



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# The swan song of coronavirus is audible in an ebbing third wave

Its declining danger tracks the last pandemic closely with infections getting milder as mutants and hosts adapt to coexist



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**The Lockdown**  
*The Corona Virus is strange,  
It has a variable range,  
Dangerous in the way it spreads,  
And in mysterious ways it abides,  
In primary schools it breeds,  
But in grocery stores it dies,  
It spreads when buying clothes at malls,  
And multiplex cinema halls,  
It is non-alcoholic, it  
Cannot spread through beer or spirit,  
Although it lurks in drinking bars,  
While three persons are safe in cars,  
Should you another dare to add,  
It drives corona very mad,  
Weddings with fifty are koshier,  
One more is a party pooper  
On Amazon boxes it lies,  
On takeaway coffee it dies,  
Politics too does Covid play,  
Those in mass rallies get away,  
While it takes mass protests to task,  
Spurred is the leader without mask,  
To playing fields and gyms it flies,  
But in bakery shops it dies,  
Fast food workers and bank tellers  
Cannot spread it, unlike barbers,  
Coaches and masseurs Covid kicks,  
Not TV and fridge mechanics  
Covid is also time savvy  
10 to 5 AM most deadly  
Businesses can create mayhem  
If they don't close by 6 PM  
Clear is it that none can escape  
Corona's whimsical embrace  
The bureaucrat's rule making skill  
Even Corona cannot kill.*

It is said that swans sing before they die. The ebbing third wave of the pandemic, with the highly infectious but far less lethal Omicron mutant, might well be the swan song of covid. This is despite the fact that at its third-wave peak (around 20 January 2022), daily new cases touched 3.8 million globally. At the height of the deadly second wave (around 20 April 2022), these were far lower, at around 0.9 million. Also, while peak daily mortality during the second wave (about 17,000) was higher around the world, it was by no means low (3,000) during the third wave. That said, if one were to divide peak daily deaths by peak new cases, you get a peak mortality of just 3.4 per 1,000 during the third wave, compared to 190 per 1,000 at the height of the second wave. One can, therefore, conclude that while the third wave has been over four times as infectious as the second wave, it's 56 times less lethal.

The accompanying table analyses coronavirus data at six-weekly intervals since the start of the pandemic (*bit.ly/3oRsqfO*) for 32 major countries that together account for 69% of the world's

## A global scourge that's on its way out

Deaths across the world have fallen sharply with Transatlantic countries having recorded the worst tolls.

	Timeline	Global	15 European group	10 Americas	7 South & East Asia
<b>Population share</b>	2020	69%	10.2%	12%	47.4%
<b>Covid deaths</b>	6 Mar 2022	6,015,754	1,687,836	2,569,019	762,705
	% of global	100	28	43	13
<b>Deaths per million during 6-weekly intervals</b>	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-6 Sep	39	66	96	20
	6 Sep-21 Oct	65	156	209	12
	21 Oct-6 Dec	43	200	95	6
6 Dec-21 Jan	41	171	113	5	
21 Jan-6 Mar	54	156	202	12	
<b>Total</b>		<b>778</b>	<b>2,137</b>	<b>2,893</b>	<b>208</b>

Source: Worldometer  
SATISH KUMAR/MINT

population and about 85% of all recorded covid deaths. A data analysis reveals three major pandemic trends that are unlikely to change much.

First, global covid mortality exceeds 6 million now, with the US death toll at around a million, and that in Brazil and India above half a million each. Another 14 countries have recorded deaths in excess of 100,000, all in Transatlantic countries, except for Indonesia. There are, however, likely to be subsequent revisions of mortality data on account of undercounting/reporting.

Second, the pandemic has centred on the Transatlantic, with the 25 countries (West and Central Asia included) adjoining the two seaboard of the Atlantic Ocean that have just 22.2% of the world population accounting for 71% of all deaths. By contrast, the global share of the seven South and East Asian countries (China and India included) that account for over 47% of the global population is just 13%. Of this, 68% of the deaths recorded are in India. Africa was minimally impacted, except for South Africa and northern countries near the Mediterranean Sea (part of the Atlantic system).

Third, the pandemic has had three major waves so far, with the second wave the most lethal. This is not clearly discernible in the global numbers because these peaked at different times (as highlighted) across the three regions. There could be more and increasingly benign waves.

There is much about viruses that remains to be uncovered by science. The debate on whether they are living things or not is still not settled. While antibodies can 'kill' viruses, several others survive and can remain dormant for unknown durations, turning active again once conditions are favourable. For

this reason, some cosmologists believe that life on earth, and perhaps elsewhere in the universe, was seeded by viruses, possibly through comets.

It is, therefore, difficult to be absolutely certain about where we might go from here. A pattern of virus pandemics is nevertheless evident. Viruses that are highly infectious, such as the common cold, are rarely lethal. Those that are, are rarely too infectious. But every now and then, perhaps once a century, you get a virus that is both highly infectious and lethal, like the one that caused Spanish Flu in the last century and covid today.

The virus mutates at a pace unparalleled in the living world. After causing high mortality initially, later-generation mutants tend to become more and more benign, as the virus and its host learn to coexist peacefully and the host develops new antibodies. This is what happened to the Spanish Flu and covid too seems headed in a similar direction.

Both infections and deaths from the third wave have been falling sharply globally after peaking in the second half of January. This points to the end of the most serious phase of the pandemic,

although there could be relatively benign subsequent waves, indistinguishable from seasonal flu.

So even as we continue to take necessary precautions and follow mandated protocols, including vaccinations, and mourn the clear ones we lost in the deadliest phase of the pandemic, we can begin the year with cautious hope. Indeed, with the distance of time that insulates feeling from experience, we can begin to look back with a smile at the way we bumbled our way through a deadly virus about which everybody, including those tasked with protecting us, seemed clueless.

# Dropping SAT scores will give US colleges even more leeway

by League universities will get more space to admit who they want



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Harvard's admission preference policy has been challenged in court  
GETTY IMAGES

It is hard not to be cynical about college admissions. In the latest effort to encourage diversity at American colleges and universities, two Democrats in US Congress have introduced legislation to bar colleges that participate in the federal financial aid programme from considering 'legacy' status in deciding who gets in. As Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley, one of the co-sponsors, explained, "Selecting applicants to universities based off of family names, connections, or the size of their bank accounts creates an un-level playing field for students without those built-in advantages, especially impacting minority and first generation students."

But if we've learnt any lessons from the past quarter century, it should be that college officials will look for a way to skirt these restrictions, just as they have with laws limiting the use of race as a primary factor in admissions to favour some groups. Strategies designed to promote racial diversity can just as readily be used to provide cover for legacy admissions, whereby children or grandchildren of alumni or donors receive special preference. The current trend toward eliminating standardized tests and class rankings for purposes of diversity, or making those tests optional, gives schools even more leeway.

As measures of ability or promise become less objective, legacy students—just like all students with wealth and connections—will likely benefit by taking advantage of new rules. Of course, this is the reverse of what the sponsors of the congressional legislation intend. They would reject comparisons to ongoing lawsuits against Harvard and University of North Carolina that claim these universities have been discriminating against students in some racial groups at the expense of others.

The Supreme Court will hear arguments in these cases in October with a ruling expected next year. The court ruled in *Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke* (1978) that colleges could not use race as a primary factor in admissions, but only as a "plus factor." In *Grutter vs. Bollinger* (2003), the justices stipulated that the policy be "narrowly tailored."

The only way that plaintiffs in the two court cases might prove they had been discriminated against would be to examine the individual test scores and grade point averages of the various applicants to these schools. That is not readily done because those records are confidential and private.

But the plaintiffs claim that Asian American students in the Harvard case and Caucasian and Asian students in the University of

North Carolina suit who have test scores (as well as grades and extracurricular resumes) well above their average were turned down in favour of admitting African-American, Hispanic and Native American students whose SAT scores were below the average. Admissions officers have used vaguely worded tests of personality or character to boost the portfolios of students from favoured groups and scale back the records of students from others. Asian applicants argue that they tend to be greatly disfavoured by these subjective measures. The court will decide whether or not universities are allowed to tip the scales that way. The schools claim such measures are necessary if they are to admit diverse and balanced classes.

A parallel question for universities is about their "legacy" policies of admission. The stated idea is to encourage alumni loyalty and assist in raising funds. Even if such legacies were banned or discouraged due to outside pressures and attention, colleges will still be able to find ways to identify relatives of alumni or donors through essays, interviews, letters and recommendations.

Legacy students might be more likely to write an essay that mentions specific aspects of a school's history or campus traditions. They might be less likely to use a common application and more able to write a school-specific essay. They might also be more likely to visit in person and mention that they have parents who attended.

Legacies made up 15% of the 2019 Harvard class. If Harvard eliminated preferences based on race and legacy and for children of donors, faculty and staff, and gave a larger boost to socio-economically disadvantaged students of all races, legacies would have declined from 15% in the status quo to 4%, according to an expert report.

But the campaign against legacy admissions, thought to be an aspect of the push for diversity and against 'privilege', cannot be squared with efforts to get rid of standardized tests—since elimination of clear and reliable measures will give admissions officers more wiggle room to select the mix of students they want.

Whatever you want the next freshman class to look like, the only way to ensure accountability on the part of colleges is by insisting on measurable standards of academic performance. **BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

# It pays to recognize that we all have multiple identities

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The concept of multiple identities might be one of the most under-used human behaviour characteristics in policymaking and corporate strategies. Individuals have various identities, depending on their gender, religion, caste, ethnicity or nationality. These identities are mostly inherited at birth. Then there are identities that are acquired by the individual through education, political beliefs, and their professional and other accomplishments. These are conscious identities of the individual that are often known to others.

Like Russian dolls, every individual, at a non-conscious level. What is interesting is that some of these identities within a person can vary more than the identities of different people. For example, while going to sleep, there is a healthy-conscious identity that decides to set a wake-up alarm for a walk the next morning. But when this alarm rings, there is another identity that stretches a hand across to switch it off and urges us to sleep a

bit longer. This lazy identity that switches off the alarm is poles apart from the diligent health-conscious identity that set it the night before. Many of these non-conscious identities are difficult to decipher because they surface only in particular contexts.

Even though the existence of multiple identities is a well-established concept, most traditional discussions on human behaviour poo-pooed it. Consistency of behaviour, as determined by one's personality, was always considered the mark of a true human being. Those who displayed different identities at different times have long been dismissed as chameleons or two-faced. Such attempts to project a 'singular' conception of human identity onto everyone is not always driven by noble intentions.

Throughout history, various vested interests have tried to compartmentalize people based on a single identity factor. Almost always, the identity played up was one of many inherited identities, like nationality or religion. Playing up inherited identities is a binary game, where winners and losers are all decided even before the game begins, at birth. Those unlucky to be born into 'less privileged' identities have no escape route from their perceived low status. At the same time, those lucky to be born into 'privileged'

identities find different ways to hold on to their perceived 'superiority'. At the core of many recent controversies are attempts to define an individual's identity solely based on religion and use that single identity factor to override all other identities. This over-emphasis on a single identity across all facets of life can have disastrous consequences.

In recent years, there have been several studies that focused on the benefits of having multiple identities. Research by Sarah Gaither, an assistant professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, on a person's multiple identities has shown that thinking about one's self from the angle of multiple identities improves flexible social thinking and creativity. Other research projects have demonstrated that individuals who have spent time studying abroad in other cultural contexts than their own are more creative problem-solvers because they have added experience in reconciling different cultural identities and

social norms. Multiple social identities are also found to be positively correlated with better health and increased well-being in retirement, because they allow individuals to both give and receive social support.

According to the 'identity accumulation hypothesis', the more identities possessed by an actor, the less psychological distress s/he should exhibit.

Understanding multiple identities, more so our non-conscious ones, can provide significant insights for behavioural change programmes. For example, a leading bank was trying to get its loan defaulters to pay up their dues. Initial research among the bank staff led to realize that these loan defaulters, more so those who had not paid for more than six months, were treated very differently by the bank staff. With many of these defaulters not even willing to take phone calls from the bank, the staff perception that they were not their usual customers only got strengthened. The single identity that the bank staff had given

every defaulter was that of an absconding criminal. The tone of voice, language used by bank employees in their interactions and call-centre conversations with the defaulters reflected this perception.

But a deep dive into the multiple identities of defaulters threw up very interesting insights. Deep within most of them was an honest person who wanted to repay the money borrowed. But their present financial situation did not allow them to meet their regular-payment obligations. They wanted to pay intermittently. Yes, they avoided calls from the bank, but that was because they felt evaluated. Armed with the knowledge that there were honest individuals residing in defaulters, all further efforts at loan recovery were aimed at this upright identity of theirs. This led to a 20% increase in the collection of loan dues that had been pending for more than six months.

Every individual is a combination of multiple identities, both conscious and non-conscious. Depending on the context, one of them pops up. The more we understand the various identities of a person, the conversations and debates among these identities, the easier it will be to intervene in such self-conversations and debates. This is actually the crux of all behaviour-change strategies.