

COVID-19 DEATHS world-wide recently crossed the 1.5-million mark. The expectation is that by the time the winter is over these will top 2 million—the estimated death count during the Asian flu pandemic of 1957-58. This will make Covid-19 the worst pandemic in over a century, exceeded only by the estimated 40-70 million deaths during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19.

News regarding the emergence of a new viral disease in China started filtering in as early as in December 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic arguably started sometime around early March 2020, when there were few Covid-19 deaths outside China. It then spread rapidly, first to Europe, and then across the Atlantic to the Americas.

The number of Covid-19 infections and deaths are the two variables most commonly used to compare the incidence of Covid-19 across space and time. The reliability of both sets of data varies considerably from country to country. Counting the number of infections in each country, and then making cross-country comparisons, is more problematic because the incidence and criteria of testing varies enormously. In contrast, howsoever flawed, reported Covid-19 mortality remains the single most reliable criteria to make cross-country comparisons.

Covid-19 mortality in deaths per million (to control for population differences) has been aggregated through snapshots taken at six-week intervals beginning March 6, 2020, to track the spread and intensity of the pandemic across space and time (see table). Data for 27 major countries has been classified into the East Atlantic, West Atlantic and South and East Asia—these countries together account for 68% of the global population and 83% of all Covid-19 deaths.

The last six-week interval saw the largest number of Covid-19 deaths per million (52) globally. This rate has risen in each successive six-week interval, except that ending July 21, when it appeared that the pandemic might be receding. It is now clear that the pandemic is still in the expanding mode. The significance of the breakthrough in Covid-19 vaccines must be seen against this backdrop. Help might be on its way, but things are likely to get worse before they get better.

The winter second wave is still basically a European phenomenon. Covid-19 mortality in Europe showed a sharp fall during the last few intervals, before the resurgence in the six weeks beginning September 5, and a further acceleration over the last six weeks. The table indicates that Covid-19 mortality in Europe during the second wave is significantly higher than during the first phase. The Americas, on the other hand, have shown a consistently high mortality of above 150 in each

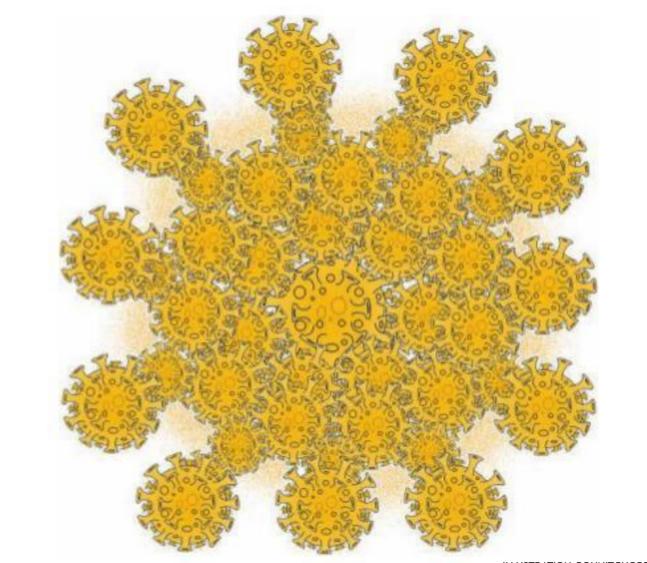


ILLUSTRATION: ROHNITH PHORE

ALOK SHEEL

The author is RBI Chair Professor, ICRIER



COVID-19 SECOND WAVE

A winter surge

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of the last five intervals. Overall mortality in the Americas is still much higher than in Europe. Covid-19 deaths have declined in Asia during the last six weeks.

The pandemic so far is primarily a transatlantic phenomenon. The Americas and Europe together account for 77% of

deaths globally, even though they hold just 23% of the global population. Covid-19 mortality in these regions currently averages 550-750 per million, compared to 65 in Asia and 40 in Africa.

Asia's figures are inflated by the relatively higher mortality in West Asia, and

in India, and Africa's by the high mortality in South Africa. India accounts for over 75% of Covid-19 deaths in South and East Asia taken together, and its Covid-19 mortality of 100 per million is twice that of any other country in this region. It is also the only country outside the Americas (the US, Brazil and Mexico) where Covid-19 deaths exceed 100,000. The good news, however, is that Indian Covid-19 mortality during the last six weeks was at half the level of the preceding six weeks.

If India is excluded, Asia's death rate falls to 50 and Africa's to 25. Asia's death rate would fall further if only South and East Asia were considered, as Covid-19 mortality in West and Central Asia that adjoin Europe and the Atlantic system is much higher—although still lower than European levels. Asia's death rate would then be comparable to Africa's.

China's official Covid-19 mortality figures are puzzling. Following the initial high mortality, the number has remained frozen at 4,634 since April 2020, which is difficult to believe. But China's economic recovery is nothing short of remarkable. It is the only major economy that will not shrink in 2020. It is also on track to recoup all the output lost on account of Covid-19, with its GDP next year expected to be at the level forecast before the Pandemic. A V-shaped recovery can only occur if conditions are back to near-normal.

The sharp difference in Covid-19 mortality, by a factor of over 10, between the transatlantic region and Africa and Asia is even more startling when one considers that the transatlantic region is on the whole more advanced technologically, richer, and with better healthcare systems. The G7 countries, the most advanced, best governed and prosperous globally, with half of global GDP at nominal prices, and one-third at purchasing power parity, have just 10% of the global population. However, they account for a third of all Covid-19 deaths.

In these circumstances, the finger of suspicion points to genetic differences as a major determinant of mortality. Is the Darwinian logic of natural selection at work? This can also explain the relatively higher mortality in India, which lies at the junction between the West and the East as it were, and has a greater intermingling of races than in other parts of Asia.

Since Covid-19 mortality is higher amongst the elderly, the higher median age in richer countries could also be a factor in greater mortality in Europe and the Americas. However, Japan, an aged and rich Asian country, has very low levels of Covid-19 mortality. Also, mortality in poorer and younger countries like Mexico in North America, and in South America, is very high. Median age can, therefore, at best, be a contributory rather than a determining factor.

Within the same region, differences in governance could also be a contributory factor. Populist leaders who discount science and do not adjust policies on the basis of fast-growing evidence and knowledge about Covid-19 transmission and prevention have generally fared badly. The US, under the whimsical President Donald Trump, and Brazil under the populist Jair Bolsonaro have fared poorly in the transatlantic. In Asia, countries like India and Iran have floundered. India's Covid-19 mortality and economic growth are out of sync with surrounding Asian levels. The collapse in growth is closer to Latin American levels where Covid-19 mortality is several times higher.

On the other hand, Germany has fared well by European standards. Indeed, several advanced countries with women leaders, such as New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Taiwan and Scotland, have done better than those governed by male leaders. They tend to be more empathetic and guided by science, and focus more on good housekeeping in governance rather than adopt a populist or muscular stance. The pandemic would hopefully assist women leaders to break a critical glass ceiling and take the world back to a semblance of normalcy.

NEW NORMAL

Rewriting the rules of business

RAJIV SABHARWAL

The author is MD & CEO at Tata Capital

Businesses have to be driven by tech, and creating digital assets is a must

WE HAVE COME a long way in our tryst with the pandemic. Over nine months, we have braved our way through the challenges and come to terms with the new way of living and working. Covid-19 has impaired economic growth; while the IMF's projections for India's economic outlook in the first quarter of FY21 depicted 9-10% contraction, it is our resolve to combat the situation that will help each one of us bounce back. I believe we will emerge stronger and better, with the effects of Covid-19 weaning off as we move on to Q4.

But what next?

India is not new to weathering crises. The Asian crisis of the 1990s, the global meltdown of 2007-08 or the more recent liquidity crisis all put businesses to test. Each brought a spectacular show of able leadership, resilience and determination that helped the economy bounce back. Given this learning set, how do we write the future on a new slate? How do we ensure businesses are better prepared?

Restore, rebuild and rethink

Restore: Reinstating the lost confidence in your people, preserve the interests of your business and its operations. The aim is to restore normalcy.

Rebuild: It's about managing the in-between phase of rebuilding what's lost and broken.

Rethink: Growth and business models need extraordinary thinking; after all, these are truly exceptional times.

Here are a few guiding points that can help businesses in their journey to adapt to the new normal:

Reset: This is the time every facet of the business will need a thorough re-evaluation. So, reassess your resources, relook at your priorities and change your plans suited to the current situation. The pandemic is here to stay for a while, so make the required adjustments so that the business is ready for a smooth sail. An example is how financial services companies shifted from only focusing on

growth and risk to costs and risk as a response to the initial lockdowns and the subsequent moratorium.

Investment in technology, analytics and digital: The pandemic has reinforced the fact that businesses have to be driven by technology and creating digital assets is a must. Also, companies will have to work towards creating and nurturing a data-driven environment. All this will help in more ways than one; from seeking new opportunities to grow to making faster decisions than ever before. Many industries have accelerated the shift to full-fledged digital delivery models. Take, for example, the education sector, where online platforms and apps are the new accepted modes for learning and teaching.

Engage with stakeholders: With digitisation, the world has become one whole ecosystem. Engage, speak and interact with your stakeholders, peers, government officials, employees and customers. Living in a collaborative environment will not only open new avenues, but also help each one traverse their own path successfully.

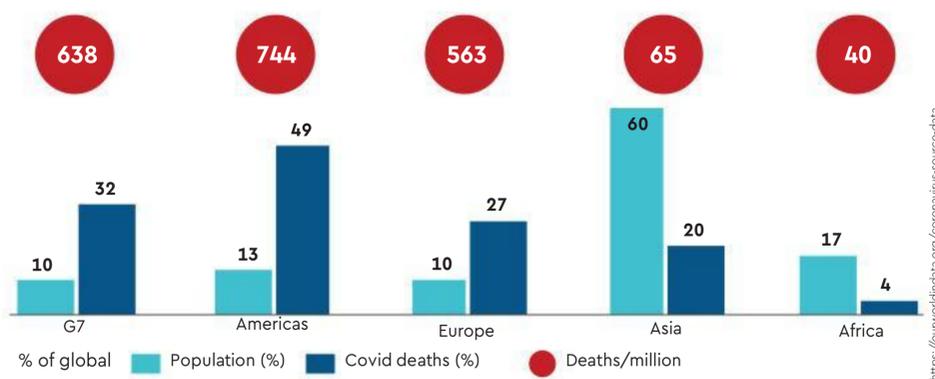
Empathy quotient: Customers in these times need more empathy than ever before. Listen to them more, offer support, show that you care, and this will go a long way. Rethink how you service your customer and do all that it takes to make your customer's life easy and hassle-free.

Be a student, always: Bring out the student in you—learn to unlearn and relearn to learn. The aim is to invest in yourself and the organisation you serve. Today, with the plethora of remote learning options, one can keep learning anytime and anywhere. Companies, too, are playing their role well and are encouraging their people to upskill and adapt to the changing dynamics.

A crisis or a tough situation usually has a hidden opportunity somewhere; this is a good time to seek one. Reimagine what will drive sustainable growth for your organisation and how businesses can create value in the new world order.

Companies will have to work towards creating and nurturing a data-driven environment

Timeline:	Population million	Deaths	Deaths/million	Deaths per million during six-weekly interval (date/month)					
				6/3-20/5	20/4-6/7	6/6-21/8	21/7-5/10	5/9-21/11	21/10-6/12
East Atlantic	655	3,57,803	546	146	104	35	17	50	194
West Atlantic	888	7,37,687	831	53	158	154	169	144	153
Asia	3,682	1,81,280	49	1	3	8	12	16	9
World	7,718	15,33,688	199	21	30	28	32	35	52



https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-source-data

BE IT THE corporate world or the government, effecting change is difficult. Remember Ratan Tata's battles with Russi Mody etc when he sought to give all group companies a common identity, amongst others?

Status quo creates vested interests, and Punjab is no different. There is a political angle to these protests, if only the government was proactive. Read 'This is about politics, not farmers rights' in FE, December 1' (bit.ly/2JIY2ow).

Those who believe the Centre should have spoken to farmers before introducing the farm Bills are mistaken. This is an all-India and not a Punjab-specific Bill.

Farmers fail to see that Punjab needs a second Green Revolution. Do they know that, according to a draft report of the Central Ground Water Board (North-Western region), Punjab will be rendered a desert within 25 years if the exploitation of its underground water resources continues at the current rate? (bit.ly/3oLbMyf).

Next, Indian governments do not have a tradition of speaking with the people of India before effecting change. Did PV Narasimha Rao do so before introducing the 1991 reforms? Or did Sonia Gandhi speak to states before introducing the Right to Education Act? In a democracy people elect leaders to take decisions in the country's interest. If the decision is anti-people, the government is voted out.

In the UK, former Prime Minister David Cameron forgot this when he called for Brexit referendum. The public voted for exiting the European Union without knowing the pros and cons of being part of

How can the BJP effect change

A vigorous outreach programme is needed. The BJP does a good job during elections. It needs to replicate the effort whilst effecting change

SANJEEV NAYYAR

The author is a chartered accountant and founder of www.esamskriti.com



the EU. This information and intellect, an elected government is supposed to have. Having said that, it is incumbent on the management or government to convince stakeholders on the need for change and the quality of their ideas.

Here, the Centre could have done better; for example, has it told the citizens that the gap between the outstanding cash credit limit (provided by banks to state government to fund procurement) and the value of physical stocks with agencies was ₹31,000 crore? (bit.ly/2JCGniB). Or that large farms in Punjab are also managed by a *thekedar* (contractor) who takes a *theka* (contract) of growing produce, with the farmer receiving net proceeds (no

incentive to compete or change), or the current system allows rice/wheat from Uttar Pradesh/Bihar to be sold in Punjab/Haryana *mandis* and shared a report comparing quality of wheat procured in Punjab versus Madhya Pradesh?

So, how could the government have effected change?

Through numerous articles (English and Punjabi) the Centre could have built a case for change. They could also have exposed the politician-buying agent-*mandi* boss nexus. The problem is a strong perception that the state government wants status quo-vote bank politics. Knowing this, the Centre should have:

► Formed a crack team of communica-



High Commissions in the UK and Canada where Sikhs are a vote bank.

This process prevents misinformation, makes all speak in one voice, exposes protestors and unreasonableness of their demands. Having a good idea is great, but it has to be sold, only then will there be a buy-in by the stakeholders.

Since there is a possibility of foreign governments trying to inflame emotions, the Ministry of Home Affairs must track protests 24x7. The MHA could identify key protestors in advance and share the FAQ. Ditto with public influencers.

In short, what is required is a vigorous outreach programme. The BJP does a good job during elections. It needs to replicate the effort whilst effecting change. For how long can the BJP depend on its supporters to defend its moves?

Nevertheless, some may still protest with intent to create public unrest or for political reasons. The government must check if such protestors are Indian citizens and their income-tax returns. If they are in business, what is the legal structure? Has their company received foreign direct investment or foundation donations from abroad, plus have they incorporated business entities outside India?

This way, the government can be on top of the situation. It also prevents derailing the key issue—for example, some have converted the farmer issue into a Hindu-Sikh one.

In addition, since India has to effect significant change, it might be useful if the government puts IAS officers and politicians through change management programmes.