

PANDEMICS WITHOUT BORDERS, SOUTH ASIA'S EVOLUTION

Rather Than Deliver An Autocratic Wasteland, The Epidemic Should Be An Opportunity

To Transform The Region's Politics

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic spares South Asia the worst impact it has reserved thus far for the northern latitudes, it is certain that this region of nearly a fourth of the global population will be wounded gravely — economically, and as the process unfolds, socio-politically. Holding the largest volume and density of poverty in the world, the countries of South Asia are looking into an abyss of distress and discontent.

Dire sign

As the region from the Indian Ocean to the Himalaya is hit by recession, more than half a century's effort against poverty could be wasted. The coddling of the middle class and neglect of the majority underclass, so starkly seen during the pandemic response, points to all that has gone wrong in our electoral democracies; no country of South Asia is presently a formal dictatorship.

Amidst our separate insularities, South Asians should take the pandemic as a wake-up call beyond public health, on ills ranging from plastic pollution to global warming, extinction of species, hijacking of the commons, dirty water, toxic air, a weakening of the welfare state, infrastructural exceptionalism — and the rapid conversion of our demographic diversity into the worldwide sameness of a suburban mall.

If we fail to act, the COVID-19 episode will be but an interlude as we wade further into the Anthropocene quicksand. You can see the return to 'normalcy' in the aircraft tracking apps that show China's airways bustling once again, as they were before the coronavirus radiated out from Wuhan.

As a dire telegram sent by Earth to Humanity, COVID-19 has laid bare the demagoguery that marks the democracies of South Asia. The response of the regimes has been to entrench themselves further, and they are shifting blame on mal-governance to the pandemic even as they tighten state control through surveillance, repressive laws and radical populism backed by ultra-nationalism.

The public's fear of the virus is allowing Presidents and Prime Ministers to press on with top-down rule, whereas the lockdown should be the time to generate momentum towards federal devolution and Gandhi's empowering 'gram swaraj' — a term that must be revived without a sense of embarrassment.

In Sri Lanka, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa takes advantage of COVID-19 to grant pardon to a war criminal. In Pakistan, the Army has Prime Minister Imran Khan against the ropes, and Nepal's political class uses the pandemic for political adventurism and Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli engages the military to carry out key COVID-19 tasks, from buying protective gear to contact tracing. The virus has solidified the foundation of Sheikh Hasina's one-party rule in Bangladesh.

India's continent-sized polity craves federalism, but COVID-19 has energised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's centralising mission. His Hindutva-backed, Pakistan-focused ultra-nationalism creates a web of control that strengthens Mr. Modi but weakens India. After a series of polarising actions from Kashmir to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, we watch unbelievably as Islamophobia is injected into the pandemic response.

The majoritarian attitude exhibited by the state, mass media and social media towards India's 200 million Muslims will before long transfer to the Dalit, tribal and Adivasi communities, and the underclass as a whole. The anti-poor imperiousness seen in the demonetisation of November 2016 was evident also in the four-hour notice given for lockdown on the night of March 23, in a country of more than 350 million workers, many of whom are internal migrants. Since Mr. Modi shuns unrehearsed encounters, journalists and academics are not able to challenge him about the fabric of India that is tearing.

Soft power

The reason to talk at length about India within South Asia is that the country comprises much of the region by population and geography. Further, the actions and the omissions of India impact

each neighbour. While all the other capitals have adversarial positions *vis-à-vis* New Delhi, however, it is also true that modern India has been aspirational for neighbouring societies — till now, that is.

The trajectory of India, with its galloping centralisation, removes governance from the people's reach. There was a time, decades ago, when New Delhi's messaging was limited to promises of '*roti, kapda aur makaan*', but ever more populist slogans were required to maintain command. Hence, the strident Hindutva-laced nationalism, which can only divert attention of the huddled masses, not spread prosperity nor social justice.

In both India and Pakistan, the two large countries of South Asia, ending insensitivity and inefficiency in governance require power and agency to pass to the provinces/States. Self-correction is only possible in smaller, devolved polities. As has been seen during the ongoing crisis, the States of India have risen to the occasion and are seen to be more caring, for the simple reason that they are closer to the ground and more accountable.

India has shone in the world because of its soft power, defined by a textured history, empathetic open society, "scientific temper" and Gandhian legacy. India simply cannot succeed as a hard power, which is why under the Bharatiya Janata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the country is losing the very values that command respect abroad.

If India were an internationally confident nation-state, as in decades past, it would have used its clout to lobby and build demand for a sitting of the UN Security Council to discuss the global security threat represented by the COVID-19 pandemic. India is also weakened internally by the New Delhi intelligentsia's China fixation, which must be overcome. Unknowingly or with deliberation, New Delhi seeks to copy-paste Beijing's centralism as well as its xenophobia, both of which are bound to backfire in a country whose historicity and circumstances are quite different.

A reformatting

The unflinching lack of caring for the citizenry by governments in South Asia can only be reversed through a formula that incorporates the internal and external to the nation-states, a reformatting of relationships. Internally, power must devolve from the capital to the provincial units of the two larger countries (Pakistan and India), as well as empowerment of local governments all over (as done in Nepal under the 2015 Constitution, but not yet fully implemented).

Externally, the countries of South Asia must bring down the hyper-nationalist mind barriers to allow porous borders, thereby reviving historical synergies in economy, ecology and culture. This is essential for both social justice and economic growth, and cannot happen without a palpable reduction in military expenditures that will come with abandonment of the national security state.

South Asian regionalism requires resuming the evolution of the subcontinental polity that was terminated in 1947 with Partition.

Regionalism would lead to collaborative battles against pestilence, and for wealth creation through trade, comparative advantage, and economies of scale. Regionalism would help fight plastic pollution in our rivers, battle the air pollution that wafts across our frontiers, promote cooperation in natural and human-made disasters, and boost the economies of the geographical "periphery" of each country.

The push for South Asia-wide thinking and planning need not be seen as a malevolent attempt to subvert India. Instead, it is the path for India's own socio-economic advance, and the way to garner international recognition of its soft power. Internal devolution and cross-border bonding has always been a necessity but impossible for some to contemplate. Hopefully, the shake-up of the COVID-19 pandemic will succeed where past exhortations have failed.

The opinion-makers of India — economists, political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, diplomats and others — have tended to be New Delhi-centric, and, as a result, downright reluctant to address issues of both federalism within and regionalism without. They have thus far been unable to see the jungle for the trees.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

1. **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
2. **evolution** (noun) – progress, advancement, progression, development.
3. **autocratic** (adjective) – undemocratic, totalitarian/ authoritarian, oppressive.
4. **wasteland** (noun) – desert, no-man’s-land, barren, neglected/abandoned area.
5. **epidemic** (noun) – widespread disease/illness; outbreak, plague, scourge.
6. **spare** (verb) – refrain from affecting something; leave unhurt.
7. **wound** (verb) – inflict, hurt, damage, harm.
8. **unfold** (verb) – occur, happen, take place.
9. **hold** (verb) – have, own, possess.
10. **abyss** (noun) – a catastrophic/disastrous/awful situation.
11. **distress** (noun) – difficulty, trouble, suffering.
12. **discontent** (noun) – dissatisfaction, disaffection, unhappiness, displeasure.
13. **dire** (adjective) – terrible/awful, appalling, distressing.
14. **coddling** (noun) – pampering, spoon-feeding, over-parenting; spoiling.
15. **underclass** (noun) – poor & unemployed people.
16. **starkly** (adverb) – in a sharply clear way.
17. **point to** (verb) – indicate, suggest, signal/signify.
18. **go wrong** (phrase) – fail, stop working, be defective, cease to function.
19. **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
20. **insularity** (noun) – the quality of being interested in own country and not willing to accept anything (ideas, culture, etc,) from outside of it.
21. **wake-up call** (noun) – something which alerts a person to a problem and makes him/her to do some remedial action.
22. **ills** (noun) – problems, troubles, difficulties.
23. **global warming** (noun) – it is the rapid increase in Earth’s average surface temperature over the past century primarily due to the greenhouse gases released as people burn fossil fuels.
24. **commons** (noun) – common properties /resources belonging to the whole of a community.
25. **exceptionalism** (noun) – the state of being special, exceptional or unique. The belief that a country, society, or individual, is “exceptional” (i.e., extraordinary).
26. **demographic** (adjective) – relating to the statistical study/structure of populations, especially human beings.
27. **demographic diversity** (noun) – it refers to the degree to which a unit (e.g., an organization) is heterogeneous (varied/diverse) with respect to demographic attributes which generally include unchangeable characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity.
28. **sameness** (noun) – similarity, uniformity.
29. **suburban** (adjective) – conventional, boring, uninteresting.
30. **interlude** (noun) – interval/rest, intermission, break.
31. **wade into** (phrasal verb) – move in, plunge in, dive in (vigorously).
32. **anthropocene** (noun) – a new period/epoch in which human’s collective activities dominate the planetary mechanism; the period of Earth’s history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system. It is widely agreed that the Earth is currently in this state.
33. **quicksand** (noun) – a dangerous situation.
34. **bustling** (adjective) – busy, lively, full of activity (of a place).
35. **radiate out** (verb) – spread out, fan out, ray out (from a central point).
36. **lay bare** (phrasal verb) – reveal, expose, disclose.
37. **demagoguery** (noun) – the practice of a political leader who gains popularity & power by exploiting common people with prejudices (preconception), false claims & promises.
38. **entrench** (verb) – settle, establish, embed, install.
39. **mal-governance** (noun) – bad/poor governance.

40. **surveillance** (noun) – observation, scrutiny, inspection/examination.
41. **repressive** (adjective) – oppressive, dominating/coercive, authoritarian/draconian.
42. **radical** (adjective) – thorough, wide-ranging, extensive.
43. **back** (verb) – support, endorse, uphold.
44. **ultra-nationalism** (noun) – extreme nationalism (hyper-nationalism).
45. **press on** (phrasal verb) – continue in his/her action.
46. **top-down rule** (noun) – In the top-down rule, the policy or action will be processed from the highest level/rank of a hierarchy and then it will proceed to the lowest level/rank (for final execution).
47. **federal devolution** (noun) – federal distribution; the transfer of power from a central government to state governments.
48. **federalism/federal framework/ system/ government** (noun) – a system of government in which establishments such as states or provinces share power with a national government.
49. **empower** (verb) – authorize, allow, entitle.
50. **revive** (verb) – recover, regain, restore, improve.
51. **embarrassment** (noun) – awkwardness, self-consciousness, uneasiness, discomfort.
52. **have someone on/against the ropes** (phrase) – have someone in a defensive position as there is no means of escape.
53. **adventurism** (noun) – the inclination/readiness to take risks in business or politics.
54. **carry out** (phrasal verb) – conduct, perform, execute.
55. **solidify** (verb) – make stronger, reinforce, consolidate.
56. **polity** (noun) – a politically organized society.
57. **crave** (verb) – long for, yearn for, aspire to, seek.
58. **centralise** (verb) – concentrate, bring under one roof, consolidate (under one authority).
59. **islamophobia** (noun) – the fear, hatred of, or prejudice against, the Islamic religion or Muslims generally, especially when seen as a geopolitical force.
60. **majoritarian** (adjective) – relating to a philosophy that states that a majority (sometimes categorized by religion, language, social class, or some other identifying factor) of the population is entitled to a certain degree of primacy (priority) in society, and has the right to make decisions that affect the society.
61. **as a whole** (phrase) – all together.
62. **imperiousness** (noun) – high-handedness, overbearance, commanding behaviour.
63. **demonetisation** (noun) – the act of deprive currency unit (note/coin) of its status as money.
64. **shun** (verb) – avoid, ignore, reject, eschew.
65. **unrehearsed** (adjective) – unplanned, unprepared, unarranged.
66. **encounter** (noun) – meeting, contact.
67. **fabric** (noun) – the basic/fundamental structure.
68. **soft power** (noun) – soft power is convincing & effective power deriving from attraction and imitation and be based on intangible (non-physical) resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions.
69. **at length** (phrase) – in detail, completely, eventually.
70. **act of omission and commission** (phrase) – act of omission and commission are, respectively, things someone failed to do, and things someone has done.
71. **adversarial** (adjective) – involving conflict or opposition.
72. **vis-a-vis** (preposition) – in relation to, with regard to.
73. **trajectory** (noun) – direction, route, path.
74. **galloping** (adjective) – racing, hurrying, speeding/rushing.
75. **centralisation** (noun) – the process of having functions, powers, people or things only in a central location or authority.
76. **strident** (adjective) – in an excessively forceful way; high-pitched, loud & harsh.
77. **laced** (adjective) – mixed, infused, fitted with.
78. **huddled** (adjective) – (of people) gathered, thronged, flocked together.
79. **devolve** (verb) – delegate, pass down, transfer/assign.
80. **rise to the occasion** (phrase) – perform better than usual.

81. **on/to the ground** (phrase) – in/to a situation/place where things are happening really/practically.
82. **textured** (adjective) – having created by the combination of the different elements.
83. **empathetic** (adjective) – compassionate/humane, sympathetic, understanding.
84. **temper** (noun) – disposition, nature, character.
85. **legacy** (noun) – effect/outcome (something received from a predecessor or from the past).
86. **hard power** (noun) – hard power is coercive power executed through military threats and economic incentives and based on tangible resources such as the army or economic strength.
87. **command** (verb) – receive, be given, get/gain, obtain.
88. **nation-state** (noun) – nation-state is a sovereign/independent country (state) where the great majority of people are conscious of a common identity and share the same culture.
89. **clout** (noun) – influence, power, control.
90. **lobby** (verb) – seek to influence, try to persuade, urge.
91. **intelligentsia** (noun) – intellectuals, intelligent people, academics/learned people.
92. **fixation** (noun) – obsession, preoccupation, mania.
93. **deliberation** (noun) – careful thought, thinking, consideration, discussion.
94. **xenophobia** (noun) – Greek phrase meaning fear/hatred of foreigners; racism.
95. **bound to** (adjective) – certain/sure, very likely, guaranteed.
96. **backfire** (verb) – rebound/boomerang, come back, have an adverse effect.
97. **historicity** (noun) – (historical) reliability, dependability, trustworthiness.
98. **unflinching** (adjective) – resolute/firm, determined, committed, single-minded.
99. **citizenry** (noun) – all the people/citizens (of a place/country considered as a whole).
100. **empowerment** (noun) – accreditation, authorization, validation.
101. **porous** (adjective) – unprotected/ill-protected, insecure.
102. **synergy** (noun) – collaboration, joint action, team work.
103. **ecology** (noun) – preservation, protection; the scientific study of the distributions, abundance and relations of organisms and their interactions with the environment.
104. **palpable** (adjective) – noticeable, appreciable, discernible.
105. **regionalism** (noun) – excess caring for one's region and to all related to it.
106. **collaborative** (adjective) – collective, united, combined.
107. **pestilence** (noun) – disease, epidemic/pandemic, infection.
108. **waft** (verb) – pass, be carried, be borne, be transported.
109. **frontier** (noun) – border, boundary, perimeter.
110. **malevolent** (adjective) – malicious/malignant, vicious; harmful, dangerous.
111. **subvert** (verb) – undermine, weaken, impair, damage.
112. **garner** (verb) – gather, collect, accumulate, amass.
113. **contemplate** (verb) – consider, think about, reflect on.
114. **shake-up** (noun) – reorganization, restructuring, overhaul.
115. **downright** (adverb) – completely, totally, undeniably.
116. **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
117. **be unable to see the wood/jungle/forest for the trees** (phrase) – concentrate on a small issue and so could not see the big picture (overall situation).
