

INDIA'S GREAT SILENCE IS THE LOUDEST SOUND

**Citizens must unceasingly demand that they be enabled
to know the facts of the crises, authoritatively**

Ghosts of the Spanish flu (1918-1920), the four great recessions of 1958, 1966, 1973, 1980, and the Sino-Indian conflict (1962) have come together as one torment to plague India.

And no one really knows how to handle this multi-headed sprite.

In fact no one really knows quite what it really is.

No reasoned explanation

We have no one in public office telling us what-is-what, convincingly, authoritatively on the epidemic. We know that India has, as virologist T. Jacob John tells us, 'surpassed Brazil and the United States to earn the sad distinction of having the fastest-growing novel coronavirus caseload in the world.' And that India has broken world records in the daily new case totals. But there is so much we need to know about the details, and to know about them authoritatively from official, government sources.

Is community transmission happening? If it is, then is the nation to expect testings, beds and ventilators to match the need or are we going to be asked to self-diagnose, treat and deal with the virus from our homes? Is the virus now migrating from the smitten cities to our villages? If yes, does rural India know what is going to descend on it? Are India's villages prepared, even remotely prepared, in terms of health centres, equipment to meet the challenge? What is the thinking — there has to be one — behind un-locking at the height of the rising curve of infections? There has to be a reasoned explanation.

More searching questions

Likewise, we do not know, authoritatively, the scale of the impact of our crippling contraction on salaried jobs and non-salaried livelihoods. We do not know what farmers and agricultural labour are going to do with what has been harvested if the country's purchasing power has dwindled, and its exports have been hit. Will we see the cruel irony of our godowns being full and stomachs empty? Our cities and towns are getting our milk supplies alright, but do we know if the dairy provider is getting paid fairly? There is no financial mastermind in government to educate us, credibly, about this.

But way more important, while there are many commentators, there is no social philosopher of pre-eminence among us, the people of India, to connect the dots of this medico-economic-ecological crisis and help us look behind it to see its global causes. There is no one to tell us with the voice of thunder as the late Anil Agarwal would have, that it is the loot of both natural and human resources for the rank profit of monopolies that has wrought and is deepening this pandemic.

The crisis has hit everyone, the government included, from the blue. And everyone, the government more than anyone else, is learning and un-learning lessons by the day. But the knowledge deficit around is hollowing us out. Very curiously, there are numerous theories on when the vaccine will come. I have heard "six to twelve months". The latest is "five years to cover 1.3 billion". The new CE — Corona Era — has become the era of guesses.

Eppo varuvaro! (When, o when, will the saviour, if ever, appear!) , the opening phrase of Gopalakrishna Bharati's Tamil song, captures this feeling of being un-guided. But it does no credit to either human intelligence or to human self-respect to wait, prayerfully, for the materialisation of such a saviour. In the grip of an epidemic, a recession, a muting of questioning voices, and a possible war-like situation, what is it that needs to be done by us, regular folk?

Pillars of the state

To know is to be able to control. We must unceasingly demand that we be enabled to know the facts of the situation. China is criticised for having kept the truth of the virus and its fallout concealed. We do not have to invite the same charge.

Of the three pillars of the state, knowledge-sharing has to be the executive's duty, privilege. We need to know all that needs to be understood about the epidemic, the economic contraction and the situation on our borders with China. This is ineluctable.

Is the nation ready, or has it been prepared for the cost of a not-to-be-ruled-out virus plus war challenge?

The agreement reached on September 11 between our External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi is a heartening step and may well have brought the countries back from the brink. But should the Moscow consensus fail to last, ballistics could well boom across the border. War and viruses make a deathly cocktail. World War I, we may remind ourselves, coincided with the 1918-1920 pandemic. Infected Indian troops returning from the front carried the flu deep into towns and villages in India killing 14 million to 17 million Indians.

We need to know, and the Executive needs to tell us, details of the likely cost in terms of public health, public finance of such a war. The situation on the India-China border needs today not the dangerous diversions of jingoism but pragmatic, diplomatic engagement with the country being taken into confidence about it.

In Parliament

And this where the second pillar — the legislature comes in. In a salutary half-step forward, our Parliament is currently meeting, physically, for a fortnight. This amounts to half the duration of the normal session. Still, given our virus concerns, this move is gratifying. But sessions of the House are one thing; the spirit of the House another. The doing away, in our Parliament, of Question Hour, an MP's greatest chance to elicit information, is a matter of great regret. But other, worse fates can befall Parliament. There was no legislature worth the name during the British Raj. And yet such of it as there was — the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi — did grave disservice to vox populi. The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, popularly known as the Rowlatt Act passed by that Council on March 18, 1919, was ostensibly to subserve the war effort, but in effect curbed individual liberties, notably those relating to freedom of assembly and speech.

The national emergency 1975-1977, we will recall, got the approval of the Parliament of the day. The greatest vigilance and prudence is required of Parliament today. Rowlatt-like ideas can occur at a time when the country is facing an unprecedented epidemic, a worse-than-ever economic contraction and the growlings of war.

Hush over institutions

This is where the third pillar, the judiciary, comes in. Vital matters before it such as Article 370 of the Constitution, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the habeas corpus petitions in the Jammu & Kashmir High Court give it the chance to show its autonomous mind, its independence and, in short, to speak up. Few words are needed to say what needs to be heard, like Justice D.Y. Chandrachud's when he said, memorably, "Dissent is a safety-valve of democracy".

A viral stillness hovers eerily over the institutions of state.

It threatens to smother their breath and, by so doing, ours as well.

With the Fourth Estate leading we, the people of India, need to become our freedom's life-support.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **unceasingly** (adverb) – continuously, constantly, persistently.
- ❖ **authoritatively** (adverb) – with authority; reliably, dependably, legitimately.
- ❖ **enable** (verb) – allow, permit, give permission to.
- ❖ **ghost** (noun) – hint, faint sign, shadow.

- ❖ **Spanish flu** (noun) – The Spanish flu, also known as the 1918 flu pandemic, was an unusually deadly influenza pandemic caused by the H1N1 influenza A virus. Lasting from February 1918 to April 1920, it infected 500 million people—about a third of the world’s population at the time.
- ❖ **recession** (noun) – economic decline, downturn, slump.
- ❖ **torment** (noun) – distress, affliction, suffering.
- ❖ **plague** (verb) – afflict, worry, trouble.
- ❖ **sprite** (noun) – spirit, ghost, spectre.
- ❖ **reasoned** (adjective) – logical, rational, organized.
- ❖ **what’s what** (phrase) – the true state of things.
- ❖ **convincingly** (adverb) – credibly, believably, clearly.
- ❖ **epidemic** (noun) – widespread disease/illness.
- ❖ **virologist** (noun) – a specialist in virology (the study of viruses and viral diseases).
- ❖ **surpass** (verb) – be greater than, exceed, outdo/eclipse.
- ❖ **distinction** (noun) – honour, credit, excellence, merit, advantage/value.
- ❖ **caseload** (noun) – the number of cases to be handled by a doctor at one time.
- ❖ **community 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.
- ❖ **local 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.
- ❖ **ventilator** (noun) – a respirator, a device (used for a patient to breathe).
- ❖ **smitten** (adjective) – afflicted, attacked, troubled, tormented.
- ❖ **descend on** (verb) – attack, assail, harass, invade, come in force.
- ❖ **in terms of** (phrase) – with regard to, regarding/concerning, in connection with.
- ❖ **thinking** (noun) – idea, thought, opinion.
- ❖ **unlock** (verb) – make something less strict.
- ❖ **at the height of** (phrase) – at the most extreme part/point of something.
- ❖ **crippling** (adjective) – weakening, damaging, impairing, destroying, spoiling, paralyzing.
- ❖ **contraction** (noun) – In economics, it refers to a decline in national output as measured by gross domestic product.
- ❖ **livelihood** (noun) – means of making a living with the basic necessities (food, water, shelter and clothing); means of support, subsistence, source of income.
- ❖ **harvest** (verb) – acquire, obtain, get, gather.
- ❖ **purchasing power** (noun) – the ability to buy something (goods/services).
- ❖ **dwindle** (verb) – diminish, reduce, decrease.
- ❖ **hit** (verb) – affect badly, devastate, damage.
- ❖ **irony** (noun) – paradox, incongruity, peculiarity; contradiction, a strange/funny situation where things are happening the other way around (than expected).
- ❖ **mastermind** (noun) – planner, organizer, originator.
- ❖ **way more** (adjective) – much more, a lot more.
- ❖ **commentator** (noun) – critic, analyst, observer.
- ❖ **connect the dots** (phrase) – to put various facts and ideas together to find the big picture (broad overview) of a situation, issue, or problem.
- ❖ **pre-eminence** (noun) – greatness, excellence, distinction, prominence.

- ❖ **ecological** (adjective) – relating to the branch of biology which studies the interactions among organisms and their environment.
- ❖ **look behind** (phrasal verb) – look back, in retrospect, with hindsight.
- ❖ **thunder** (verb) – used to express anger, annoyance.
- ❖ **loot** (noun) – stolen things (valuables/resources).
- ❖ **rank** (adjective) – outright, out-and-out, absolute, complete, sheer.
- ❖ **monopoly** (noun) – exclusive/complete control of something by a person/organisation.
- ❖ **wrought** (verb) – (old) past and past participle of work; cause, effect.
- ❖ **deepen** (verb) – increase/intensify; exacerbate, aggravate, inflame, worsen.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **from the blue** (phrase) – (of something unusual) happens suddenly/unexpectedly.
- ❖ **by the day** (phrase) – gradually.
- ❖ **deficit** (noun) – shortfall, deficiency, shortage.
- ❖ **hollow out** (verb) – undermine, weaken, erode.
- ❖ **curiously** (adverb) – strangely, unusually.
- ❖ **vaccine** (noun) – a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease.
- ❖ **saviour** (noun) – someone/something saving (people) from danger/difficulty; rescuer, liberator, deliverer.
- ❖ **credit** (noun) – praise, commendation, acclaim, approval, acknowledgement, recognition.
- ❖ **intelligence** (noun) – brilliance, aptness, ability, acumen.
- ❖ **self-respect** (noun) – self-regard, morale, self-esteem.
- ❖ **materialisation** (noun) – appearance, emergence, arrival.
- ❖ **in the grip of** (noun) – affected by something undesirable.
- ❖ **mute** (verb) – restrain, subdue, tone down.
- ❖ **folk** (noun) – people.
- ❖ **fallout** (noun) – adverse results/consequence; after-effects, repercussions.
- ❖ **the executive** (noun) – the executive is a branch of government which enforces the law as written by the legislature and interpreted by the judiciary.
- ❖ **privilege** (noun) – right.
- ❖ **ineluctable** (adjective) – inescapable, inevitable, unpreventable.
- ❖ **heartening** (adjective) – encouraging, promising, hopeful.
- ❖ **brink** (noun) – edge/verge/end (of something).
- ❖ **consensus** (noun) – an idea or opinion that is shared by all the people in a group, agreement, concurrence.
- ❖ **last** (verb) – continue, go on, remain, exist.
- ❖ **ballistics** (noun) – projectiles, missiles.
- ❖ **boom** (verb) – sound loudly, thunder, fill the air, explode.
- ❖ **cocktail** (noun) – mixture of different substances.
- ❖ **front** (noun) – a particular situation (or) front line, vanguard, combat zone.
- ❖ **cost** (noun) – sacrifice, loss (needed to achieve/get something).
- ❖ **diversion** (noun) – deviation, alternative route, bypass/detour.
- ❖ **jingoism** (noun) – extreme/blind patriotism, xenophobia/ chauvinism, extreme nationalism.
- ❖ **pragmatic** (adjective) – empirical, realistic/actual, practical.
- ❖ **diplomatic** (adjective) – (delicate & sensitive) consular, foreign-policy, political.
- ❖ **the legislature** (noun) – parliament; the Legislature is responsible for enacting the laws and determining the public policy of the State.
- ❖ **engagement** (noun) – participation, taking part, involvement.

- ❖ **salutary** (adjective) – helpful, useful, beneficial.
- ❖ **half-step** (adjective) – wanting to engage in something, but then back down.
- ❖ **fortnight** (noun) – a period of two weeks/fourteen days continuously.
- ❖ **given** (preposition) – considering, taking into account, bearing in mind.
- ❖ **gratifying** (adjective) – giving satisfaction.
- ❖ **spirit** (noun) – principles, standards, ethos.
- ❖ **the doing away** (noun) – removal, discontinuation, termination.
- ❖ **Question Hour** (noun) – Question Hour is the liveliest hour in Parliament and it is taken up from 1100hrs to 1200 hrs in every sitting. It is during this one hour that Members of Parliament ask questions of ministers and hold them accountable for the functioning of their ministries. The questions that MPs ask are designed to elicit (bring out) information and trigger suitable action by ministries.
- ❖ **elicit** (verb) – obtain, bring forth, bring out, extract, evoke.
- ❖ **regret** (noun) – sadness, disappointment, dismay, unhappiness, dejection.
- ❖ **befall** (verb) – (of something bad) happen, occur, take place/appear.
- ❖ **imperial** (adjective) – relating to a policy or ideology of extending a country's rule over foreign nations.
- ❖ **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, alarming, gloomy.
- ❖ **disservice** (noun) – injustice, disfavour, harm/damage.
- ❖ **vox populi** (noun) – Latin, literally means 'the people's voice'; voice of the people.
- ❖ **ostensibly** (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, allegedly, supposedly.
- ❖ **subserve** (verb) – help, assist, aid (to promote).
- ❖ **curb** (verb) – stop, control, contain, restrict, limit.
- ❖ **liberty** (noun) – freedom, independence.
- ❖ **vigilance** (noun) – careful observation, surveillance, alertness/carefulness.
- ❖ **Rowlatt Act** (noun) – The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act; The act, passed on March 18th, 1919, censored the press in India, allowed the British to imprison indefinitely without trial and prohibited "suspects" from gathering in public. It was passed ostensibly to subserve the war effort, but in effect curbed individual liberties, notably those relating to freedom of assembly and speech.
- ❖ **prudence** (noun) – cautiousness, carefulness, good judgement/management.
- ❖ **unprecedented** (adjective) – not done or experienced before.
- ❖ **growling** (noun) – a low, rough sound made/expressed usually in anger/hostility.
- ❖ **hush** (noun) – silence, quiet.
- ❖ **judiciary** (noun) – a branch of government in which judicial power is vested.
- ❖ **habeas corpus** (noun) – Latin phrase meaning literally "that you have the body". The court order to bring the person (in custody/detention) to the court to decide on the imprisonment is legal or illegal.
- ❖ **in short** (phrase) – briefly, in essence, in sum.
- ❖ **speak up** (phrase) – to express one's opinion (in support/against something) openly.
- ❖ **dissent** (noun) – disagreement, difference of opinion, opposition.
- ❖ **safety valve** (noun) – a way or medium of expression to release strong feelings without harming oneself & others.
- ❖ **stillness** (noun) – the absence of voice/sound.
- ❖ **hover** (verb) – remain at a level.
- ❖ **eerily** (adverb) – peculiarly, oddly, in a strange and frightening way.
- ❖ **smother** (verb) – stifle, muffle, repress, suppress; choke, throttle.
- ❖ **Fourth Estate** (noun) – it refers to the watchdog role of the press/media in democratic society.