

THE OCCASION TO REVISIT THE SOVEREIGN'S ROLE

There Has To Be A Discourse On Redefining The State's Involvement In India's Political, Economic And Social Life

Let us make no mistake. COVID-19 is forcing a paradigm shift. We are unlikely to return to a pre-coronavirus homeostasis after the war against it is won. No section or sector is going to remain untouched and unaltered by the devastation the novel coronavirus is now unleashing. The virus is going to stay around for a while. Its annihilation in the near future is not on the cards. Vaccines are going to be slow in coming; therefore, its taming is not immediate. A second wave of outbreak is a realistic probability.

Unlike other threats to humanity such as global warming and a nuclear Armageddon, this threat is now, not in the future; it is here simultaneously for everyone, not for someone else and somewhere else; its casualties are around us, not in far away battlefields or polar regions and coastal areas. No country can rescue another; it is each one fending for itself.

Defining moment

COVID-19 threatens to push the world into a deep recession. If the lockdown continues, the world economy will contract by as much as 6% according to the International Monetary Fund. If it is not extended, the loss of human lives could be of unacceptable proportions. The global community will be fortunate if it does not spiral into depression. Both demand and supply contractions are likely to be severe. They are not going to be short-lived. Political systems, economic architectures and cultural mores are on trial. Work patterns, production and distribution practices are up for redefinition. Denial and wishing away unpleasant, yet probable, realities by governments, global organizations and public intellectuals will only compound economic, social, political and human costs. We must now be quick in seizing lessons from the present crisis and get ready to embark on measures to build a new paradigm of life, work and governance.

The enlarged economic role of the state in the aftermath of the Second World War came under major assault since the 1980s. Leaders who asked 'where is society?' rode to power on 'cut the damn government down' ticket. Systems that were putative alternatives to capitalism fell into disgrace. Entrepreneurs heading unicorns and 'sooncorns' have become the new demigods. Minimum governance became the mantra. India too willy-nilly signed up to this creed. But COVID-19 is beginning to challenge the political economy of this creed. Very soon the full scores of the performance of state and non-state actors in the COVID-19 stress test will be available across the globe. The Indian state will also have to give answers as far as its report card is concerned.

The retreat of the state

India embarked on the path of trimming the role of the state, initially, with such caveats as 'safety net' and 'reform with a human face'. Gradually, those caveats fell by the wayside. The lurch became sharp, unapologetic and full-throated. The Indian state's role in health care, education, creation and maintenance of infrastructure and delivery of welfare has shrunk or become nominal, half-hearted, inefficient, and dysfunctional. Of course, it is true that it did not give a great account of itself in these sectors even before the 1991 departure. Disappointment with the dismal performance in its economic and administrative functions in the backdrop of a changing global ideological ecosystem encouraged a sharp de facto downsizing of the Indian state's role. Its retreat from vital functions and abdication of its social responsibility have gained acceptance and legitimacy among the articulate upwardly mobile. While retreat and abdication found influential and forceful evangelists, selective retreat had few advocates.

This departure, however, was not vigorously interrogated. When it was, it was limited to the broad ideological opposition from the left which defended the discredited position of the Indian

state occupying the commanding heights of the economy. Supporters of the departure, on the other hand, had little engagement in giving shape to the new policy. Nor did they worry about calibrating the architecture of the emerging role for the state. As a result, 'private sector' became the new holy cow in place of the 'state sector'. What made matters worse is the culture of a simplistic and shallow discourse of public policy that took hold in civil society. It mindlessly privileges the agenda of corporates. It transacts in the idiom of stock exchanges and international rating agencies.

Lost voices

Therefore, those with no social media handles, who cannot organize annual 'thought' conclaves, who are incapable of highlighting their problems with impressive presentations are rendered voiceless. Today, those who bear the brunt of the consequences of shrunken and unresponsive state are the farmer and farm labour, the migrant worker, the unemployed, those in the unorganized sector, the rural poor, and the small entrepreneur. They are paying the highest price for the necessary but unbearable lockdown. They are either stranded far away from home, or confined to their homes with no work and incomes, unsupported by the state. Underfunded public health systems are unable to serve them. Tips on how to beat lockdown blues, how to work from home, use Zoom, spend quality time with family that fill our pullouts are irrelevant for them. But the dominant strand of public discourse is out of its depth. It has no time for these concerns. Worse, this discourse can be gamed from time to time. And the alternative discourse is too feeble to draw the attention of the government to the grave implications of COVID-19 for the weak in our society.

Time for tough questions

But the state's first responsibility is the marginalized. They are also the crucial part of our economy. They lubricate its wheels and generate demand. Announcing stimulus packages that address the supply side alone without beefing up the demand side will be self-defeating to corporates. Prioritizing the needs of corporate entities will lead to convulsions in our body politic in the wake of COVID-19. The state is in danger of forfeiting legitimacy if it does not ensure the survival and revival of the marginalized sections.

This is the appropriate context to revisit the political economy of the Indian state and its role. The country should begin a vigorous discourse on redefining every aspect of its involvement in our collective political, economic and social life. The relation between the state and economy, its role in allocating resources and addressing questions of inequality, its duty to provide basic human needs, the extent of the market's role in providing services such as health, education, civic amenities, and the responsibility of the state and private enterprise towards deprived sections, need urgent attention.

We should re-examine the efficacy of our political structures too: the equation between citizens and government and what its implications are for individual freedom, privacy and national security; the equation between legislature and executive; the balance of administrative and financial power between provinces and the union on the one hand and provinces and local bodies on the other. The way we elect our representatives to legislatures must also come under the lens. The issue of atrophied local authorities and enfeebled legislatures needs attention. For, they are at the coalface, delivering the state to the citizen. The way legislatures are elected and governments are made and unmade must be scrutinized. Our outrage at the power of big money in our electoral system has not arrested its growth. The role of serving and retired members of higher judiciary ought to be a part of the debate.

We had an opportunity for intensive debate when the Justice Venkatachaliah Commission submitted its report in 2002 (to review the working of the Constitution). We missed it. The opportunity that COVID-19 provides should not be squandered. The Indian state should be strong so that the weak in our society can lean on it. Our rishis told us: *durbalasya balam Raja*. The strength of the weak is the Sovereign. Not the market.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

1. **sovereign** (noun) – independent state (country); head of state.
2. **discourse** (noun) – a formal discussion.
3. **make no mistake** (phrase) – used to demonstrate that you are sure about something.
4. **paradigm shift** (noun) – a fundamental and important change with new ideas/thinking.
5. **homeostasis** (noun) – the ability to maintain a relatively stable internal state that continues despite changes in the world outside. All living organisms, from plants to people, must regulate their internal environment to process energy and ultimately survive. It refers to stability, balance, or equilibrium within a cell or the body. Humans' internal body temperature is a great example of homeostasis.
6. **devastation** (noun) – destruction, damage, havoc/wreckage.
7. **unleash** (verb) – let loose, release, set free.
8. **annihilation** (noun) – destruction, elimination, eradication, wiping out.
9. **on the cards** (phrase) – likely to happen, possible, expected, in the offing.
10. **vaccine** (noun) – a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease.
11. **taming** (noun) – controlling something dangerous; making something less powerful.
12. **outbreak** (noun) – sudden appearance /occurrence (of a disease); outburst, epidemic.
13. **probability** (noun) – possibility, expectation, chance, probable event.
14. **humanity** (noun) – humankind, the human race, people.
15. **global warming** (noun) – it is the unusually rapid increase in Earth's average surface temperature over the past century primarily due to the greenhouse gases released as people burn fossil fuels.
16. **Armageddon** (noun) – a final battle or conflict (highly destructive/catastrophic).
17. **casualty** (noun) – victim, fatality, mortality.
18. **far-away** (adjective) – distant, far off, remote.
19. **rescue** (verb) – save (from danger).
20. **fend for oneself** (verb) – take care of oneself, look after oneself, manage by oneself.
21. **defining moment** (noun) – a point in life when someone is urged to make an important decision, or when someone experience something that fundamentally changes everything.
22. **recession** (noun) – economic decline, downturn, slump.
23. **contract** (verb) – decline, decrease, diminish, reduce.
24. **as much as** (phrase) – almost.
25. **proportion** (noun) – size, ratio; magnitude.
26. **fortunate** (adjective) – lucky, blessed.
27. **spiral** (verb) – increase rapidly, rise rapidly, leap up, escalate.
28. **contraction** (noun) – decline, decrease, reduction.
29. **short-lived** (adjective) – brief, short, short-term, temporary.
30. **architecture** (noun) – structure, construction, formation.
31. **mores** (noun) – customs, conventions, practices, way of life.
32. **on trial** (phrase) – being tested for suitability.

33. **up for** (phrase) – being considered for, available for.
34. **wish away** (phrasal verb) – try to stop/eliminate something (problem) just by wishing that it did not exist.
35. **probable** (adjective) – possible, likely, predictable.
36. **intellectual** (noun) – learned person, well educated person, academic, scholar.
37. **compound** (verb) – aggravate, worsen, intensify, make worse.
38. **seize** (verb) – take hold of, grasp, grab, capture (suddenly).
39. **embark on** (phrasal verb) – start, begin, initiate/commence.
40. **paradigm** (noun) – model, pattern/example; world view.
41. **aftermath** (noun) – consequences, effects, results, repercussions.
42. **come under** (phrasal verb) – be subjected to.
43. **ride** (verb) – move, progress, proceed.
44. **cut down** (phrasal verb) – bring down, fell, demolish, knock down, bulldoze.
45. **putative** (adjective) – supposed/claimed, commonly regarded, generally considered.
46. **capitalism** (noun) – an economic system based on the private ownership; private enterprise, private ownership.
47. **disgrace** (noun) – dishonour, shame, ignominy, discredit.
48. **entrepreneur** (noun) – businessman, businesswoman, business person.
49. **unicorn** (noun) – a privately held startup company with a current valuation of US\$1 billion or more.
50. **soonicorn** (noun) – startup company with the potential to become unicorn.
51. **demigod** (adjective) – greatly admired or respected (status).
52. **willy-nilly** (adverb) – whether one likes it or not, one way or the other, of necessity, necessarily; randomly.
53. **sign up** (phrasal verb) – commit, conclude, agree (formally).
54. **creed** (noun) – system of belief, set of principles, beliefs.
55. **state actor** (noun) – a person who is acting on behalf of a governmental body.
56. **non-state actor** (noun) – an individual or organization that has significant political influence.
57. **stress test** (noun) – a test to analyse the function of a system when it is subjected to more pressure.
58. **as far as** (phrase) – to the degree/extent that.
59. **retreat** (noun) – withdrawal, pulling back.
60. **trim** (verb) – reduce, decrease, scale down.
61. **caveat** (noun) – warning, caution, condition.
62. **safety net** (noun) – something which gives protection against misfortune or difficulty.
63. **human face** (noun) – a human quality or character (otherwise it will be considered as careless, pointless).
64. **reforms with a human face** (phrase) – benefits or advantages of reforms must reach the poorest sections of the society, alleviate their poverty and eliminate their ignorance & sufferings, otherwise such reforms will be considered as useless/careless/worthless).
65. **fall by the wayside** (phrase) – fail to continue in an attempt/try.
66. **lurch** (noun) – move unsteadily, stagger, stumble.
67. **unapologetic** (adjective) – not showing regret or shame.
68. **full-throated** (adjective) – vehement, outspoken, vigorous.
69. **shrink** (verb) – lessen, reduce, decrease.
70. **half-hearted** (adjective) – cursory/casual, artificial/superficial, uninterested.
71. **dysfunctional** (adjective) – not functioning/working normally or properly; troubled, unsettled, flawed.
72. **account** (noun) – narrative, report, explanation, interpretation.

73. **dismal** (adjective) – bad, poor, awful/terrible.
74. **backdrop** (noun) – situation, scenario, context.
75. **ideological** (adjective) – relating to a system of ideas.
76. **ecosystem** (noun) – complex situation/environment.
77. **de facto** (adjective) – Latin, literally ‘of fact’; existing, actual, effective.
78. **downsize** (verb) – reduce, cut down, decrease, lessen.
79. **abdication** (noun) – disowning, rejection, refusal/avoidance.
80. **legitimacy** (noun) – authority, lawfulness, legality; justification, validity.
81. **articulate** (adjective) – effective, persuasive, coherent/united (people).
82. **upwardly mobile** (adjective) – moving into a higher social position/status.
83. **evangelist** (noun) – advocate, champion, supporter (of a particular cause).
84. **advocate** (noun) – upholder, supporter, backer, proponent.
85. **interrogate** (verb) – probe, cross-question, cross-examine.
86. **discredited** (adjective) – dishonoured, degraded, lowered.
87. **calibrate** (verb) – carefully assess, regulate, adjust.
88. **holy cow** (noun) – an exclamation of surprise/excitement/shock.
89. **state sector** (noun) – public sector.
90. **simplistic** (adjective) – oversimple/oversimplified, schematic, facile.
91. **shallow** (adjective) – insubstantial, superficial, insignificant, empty, trivial.
92. **take hold** (phrase) – begin to have an effect.
93. **privilege** (verb) – give a special advantage.
94. **transact** (verb) – negotiate, conduct, carry out.
95. **idiom** (noun) – mode of expression, expression, language.
96. **conclave** (noun) – meeting, gathering, assembly/conference.
97. **render** (verb) – make, cause to be, cause to become.
98. **bear the brunt** (phrase) – to suffer or endure the worst part of something (force/burden/pressure) when a very bad or unpleasant thing happens.
99. **consequence** (noun) – outcome, ramification, repercussion.
100. **unorganised sector** (noun) – unorganized sector means an enterprise owned by individuals or self-employed workers and engaged in the production or sale of goods or providing service of any kind whatsoever, and where the enterprise employs workers, the number of such workers is less than ten.
101. **pay a price** (phrase) – experience the bad/unpleasant result of something.
102. **unbearable** (adjective) – intolerable, insufferable, unsupportable, unmanageable.
103. **strand** (verb) – get stuck, be in a place (unable to move).
104. **blues** (noun) – depression, sadness, unhappiness.
105. **pullout** (noun) – departure, retirement, retreat, disengagement.
106. **strand** (noun) – element, aspect, factor/feature.
107. **out of one’s depth** (phrase) – (of a difficult situation) beyond one’s ability to deal with.
108. **from time to time** (phrase) – sometimes, occasionally, irregularly.
109. **feeble** (adjective) – weak, powerless, ineffective.
110. **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, alarming, gloomy.
111. **the marginalised** (noun) – people who are treated as insignificant, treated as unimportant, neglected.
112. **lubricate** (verb) – make smooth, ease, facilitate.

113. **stimulus package** (noun) – an attempt by the government to boost economic growth and save their country from a financial crisis by involving tax cuts, lowering interest rates and increasing government spending.
114. **beef up** (phrasal verb) – strengthen, reinforce, consolidate, improve.
115. **self-defeating** (adjective) – futile, pointless, useless.
116. **convulsion** (noun) – (political) upheaval, agitation, disturbance/disorder.
117. **body politic** (noun) – all citizens of a nation collectively.
118. **in the wake of** (phrase) – as a result of some event, especially an unpleasant one; aftermath, as a consequence of.
119. **forfeit** (verb) – lose, give up, renounce, be stripped of, deprived of.
120. **vigorous** (adjective) – strenuous, powerful, potent, forceful.
121. **collective** (adjective) – combined, united /joint, cooperative (by people as a group).
122. **inequality** (noun) – Inequality is simply defined as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities”; imbalance, unevenness, disproportion, disparity.
123. **deprived** (adjective) – disadvantaged, underprivileged, poverty-stricken, impoverished.
124. **efficacy** (noun) – effectiveness, efficiency, power/ability to give estimated results.
125. **the equation** (noun) – the situation, the problem, the predicament.
126. **the executive** (noun) – the executive is a branch of government which enforces the law as written by the legislature and interpreted by the judiciary.
127. **lens** (noun) – evaluation, analysis, assessment, judgement.
128. **atrophied** (adjective) – relating to something wasted away/lost productiveness/potency due to neglect/disregard.
129. **enfeebled** (adjective) – weaken, debilitated, crippled, disabled.
130. **at the coalface** (phrase) – engaged in work directly (instead of in a managerial position).
131. **scrutinise** (verb) – examine carefully, inspect; investigate.
132. **outrage** (noun) – indignation, fury, anger.
133. **arrest** (verb) – stop, halt, end.
134. **ought to** (modal verb) – must, should.
135. **squander** (verb) – waste, misspend, misuse.
136. **lean on** (phrasal verb) – depend, rely, have every confidence in.
