



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Covid 21 months after it struck: Is it a replay of the Spanish Flu?

The current pandemic's pattern echoes the one a century ago, though it's far less lethal and the global context differs vastly



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The pandemic's disproportionate toll

Official mortality data shows that Europe and the Americas have been hit significantly harder than other parts of the world.

	Timeline	Global	15 European group	10 Americas	7 South & East Asia
Population share	2020	69%	10.2%	12%	47.4%
Covid deaths	6 Dec 2021	5,276,788	1,429,916	2,288,861	701,088
	% of global	100	27	43	13
Deaths per million during 6-weekly intervals					
	6 Mar-20 Apr	21	131	53	1
	20 Apr-6 Jun	30	94	179	3
	6 Jun-21 Jul	28	32	173	8
	21 Jul-5 Sep	32	19	185	12
	5 Sep-21 Oct	35	54	151	16
	21 Oct-6 Dec	51	227	153	9
	6 Dec-21 Jan	73	249	270	8
	21 Jan-6 Mar	66	208	297	6
	6 Mar-21 Apr	60	176	269	11
	21 Apr-6 Jun	88	134	254	50
	6 Jun-21 Jul	53	64	193	29
	21 Jul-5 Sep	39	66	96	20
	5 Sep-21 Oct	65	156	209	12
	21 Oct-6 Dec	43	200	95	6
	Total	683	1,810	2,578	191

Source: Worldometer

SATISH KUMAR/MINT

The accompanying table has aggregated official mortality trends of 32 major countries, accounting for about 70% of the global population and 85% of covid deaths, as recorded, at six weekly intervals since the beginning of the covid pandemic from around March 2020. Analysing these trends, this writer had concluded at the end of July 2021 that the pandemic appeared to be either petering out or a third wave was still to manifest itself. Covid mortality had declined across the board, but not for the first time. Europe and Asia had already had two distinct waves of the pandemic, whereas the Americas had had an extended first wave.

This was around the time the Delta variant of the Sars-CoV-2 virus was generating global fear, and the Omicron strain had not even evolved. How things panned out?

By September 2021, mortality had risen again on both sides of the Atlantic. Europe was in the throes of a third wave, and the Americas in their second. The second wave is now rapidly waning in the Americas, and mortality continues to drop in Asia, even as the third wave is yet to peak in Europe.

Where might things go from here? This is difficult to predict. Not only do we still not know enough about the coronavirus, but viruses in general remain a continuing puzzle for science. There is still no consensus on whether viruses, which can survive for extended periods in a dormant state, are a form of life or not. Apart from their zombie-like existence, they tend to mutate rapidly, so vaccines offered only limited protection that often wanes over time. Sars-CoV-2 has mutated repeatedly, which can be ascribed partly to global vaccine inequality that makes it hard to stamp out the pandemic. The best health care systems have struggled. Unusually, mortality is much higher in advanced countries than in Africa. Within Africa, the relatively prosperous South Africa has higher mortality than the poorer parts.

What we do know about viruses is that they tend to be very lethal or highly infectious, but not both. However, every now and then, an extremely transmissible virus comes along that's also deadly, such as during the Spanish Flu pandemic a century ago. If it is difficult to predict the future trajectory of the ongoing covid pandemic, might the experience of the Spanish Flu provide pointers?

Some pointers are superficial. Despite the name, Spain was not the epicentre of the Spanish Flu, and covid mortality is not very high in China, from where the virus is widely believed to have originated. But the covid outbreak so far has broadly tracked the course of the Spanish Flu. Like the latter, covid has had a deadly second wave, followed by successively less lethal waves. The

Spanish Flu petered out over time without really going away. While the initial mutations were deadly—hence the lethal second wave—they became milder over time. The long-term objective of viruses is to thrive within their hosts and not mutually assured destruction. Omicron may well turn out to be the barking dog that did not bite.

The US, the wealthiest country in the world, has had very high relative mortality, just as it did during the Spanish Flu. Its serving presidents were infected on both occasions, which may have altered the course of history. Woodrow Wilson staunchly opposed the Treaty of Versailles until he was debilitated by the flu, following which he ceased to be an active player at the Potsdam negotiations. The Treaty paved the way for the rise of Hitler and World War II. Trump's inept handling of covid turned the electoral tide against him in the 2020 White House race that he had appeared to be winning, marking a major defeat for a rampant American All Right movement.

The world has changed greatly since the days of the Spanish Flu. Though viruses remain mysterious, the vastly improved quality of healthcare since has reduced mortality. The consensus estimate of aggregate global mortality is around 20 million for the Spanish Flu, compared to about 5 million so far for covid. Controlling for the population base effect translates into mortality of just 7 per 1,000, compared to about 100 for the Spanish Flu. The rapid spread of the internal combustion

engine and jet travel has vastly increased human mobility. A virus can now get transported across the globe within hours, rendering border controls ineffectual. Denser urban populations compound the problem, especially in poorer countries where lockdowns amplify physical proximity instead of attenuating it. The reason why the Spanish Flu spread rapidly despite the relatively backward state of transport at the time was the unusually large cross-border (indeed transcontinental) troop movements facilitated by various states at the tail end of World War I. This is the reason why India suffered very high mortality from the Spanish Flu. These troops then travelled back home to the interiors. This time around too, India, along with Indonesia, has the highest pandemic mortality rate in south and east Asia.

The communication and information revolution has spawned a vibrant civil society and social media. A pandemic is fertile ground for the spread of false information quickly and globally, causing outbreaks of mass anxiety and depression, and copy-cat policy responses, leading to policy mistakes that can aggravate underlying problems. Our acceptance of illness and death is far less than was the case a century ago, when public health infrastructure did not exist and the deaths of those aged 40-50 in war or from illness were seen as painful but tolerable acts of God. The prospect of dying even at an older stage of life is much more intolerable now.

QUICK READ

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Obstacles that women entrepreneurs continue to face

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Women have been at the receiving end of several atrocities since the beginning of time. The fight for gender equality came into being not more than a couple of centuries ago, and even though the movement has been roaring in most corners of the world now, we are far from the desired reality. It is true that women have come a long way since when the movements began but, gender discrimination and misogyny unfortunately still exist.

Women of today have proven themselves in all fields, including those heavily dominated by men. However, even in today's day and age, women rarely achieve victory without facing numerous challenges of gender-based and other related social biases. Some of the obstacles that women commonly encounter, especially in a male-dominated field of human endeavour, are as follows:

Societal biases on capabilities: It goes without saying that society holds certain biases in the commonly assumed capabilities of pro-

ponents of different genders. Women have historically been viewed as the "weaker sex", as people in need of protection, as opposed to men who have traditionally been characterized as protectors and defenders. While it cannot be denied that men and women are physiologically wired differently, which does make men physically stronger in usual circumstances, a serious problem arises when this general phenomenon is taken as the gospel truth. Even if an average man is physically stronger than an average woman, this does not mean that all men are stronger than all women. Nor does it justify assuming that every woman is physically fragile or that all men are 'strong', for that matter.

Another problem emerges when biology is used to assess the cerebral capacities of women. One long-standing perception has been that men are wired to be more logical, while women are more likely to be empathetic, which is touted as justification for women being seen as 'fit' for a certain set of professions limited by that understanding. While this argument may seem smart to some on the surface, it makes little sense when it is used to bar women from entering certain fields based on average estimates drawn from psychological observations.

Familial constraints: If society stands against women pursuing careers in male-dominated fields, then, well, the families of these women may harbour the same notions, as they are also constituents of the same social set-up. Unfortunately, even though a lot of women have the potential as well as ambition to make it to the top in arenas that are usually dictated by a stark male presence, they are often denied their dreams by the patriarchal construct of society.

Several underlying biases and even concerns as to how "our daughters" would sustain themselves in an acutely male-inclined field have been known to cloud the judgement of families, some of which then try to curb the wishes of women aspirants. This phenomenon, in turn, spells feminine drought in many such domains, which only worsens gender inequalities.

Restricted access to funds: As established,

women have been discriminated against on several fronts for a long time, and this discrimination does not cease even after a woman has entered and made her mark in a male-dominated profession. It is not unheard of for women entrepreneurs to be denied basic enablers such as easy access to funds and sponsorships. A lot of people, even in today's times, have reservations about women's capabilities in the field of finance. This bias exists as finance was traditionally a male-dominated area, given its 'logical' basis.

This bias dates back centuries to a period when the world was extremely backward in terms of scientific research on whether women's capabilities could actually be judged through the yardsticks in popular use. Most studies were heavily infected by sorry notions of patriarchy, and sadly, some of these continue to cloud the prospects of ambitious women in male-dominated sectors such as business.

Lack of networks and mentors: According to a research study: "People with experience mentor and give money to people like themselves, while those starting out do what they see people like themselves doing." With fewer female business founders, the pool of women who can mentor and advise fellow entrepreneurs is consequently smaller. One of the major barriers to startups is a lack of role models for women, who tend to feel very lonely. This makes it harder for enterprising women to learn from their peers and tap the help of those who have been there, done that. It is also harder for women to maximize the value of a business network, because networking has traditionally been done in male-centric groups and organizations.

To sum up, across the world, women have been fighting against widespread gender discrimination for a considerable period of time now. Even after centuries of struggle marked by gains made in terms of empowerment, women continue to face undeniably taxing struggles in all fields of life and work, especially those that have long—and irrationally—been considered the preserve of men. The patriarchy that has prevailed is far from over and this impacts the world of business in ways we cannot overlook.

India seems likely to grow old before it can become wealthy

The country's demographic challenge has been entirely transformed



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Our population is set to peak and start declining sooner than we had expected

By the middle of this century, India will have 1.6 billion people. That's when the country's population will finally start to decline, ending up at perhaps a billion by 2100. While that is still around 250 million more people than China will have then, every time India's population is projected, its peak seems to come earlier and crest lower. While India will be a young country for decades yet, it is ageing faster than expected. The latest round of India's massive National Family Health Survey (NFHS) underscores the point. The average Indian woman is now likely to have only two children. That's below the "replacement rate" of 2.1, at which the population would exactly replace itself over generations.

A few decades ago, this would have been considered miraculous in a country dismissed as a Malthusian nightmare. As modern health care became increasingly available after independence in 1947, population growth exploded—rising from 1.26% annually in the 1940s to 2% in the 1960s. Twenty years after independence, the demographer Sriprati Chandrashekhar became India's health minister and warned that "the greatest obstacle in the path of overall economic development is the alarming rate of population growth." The India in which I grew up was plastered with the inverted red triangle of the government's family planning campaign.

As it turned out, increasing prosperity, decreases in infant mortality—and crucially—female education and empowerment achieved more than government propaganda ever could. In urban India, the fertility rate is now 1.6, according to the NFHS, equivalent to that of the US. This is good news. But unalloyed good news is rare in India and this is no exception. The unexpected speed of the demographic transition has forced India to confront a new problem.

China-watchers have long debated whether that country will grow old before it gets rich. India now has to answer that same question, with far fewer resources at its disposal.

Draconian though China's one-child policy was, those born under it received unprecedented attention from their families. Average education levels rose sharply, as did the quality of their nutrition. In India, by contrast, the NFHS shows that not only is child malnutrition high, it is not improving fast enough. In fact, in the five years after 2015-16, acute undernourishment actually worsened for children in most parts of India.

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