

Towards a new normal: On Unlock 3

With a vaccine not yet in sight, easier, cheaper testing can help protect the vulnerable

The Centre has announced further relaxations in the lockdown that began on March 25 to combat the COVID-19 pandemic although the numbers are unrelenting. The third phase will now take effect from August 5. At nearly 17 lakh, India stood third among countries with the highest number of cases; a third of these cases are currently active. With over 36,000 deaths, India's case fatality rate of 2.16% is relatively low. The possibility of wider prevalence indicated in serology surveys in Delhi and Mumbai suggests that the death rate could be even lower than current estimations. The disease spread has been uneven within the country. The responses of States and cities have also remained inconsistent. Along with the number of cases, overworked health-care professionals experiencing fatigue and the public showing impatience with restrictions are also on the rise. This is not a pleasant mix of circumstances, and utmost vigil must continue. By now, it is also evident that complete lockdowns that disrupt economic activities cannot be sustained over long periods of time. Gyms and yoga centres, but not educational institutions, metro rail, and large gatherings, will be allowed in the next phase. Movement of people and goods across borders will be easier as per the Centre's guidelines. Random restrictions on movement such as those in Tamil Nadu, where an e-pass is required for intra- and inter-State travel, must now be done away with.

As a vaccine or a cure is not yet visible, it is time the focus on adaptation got sharper. Though many questions about COVID-19 remain, certain measures are evidently helpful in managing the pandemic better and bringing fatalities down. The coming phase of unlocking must prepare the country for complete opening. For that, first of all, testing should be unlocked and made available on demand as close to home as possible. For those infected to not step out of home is a far superior measure in preventing spread, compared to inadequate mask usage. With most cases turning out to be asymptomatic, wider and cheaper availability of testing must be a thrust area for the government now. Easy, early diagnosis of infections, even when asymptomatic, will go a long way in containment. The concerns regarding increased dependence on rapid antigen tests in some places must be addressed. Second, real time epidemiological data should be unlocked. Just as weather data is freely available, and allows for cropping practice readjustments, disaggregated real time data enables micro-planning and localised behavioural response. The proclivity shown by some States and cities to conceal data has been self-defeating. Even official death counts do not match with the numbers available with other sources. There must be efforts to harvest accurate data, and with ease of availability. Normalcy, albeit a new one, could be reached faster with the right efforts.

DEFINITIONS:

- ❖ **vaccine** (noun) – a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease.
- ❖ **in sight** (phrase) – near at hand, close to being realized; visible, noticeable.
- ❖ **the vulnerable** (noun) – a weak/neglected person who is in need of special care/support.
- ❖ **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/ encirclement/ isolation of a person by the authority.
- ❖ **the new normal** (phrase) – an earlier unusual situation that becomes a standard now.
- ❖ **combat** (verb) – fight, tackle, confront, defy/resist.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **unrelenting** (adjective) – unceasing, unabating, unflagging, unstoppable.
- ❖ **fatigue** (noun) – tiredness, weariness, exhaustion.

- ❖ **case fatality rate/ratio** (noun) – in epidemiology, the proportion of people who die from a particular disease compared to all individuals diagnosed with the disease over a certain period of time.
- ❖ **relatively** (adverb) – comparatively, proportionately, somewhat, to a certain extent/degree.
- ❖ **prevalence** (noun) – it refers to the number of cases of a disease that are present in a particular population at a given time whereas “incidence” refers to the number of new cases that develop in a given period of time.
- ❖ **serology** (noun) – a method of diagnostic examination of blood serum concerning immune system’s response to pathogens (pathogen is something, like bacteria/virus, that causes disease). (serum is an amber (yellowish-orange), watery fluid, rich in proteins, obtained from blood that has coagulated whereas plasma is a clear yellowish fluid part of the blood, contains blood clotting agents-Fibrinogen).
- ❖ **overworked** (adjective) – overtaxed, overburdened, overloaded, exhausted, fatigued.
- ❖ **impatience** (noun) – restlessness, irritability, frustration, annoyance.
- ❖ **on the rise** (phrase) – increasing.
- ❖ **utmost** (adjective) – greatest, maximum, most extreme.
- ❖ **vigil** (noun) – surveillance, close watch, monitoring.
- ❖ **sustain** (verb) – continue, carry on, extend, retain.
- ❖ **intra-** (prefix) – within.
- ❖ **inter-** (prefix) – between.
- ❖ **do away with** (phrasal verb) – abolish, discard, remove.
- ❖ **adaptation** (noun) – adjustment, familiarization, habituation.
- ❖ **measure** (noun) – step, action, course of action, plan of action, procedure.
- ❖ **evidently** (adverb) – obviously, clearly, visibly, distinctly.
- ❖ **bring down** (phrasal verb) – decrease, reduce, lower.
- ❖ **fatality** (noun) – death, casualty, mortality/loss.
- ❖ **first of all** (phrase) – most importantly.
- ❖ **step out** (phrasal verb) – leave a building/place for a short period of time.
- ❖ **far** (adverb) – much, very much, noticeably, considerably.
- ❖ **superior** (adjective) – better.
- ❖ **turn out** (phrasal verb) – transpire, emerge; happen/occur.
- ❖ **asymptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with no symptoms.
- ❖ **symptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with symptoms.
- ❖ **pre-symptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with mild illness/symptoms.
- ❖ **thrust area** (noun) – significant, important, essential area (of work/research).
- ❖ **diagnosis** (noun) – identification, recognition, detection (of an illness/disease from its signs and symptoms).
- ❖ **go a long way** (phrase) – achieve great success.
- ❖ **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).
- ❖ **antigen** (noun) – disease causing organisms (bacteria & viruses) and other harmful/toxic foreign substances like insect venom that induce an immune response in the body.
- ❖ **rapid antigen test (RCT)** (noun) – It is a test on swabbed nasal samples that detects antigens (foreign substances that induce an immune response in the body) that are found on or within the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is a point-of-care test, performed outside the conventional laboratory setting, and is used to quickly obtain a diagnostic result. In a reliable rapid antigen detection test, the maximum duration for interpreting a positive or negative test is 30 minutes.

- ❖ **dependence** (noun) – reliance on, need for, confidence in.
- ❖ **RT-PCR testing** (noun) – Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) Testing; it is one of the most accurate laboratory methods for detecting, tracking, and studying the coronavirus. It is a nuclear-derived method for detecting the presence of specific genetic material from any pathogen, including a virus. (pathogen is a bacteria/virus that causes disease).
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **epidemiological** (adjective) – relating to the study and analysis of the distribution, patterns and determinants of health and disease conditions in defined populations.
- ❖ **disaggregated** (adjective) – separated, divided; disaggregated data is a data that has been broken down by detailed sub-categories, for example by marginalised group, gender, region or level of education.
- ❖ **crop** (verb) – cut short, shorten, remove.
- ❖ **micro-planning** (noun) – planning work done at regional and local levels to improve the operation of the public health care system; bottom-up planning.
- ❖ **localised** (adjective) – restricted to a particular place/area.
- ❖ **localized behavioural response** (noun) – a behavioural response requires the actions and interactions of the people to try to maintain a balance in their restricted/local area.
- ❖ **proclivity** (noun) – liking, inclination, tendency/ leaning.
- ❖ **self-defeating** (adjective) – futile, pointless, useless.
- ❖ **harvest** (verb) – acquire, obtain, get, gather.
- ❖ **normalcy** (noun) – a normal condition; normality, regularity.
- ❖ **albeit** (conjunction) – though, even though, however.

War and talks: On Taliban ceasefire

The Taliban’s ceasefire is an opportunity to kick-start intra-Afghan peace talks

The Taliban’s decision to cease fire for three days during Id-ul-Adha has come as a relief for Afghans who have seen unabated violence despite a peace agreement between the insurgents and the U.S. This is the third official respite since the war started in 2001. In June 2018 and May this year, the Taliban had briefly ended hostilities to mark the end of the holy month of Ramzan. On both occasions, it refused to extend the ceasefire, returning to war as soon as the celebrations were over. This time, however, hopes are high that the truce could be extended as Kabul and the insurgents are preparing to launch the intra-Afghan talks that were promised in the U.S.-Taliban deal. According to the pact, talks were to begin in March. But both sides failed to reach an agreement on prisoner exchange, which the U.S. had agreed with the Taliban. The insurgents complained that the government was not complying with the terms of the agreement, while officials of the Ashraf Ghani administration said the Taliban’s demands were unacceptable. Finally, President Ghani decided to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, which was followed by the Taliban’s ceasefire announcement. Both sides have now agreed to kick-start talks after Id and they could do it in a peaceful environment if the ceasefire is extended.

While the cessation of hostilities is welcome, there are underlying issues that continue to plague the peace process. When the U.S. entered into talks with the insurgent group, it did not insist on a ceasefire. So the Taliban continues to engage in war and talks simultaneously. Worse, the Americans, badly looking for a way out of the conflict, kept the Afghan government out of the peace process. After the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed in February, according to which the U.S. agreed to pull out its troops in return for

security assurances from the Taliban, the onus was on a weakened Afghan government to start talks even as the Taliban continued attacks. According to the government, 3,560 government troops and 775 civilians have been killed in conflict since the deal was signed. Also, infighting made matters worse for the government. Last year's presidential election saw a record low turnout. The results, announced months later, were contested by the main Opposition candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, who formed a parallel administration. He backed off, but only after being appointed the head of the High Council for National Reconciliation that will lead talks with the Taliban. These factors allowed a resurgent Taliban to maintain the upper hand — in war and in talks. This will be the government's key challenge when its representatives and that of the Taliban, which sees itself as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan and has not recognised the country's Constitution, would be holding talks.

DEFINITIONS:

- ❖ **ceasefire** (noun) – a negotiated agreement that will be accompanied by other associated commitments to de-escalate the fighting; a temporary stoppage of a war, truce, armistice.
- ❖ **kick-start** (verb) – revive, renew, restore.
- ❖ **intra-** (prefix) – within.
- ❖ **Id-ul-Adha** (noun) – Bakr-id; it is also known as festival of sacrifice, is one of the two most important festivals of Muslims.
- ❖ **unabated** (adjective) – non-stop, continuous, unceasing, unending.
- ❖ **insurgent** (noun) – dissenter, agitator/rioter, subversive.
- ❖ **respite** (noun) – break, interval, stoppage.
- ❖ **hostilities** (noun) – fighting, war, armed conflict, combat.
- ❖ **mark** (verb) – indicate, represent, signify, signalize.
- ❖ **truce** (noun) – an ad-hoc (temporary/makeshift) arrangement, arrived at by the combatants (fighters), to pause the fighting.
- ❖ **pact** (noun) – deal, agreement, settlement.
- ❖ **prisoner swap/exchange** (noun) – prisoner exchange; a deal between opposing sides in a conflict to release prisoners.
- ❖ **comply with** (verb) – abide by, adhere to, conform to.
- ❖ **cessation** (noun) – suspension, stopping, ceasing.
- ❖ **cessation of hostilities** (phrase) – it means that the combatants are willing to stop fighting and to restrain their forces.
- ❖ **underlying** (adjective) – fundamental, basic, primary.
- ❖ **plague** (verb) – afflict, worry, trouble.
- ❖ **insurgent** (adjective) – rebellious, dissident, rioting, seditious, subversive.
- ❖ **insist on** (verb) – demand forcefully, ask for, call for, press/push for.
- ❖ **look for** (phrasal verb) – search for, try to find, seek.
- ❖ **way out** (phrase) – solution, way of escape.
- ❖ **pull out** (phrasal verb) – withdraw, leave, get/move out.
- ❖ **in return** (phrase) – in exchange for, in consideration of.
- ❖ **onus** (noun) – responsibility, duty.
- ❖ **infighting** (noun) – conflict, disagreement, argument.
- ❖ **turnout** (noun) – attendance.
- ❖ **parallel administration/governance** (noun) – it refers to rebel groups or political movements performing state functions in competition with the state and sometimes displacing it.
- ❖ **back off** (phrasal verb) – retreat, withdraw, step back, pull back.
- ❖ **upper hand** (noun) – a dominating position.
- ❖ **see (oneself)** (verb) – regard, consider, think of (in a particular way).
- ❖ **legitimate** (adjective) – lawful, legal, authorized/recognized, valid.