

NO RIGHT ANSWER: ON DECISION OF REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

The decision to reopen schools must be guided primarily by epidemiological evidence

The course of the COVID-19 pandemic remains far from predictable, posing for the Central government the dilemma of salvaging part of the school academic year, while avoiding a fresh wave of infections. The school reopening question has not been resolved satisfactorily in other parts of the world, and the measures by many countries have been experimental. Yet, policymakers are aware of severe impacts to the education process, and the losses to students. The alternative, of remote and online learning opportunities, is skewed by economic status and geography. In India, the many divides — digital, rural-urban and rich-poor — have painfully come to the fore between regions and even within States. There are instances of children left behind, without computer access, Internet connectivity, TV sets and even electricity. The issue of reopening schools in a calibrated manner must, therefore, be addressed soon, but based mainly on epidemiological evidence. It is understandable that in the present confused situation, 21 out of 36 States and Union Territories including worst-affected Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have not taken a view yet on when to permit direct classes. States have also been asked to ascertain the opinion of parents on this issue, although it is unclear how they can do this in the short window given to them.

Among the Centre's responses to the problem, initiated through organisations such as the CBSE, is a reduction of the syllabus load for Classes 9 to 12 by 30%, although this ostensibly supportive decision has become controversial for its choice of topics for removal: democratic rights, federalism, citizenship and secularism, to name a few. There is a discernible trend of diminishing basic rights as a necessary sacrifice to fight the pandemic, but impoverishing the syllabus on these topics can only stunt social development. Such decisions should be vetted by academic experts, and not imposed by bureaucratic fiat. More fundamentally, if lessons are to be drawn from around the world on a back-to-school plan, a just-released large-scale study from South Korea would be useful. Research findings from that country, which worked hard to contain the pandemic early, show that older children, between 10 and 19, transmit the virus as much as adults do. The findings have been acknowledged by public health institutions in the U.S. as valuable, and offer a cautionary pointer to community spread among adults and vulnerable groups from older students. On the other hand, the European experience, instanced by Denmark as far back as April, is that containment in the community has to precede school reopening. The question is much more complex for India, as a society that has severe iniquities, and where students live in multi-generational homes. Clearly, no early date can be set for a full reopening, and protocols on class size, distancing, ventilation of rooms, face coverings and even open air classes need to be evolved. Meanwhile, developing remote education for measurable outcomes should be pursued actively, since future disruptions cannot be ruled out.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **epidemiological** (adjective) – relating to the study and analysis of the distribution, patterns and determinants of health and disease conditions in defined populations.
- ❖ **course** (noun) – progression, advancement, progress, flow/rise.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **far from** (phrase) – not, not at all, nowhere near.

- ❖ **pose** (verb) – raise, ask, put (a question/matter for consideration).
- ❖ **dilemma** (noun) – quandary, predicament, difficulty.
- ❖ **salvage** (verb) – save, rescue, recover, regain, restore, reclaim, get back, retrieve.
- ❖ **measure** (noun) – course of action, action, step, procedure.
- ❖ **skew** (verb) – cause to be asymmetrical, unevenly balanced, unequal.
- ❖ **geography** (noun) – region.
- ❖ **come to the fore** (phrase) – to become visible.
- ❖ **left behind** past participle of **leave behind** (phrasal verb) – neglect, forget, abandon.
- ❖ **calibrated** (adjective) – carefully assessed/analysed.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **take a view** (phrase) – to have an opinion/idea about something.
- ❖ **ascertain** (verb) – find out, understand, recognize, get to know.
- ❖ **window** (noun) – opportunity, chance, opening.
- ❖ **ostensibly** (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, allegedly, supposedly.
- ❖ **federalism/federal framework/system** (noun) – a system of government in which establishments such as states or provinces share power with a national government.
- ❖ **secularism** (noun) – the belief that religion should not have a strong influence in education or other public parts of society.
- ❖ **to name (but) a few** (phrase) – to give only a few examples (when there are a lot of things to).
- ❖ **discernible** (adjective) – visible, noticeable, identifiable.
- ❖ **diminish** (verb) – decrease, decline, reduce, shrink.
- ❖ **impoverish** (verb) – weaken, empty, diminish, reduce, deplete, decrease.
- ❖ **stunt** (verb) – inhibit, impede, stop, restrict.
- ❖ **vet** (verb) – evaluate, review, inspect.
- ❖ **bureaucratic** (adjective) – governmental, ministerial, administrative.
- ❖ **fiat** (noun) – order, decree, command, diktat.
- ❖ **draw from** (phrasal verb) – obtain, get, acquire.
- ❖ **as much as** (phrase) – almost, nearly the same as.
- ❖ **community spread/transmission** (noun) – community spread/transmission means spread of an illness/disease for which the source of infection is unknown. An infected person has no travel history to an affected area and no known contact with a person previously diagnosed with a particular disease. It is possible the patient is exposed to a returning traveler who is infected.
- ❖ **acknowledge** (verb) – admit, accept, realize.
- ❖ **pointer** (noun) – indication, hint, signal.
- ❖ **findings** (noun) – results.
- ❖ **local spread/transmission (cluster)** (noun) – local spread/transmission means spread of an illness/disease for which the source of infection is known. An infected person has travel history to an affected area. We could be able to identify and trace individual cases, and ring-fence a cluster (of them) to prevent the spread of infection.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – relating to a weak/neglected person who is in need of special care/support; at risk, unsafe, unprotected.
- ❖ **instance** (verb) – cite, refer to, invoke, draw attention to.
- ❖ **as far back as** (phrase) – It means that an object or event goes as far back in distance or time as some other object or event, which is used as a reference point.
- ❖ **containment** (noun) – an act of keeping something (harmful) under control (it means quickly identifying cases of coronavirus through testing, placing infected individuals in isolation, tracking who infected persons might have been in contact with and potentially quarantining those who came into contact with infection so that the disease doesn't continue to spread).
- ❖ **precede** (verb) – come/go before, pave the way for, lead to.
- ❖ **iniquity** (noun) – immorality, impropriety, unfairness, wrongdoing/violation.
- ❖ **multi-generational home** (noun) – multi-generational homes are designed to provide space for multiple generations to live together under one roof.

- ❖ **protocol** (noun) – procedure, convention, rules of conduct.
- ❖ **ventilation** (noun) – the supplying of fresh air to a room.
- ❖ **evolve** (verb) – develop, progress, advance.
- ❖ **measurable** (adjective) – appreciable, noticeable, significant, reasonable, tangible.
- ❖ **pursue** (verb) – engage in, conduct, follow, carry on.
- ❖ **rule out** (phrasal verb) – eliminate, reject, dismiss.

RULE OF MOB: ON MOB LYNCHING IN SEVERAL STATES

Lynchings point to a breakdown of the rule of law in several States

The lynching of three people, alleged cattle thieves suspected to be Bangladeshi nationals, in southern Assam’s Karimganj district on July 18 was the second such disturbing incident in recent weeks in the area. On June 1, a 43-year-old Bangladeshi national was lynched in Putni Tea Estate situated about 3 km from the India-Bangladesh border. According to reports, the district police are trying to hand over the bodies to the Bangladeshi authorities. Irrespective of whether they are thieves or smugglers, such killings point to a lack of faith in the rule of law, leading to a general lawlessness. According to the National Crime Records Bureau’s 2017 data which was released in October 2019 a year behind schedule, Assam has one of the highest crime rates in the country. The State had 143 registered crimes per lakh of population, but such numbers can often be misleading due to the arbitrariness in the registration of crimes. The varying standards of prosecution of crimes across the country add further challenges to the rule of law. Anecdotal trends suggest a spike in mob lynchings in recent years, often incited by malicious dissemination of false accusations of cow slaughter, kidnapping of children and theft, through social media.

The NCRB did collect data on lynchings in 2017 but did not publish those for reasons best known to it. In 2019 there was also a controversy over the usage of the word ‘lynching’, after RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat termed it as an attempt to defame India. Wild conspiracy theories spread fast on social media, but one cannot overlook the context of polarising diatribes, often initiated by political leaders, related to cow protection, movement of people across the border and religious issues. The victims are invariably from vulnerable groups. Whatever name one calls it by, lynchings are an abomination that must have no place in a democratic society, which India prides itself to be. Lynchings are a uniquely unsettling derailment of governance — while an act of mob violence is itself a sign of failure of law enforcement, it is committed in an apparent consideration that there can be no legal recourse. In a pathological subversion of principles, the police inaction in cases of mob violence is reciprocated by an apparent public sanction of extrajudicial punishments by the police. All this bodes ill for the country. Mob violence indeed defames the country and there must be stringent intervention by the police to bring an end to this. The political leadership also has a role to play in questioning the social consent that allows mob violence.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **mob** (noun) – a large, disorganized, and often violent crowd of people.
- ❖ **lynching** (noun) – an act of punishing/killing someone for claimed offence by the group of people without legal trail.
- ❖ **point to** (verb) – indicate, suggest, denote.
- ❖ **breakdown** (noun) – failure, collapse, foundering.
- ❖ **alleged** (adjective) – claimed, purported, assumed, reported.
- ❖ **lead to** (verb) – cause, give rise to, result in, bring on.

- ❖ **lynch** (verb) – punish/kill someone for claimed offence without legal trail by the group of people.
- ❖ **rule of law** (phrase) – it is described as “a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards.
- ❖ **irrespective of** (adjective) – notwithstanding, without regard for, regardless of.
- ❖ **arbitrariness** (noun) – the quality of being “determined by personal chance, whim (desire), or impulse, and not by necessity, reason, or principle”.
- ❖ **varying** (adjective) – varied, differing, different.
- ❖ **prosecution** (noun) – legal action/trial, legal proceeding, litigation.
- ❖ **anecdotal** (adjective) – informal, unreliable, untrustworthy.
- ❖ **incite** (verb) – instigate, provoke, stir up/egg on.
- ❖ **malicious** (adjective) – harmful, pernicious, destructive.
- ❖ **dissemination** (noun) – spreading, circulation, distribution.
- ❖ **accusation** (noun) – allegation, charge, claim.
- ❖ **slaughter** (noun) – the killing of animals for food.
- ❖ **for reasons best known to** (phrase) – used for saying that others find something hard to understand why someone does it.
- ❖ **defame** (verb) – discredit, tarnish, insult.
- ❖ **wild** (adjective) – ridiculous, stupid, absurd, silly, senseless, illogical.
- ❖ **conspiracy theory** (noun) – an explanation of an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by evil, criminal and powerful actors, often political in motivation, when other explanations are more probable (likely to happen/anticipated).
- ❖ **overlook** (verb) – miss, fail to notice; disregard, neglect/ignore.
- ❖ **context** (noun) – situation, conditions, state of affairs.
- ❖ **polarising** (adjective) – dividing, separating, parting.
- ❖ **diatribe** (noun) – a bitter verbal attack; a tirade, verbal onslaught, rant.
- ❖ **invariably** (adverb) – always, every time/each time; habitually/inevitably.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – undefended, powerless, helpless; unsafe, unprotected.
- ❖ **abomination** (noun) – disgrace, outrage, evil/bane.
- ❖ **pride (oneself)** (verb) – be proud of, revel in, take satisfaction in, delight in.
- ❖ **uniquely** (adverb) – remarkably, notably, particularly, distinctively.
- ❖ **derailment** (noun) – disruption, obstruction, interruption (of a particular process and diverting it from its course).
- ❖ **enforcement** (noun) – imposition, implementation, execution.
- ❖ **apparent** (adjective) – evident/clear, visible, noticeable, recognizable.
- ❖ **consideration** (noun) – a factor, point, aspect, matter (taken into account while judging/deciding something); thought.
- ❖ **recourse** (noun) – option, possibility, alternative, way out, possible course of action.
- ❖ **pathological** (adjective) – habitual, obsessive, chronic, unreasonable, irrational.
- ❖ **subversion** (noun) – the act of undermining, worsening, reducing (power & authority gradually).
- ❖ **inaction** (noun) – inactivity, negligence, disregard.
- ❖ **reciprocate** (verb) – return the favour, give back; respond.
- ❖ **sanction** (noun) – authorization, permission, acceptance.
- ❖ **extra-judicial** (adjective) – out-of court, private, unauthorized/unwarranted (by law).
- ❖ **bode well/ill** (verb) – augur, indicate, portend (a good/bad outcome).
- ❖ **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually.
- ❖ **stringent** (adjective) – strict/stern, severe, tough/rigorous.
- ❖ **play a part/role** (phrase) – contribute to, be instrumental in, be a factor in.
- ❖ **consent** (noun) – agreement, assent, permission/approval.
- ❖ **spike** (noun) – a sharp increase.