital? Has there been any contact tracing to find out potential concentrations of the virus? Experts have been asking the government to remain vigilant and do much more to prevent the Indian virus from entering the country. And the government should pay heed and be more proactive in that and in monitoring border districts strictly for this purpose.

The re-employed are not faring well

Urgent support needed for better recovery

A recent CPD-Oxfam survey on 2,600 households from 16 districts has painted a grim picture of the pandemic's effect on people's incomes and livelihoods. The survey found that more than 60 percent of the respondents had lost their jobs at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic last year in April-May. On average, it took them 95 days to find new jobs but almost all of them returned to the workforce by February of this year, which is of course a positive development. Yet, the survey also found that 78 percent of the households had reduced their expenditure and more than half had to resort to changes in their diets (e.g. cutting down on protein consumption).

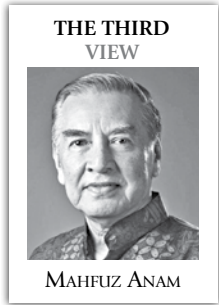
On top of this is the disheartening news that only 20 percent of the households had received any form of support from the government, and most had lived on charity from friends, relatives, and private organisations. The average income of individuals had also reduced by around 12 percent, and more people had been pushed into the lower-income category with income inequality also rising. It was also seen that some groups suffered worse than others, such as the tea garden workers, victims of river erosion, tribal people, the "untouchables", char and haor dwellers, and floating workers in Dhaka city.

According to the CPD's Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, the government needs to come up with a framework spanning two to three years and a core budget to properly recover from the pandemic, and that the one-year time frame is not enough. He also pointed out the "state of reluctance and denial" of policymakers when it came to determining a strategy to help the country out of a "virus-induced downturn". Though many of the surveyed individuals have found jobs again, they have not been compensated for the losses they suffered during unemployment. And now, they are also having to go through worsened standards of living by eating less or by pulling their children out of school.

No doubt, recovering from the virus itself should be our main priority as a nation. We have to limit its spread and it must be ensured that the majority of the population is inoculated as early as possible. However, we would urge the government to also have more foresight when it comes to developing plans for the future that will affect the people's livelihoods. Those who require government assistance must be recognised and helped urgently so that they do not fall into further poverty.

We used to have such elections, once

Why were Bangladeshis so keenly interested in the West Bengal elections? What are we to make of its results?



and to that extent democracy worked; b) religion-based politics took a battering, but only just; and c) a new charismatic woman leader has emerged whose sheer willpower, inexhaustible energy, fighting spirit, self-belief and personal honesty could inspire a whole generation of young leaders who may be able to steer India away from today's corrupt politics and also be an example for the region.

It is most gratifying to see democracy in operation next door while in many countries, including ours, we are witnessing a highly controlled expression of people's will and a gradual denigration of individual rights and freedoms. With governments becoming more and more powerful, with public money being increasingly usurped by those holding power for personal and party politicking purposes, and with newer technologies empowering governments to spy on their citizens, manipulate both their perception and opinion, control freedom of expression and punish and even eliminate critics—the overall democratic culture is on the wane, to say the least. In such an environment, to see a regional party headed by a woman stand up against a giant of a party with an unending financial war chest and inexhaustible muscle power, and defeat the politics of hatred and division through democracy's most vital instrument—elections—is indeed heart-warming for every lover of democracy.

The battering of religion-based politics in West Bengal is indeed a happy augury for us. West Bengal going saffron would have had serious repercussions on Bangladesh's politics. It would have given a spurt to our fundamentalists. The exponents of religion-based politics could have seen the developments across the border as an opportune moment for their own assertion. The religion-based politics that the BJP is advocating all over India, and wanted to bring next door, is a matter of great worry from which we appear to have been spared for the moment.

In addition to the overall issue of secular versus communal politics, we in Bangladesh had some specific concerns that naturally caused us to lean against BJP. To start with, we were stunned by the negative image that was being portrayed of Bangladesh by no less a person than the central home minister, who was also the chief of the present ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). His words were disrespectful and arrogant and, equally importantly, false. He exhibited absolutely no concern as to how his words would impact the hearts and minds of the people of the country that India terms as its closest and friendliest neighbour.

He depicted Bangladesh as a country

from where starving people were flocking into India. He castigated the incumbent chief minister as an appeaser of Muslims, as if it was a crime, and as if the people he was referring to were not Indian citizens. What sort of inner impression of Bangladesh and what sort of feeling for its people does Mr. Amit Shah harbour that could have made him call our citizens "termites"? It is not lost on us that he never withdrew his comments, let alone apologise for them.

The whole BJP contingent that poured down on West Bengal over the election period made Muslim-bashing one of their primary election strategies, implying that all of them were part of a massive illegal migrant population which were a "burden" on India and thus needed to be shunted out. The NRC (National Register of Citizens) and the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019) both have strengthened the government's hands to implement this policy, which, we feared, would be expeditiously implemented if BJP won.



A supporter of Trinamool Congress (TMC) chief Mamata Banerjee, wearing a face shield with her image on it, gestures during celebrations after the initial poll results in Kolkata, on May 2, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The third point to celebrate is the emergence of a new Indian leader whose stature and charisma can now match anyone else's at the national level, especially that of Prime Minister Modi, whose reputation of having a magnetic appeal among voters stands significantly dented. If Modi gained from a humble-beginnings image, so did Mamata. Additionally, she scored high for simple living, even after being in power for two terms. In a recent TV interview, she said that she does not take a paisa from the state exchequer—no salary, no TA/DA, no official residence (she lives in her old, modest flat), no official car (uses her own Maruti), travels economy class, pays for hotels and guest houses—and runs her family affairs and personal expenses from the royalty she gets from her 87 books (many of them bestsellers, she claimed) and numerous CDs where she is the lyricist. It is indeed a very powerful story of an honest leader at a time when corruption in politics is an everyday phenomenon, not just in India

but also regionally. (Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about many of her senior party leaders).

Purely from an election point of view, Mamata Banerjee proved that if a leader is really connected with her base and if people have trust in their leader, then money, muscle power, administrative support, false and misleading propaganda and religion-based campaign can all be overcome, and decisively so. The election became an excellent example of a contest between two parties ultimately reducing itself to a clash of two personalities. The more it became so, the more it helped Mamata, who emerged as a lone lady standing against the all-out efforts of a giant all-India party with more money than it needs, backed by the prestige of a sitting prime minister with charisma and formidable popularity, with all the attendant advantages of support from the administration that holding the highest office in a South Asian country automatically brings.

So, what is it about this election that

should worry us?

Hidden within Mamata's victory is another victory that is appearing to get buried under the momentary relief that the saffron wave has been thwarted. That victory is of the BJP. They may not have captured power but they have come a long way towards it. They have expanded their presence in the Bidhan Sabha from a mere 3 seats in the last election to 77 seats at present. By any standard, this can be considered a significant victory. But because BJP had set itself a target of getting 200 seats and created the hype of forming the government this time around, their result—a significant success on its own—is appearing to be the very opposite, creating a false scope for complacency of the victors. It is quite possible that the real strategists of RSS-BJP knew well that capturing power in 2021 could be an impossible task and have thus set their eyes on 2026 as the real turning point, making the present election a mere dress rehearsal. This apparent defeat may

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A European-Style United Nations

SANDRA BREKA and BRIAN FINLAY

LAST September, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, the General Assembly adopted a landmark declaration affirming a commitment to "mobilise resources" and "show unprecedented political will and leadership," in order to ensure "the future we want." The so-called UN75 Declaration was an inspiring statement. But will it lead to meaningful change?

History suggests that it might just. After all, past anniversaries of the UN's founding have delivered significant structural reforms. On the UN's 60th anniversary, for example, world leaders established a Peacebuilding Commission to help countries in transition from war to peace, upgraded the Human Rights Commission to a stronger Human Rights Council, and adopted the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine to help safeguard civilians in conflict zones.

Improving the UN75 Declaration's prospects further is the fact that it reflects the will of civil society. Ahead of last year's General Assembly, the UN conducted a global survey to discern what ordinary people cared about. Of more than 1.3 million respondents, 87 percent said that international cooperation was vital to deal with today's challenges. The UN also supported more than 3,000 dialogues in 120 countries on "the future we want, the UN we need." The results of these dialogues—which took place in "classrooms, boardrooms, parliaments, and community groups"—helped to shape the declaration.

At the same time, national governments have been working to revive multilateral

cooperation. For example, in April 2019, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian launched the Alliance for Multilateralism to promote global cooperation at a time of resurgent nationalism. The Alliance now has the support of more than 50 countries. Similarly, this past February, G7 leaders, including US President Joe Biden, proclaimed that they would work together to "make 2021 a turning point for multilateralism." Cooperation on the pandemic recovery and "building back better" were deemed top priorities.

Countries are also supporting the UN75 Declaration, in particular. Two months after its unanimous adoption, ten heads of state and government, convened by Spain and Sweden, published a joint statement reiterating their commitment to the Declaration and the ambition it embodies and calling for reforms of the UN's three principal organs to create a "more agile, effective, and accountable organisation" that can "deliver better" results.

All of this bodes well for the future of multilateralism. But transforming words into action is rarely easy, especially when dealing with so many actors with competing visions and interests. With nationalist and populist forces potent in many parts of the world, the challenge ahead is all the more formidable. To meet it, we should look to Europe.

The European Union has been a reliable champion of multilateralism. In February, for example, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, issued a joint communication on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism. Likewise,

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen joined UN Secretary-General António Guterres and Senegalese President Macky Sall in calling for a more inclusive multilateralism.

Europe's leadership in this area makes sense. Though the EU is often decried as slow, risk-averse, and inflexible, it stands out for its success in forging an effective supranational polity and pooling resources to meet shared challenges. Europeans are also particularly supportive of international cooperation. In the UN survey, more than 90 percent of Europeans—several percentage points above the global average—described international cooperation as "very important" or "essential."

Building on Europe's example of active multilateralism, our organisations, the Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH and the Stimson Center, together with other partners recently convened leading policymakers and experts from Europe and around the world to debate how to make the UN75 Declaration a reality. We identified several key imperatives. For example, in order to ease pressure on the UN Security Council and the global humanitarian system, world leaders must take action to address the root causes of conflicts. This means, for example, ensuring that basic social needs are met; improving representation in politics; and strengthening national and regional governing institutions.

Moreover, we must tackle the "crisis of expertise"—including growing scepticism of science—which is undermining

germinate into something totally different in the future, and there is a pertinent historical precedent to guide us here.

When the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government lost to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2004, after being in power for five years, many saw it as a defeat of communal politics to the secular forces. Then, when the UPA coalition got re-elected in 2009, it was taken to be additional proof that religion-based politics would never succeed in India and that the post-Independence legacy of the ideals set forth in the Indian constitution had found sufficient roots in the hearts and minds of common Indians for obscurantism not to have any future in modern India.

The 2014 election saw a complete reversal of the previous outcomes and the NDA's re-election with massive support in 2019 shocked the secularists, bringing BJP to the centre stage of present-day Indian politics where, some say, it will stay for a while.

So is Trinamool Congress's victory a serious rebuff to communal politics, or is it a precursor of a repeat of the UPA defeat at the hands of the NDA? The present outcome in West Bengal elections may have sown the seed for a repeat of what had happened at the centre in 2014.

But why should it concern us, in Bangladesh, as to which political party comes to power in West Bengal or in India? On the face of it, it shouldn't. But there is more than the "face" to the rest of the reality. Didn't Trump's election and his subsequent defeat affect us? Isn't the US and the world now a better place because Trump is gone, along with his white supremacist politics? The reason we are concerned is because BJP, along with RSS and others of the family of such parties, are far more than mere political parties. Normally, a political party asks for votes. But these religion-based political parties—like ours in Bangladesh—ask not only for our votes but also for our minds, our intellectual space, our emotional space, our cultural space—in fact, our whole being. As the now-famous election strategist Prashant Kishor, who is credited for Mamata's stunning performance, recently said in a TV interview, parties like BJP "just don't want only your votes. They want to dominate the mind-space—dictate what we should wear, eat, hear, see, how to run our lives. They want to have a say in everything. That is problematic."

As we analyse elections held in West Bengal and in four other states—as we did earlier for the US elections too—we cannot but feel a tinge of jealousy. As we see robust electioneering, spirited campaigning and finally people exhibiting the "majesty" of the public will elsewhere, we naturally wonder what has happened to ours. For, we too used to have such highly contested, freely participated and fearlessly voted elections which reasserted, time and again, that people were "sovereign" and that they were the ultimate arbiter of who could be entrusted to run our affairs. Whatever happened to that?

When will we get our elections back?

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Covid-19 vaccination programmes and climate-mitigation efforts. This can be achieved through international and national outreach campaigns that foster trust and combat disinformation. A third imperative is to change the architecture and approach of global and regional financial institutions, in order to bridge gaps in digital participation, bolster education, and make progress toward gender equality. Equally critical are reforms to legal and normative frameworks—to meet the challenges of today's online and offline world.

Multilateral solutions can be arduous to devise, agree on, and implement. This can make them seem inefficient and uneconomical, with actors assuming they are better off going it alone. And yet, as Europe has proven time and again, the solutions forged from multilateral processes tend to be more inclusive, effective, and durable. Europe owes its longest-ever period of peace and stability to those processes.

That alone should qualify the EU to provide some valuable lessons for the UN's renewal. An inclusive, adaptive, and empowered UN that takes into account the EU's experience can form a strong foundation for a rules-based international order that advances global peace and stability, while facilitating action on shared challenges. Such an institution could not be more worthy of our steadfast commitment and care.

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