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10 pages in 1 section
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WORLD P6
FINAL PORSCHE 911 OF A GENERATION TO BE SOLD

WORLD P6
TRUMP: BIGGEST DECISION I HAVE EVER HAD TO MAKE



PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM BENGALURU, KOLKATA, MUMBAI AND NEW DELHI

COVID LED TO 4K-CR FRESH BAD LOANS ON OUR BOOKS: PNB MD

Punjab National Bank's (PNB's) integration with Oriental Bank of Commerce and United Bank of India came at a time when the country was under lockdown. On the eve of PNB's 126th Foundation Day, the bank's managing director and chief executive officer, **S S MALLIKARJUNA RAO**, tells **Somesh Jha** how coronavirus has impacted customer outreach programmes related to the amalgamation.



ECONOMY P4

Health insurance premiums set to rise

Health insurance premiums are set to rise as non-life insurance companies and standalone health insurance firms scurry to revamp their products to include the modifications mandated by the insurance regulator, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDAI). The rise in premiums could be in the range of 5-25 per cent, depending on the features that each insurance company adds.

► LIC CUSTOMERS GET MORE TIME TO PAY PREMIUM P5

CORONAVIRUS EFFECT P3

NBFCs may face more liquidity challenge

Non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), which are cash-strapped, are bracing for the challenge of repayments to banks in the absence of clarity on moratorium from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Banks are offering fresh credit at above 8 per cent while borrowing funds from the RBI comes at 4.4 per cent. NBFCs and housing finance companies have to give three-month moratorium to their consumers.

COMPANIES P2

Bengal Chemicals starts production of HCQ

Bengal Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals (BCPL), India's oldest pharmaceuticals company, said it had again obtained a licence from the Directorate of Drugs Control, West Bengal, to manufacture hydroxychloroquine (HCQ). Founded in 1892, BCPL had ceased producing HCQ decades ago because of cash constraints and labour issues. United States President Donald Trump had touted HCQ, an anti-malarial drug, as a game-changer in the fight against Covid-19.

COMPANIES P2

Wipro to start earnings season for IT industry

Wipro will kick-start the earnings season for the information technology industry next week. This had so far been done by its larger peers - Tata Consultancy Services and Infosys. Wipro will announce its fourth quarter results and annual financial statements on April 15.

IN DEPTH

The other front-line workers of the pandemic



Across India, grassroots workers engaged in developmental work have taken on the role of keeping rural communities safe, writes **VEENU SANDHU**

Apple, Google team up to 'contact trace' the virus



HOW THE TECH WORKS

- 1 After downloading the public health app, the user will have to permit it to collect anonymous data
- 2 When he/she meets a person, a record will be made
- 3 If a person updates his/her status as Covid +ve, the app shall update data on the cloud
- 4 Other people's app will check if they had met any Covid +ve person
- 5 If a match is found, the user will be alerted

JACK NICAS & DAISUKE WAKABAYASHI
California, 11 April

In one of the most far-ranging attempts to halt the spread of coronavirus, Apple and Google said they were building software into smartphones that would tell people if they were recently in contact with someone who was infected with it.

The technology giants said they were teaming up to release the tool within several months, building it into the operating systems of the billions of iPhones and Android devices around the world. That would enable the smartphones to constantly log

other devices they come near, enabling what is known as "contact tracing" of the disease. People would opt in to use the tool and voluntarily report if they became infected.

The unlikely partnership between Google and Apple, fierce rivals who rarely pass up an opportunity to criticise each other, underscores the seriousness of the health crisis and the power of the two companies whose software runs almost every smartphone in the world. Apple and Google said their joint effort came together in just the last two weeks.

Their work could prove to be

significant in slowing the spread of coronavirus. Public-health authorities have said improved tracking of infected people and their contacts could slow the pandemic, especially at the start of an outbreak, and such measures have been effective in places like South Korea that also conducted mass virus testing.

Yet two of the world's largest tech companies harnessing virtually all of the smartphones on the planet to trace people's connections raises questions about the reach these behemoths have into individuals' lives and society.

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PM hints at lockdown extension

Curbs likely till April 30; construction, farm, some industrial activity may begin

ARCHIS MOHAN & RUCHIKA CHITRAVANSHI
New Delhi, 11 April

On a day India witnessed its largest number of new coronavirus cases, the central government was set to extend on Saturday the nationwide lockdown by another two weeks, until April 30.

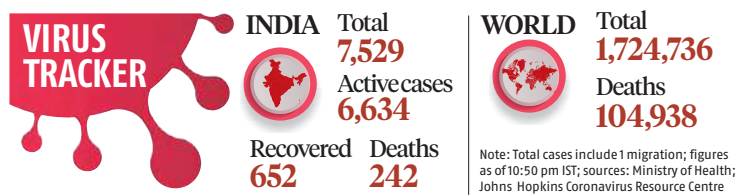
While a formal announcement was awaited, official sources said the second phase of the lockdown was likely to be less comprehensive than the first, and that agriculture, construction, and limited industrial activity would be permitted.

Maharashtra, however, didn't wait for the Centre's announcement and said it would extend the lockdown till at least April 30. Odisha and Punjab have already announced the extension.

Interacting with chief ministers via videoconferencing in his third such meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hinted at the need to strike a balance between saving lives and reviving economic activity.

According to a government statement, the PM underlined that the motto of the government earlier was "jaan hai to jahaan hai" — or the world exists if there is life. But it now is "jaan bhi jahaan bhi", he said. "Jaan bhi and jahaan bhi — a future where people care about both the aspects, follow their duties and abide by the directions of the government — will be important for India's prosperous and healthy future," the PM said, who was seen wearing a cotton scarf as a face cover, as were some of the chief ministers.

Modi said there seemed to be a consensus among the states on the extension of the lockdown by another two weeks. The chief ministers demanded a relief package, besides more financial, fiscal and media support from the Centre.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with chief ministers on the Covid-19 lockdown via videoconferencing, on Saturday

MINISTERS, SENIOR OFFICERS TO RESUME NORMAL WORK

All central ministers have been asked to resume work in ministries from Monday and put together plans for the post-lockdown period to kick-start the economy. Also, joint secretary and above rank officers will resume work in respective departments, sources said, adding that one-third of the essential staff members in every ministry need to be present.

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States want up to ₹10-trn package

States on Saturday demanded a package of up to ₹10 trillion from the Centre and dues such as compensation on account of goods and services tax (GST), besides front-loading grants to local bodies. They also wanted the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to go for deficit financing, which is printing notes, to help these packages.

During the virtual meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asked for a national economic relief package of ₹10 trillion, which can be disbursed to the states.

Funds from this can be used to fight the pandemic as well as support the states' economies.

Last month, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced a ₹1.70 trillion central package. However, Banerjee contended it was only 1 per cent of national GDP and the Centre needed to spend more. "Globally we are seeing Japan, the US, and others are spending much more in proportion to their GDP. India needs to do the same thing," she said. So far as her state was concerned, Banerjee pressed for a ₹25,000-crore special package.

She also asked the Centre to clear GST dues of ₹2,393 crore for the last four months of FY20, apart from pending dues of ₹36,000 crore and funds of ₹11,219 crore for the state. "There is no earning but only burning (expenses) now," she said. Additionally, she sought special relief measures like a loan-repayment moratorium.

Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrababhan Naidu urged the prime minister to announce a big economic package for the states. For this, he suggested the RBI do deficit financing by way of quantitative easing or printing currency notes to the extent of 5 per cent of GDP.

He asked the Centre to increase the states' borrowing limit (FRBM) limit to 5 per cent from the present 3 per cent. Citing the revenue loss, the chief minister asked the Union government to facilitate deferring loan instalments of states by at least six weeks.

Turn to Page 4

How Covid crisis is different from 2008 meltdown

It's been a sudden slump in economic activity, as against a slow burn then

KRISHNA KANT
Mumbai, 11 April

The decline in economic activity because of the Covid-19 lockdown is unprecedented in India's history. Its impact on the real or productive sectors of the economy is worse than what was witnessed in the aftermath of the 2008 Lehman crisis, which had reached its peak in the month of September 2008.

The collapse may appear similar in both cases, but the reality is different. The 2008 economic crisis was a slow burn, and events, including macroeconomic developments, played out over months, while this time it is a sudden dip in economic activity after the lockdown was announced on March 24. This comes out most clearly in the dip in electricity generation and passenger vehicle sales where the impact has been immediate.

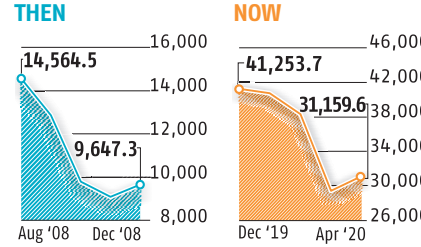
For example, daily average electricity generation declined from an average of around 3,800 million units (MU) in the first half of March 2020 to around 2,800 MU after March 24, a 26 per cent decline, according to the data from the National Load Despatch Centre. In contrast, electricity generation was flat even at the height of the Lehman crisis in September and October 2008, as there was no interruption in economic activity.

The 2008 crisis had led to a decline in car sales in the December 2008 quarter, but sales recovered fairly quickly. In comparison, passenger car sales were down 51 per cent year-on-year in March 2020 and 47 per cent on month-on-month basis — one of the sharpest decline ever.

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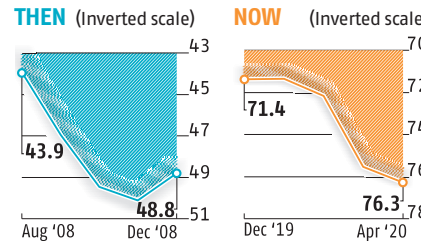
MARKET MOVEMENT

The fall of the Sensex has been too sharp and sudden this year



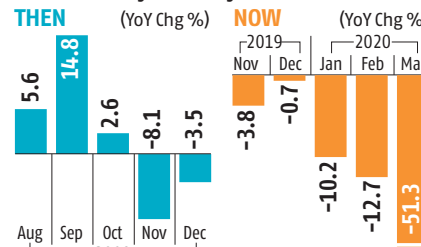
RUPEE vs DOLLAR

The domestic currency has not declined as much as it did in 2008



MONTHLY TREND IN PASSENGER VEHICLE SALES

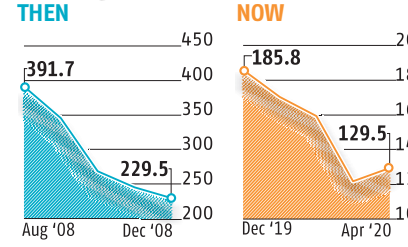
Car sales have halved year-on-year in March 2020



Sources: Reserve Bank of India, Bloomberg, National Load Despatch Centre, Central Electricity Authority, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers, Compiled by BS Research Bureau

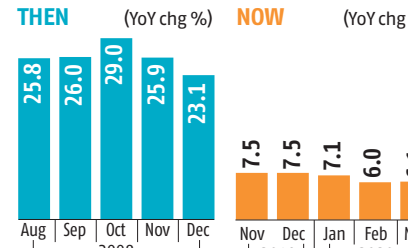
THOMSON REUTERS/ CORE COMMODITY INDEX

Commodity futures have tumbled amid oil volatility



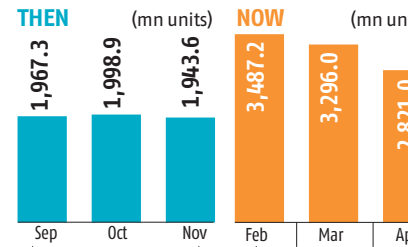
GROWTH IN BANK'S NON-FOOD CREDIT

Growth had been declining in the recent past, has fallen further



POWER GENERATION

While it has plunged sharply now, it was largely flat during the 2008 crisis



Highway work in safe zones likely to be exempted

MEGHA MANCHANDA
New Delhi, 11 April

Construction of highways is likely to be exempted even as the country gears up for another two weeks of lockdown. The decision is being taken after several districts asked the central government to allow construction of roads as it's essential for any economy, according to officials.

"Some districts have said that areas which are away from urban centres and where there have been minimal to zero Covid-19 cases may be exempted from the lockdown and construction activity should be allowed," a person in the know told *Business Standard*.

Construction of Maharashtra Samruddhi Mahamarg — the state's marquee expressway connecting Mumbai and Nagpur—is believed to be among the projects to be exempted from the lockdown. Once constructed, the eight-lane expressway would be 701 kilometre long. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) are also in discussion with many states to evaluate the situation.

According to an official, some states and districts had sought permission to start road construction work where the density of population was low.

Reviving construction activity would also ensure some livelihood for migrant workers who have been jobless ever since the coronavirus-triggered lockdown began in March.

In a video press conference after a meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with all states, Pudukcherry chief minister V Narayanasamy spoke of restarting the construction activity. He said the PM had given an assurance that guidelines would be issued for restarting the construction industry in a graded manner. The government proposed to segregate the construction industry into green, orange and red zones, he said while quoting the PM.

Experts believe that even though every infrastructure project is a priority, widening and expansion of existing roads may get precedence.

Beginning work on those projects would be easier considering they would not require large amounts of land to start work.



Reviving construction activity would ensure some livelihood for migrant workers who have been jobless since the lockdown began in March

IN BRIEF

Trai recommends making STB interoperability mandatory

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) on Saturday recommended that all DTH and cable set-top-boxes (STBs) provided to the customers must support interoperability, and urged the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to make it mandatory by introducing the requisite provisions. Interoperable STBs will allow consumers to change their DTH operator without buying a new set-top box. Presently the STBs deployed in the Cable TV networks are non-interoperable — the same STB cannot be used interchangeably across the different service providers. Trai also recommended the mandatory provisioning of USB port-based common interface for all digital television sets in India. **PTI**

Luxury home sales remain muted, shows report

Real estate developers have been able to sell only 45 per cent of luxury homes (priced above ₹3 crore) launched during the last three years, with investors still shying away from putting money in premium properties due to lower returns, according to PropTiger data. Housing brokerage firm PropTiger reported that only 5,926 luxury units have been sold till January this year, out of the 13,290 homes launched by developers across nine major cities during the last three calendar years. **PTI**

Production of cooking oil down 40%: Adani Wilmar

Adani Wilmar on Saturday said production of cooking oils has declined by 40 per cent due to labour shortage in the current lockdown, resulting in tight supplies of the essential commodity. Sales of cooking oils too have fallen 25 per cent with closure of all hotels, restaurants and cafeterias amid lockdown, said Anshu Mallick, deputy CEO of Adani Wilmar. **PTI**

Lupin contributes ₹21 cr for Covid-19 relief efforts

Pharma major Lupin on Saturday announced contribution of ₹21 crore for relief efforts directed towards mitigating the Covid-19 crisis. Lupin's employees have given their two days' salaries, together contributing a sum of ₹5.5 crore to the PM CARES Fund, the company said. **PTI**

Fino Payments Bank logs 80% fall in local remittances

Fino Payments Bank said it had seen an 80 per cent decline in domestic remittances volume as migrant workers returned to their homes following closure of small businesses due to the nationwide lockdown. The payments bank sees average monthly remittances of close to ₹5,000 crore from daily wage earners. **PTI**

Flipkart, Tata team up to deliver essentials

Distributors of Tata group firms will list on Flipkart as marketplace sellers

PEERZADA ABRAR
Bengaluru, 11 April

E-commerce firm Flipkart joined hands with Tata Consumer Products to provide its customers access to essential food and beverage products, in the wake of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) outbreak.

As a part of this, distributors of the Tata group companies will list themselves on Flipkart as marketplace sellers. Consumers can use the Flipkart to buy different combo packs of essential products such as beverages (Tata Tea and Coffee) and foods (Tata Sampann spices, pulses, and nutri mixes) offered by Tata Consumer Products.

"The synergies and capabilities of both Tata Consumer and Flipkart are complementary and we are proud to enable an alternative business channel built on our marketplace model to deliver great value to consumers in these times of crisis," said Kalyan Krishnamurthy, chief executive officer of Flipkart Group.

"Tata Consumer Products is committed to ensuring the availability of our beverage and food brands to consumers across India, during this difficult time. This partnership with Flipkart provides an innovative way to set up a strong alternative distribution channel through our wide network," said Sunil D'Souza, managing director and chief executive officer, Tata Consumer Products.

Flipkart's marketplace supply chain will fulfil the orders by picking up these combinations from Tata



THE PARTNERSHIPS

- Consumers can buy combo packs such as Tata Tea and Coffee and Tata Sampann spices, pulses, and nutri mixes
- The partnership is already operational in Bengaluru and will be expanded to Mumbai, Delhi and tier-2 cities
- Flipkart's marketplace supply chain will fulfil the orders by picking up these

combinations from Tata Consumer's distributors

Flipkart had also announced a pilot programme with Spencers to introduce hyperlocal deliveries of groceries and essentials in Hyderabad

Earlier, BigBasket partnered with Uber to help in delivery of essential items



CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Consumer's distributors and delivering those to customers using its network of delivery executives. The partnership is already operational in Bengaluru, and the companies plan to expand these facilities in Mumbai and Delhi in the coming week and tier-2 cities in the future.

This week, Flipkart also announced a pilot programme with retail chain Spencers to introduce hyperlocal deliveries of groceries and essentials in Hyderabad.

Tata Consumer Products, part of Tata group, was formed in February this year following the merger of Tata Global Beverages and the consumer products business of Tata Chemicals.

E-commerce companies have been exploring unique models to ensure business continuity amid the

21-day nationwide lockdown imposed by the government to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Earlier, BigBasket partnered with Uber to help in delivery of essential items, while Grofers said it had hired about 2,000 people from industries that have been deeply impacted by the current crisis.

E-commerce companies have struggled to deliver orders after the lockdown was imposed on March 24. Even though the government allowed delivery of essential goods including food, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment through e-commerce platforms, players faced hiccups initially.

The surge in orders also disrupted operations for these companies. Players have now started resuming operations across various cities, clearing pending orders before accepting new ones.

With additional inputs from PTI

Bengal Chemicals restarts producing HCQ after decades

AVISHEK RAKSHIT
Kolkata, 11 April

Bengal Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals (BCPL), India's oldest pharmaceuticals company, is back in the spotlight because of surging demand for hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), the most sought-after drug in the treatment of Covid-19.

Founded in 1892, BCPL, which once used to manufacture HCQ, ceased to produce the anti-malarial drug decades ago because of cash constraints and labour issues.

The company has once again obtained a license from the Directorate of Drugs Control, West Bengal, to begin manufacturing of the drug that US President Donald Trump has touted as a game-changer in the fight against Covid-19.

However, BCPL — the only central public sector enterprise (CPSE) that can manufacture HCQ and other anti-malarial drugs — is now facing a shortage of raw materials.

The company, which has been scouting for raw materials since as early as March 20, hasn't been able to procure any yet. "There hasn't been any success in procuring raw materials, and this is the major constraint which can affect production of HCQ. Besides, we are a small company and our resources on this front are limited," said P M Chandraiah, managing director (additional charge) and director (finance), BCPL.

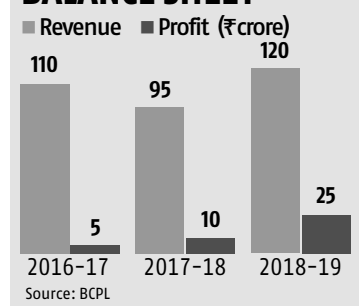
"Imagine a situation when the demand for a certain tablet spikes from 1 million to 100 million suddenly. Will a company be able to cater to the demand if the necessary ecosystem is not there," he added.

BCPL also has licence manufacture chloroquine phosphate — another anti-malarial drug which is also being used to treat Covid-19.

The base formulation for both of these drugs is based on extracts from the bark of the cinchona plant and



BALANCE SHEET



some other synthetic chemicals.

Importantly, BCPL has exhausted all the raw material it previously had to manufacture chloroquine phosphate and is now awaiting raw material supply. "We had orders for 2 million tablets from 15-16 state governments. We have been able to make around 800,000 tablets and will need more raw materials to produce more," he said.

With the current production capacity, BCPL can manufacture 1 million HCQ and chloroquine phosphate tablets every day.

Chandraiah said given BCPL's operational and manpower constraints, it would be helpful if the local administration can help the firm procure raw materials.

The West Bengal government has stepped in to arrange for raw materials for pharmaceutical companies to make HCQ, and has asked the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) to submit a report on the feasibility of restarting operations at cinchona plantations in Mongpu in Kurseong district. This plantation, which is spread over 9,600 acres, has been closed for over 15 years now.

IT earnings season starts with Wipro on April 15

DEBASIS MOHAPATRA
Bengaluru, 11 April

IT services major Wipro will kick-start earnings season for the IT industry next week. This had so far been done by its larger peers — Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys.

While Wipro will announce its fourth quarter (Q4) results along with annual financial statements on April 15, market leader TCS will hold its board meet the next day (April 16) for approval of its financial statements. Infosys is yet to inform investors the date it will announce its Q4 earnings.

Though making Q4 results public before its competitors doesn't hold much significance, sources said Wipro is likely to announce the name of its new chief executive officer (CEO) after the resignation of Abidali Neemuchwala. In the first week of February, Neemuchwala had resigned from the firm, citing family commitments. "Amid the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, it is important to have a clear leadership roadmap. So, it is likely that Wipro will announce its

WHAT TO EXPECT



The firm is likely to announce the name of new CEO after the resignation of ABIDALI NEEMUCHWALA

new CEO's name with the results," said an IT outsourcing advisor who is familiar with the development.

Names of Bhaskar Ghosh, group CEO of Accenture; former Accenture executive Omar Abobsh; and Ravi Kumar S, deputy COO and president at Infosys, are being floated as the likely successor of Neemuchwala.

Most domestic IT biggies are likely to post revenue and profit growth in their guided range despite Covid-19

While TCS will announce Q4 earnings on Apr 16, Infosys is yet to announce a date

Most IT firms likely to post revenue and profit growth in their guided range despite Covid-19 crisis

Many may refrain from giving guidance for FY21 due to uncertain business environment

impacting their business operations adversely in March.

"Wipro's revenue was expected to improve across business segments, barring health and care. But that view now needs to be recalibrated in the aftermath of Covid-19," ICICI Securities has said in a recent note. "The firm will see obvious impacts of Covid-19 on growth in FY21, given its higher exposure than peers to segments like oil & gas and regions like the Middle East," it said.

Donations to CM fund won't qualify as CSR, says MCA

RUCHIKA CHITRAVANSHI
New Delhi, 11 April

Companies can't claim contributions made to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund or the State Relief Fund for Covid-19 as corporate social responsibility (CSR) spending, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has said.

These funds are not part of the Schedule VII of the Act that enumerates eligible funds under CSR, it said.

Also, payments made to temporary and daily wage workers during the lockdown period would not be counted as CSR as such payments are a part of "moral, humanitarian and contractual obligations of the company", the MCA said.

It said any ex-gratia payment made to daily wage earners specifically for the purpose of fighting Covid-19 over and above the disburse-

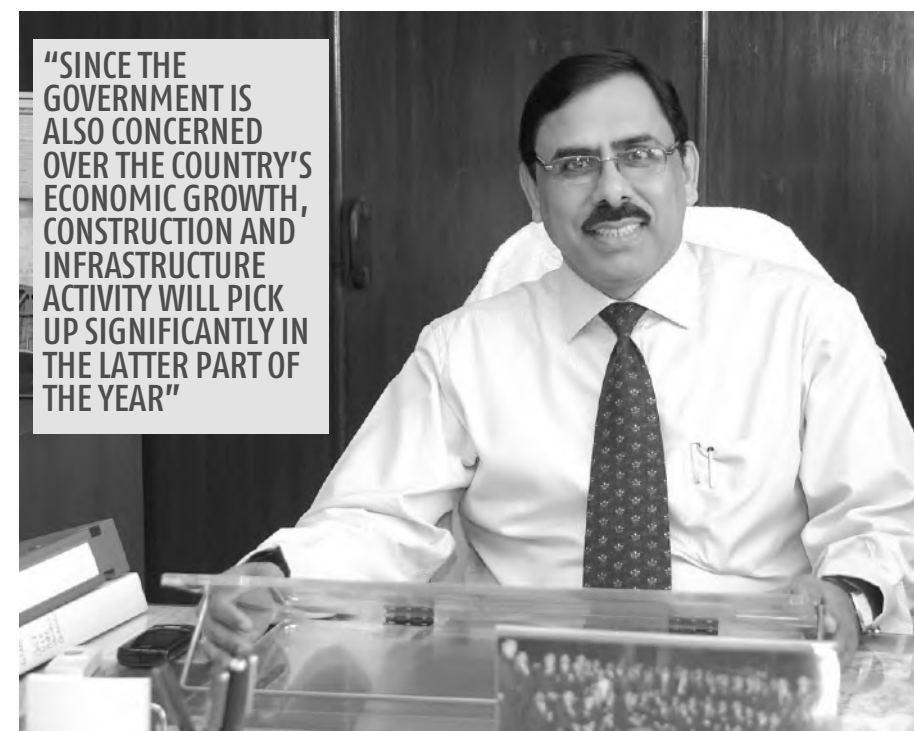
ment of wages would be allowed as CSR expenditure as a one-time exception. This, provided there is an explicit declaration to that effect by the board, duly certified by the statutory auditor.

On March 28, the government had announced PM CARES Fund to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and any other such emergencies that may arise in future. The fund was declared an eligible activity under CSR of companies.

The schedule VII provides for setting up a fund by the central government for socio-economic development and relief which would be counted as CSR expenditure, an MCA notification said.

On March 23, the government had said contributions towards fighting the coronavirus pandemic will be treated as CSR activity.

'We foresee strong steel demand post-Covid'



"SINCE THE GOVERNMENT IS ALSO CONCERNED OVER THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC GROWTH, CONSTRUCTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE ACTIVITY WILL PICK UP SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE LATTER PART OF THE YEAR"

With the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic disrupting domestic steel demand, ANIL KUMAR CHAUDHARY, chairman, Steel Authority of India (SAIL), has chalked out a strong business continuity plan to combat its impact. In a telephonic interview with Aditi Divekar, Chaudhary talks about lessons learnt from the crisis, and the demand outlook for steel in FY21. Edited excerpts:

SAIL has lowered production due to the pandemic, which has hit steel demand. What are the steps being taken to have a strong business continuity plan for FY21? Firstly, we will be rationalising steel production according to the market demand. For this, blast furnaces — which are more productive and cost effective on techno-economic parameters — would be kept active, while others will remain in standby mode. Secondly, with the help of our unions, we are keeping contract as well as regular labourers on the supportive side. They have assured that if extra work needs to be done once the situation normalises, the workforce will be forthcoming. Thirdly, our officials are in touch with end-users, including dealers and distributors, trying to ascertain the demand size of the market after the lockdown.

How do you see the domestic steel demand in FY21, keeping in mind the uncertainty over when the crisis would take a breather? I am foreseeing strong demand for steel once the coronavirus impact declines over the next few months. Even if we do not see strong demand immediately, or in the first few months of the fiscal, it may gradually pick up and, in fact, make up for the loss in the balance part of the year. Since the government is also concerned over the country's economic growth, construction and infrastructure activity will pick up signifi-

cantly in the latter part of the year.

The pandemic has led to several issues pertaining to domestic logistics and the supply-chain segment. What are SAIL's learnings?

Our decision to rely on railways, and not roadways, to transport both raw material as well as finished products is bearing fruit. About 85 per cent of our material moves through railways. We did not face any shortage of material despite the lockdown. There is only labour shortage at the contractor's end to unload material, but this situation is not specific to SAIL.

SAIL continues to have a high labour cost when compared to its peers. Have you changed your hiring strategy? How are you handling the employee cost parameter?

Our effort to maximise production and reduce labour cost per tonne is something which will continue. Apart from this, though 7-8 per cent of our workforce retires annually, SAIL is doing only 2 percent fresh hiring against this. This is ensuring cautious hiring. Also, we are looking at bringing down the average employee age in the company to 42 years, from the current 46 years. This would take about 2-3 years.

SAIL has enjoyed monopoly when it came to bagging orders from the Railways. Lately, Jindal Steel & Power has been bagging a few orders as well. What is SAIL doing to keep its market share intact?

About 12 per cent of SAIL's turnover comes from the Railways. There is no question of competition with Jindal Steel as we are complementing each other. The Railways are going to other suppliers only after having exhausted their requirements from SAIL. So, to that extent, there is no threat to our market share.

Co-living firms open doors to health care staff

Some also rent out their premises to IT firms' employees

SAMREEN AHMAD
Bengaluru, 11 April

Saurabh Chittora, who's treating coronavirus disease (Covid-19) patients at a government medical college in Kota, Rajasthan, gets done with his afternoon shift by 5.30 pm. The medical practitioner then leaves for his new temporary home where he takes the first proper meal of the day, having skipped lunch.

"I am supervising the health of 134 Covid-19 patients and have a family with parents who are over 65 years of age. I don't want to expose them to any health risk. Both my children are also below 5 years. So I have moved to a co-living space for now," says Chittora, who hasn't met his family for 10 days despite being in the same city.

Chittora is staying at one of the Hello World co-living spaces in Kota, which has given out two of its properties — one for health care professionals and another for migrants who have been stranded in the city because of the 21-day nationwide lockdown.

"We have opened five of our



properties in Kota, Jaipur, and NCR for health care professionals, who are on the frontline serving Covid-19 patients, and people who are stranded because of the lockdown," says Jitendra Jagadev, founder of Hello World, a co-living venture of Tiger Global-backed home rental network NestAway.

The company has so far rolled out 150 beds for doctors, nurses, and ward boys in these properties. In order to facilitate the health professionals' food at any time during the day, the start-up has also

provided 24x7 housekeeping. "In total, we will roll out 500 beds in the first phase during this month in cities including Mumbai and Bengaluru," says Jagadev.

Hello World is also in talks with schools to convert those into temporary homes for migrant labourers. "We will run our services for free for up to three months... we will be looking at raising external funds," says Jagadev.

Another co-living start-up Guesture has also been in talks with multi-specialty hospital Narayana

Health to open up its vacant properties for health workers. However, the hospital chain has so far not sought a requirement for such a space.

"The construction workers that are stuck at sites during the lockdown are staying safe at the quarters provided by the firm. Shanders, the parent company of Guesture, is taking care of their other needs such as food and medical support," says Sriram Chitturi, founder, Guesture.

The start-up has also tied up with Tech Mahindra to provide its facilities to employees who do not have any means to work from home. "We have cordoned off an entire property with 100 beds along with work desk, Wi-Fi connectivity, housekeeping, and food for those employees who did not have work-from-home facilities," says Chitturi.

In a similar tie-up, Nexus Venture Partners-backed co-living platform Zolostays has also rented 400 beds in Chennai and Hyderabad to Cognizant and Capgemini for employees who were struggling to work from home. "We are charging any-where between ₹7,000 and ₹10,000 per bed per month which are the standard Zolostays charges including food, Wi-Fi, DTH connection, and housekeeping," says Nikhil Sikri, cofounder and CEO, Zolostays.

NBFC sector staring at another bout of liquidity challenge

Most banks are yet to decide on giving moratorium to shadow lenders

SUBRATA PANDA & ABHIJIT LELE
Mumbai, 11 April

The cash-strapped non-banking financial company (NBFC) sector is bracing for another challenge. In the absence of clarity on whether the three-month moratorium applies to the loans NBFCs have taken, the shadow lenders have to repay banks at a time when their cash flows have taken a hard knock due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Banks are offering fresh credit at rates above 8 per cent depending on the tenor, while borrowing funds from the RBI at 4.4 per cent. NBFCs and HFCs have to give a three-month moratorium to their consumers on term loans, as suggested by the RBI last month. But majority of the banks are yet to decide on granting a moratorium to the NBFCs and HFCs that are availing credit like any other borrower.

Moratorium becomes crucial for NBFCs and HFCs as disbursements and collections will take a hit because of the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in cash flow problems.

Senior executives with NBFCs and experts have warned that the sector may face another bout of liquidity challenge if there is no clarity on the moratorium. The lenders had faced a severe liquidity crunch after defaults by IL&FS Group in 2018.

Bankers said they have taken up the issue with the RBI through industry body Indian Bank's Association and are soon expecting a clarification.

"We are still not sure and we are waiting for a clarification either from the RBI or from SBI," said a public sector banker. "We feel the RBI circular is fairly clear and it doesn't exclude NBFCs from being a beneficiary of the moratorium, but a few banks, such as SBI, have some reservations on it, so we are waiting for the RBI to clarify. We will definitely have some clarity soon."



Plea in SC challenging 3-month moratorium

A petition was filed in the Supreme Court on Saturday seeking direction on setting aside the RBI's March 27 circular on three-month moratorium on loan repayment between March 1 and May 31 amid coronavirus pandemic.

The plea, filed in the apex court by advocate Amit Sahni, has alleged that the RBI circular is an "eyewash as it provides that the interest shall be chargeable during the moratorium period and it makes no sense in paying additional interest along with the regular EMIs".

Rating agency CRISIL said the analysis of the entities it rates suggests that liquidity pressure will increase for nearly a quarter of them if collections do not pick up by June this year. These NBFCs have ₹1.75 trillion of debt obligations maturing by then.

With collections at a low and the moratorium only for their borrowers, raising funds is critical for NBFCs, especially because these lenders, unlike banks, do not have access to systemic sources of liquidity and depend significantly on wholesale funding.

Bank borrowing is a major source of funding for the shadow banking sector, especially the smaller ones. Apart from that, they borrow money from the debt

capital markets via instruments like NCDs and CPs. Of late, many have been borrowing overseas through ECBs, given the liquidity challenges they are encountering in the domestic market.

Raman Aggarwal, co-chairman, Finance Industry Development Council, said "We had communicated the concerns to the RBI and have been given assurance that the matter is being looked into."

The CEO of a large HFC said: "There are differences between banks on this issue. Some banks are willing to provide moratorium while some others do not want to. The impact on the sector will vary among NBFCs depending upon their liquidity position."

Textile industry reels from lockdown body blow

T E NARASIMHAN
Chennai, 11 April

The busy roads of Tiruppur, one of the largest textile hubs in the country, look deserted. Gone is the hum of the 10,000 factories — mainly small and medium enterprises — where over 600,000 people worked.

The city used to do around ₹25,000 crore worth of exports and around the same amount in the domestic market. Now the town expects a ₹10,000-12,000 crore loss in just three months.

Tiruppur's fate has been replicated across other major textile hubs ever since the lockdown was announced. The textile industry, the second largest employer after agriculture, may lose 25 per cent of its jobs. Around 12.9 million people's livelihoods depend on the industry and nearly 70 per cent of them are women.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has completely halted production and new orders, exporters say that payments have also been delayed for the shipments sent before the lockdown. Exporters say some customers are not taking delivery of the shipments because they have shut shop. Ready-made garment players had been hoping for a revival in demand in China but with the virus spreading to Europe, the US and other major markets, there are no orders coming from the major retailers. It's true that the government has extended the rebate on state and centre taxes from 1 April to boost the liquidity and competitiveness of these players but this will not help many buyers who are going bankrupt because the lockdown and concomitant closure of stores has resulted in a fall in exports.

For FY20, the margins are likely to be impacted by 120-150bp and credit metrics to moderate with pressure on liquidity and higher working capital utilisation, according to India Ratings and Research.

The agency assumes that India's exports — already reduced by more than 40 per cent till



The Clothing Manufacturers' Association of India has asked the government to consider postponing income tax, advance tax, and GST. It also called for a 180-day moratorium on repayment of bank loans

January 2020 owing to the US-China trade war — will be substantially hit till H1FY21. The agency assumes Ebitda will drop at least 15 per cent in FY21 across its textile portfolio.

The home textile industry has seen shipments being held up and faces bleak uncertainty about operations being resumed in the short term. A handful of larger players have sufficient liquidity to manage the tough times but if the impact of the coronavirus is larger or longer than expected, the outcome will be grim for the smaller companies. With malls and shopping centres closed, movement restricted, and mass transport unavailable, domestic sales have withered. India exported \$16.2 billion worth of garments in 2018-19. The apparel sector accounts for 43 per cent of India's textiles exports in value terms and for 5 per cent of overall exports.

From manufacturing through to retail, the garment industry employs close to 25 million people. If the current situation continues beyond a month from now, nearly a quarter of the jobs in the industry will be lost, according to

the Clothing Manufacturers' Association of India (CMAI). Recovery, the CMAI predicts, will take at least 10 months to a year. Without government support, it adds, the industry cannot survive this unprecedented crisis.

Bhilwara in Rajasthan was known as a centre for py suitings and dyed yarn worth ₹25,000 crore. Now it is known as a coronavirus hot spot. S N Modani, chairman, Rajasthan Textile Mills Association and managing director, Sangam in Bhilwara, said the textile industry in the town is worth around ₹35,000 crore, including exports.

Since the night of March 21, Bhilwara has been locked down. If the industry can resume operations after April 14 when the lockdown is scheduled to be lifted, a 15-20 per cent annual basis loss is expected on the topline. The bottomline will be even worse because of fixed expenses. If the lockdown is extended, the losses will rise as vertically as the virus curve.

Exports from Rajasthan total around ₹10,000 crore. With no clearance from the ports, borders

sealed and customers cancelling orders, 25 per cent of business has already been lost.

"European buyers, particularly from Italy and Spain, have already asked our members not to export garments to them and wait for a minimum of one or two months till the situation improves and shops are reopened. Some buyers are cancelling orders outright," said Tiruppur Exporters' Association President Raja M Shanmugham.

He said that small and medium enterprises will not be able to repay bank loans. "We apprehend that due to non-clearance of dues, the banks may classify such units as non-performing assets as per BASEL norms," said Shanmugham. Even those who manage to resume operations will have to face having to pay 30 per cent more for dyes and chemicals which will impact their cost of production.

Some in the industry are pinning their hopes on demand reviving once the virus settles down. Others are focused on getting financial support from the government along the lines offered by many developed countries hoping to limit the damage caused by Covid-19's disruption of economic activity.

The CMAI has asked the government to consider postponing income tax, advance tax, and GST, give a minimum 180-day moratorium on repayment of all bank loans, and provide a disbursement of 25 per cent additional working capital loans on zero interest to tide over the current liquidity shortfall.

It has also asked for a wage subsidy to avoid job losses, the creation of a special Factor Fund for small and medium companies to discount their bills immediately, urged that banks should not treat a failure to repay loans as a non-performing asset, and provide a one year moratorium on repayment so that smaller players can avoid going under. It is only such a package, says the CMAI, that will allow the industry to see the other side of the lockdown.



All entry and exit points of the Nizamuddin dargah leading up to the basti have been sealed and nearly 1,500 houses in the area have been surveyed in the past few days

PHOTO: DALIP KUMAR

Law enforcers keep vigil at Delhi's Nizamuddin

RUCHIKA CHITRAVANSHI
New Delhi, 11 April

The historic site of the Nizamuddin dargah resembles a fortress these days. Days after the Markaz mosque, which became Delhi's epicentre of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), was evacuated and sanitised, an eerie silence hangs over the area, with armed men wearing protective masks dotting the perimeter and barricades all over.

All entry and exit points of the dargah leading up to the basti have been sealed. The tent pitched by a team of doctors outside the Markaz mosque — to test people at the site where a religious meeting was held last month

and multiple persons who attended the meeting tested positive for Covid-19 — still stands, abandoned.

Just a couple of days ago a team of doctors geared up in personal protective equipment and a battery of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawans were escorted into the back alleys of the dargah.

"After what happened in Madhya Pradesh with the doctors, we don't want to take any chance," one of the policemen posted at the Mathura road entrance said.

Last week, healthcare workers and civic officials were attacked by a mob in Indore when they went to survey residents for Covid-19 symptoms. Nearly 1,500 houses in the

area have been surveyed in the past few days, Mukesh Walia, Nizamuddin station house officer said. The questions posed in the survey are simple: How many people live in the house? Does anyone have symptoms of cold and fever?

"We are maintaining law and order and implementing the lockdown strictly...There are no specific instructions to us for after April 14 yet," Walia said.

So far, there has been no positive case. However, CRPF and police personnel do not want to leave anything to chance. Inside the narrow alleys of the basti, two CRPF companies — around 150 armed guards — have been deployed to keep a check on

any unnecessary movement. "Inka koi bharosa nahi hai," one of the officers on duty said, suggesting that the people might not be disciplined enough to follow lockdown in the cramped area.

The law enforcers arrive every day around 8 am and stay till late evening. They come with complete gear, including tear gas munitions. When asked about the tear gas, a CRPF jawan simply points towards the basti and shrugs while he says, "Who knows what can happen?"

However, police know arms and ammunition are not enough in this war against Covid-19. Many on duty at the local police station even shaved their heads after they

heard that hair can also be a carrier for the virus.

Several of those guarding Delhi's hotspot are staying away from their families. "We stay back at the police station...We don't want to put our families at risk. For us this is our duty," Ravinder Kumar, a junior police officer said.

The neighbouring housing society of Nizamuddin West is also complaining of how online delivery services are being cautious and most have refused to cater to the area. The local vegetable vendor manages to enter with a curfew pass. "I get vegetables from the Okhla mandi, which is so crowded that it is impossible to maintain any distance with people... But what else to do,"

said Surender Sharma, vegetable vendor.

The divide between rich and poor in the south Delhi neighbourhood is apparent.

The dargah has become home to more than a hundred people who lived outside its campus, as they were booted out of their shanties into a park adjoining the religious site.

"We have enough supplies for the next two days. My husband is a rickshaw puller and now there is no work. I don't know how I will manage," said Noor Jehan, a mother of six children, who is living at the dargah.

She said sometimes the CRPF personnel share their leftover food with them, which gets them by for a meal or two.

The useful things on the internet that cost only time

VEER ARJUN SINGH
New Delhi, 11 April

It's just you and the internet. There's the mindless Ludo, the endless scrolling down to see what people are up to on Instagram and those foolhardy attempts at inventing a new dish in the kitchen or cooking up a million-dollar idea in your head. Before triviality has a tenacious grip on your mind, freebies are here to save you from a looming existential crisis. Not the freebies that brands use to lure people into spending more money later, but the carefully filtered kind that should have you jamming through the blues and maybe even earn you a certificate from a prestigious university. Here's a roundup of all you can do from the comfort of your couch while sipping on a dalgona coffee in your pajamas.

Jam away

If you have a dusty old guitar lying around somewhere, join me and some 10,000 users who have signed up for the Fender's brilliant repository of online guitar lessons made free for the next three months. You can choose your instrument (acoustic, electric, bass, ukulele) and go through the entire course manual. It's like having a trusty professional by your side. The more advanced folks can jump right into their preferred genre, pick an artist and learn how to play a few more songs with video tutorials. From *Damn Right I Got the Blues* by Buddy Guy to *Ace of Spades* by Motörhead, I am euphoric with this discovery. Want more? Gibson is offering lessons

on the augmented reality guitar learning app, Amped Guitar, whose premium membership is free for the next three months.

While an ESP guitar is what I am trapped with, if you happen to be in the company of a fine set of ivories or even an old-school keyboard, check out the piano lessons on Skoove that gives you real-time feedback on your progress powered by an AI engine. For the composer in you, Apple's premium DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) Logic Pro X (Mac) and the Ableton Live 10 Suite (Mac and PC) are free for a 90-day trial period, which includes access to a huge collection of virtual instruments, effects and loops, providing a complete toolkit to help you create amazing music.

Skill up

MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course, platforms are like home schools for adults. Coursera has seen a 505 per cent year-on-year jump in registrations. Among the thousands of courses available, 85 of its top certifications from universities such as Penn, Georgia Tech, Johns Hopkins, Caltech, Duke and Imperial College London, and from companies such as Google and Amazon are now free till the end of May 2020. You don't even have to pay to get the proof of certification. Closer home, Byjus — one of India's leading online education services — is giving free live classes to students till the lockdown is over. More than six million new users started digging through the content just in the month of March. Over six million people are digging



through it as I write this piece. Unacademy has started a "gamified" UPSC CSE Championship offering five free mock tests for UPSC aspirants. The top 20 rankers within the programme will be given a free annual subscription that gives them access to all the features and courses.

And while the world contemplates on the ethics of it, don't forget to check out the Internet Archive's National Emergency Library, which is giving free access to its massive repository of 1.4 million ebooks and audiobooks until June 30, along with a 14-day borrowing pass. I have picked André Aciman's novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, to begin with, which also made for a really good film. Sayombhu Mukdeeprom's cinematography here deserves a special mention.

For people who have an eye for visual detail, Fujifilm is running photography workshops with celebrity photographers, such as Shantanu Sheorey and Dabboo Ratnani, on every alternate day till April 28 on its Instagram handle.

Isolate those muscles

Online physical trainers are a dime a dozen but the hard workouts should be backed with some credible advice. Bengaluru-based health care start-up cure.fit has roped in some extra firepower in the form of free sessions with celebrity trainer Yasmin Karachiwala, Olympian Mary Kom and actors Sonam Bajwa and Mandira Bedi for anyone who downloads the app. Australian actor Chris Hemsworth's Centr is free to use for all, albeit for a six-week period. If you own a Fitbit device, the use-

ful free trial to its premium service has been extended from 30 to 90 days. It helps me keep a tab on my runs, make use of video coaching and learn from insights into my sleep stages and patterns. I am also tracking my meals to estimate my macronutrient and micronutrient intake on the HealthifyMe app, which has also launched a tool kit for a free immunity assessment test and tracks frequency of your hand washes, among other things.

Social isolation can also cause anxiety and stress to peak. You can trust politician Omar Abdullah, who is fresh out of a more serious kind of quarantine, to recommend the right kind of wellness apps. His pick is Calm and Headspace. Both apps offer a select range of guided meditations, sleep stories and mindfulness exercises for free.

Get help

It's true that in a war-like situation such as this, doctors might not be always available to inspect every case of sore throat in person. But that doesn't mean that you should not seek help when you need to. Apollo's free self-assessment online test can help allay some fears about the Covid-19 contagion. Infosys co-founder N R Narayana Murthy-backed Acko General Insurance, too, has an AI-based risk-assessment test on its website, which can be followed up with a free virtual consultation with a doctor. DocsApp has a free 24/7 helpline for senior citizens (080 4719 3443) for complaints across all departments. And the American company vHealth by Aetna is giving free virtual consultation for everyone till April 15.

You get 3 more months to deposit money in PPF

The finance ministry has relaxed provisions for small saving schemes, allowing people three more months to make deposits in their accounts, as the country battles the coronavirus disease pandemic.

The deadline to make deposits in public provident fund (PPF) and Sukanya Samridhi Yojana for the financial year 2019-20 (FY20) has been extended till June 30 this year. However, customers will be able to deposit only till the upper limit, which is ₹1.5 lakh a year, in these two schemes.

Also, if no money is deposited in these accounts in FY20, no default fee would be levied if deposits are made till June 30 this year, according to a memorandum issued by the ministry.

INDIVJAL DHASMANA

INVESTMENT STRATEGY

Benefit from the collective wisdom of markets

By going with ETFs, you eliminate decision-making, and emotional biases that come into play when picking active funds

SUNDEEP SIKKA

The Covid-19 episode has given rise to uncertainty in all walks of life. While our work culture has already changed drastically, consumption patterns, too, are expected to see a massive shift. Earnings of both businesses and individuals are likely to be affected over the short to medium term. The resultant uncertainty has sent markets all over the world into a tailspin. The Indian equity markets have fallen by 38 per cent, with the benchmark Nifty 50 index going from a peak of around 12,300 to close to 7,500 within a matter of weeks.

Amid all the hysteria surrounding us today, it is easy for investors to fall prey to negative thoughts about the choices they have made until now. Witnessing the value of your portfolio built over several years erode in just a few weeks is not easy for anyone to digest. So, what should an investor do in such a situation?

The fall will not be permanent

It is almost impossible to predict accurately when and at what pace the global economy and markets will recover. However, the past can provide some guidance. Since 2008, which was the year of the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent economic recession, there have been only two instances where the returns from Nifty 50 (total return index) for a one-year period have been lower than 30 per cent at the lowest point in a calendar year. In the first instance, the annualised return over the next one-year, three-year and five-year periods from November 20, 2008,



ENJOY THE ETF ADVANTAGE

■ In a climate of high fear and uncertainty, choosing the right stock or active funds can be difficult

■ Going with an ETF eliminates the need to make these decisions

■ While an active fund may beat an ETF over a certain time horizon, there is no guarantee it will do so consistently

■ Expense ratios of several ETFs have plunged to just a few basis points

■ If you select an ETF with good trading volumes, you will be able to exit it easily during market hours

was 100 per cent, 26 per cent, and 21 per cent, respectively. The returns were on similar lines in the second instance too. This tells us that over the medium to long term, the global economy and markets do bounce back, even after a major setback.

At the same time, investors need to adhere to some of the fundamental rules of investing. The most important among them is to follow an asset allocation that suits their risk appetite and goals. This varies from one individual to the other. Those who have not followed an asset allocation until now need to fix this issue right away.

Go with the right product

Equity is the asset class that has been

proven to give higher returns over longer time periods and hence is suitable for long-term financial goals. But you need to select the right product for riding it. Should you go for direct equity investments or should you choose an actively-managed large-cap mutual fund? In our view, at this stage, neither of them would be the right choice. Both these options involve an element of arbitrary decision-making, based on some facts, but also based on some emotions and predictions. This makes future performance from them quite uncertain.

If uncertainty is a given, then why not rely on the collective wisdom of the entire universe of equity investors? This can be done by investing in the

entire index, and that too in the same proportion. This intelligence of the broader market has, in fact, often outperformed actively-managed schemes. For instance, as on March 20 this year, the average large-cap category outperformed the Nifty 100 TRI by 1.5 percentage points over one year, but underperformed for three- and five-year periods, on an asset-weighted average scale. If we only look at the average of top five large-cap schemes, they all underperformed over the one-year, three-year and five-year periods.

Moreover, even the schemes that outperform the market are unable to do so consistently. For instance, a large-cap scheme that gave the highest one-year return in a specific year

is unlikely to be the one giving the highest three-year annualised return in the same year. So even if you choose a scheme that has outperformed the market in the recent past, it is highly uncertain if that momentum will be sustained.

Invest in a broad basket of stocks

Now that we know that the collective wisdom of the market usually triumphs over actively-managed funds, there are two ways to passively invest in broad market indices. Either you can go for index funds, or you can choose index exchange-traded funds (ETFs).

Other than the fact that an index fund or an ETF is likely to outperform actively-managed schemes, they also offer an additional benefit. These passive investment options have a lower cost than actively managed schemes.

While both index funds and ETFs have their own set of advantages, one thing that clearly goes in favour of ETFs is their lower cost. The costs associated with investing in ETFs are lower than for index funds, which in turn are lower than for actively managed funds. Moreover, ETF units can be bought and sold anytime during market hours, thereby giving you additional flexibility to manage your liquidity.

Pay heed to tracking error

How should you select an ETF? You must first be certain about the index you want to invest in and if the investment suits your risk appetite and asset allocation. After that, you should select one based on expense ratio, tracking error and liquidity.

Remember that an index ETF does not aim to outperform the market; it merely attempts to mirror market performance. While doing so, there could be some tracking error. The lower the tracking error, the better it is for the investor. On the liquidity front, evaluate whether the ETF has good trading volume. This will allow you to buy or sell it as and when required.

An ETF spreads your investments across sectors while eliminating the emotional element from the investment process. ETFs have been gaining acceptance for some time now. As of February, the asset under management for all Nifty ETFs combined stood in excess of ₹86,000 crore. Given the uncertainty prevailing in the markets at present, passive index investing is an idea you should embrace.

The writer is executive director and chief executive officer, Nippon India Mutual Fund

BS TUTORIAL

Jayant Pai

Financial literacy

1. Which is the only G7 nation building coal-fired power plants?

- A. United Kingdom
B. USA
C. Japan
D. Germany

2. Which of these (all rather unlikely) companies was never involved with the two-wheeler industry?

- A. Kelvinator
B. GNFC
C. Bajaj Hindusthan
D. Brooke Bond

3. Which of these currently holds the title of the most valued unicorn?

- A. Stripe
B. Bytedance
C. Didi Chuxing
D. Airbnb

4. The term Kurzweil relates to _____.

- A. Loans
B. Subsidies
C. Wages
D. Trade wars

5. Which of these companies is named after the state it was incorporated in?

- A. Cisco Systems
B. Volkswagen
C. Xiaomi
D. Gojek

Solutions:
1. C. The others were involved either in the Fukushima reactor meltdown in 2011.
2. C. The others were involved in two-wheeler manufacturing or marketing of two-wheeler at some stage.
3. B. It is currently valued at around US \$75 billion.
4. C. It is a German government scheme that pays workers of eligible companies two-thirds of their pay even if they don't work. It is meant to offer temporary support during the COVID-19 lockdowns.
5. A. It was inspired by San Francisco.

The quiz master is a certified financial planner and head-products, PPFAS Mutual Fund.
Send your queries and feedback at yourmoney@bsmail.in

ECONOMY

Health insurance premiums set to increase by 5-25 per cent

SUBRATA PANDA
Mumbai, 11 April

Health insurance premiums are set to rise as non-life insurance companies and standalone health insurance firms scurry to revamp their products to include the modifications mandated by insurance regulator Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDAI).

The rise in premiums could be in the range of 5-25 per cent, depending on the features that each insurance company adds on its products. Insurance firms have been given time till September 30 to include modifications mandated by the regulator. From October 1, the products must have the suggested modifications of the regulator.

Insurers are using this time to revamp their offerings by adding new features and standardising products, according to IRDAI's guidelines. They will launch the revamped products with a higher price within 2-3 months.



Bajaj Allianz General Insurance.

"But if the increase is more than 5 per cent, then the regular process of file and use has to be followed. So, we are working on the changes and evaluating impact of the proposed changes," she added. Amit Chhabra, health business head, Policybazaar.com, said, "The scope of a product becomes much broader as things which were not covered earlier are coming into the ambit of the product. This means that prices will rise to compensate for the added coverage."

On one hand, insurance companies can refile their products and increase the features that the regulator has asked for, which many companies are doing. On the other hand, some companies are taking this opportunity to revamp their products by adding a range of features.

Last year, the regulator had come out with guidelines. Essentially, the regulator's concern was that there was no clarity on what is excluded and included in a health insurance policy.

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

BINAY SINHA



Even as most other Indian billionaires have lost wealth amid the Covid-19 crisis, the net worth of Radhakishan Damani, who controls Avenue Supermarts, has surged 11% this year to \$10.7 billion



Ritesh Agarwal-led OYO has asked thousands of employees to go on leave or furloughs for up to three months as the company fights the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its revenues

FROM PAGE 1

PM hints...

They flagged how millions had lost livelihoods and needed support.

Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray pointed to challenges migrant workers were facing as industries did not have the money to provide for their wages and shelter interminably. They sought the Centre's assistance to facilitate the harvest of crops and grain procurement, relaxing of the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) Act cap of 3 per cent fiscal deficit to 4-5 per cent, release of MNREGA funds to pay wages to workers, and also their share of GST compensation.

The CMs pointed out they might not have massive resources needed to deal with a spurt in Covid-19 cases if the lockdown was lifted sooner. Some of the CMs, particularly West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee, spoke of the interference in the government's work by governors.

There were also signs that the lockdown could be extended beyond April 30 as well. The PM said at the meeting, "The next 3-4 weeks are critical to determine impact of steps taken till now to curb the spread of the virus." The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned countries against hastily lifting Covid-related restrictions, and cautioned such a move could lead to "a deadly resurgence".

Lav Aggarwal, joint secretary at the Union health ministry, said according to a data analysis done by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the number of cases would have crossed 45,000 had there been no lockdown. If no preventive measures were to be taken, the number of positive Covid-19 patients would have crossed 200,000, he said.

The PM suggested specific measures for agriculture and allied sector, including the modification of APMC laws to facilitate sale of farm produce. He said India had adequate supplies of essential medicines. He said the crisis was an opportunity to become self-reliant and turn the nation into an economic powerhouse.

States want...

Rao suggested the Centre take adequate steps to restart the food-processing industry, including mills, so that people did not face shortages of essentials.

Chhattisgarh's Bhupesh Baghel wanted a boost for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME). "Due to the long period of lockdown, this important sector, which provides maximum employment, has been endangered," he said.

He also said given the number of coronavirus-infected people and their status, states should get to decide whether economic activities should be relaxed or not. Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy of Andhra Pradesh said migrant laborers, daily wage laborers, horticulture and aqua farmers had suffered the most.

He told the prime minister only 7,250 of the 103,986 industrial units in his state were

in operation. Reddy wanted the lockdown to be extended to red zones, public transport, schools, malls, theatres, and religious places. He urged the prime minister to announce measures to restart the wheels of the economy while enforcing steps to contain the spread of the pandemic.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K Palaniswami asked the Centre to sanction an ad hoc grant of ₹1,000 crore from the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF) to the state for procuring medical items.

He requested a smooth supply of essentials through the railways and inter-state movements of goods. He urged the prime minister to announce a special package for the agricultural sector and asked for additional funding from the Centre and allotment of essential items to support unorganised-sector workers, agricultural labourers, and others. Puducherry Chief Minister V Narayanasamy sought a package of ₹300 crore.

Apple, Google...

"It could be a useful tool but it raises privacy issues," said Dr Mike Reid, an assistant professor of medicine and infectious diseases at the University of California, San Francisco, who is helping San Francisco officials with contact tracing. "It's not going to be the sole solution, but as part of a robust sophisticated response, it has a role to play."

Timothy D Cook, Apple's chief executive, said on Twitter that the tool would help curb the virus's spread "in a way that also respects transparency & consent." Sundar Pichai, Google's chief, also posted on Twitter that the tool has "strong controls and protections for user privacy."

With the tool, people infected with coronavirus would notify a public health app that they have it, which would then alert phones that had recently come into proximity with that person's device. The companies would need to get public-health authorities to agree to link their app to the tool. President Trump said on Friday that his administration planned to look at the tool. "It's very new, new technology. It's very interesting," he said.

"But a lot of people worry about it in terms of a person's freedom." Privacy is a concern given that Google, in particular, has a chequered history of collecting people's data for its online advertising business. The internet search company came under fire in 2018 after it said that disabling people's location history on Android phones would not stop it from collecting location data.

Apple, which has been one of the biggest critics of Google's collection of user data, has not built a significant business around using data to sell online advertising. Still, the company has access to a wealth of information about its users, from their location to their health. There are already third-party tools for contact tracing, including from public health authorities and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In March, the government of Singapore introduced a similar coronavirus contact-tracing app, called TraceTogether, that detects mobile phones that are nearby.

But given the number of iPhones and Android devices in use worldwide, Apple and Google said they were hoping to make tracing efforts by public health authorities more effective by reaching more people. They also said they would provide their underlying technology to third-party apps to make them more reliable.

Daniel Weitzner, a principal research scientist at MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory and who was one of those behind the school's contract tracing app, said Google and Apple's partnership will help health officials save time and resources in developing their own applications to track the virus' spread. One challenge for third-party apps is that they must run constantly — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — to be effective.

Google said some Android smartphone manufacturers shut down those applications to save battery life. Apple and Google said their tool would also constantly run in the background if people opt to use it, logging nearby devices through the short-range wireless technology Bluetooth. But it would eat up less battery life and be more reliable than third-party apps, they said.

Once someone reports his or her infection to a public-health app, the tool will send the phone's broadcast beacons, or anonymous identifiers connected to the device, to central computer servers.

How Covid crisis...

The non-food credit show a similar trajectory.

In the current crisis, the Sensex lost around 38 per cent from its January 2020 high, but has recovered 20 per cent from the March 23 low. Now, the Sensex is down 25 per cent from the high, and the rupee is down around 8 per cent. On the other hand, during 2008-09, the hit on financial markets was more prolonged, and the recovery was gradual and played out in 2009 and 2010. The Sensex declined 60 per cent from its January 2008 high to March 2009, and the rupee had lost around 20 per cent against the dollar, also over a longer period.

Highway work...

According to a road ministry official, health of the workers would be a significant factor for re-starting the work. Work can start in areas where workers can be safe and other projects would follow suit, health ministry officials said.

Besides construction of existing roads, the Union government's flagship Bharatmala scheme needs a lot of catching up in terms of both award and construction," Shubham Jain, senior vice-president & group head at ICRA said.

Torn over lifting curbs, Trump faces 'biggest decision ever'

PETER BAKER, ZOLAN KANNO-YOUNGS & ALAN RAPPEPORT
Washington, 11 April

As he grapples simultaneously with the most devastating public health and economic crises of a lifetime, President Trump finds himself pulled in opposite directions on what to do next. The bankers, corporate executives and industrialists plead with him to reopen the country as soon as possible, while the medical experts beg for more time to curb the coronavirus.

The phone calls from his business friends compete against the television images of overwhelmed hospitals. The public health experts tell him what he is doing is working, so he should not let up yet. The economic advisers and others in his White House tell him what he has done has worked, so he should begin to figure out how to ease up. Tens of thousands more could die. Millions more could lose their jobs.

"I'm going to have to make a decision, and I only hope to God that it's the right decision," Mr. Trump said on Friday during his daily news briefing on the fight against the coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than 18,000 Americans so far and put more than 16 million out of work. "But I would say without question it's the biggest decision I've ever had to make."

Seizing on new estimates of a lower-than-projected death toll, the president signaled that he wanted to start resuming business on some basis after his current stay-at-home guidelines expire on April 30, and he announced that he would name a task force next week to develop a plan. But he also promised to listen to public health officials cautioning against a premature move to relax limits.

In actuality, the decision on when and how to reopen is not entirely Mr. Trump's to make because he never ordered it closed. The stay-at-home edicts that have kept the vast bulk of Americans indoors were issued by governors state by state. But the president did issue nonbinding guidelines urging a pause in daily life through the end of the month. And if he were to issue new guidance saying it was safe to reopen or outlining a path toward reopening, many states would most likely follow or feel pressure from their businesses and constituents to ease up on restrictions.



In his daily press briefing on Friday, the US President suggested he wanted to move soon, but he also promised to listen to public health officials cautioning against relaxing restrictions prematurely

"We're not doing anything until we know this country is going to be healthy," Mr. Trump said. "We don't want to go back and start doing it over again." But he added that the nation's current paralysis was not sustainable. "You know what? Staying at home leads to death also," he said. "It's very traumatic for the country."

The number of deaths worldwide from the coronavirus topped 100,000 on Friday, as a surge of cases in Moscow pushed the Russian capital's health care system to its limit. Lockdowns were extended across much of the globe heading into the Easter weekend, as countries desperately struggled to slow infections. The strain of people out of work and dependent on assistance was starting to show. A distribution of food turned into a bloody melee in a poor area of Nairobi, Kenya.

In the United States, the death toll has surpassed that of Spain, with only Italy reporting more. In Washington, lawmakers and administration officials made some progress in breaking a stale-

mate over a \$250 billion federal infusion to replenish a fast-depleting loan program for distressed small businesses. Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, said that the Trump administration had agreed to bipartisan negotiations early next week.

But the central question dominating the conversation in Washington, New York and elsewhere was how long would it be until the country could begin to get back to normal. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, the hardest hit state, said any easing of restrictions would require widespread testing to cover millions of workers first, while Mr. Trump said that "you don't need full testing" but instead concentrated screening in the most affected areas.

New government projections presented to officials this week concluded that stay-at-home orders, school closures and social distancing have greatly reduced infections, but added that lifting them after only 30 days, as the pres-

US cases touch 500,000; Spain reports fewest deaths in over two weeks

Spain reported the fewest new coronavirus deaths since March 23. In that country and elsewhere, officials are trying to prepare people for a return to public life. But mortality rates remain volatile, with Italy being the latest to extend its lockdown.

US deaths exceeded 2,000 in a single day for the first time, while the country's total cases climbed over 500,000. New York, which remains the US epicentre of Covid-19, had a slight decline in fatalities after three days of record highs. Germany recorded the smallest increase in deaths in 10 days.

A Gilead drug showed promise for treating those with severe infections, while in the UK, a professor said a vaccine might be ready in six months. **BLOOMBERG**

ident is considering, could result in a rash of new illnesses and fatalities that would rival doing nothing to counter the pandemic.

Without any of the mitigation policies now in place, the death toll from the coronavirus could have reached 300,000, according to the projections. But if the 30-day stay-at-home guideline is lifted, the death toll could reach 200,000, even if schools remain closed until summer, 25 percent of the country continues to work from home and some social distancing continues.

Using the demand for ventilators as a stand-in for serious coronavirus infection rates, the model foresees a modest bump immediately after stay-at-home orders are lifted and a major new increase in infections about 70 days after a shelter order is lifted, peaking after 120 days. The projections, dated Thursday, were prepared by the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services and obtained by *The New York Times*.

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WHO looking into reports of coronavirus patients testing positive again

STEPHANIE NEBEHAV
11 April

The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Saturday that it was looking into reports of some COVID-19 patients testing positive again after initially testing negative for the disease while being considered for discharge.

South Korean officials on Friday reported 91 patients thought cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again. Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a briefing that the patients may have been "re-activated" rather than the patients being re-infected.

The Geneva-based WHO, asked about the report from Seoul, told Reuters in a brief statement: "We are aware of these reports of individuals who have tested negative for COVID-19 using PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing and then after some days testing positive again."

"We are closely liaising with our clinical experts and working hard to get more information on those individual cases. It is important to make sure that when samples are collected for testing on suspected patients, procedures are followed properly," it said.

According to the WHO's guidelines on clinical manage-



The scene from a market in Seoul earlier this week. South Korean officials on Friday reported 91 patients thought cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again

ment, a patient can be discharged from hospital after two consecutive negative results in a clinically recovered patient at least 24 hours apart, it added.

Based on current studies, there is a period of about two weeks between the onset of symptoms and clinical recovery of patients with mild COVID-19 disease, the agency said.

"We are aware that some patients are PCR positive after they clinically recover, but we need systematic collection of samples from recovered patients to better understand how long they

shed live virus," it said. South Korean health officials said on Friday that it remains unclear what is behind the trend, with epidemiological investigations still under way.

"As COVID-19 is a new disease, we need more epidemiological data to draw any conclusions of virus shedding profile," the WHO said.

The number of deaths linked to the novel coronavirus reached 100,000 on Friday, as reported cases passed 1.6 million, according to a Reuters tally.

REUTERS

China reports 46 new cases; 42 from abroad

China reported on Saturday a rise in new coronavirus infections, mostly in travellers arriving from abroad, as doctors in the central city of Wuhan, where the virus initially emerged, warned its behaviour was still not well understood.

The National Health Commission said 46 new cases were reported on Friday,

including 42 from abroad, up from 42 a day earlier, as Hubei province, whose capital is Wuhan, reported no new cases for a seventh successive day.

Tough curbs imposed in China since January have reined in infections sharply since the height of the pandemic in February, although it has spread worldwide to

100,000 deaths. But Chinese authorities fear the possibility of a second wave triggered by arrivals from overseas or asymptomatic patients.

"We can't say that there is no such potential risk," said Wang Xinghuan, president of Wuhan's Leishenshan hospital, its second built especially for virus patients.

REUTERS

SoftBank's Son to donate 300 mn masks per month to Japan

SAM NUSSEY
11 April

SoftBank Group Corp CEO Masayoshi Son said he has secured a monthly supply of 300 million face masks for Japan from May after reaching a deal with Chinese electric vehicle maker BYD Co Ltd, which has also started producing masks.

SoftBank will donate two different kinds of mask, initially for medical staff, in cooperation with the Japanese government's "mask team", set up to tackle shortages due to the coronavirus outbreak, Son said on Twitter.

Addressing the supply crunch is a priority for the Japanese government, which will begin delivering two washable masks to households next week — a move that has been widely criticised on social media as inadequate.

The government is also targeting domestic production of 700 million disposable masks.

Son, who has a long history of partnering with and investing in Chinese firms, said BYD is setting up a new line to produce the masks.

BYD's production capacity has reached 15 million masks a day, a company spokeswoman said, confirming the firm will supply masks to SoftBank.

SoftBank's supply will consist of 100 million N95 masks, which can filter very small particles, and 200 million regular surgical masks.

The coronavirus pandemic has spurred Son's return to Twitter, where he has complained that Japan's response is being spearheaded by politicians rather than scientists and polled users on their view of the government's response — adding to pressure to increase social distancing measures.

REUTERS

WHO warns about dangers of premature lifting of restrictions

REUTERS
Geneva/Zurich, 11 April

The World Health Organization (WHO) warned countries on Friday to be cautious about lifting restrictions introduced to curb the spread of the new coronavirus and voiced alarm it was taking hold in Africa.

The United Nations agency would like to see an easing, but at the same time "lifting restrictions could lead to a deadly resurgence," WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference.

He said there had been a "welcome slowing" of epidemics in some European countries — Italy, Germany, Spain and France — but there had been an "alarming acceleration" elsewhere including community transmission in 16 countries of Africa.

Nearly 1.5 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and more than 92,000 deaths have been reported

to the Geneva-based agency, Tedros said.

Yemen reported its first case of the novel coronavirus on Friday as aid groups braced for an outbreak in a country where war has shattered health systems and spread hunger and disease. Tedros said he was particularly concerned by the large number of infections reported among health workers.

"In some countries reports of up to 10 per cent of health workers being infected, this is an alarming trend," he said.

A new UN supply task force will coordinate and scale up the procurement and distribution of protective gear, lab diagnostics and oxygen to the countries that need it most.

"Every month we will need to ship at least 100 million medical masks and gloves, up to 25 million N-95 respirators, gowns and face shields, up to 2.5 million diagnostic tests and large quantities of oxygen concentrators and other equipment for

clinical care," he said.

The World Food Programme - the U.N. agency that handles logistics - will deploy eight 747 aircraft, 8 medium-sized cargo aircraft and several smaller passenger planes to transport the goods and aid workers needed in the operation which will have 8 hubs, he added.

Tedros urged donors to contribute to WFP's operation which will cost an estimated \$280 million, while the cost of procuring supplies will be "much greater".

Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme said the world owed a tremendous debt to front-line health workers, and it was vital they got the right protective gear.

Tedros said no country was immune from the pandemic, which was spreading panic around the world. Cases have recently been found in some parts of Japan with no known links to other outbreaks.

UK yet to reach Covid peak, lockdown to stay, says health minister Hancock

MICHAEL HOLDEN
London, 11 April

Britain has not yet reached the COVID-19 peak which would allow for an easing of tight restrictions of movement, Health Minister Matt Hancock said on Saturday.

The death toll in British hospitals has reached almost 9,000, with 980 more deaths reported on Friday, a figure which exceeded the deadliest day so far in Italy, the country worst hit by the virus.

Among those who have been infected is Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is recovering in hospital after spending three nights in intensive care. His office said he was improving and was back on his feet although his recovery was still at an early stage.

Britain imposed a lockdown three weeks ago in a bid to curb the spread of the virus and the government has come



A taped-off bench with a notice at London's Brockwell Park on Saturday

under increasing pressure to detail how long the strict measures on movements would last, with people forced to stay at home and many businesses unable to operate.

Ministers have said Britain needed to pass the peak of the outbreak before changes could

be made, and Hancock said although the number of hospital admissions had started to flatten out, there was not enough evidence yet to have confidence they were past the worst.

"Our judgement is we're not there yet. We haven't seen a flat-

tening enough to be able to say that we've reached the peak," he told BBC radio.

Some scientists have suggested the peak might still be some weeks off but Hancock said "nobody knows" when it would be.

"There's all sorts of suggestions. Their job is to make their best estimate and advise us and we have a whole load of different pieces of advice from different scientists," he said.

The death rate is also expected to increase over the next few days, health officials have cautioned, but they say they are hopeful that the lockdown will mean that the overall number of deaths will be below 20,000. Initially Johnson took a more modest response to the outbreak than other European leaders but changed tack when projections suggested a quarter of a million people could die in the United Kingdom.

REUTERS

Last Porsche 911 of a generation to be sold for coronavirus relief

HANNAH ELLIOTT
11 April

Coronavirus is doing strange things in the car world.

Ford, General Motors, McLaren, and Tesla have turned their factories into outposts for medical equipment manufacturing; Bentley is holding cocktail hours for journalists, via Zoom; and Audi, Jaguar, and Mercedes-Benz have released printable sketches of iconic models so enthusiasts can colour them at home.

Now Porsche is auctioning off what could be one of the last non-turbocharged 911s ever made. The automaker will sell its final seventh-generation 911, a Speedster, in an online auction with RM Sotheby's on April 15. It was the last 911 to roll off the production line as part of the wildly successful generation known internally as "991," which Porsche started in 2011 and ended on Dec. 20, 2019. The car is offered at no reserve. All proceeds from the sale will benefit the United Way Worldwide fund for Covid-19 pandemic relief.

"This car is a significant part of our history," said Klaus Zellmer,

president and CEO of Porsche Cars North America. He was calling from his home in Atlanta, where he has worked since Porsche offices there closed two and a half weeks ago.

"With the last of anything like this, you want to make sure it's in a customer's hands who appreciates its uniqueness, so it's a chance to sell part of our history for a good cause."

A previous Porsche, the special 911 Turbo known as "Project Gold," took \$3.4 million in a charity auction sale in 2018. But Zellmer was careful to temper pricing expectations for this auction set under wildly different circumstances.

"My hopes are high, but let's stay realistic," Zellmer said. "When we sold that Project Gold car it was a completely different time, and that car was a completely different project. I certainly hope we get a really good price on the [Speedster]. Let's see what people do."

The 911 Speedster for sale is a two-door car with a removable fabric roof. It is considered highly collectible because it is the last of the 991 range and the possible swan song of Porsche 911s that use naturally aspirated, rather than



Porsche will auction the final 911 Speedster for charity in an online sale on April 15. The 502-horsepower car was part of a special run of 1,948 Speedsters made to commemorate Porsche's 70th anniversary

turbocharged, engines. (Porsche has not officially announced the end of its naturally aspirated range.) The Speedsters are a limited-edition model that debuted in the 1950s with such variants as the 356 Carrera GT Speedster. They were produced sporadically through the following

decades with examples such as the so-called 911 "G-Body" Speedster of 1988 and 2010's 997 Speedster, which was limited to just 356 units worldwide.

The current version debuted as a concept study in 2018 at a crowded gala at the Porsche Museum in

Stuttgart, Germany. Porsche brass and renowned driving champions attended the event, which culminated with the unveiling of a 70th-anniversary edition Speedster painted in white and silver racing livery. Porsche made just 1,948 of them, which had a starting price of \$274,500.

Porsche devotees drool over Speedsters for their naturally aspirated engines (no turbo lag here!) and associated stick-shift transmissions; such old-fashioned accoutrements are thought to offer the purest form of driving attainable in a modern car.

Indeed, whoever wins the GT Silver Metallic Speedster that's up for auction will find it plucky and engaging to drive, as aggressive as a GT3 and unmistakable with its rounded humps on the rear of the car, minimalist interior, and very low roadster-body style. With a zero to 60 mph surge of 3.8 seconds and a top speed of 192 mph, the 502-horsepower Speedster feels like a cannonball from behind the wheel: It's tightly constructed and nimble, with a quick-shifting, six-speed gearbox and a throaty engine roar.

The winning bid will also secure a "911 Speedster Heritage Design Chronograph" wristwatch made by Porsche Design; a letter authenticating that the chassis number applied to this car is indeed the last of the 991 cars produced; and a private tour of the Porsche development centre and test track in Weissach, Germany.

"The engineers in Weissach are very shy when it comes to letting anybody into that cradle of the brand," Zellmer said. "But in this special time, they were all for it. So it's a package that usually money can't buy, but in this time actually there is a price to it."

Zellmer declined to comment on whether Porsche would someday make more analogue-style Speedsters. Current market indicators and the prevalence of turbo engines and paddle-shifting transmissions across the rest of Porsche's lineup imply that chances are slim.

The auction will open for bidding at 11 a.m. East Coast time on Wednesday, April 15. Bidding will close a week later, at 1 p.m. East Coast time on Wednesday, April 22.

BLOOMBERG

The other frontline workers of the pandemic

Across India, grassroots workers engaged in developmental work have taken on the role of keeping rural communities safe, writes Venu Sandhu

PHOTO: CII



Health workers trained by CII distribute ration, daily essentials and hygiene kits to villagers in Maharashtra's drought-prone Marathwada region

For the last few weeks, Manisha Ghule and her team of 30-odd women have been sleeping for barely three to four hours a day. The sugarcane cutters, who head to Karnataka and western Maharashtra every year in search of work, have returned to their villages in Beed, the drought-prone district of Maharashtra's Marathwada region where Ghule works. As the lockdown was announced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the vulnerable seasonal migrants rushed home. The state borders were getting sealed, but they somehow managed to make the journey back to an uncertain future — and to antagonistic villagers who were worried they might have brought the virus with them.

Ghule, who works on the health rights of women in Beed, has now diverted her time and energy to provide these migrants with ration, daily essentials, hygiene kits, and counselling. She is helping reach out to over 5,000 families across 300 villages.

Over a thousand kilometres away, in Rajasthan's Tonk district, Rama Sharma is doing the same for some 300 families from the nomadic Banjara, Madari and Qalandar tribes. Besides distributing ration, masks and sanitisers to them, she and her team have been telling them about the virus that has brought the world to a standstill. They have taken on the task of explaining to the villagers why it is important for them and their children to frequently wash their hands, refrain from touching their faces and how and when to use this thing called the sanitiser,

which, until now, didn't even remotely feature in their scheme of things.

Ghule and Sharma are part of a vast grassroots network built and cultivated by the CII Foundation, which was set up by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in 2011 to undertake developmental activities across India. In this critical time, this robust network is coming in handy to extend both material help and mental health support to rural and marginalised communities, among whom many have lost their livelihoods and the basic means to get by.

Overall, CII is working across 26 states — covering the span from Gujarat to Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir to Tamil Nadu. So far, it has managed to reach out to nearly two million people in these areas with cooked meals, ration and hygiene kits. Awareness drives in villages and among distressed, ignored sections of society, which are crucial to protect them from Covid-19 and contain the spread of the virus, are also being undertaken. The CII Foundation alone, for instance, has carried out Covid-19 relief work and awareness initiatives among nomadic tribes, agricultural women workers, daily wage earners and the impoverished and oppressed Musahar community across seven states.

"All of these initiatives, amongst other efforts, are being funded by our member companies, where companies are contributing either in cash or kind," says CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee. "CII is facilitating the translation on ground using its extensive presence and network."

What is making these initiatives

effective is that the people carrying out the work are those who belong to those very areas, speak the local language and have the trust of the communities.

Sandeep Kumar, for example, is a member of a farmer cooperative society in Haryana's Sirsa district. The society was formed by CII Foundation in 2019 to work on stubble burning and crop residue management. Since all its members are farmers and representatives of the local farmer community, they know

the concept of social distancing does not exist in villages. So we really had to work hard to tell them why they needed to stay away from one another, remain home and decontaminate whatever essentials they bought"

"The concept of social distancing does not exist in villages," says Kumar. "So we really had to work hard to tell them why they needed to stay away from one another, remain home and decontaminate whatever essentials they bought." Besides ensuring that announcements to the effect are made from the temples and gurudwaras in the villages, morning and evening, Kumar and his team have also distributed pamphlets in Hindi about the pandemic and the safety measures it necessitates. They have also carried out decontamination

exercises in the villages.

Harminder Sidhu, a promoter of a farmer producer organisation (FPO) in the Raikot block of Ludhiana in Punjab, is working in 50 villages along with local volunteers. Like Kumar, Sidhu and FPOs such as his have been associated with CII Foundation on various issues, including stubble burning. "We are now sending out relief vans to the villages," says Sidhu. Seeing their work, the sub-divisional magistrate has asked them to continue with the campaign.

"When the lockdown was announced, it was potato harvesting season," says Sidhu. "Farmers needed passes to get out to their fields and to transport their produce. We guided them on how to get these passes, and in some cases got them made for them."

Meanwhile, CII sent relief kits and 25,000 sanitiser bottles. "We were judicious in their distribution, keeping those who go out into the fields and are, therefore, more vulnerable as priority."

All the *chaupals* (community spaces) were shut down and the village youth were roped in to guard the routes to the villages from 6 am to 8 pm. "The idea is to get people to avoid all unnecessary travel to and from the village," says Sidhu. A local artist was also brought on board to create catchy awareness messages, which are now announced through loudspeakers on a tractor across villages.

Then another issue came up. "There

was a news story that a family in Ludhiana had refused to accept the body of an elderly woman who had died of Covid-19," says Sidhu. "Doctors, police and the administration are already stretched; they shouldn't have to deal with such problems too." So now announcements are made twice a day from village temples and gurudwaras urging people to remain sensitive and mindful, while also exercising caution.

"People are traumatised," says Ghule, who is part of CII Foundation's "Woman Exemplar" network, a programme that recognises exemplary women working at the grassroots and trains them in leadership and capacity-building skills. She underwent a three-day training by CII in Delhi in 2017.

Ghule, who is the founder of an all-women federation (Mahila Vikas Manch) in Beed district, says complaint boxes have been kept in every village — either in the village school, the gram panchayat office or other such prominent places. Women can drop in their complaints or suggestions, which the field staff then acts on. Important information or feedback is communicated to CII.

Ghule is a local leader in her own right. In the past her efforts have ensured that Beed became one of the earliest districts of Maharashtra to implement the Ghar Doghaanche Abhiyan, the state government's scheme for joint property ownership between husband and wife. Her intervention made it possible for 20,000 women to become joint owners of their houses.

Ghule's personal network extends to Anganwadi and Asha workers. And then there are other NGOs she is coordinating with. Such a web of networks exists in other states too, making these grassroots workers a fortified force, one that we need in this trying time.

"Yes, we face problems when we go out to the villages. But, we also have help from the local administration and the police in distributing the relief kits from CII," she says. Each kit carries 21 products: Atta, rice, oil, toothpaste, soap and other such essentials.

Sharma, a woman exemplar from 2019 who is enabling girls from Tonk's Banjara community to enter the formal schooling system, says the police have been pro-active with their help. "Our relief vans travel with a police personnel and a nurse to the villages," says Sharma, who herself overcame marital violence and financial crisis to work for the education of marginalised girls. Appreciating her Covid-19 relief work, the district administration has given her 300 more kits to distribute to vulnerable families.

"When we started the pandemic relief work, the community had no clue that a deadly virus had shaken the world," says Sharma, who has been educating them about it. She has also been telling them to sun themselves and their clothes, drink warm potions that have spices such as cloves, turmeric and pepper, and do whatever it takes to strengthen their immunity. And, strengthen social solidarity in this time of physical distancing — the way she and networks such as hers are doing.

IMO



LOCKDOWN IN INDIA

Rana Ayyub@RanaAyyub
Blue skies, clean air and masks on our faces. The irony

Minhaz Merchant@MinhazMerchant

Question for CMs like @TelanganaCMO @KCR & @ChouhanShivraj seeking extension of lockdown: if lockdown is extended by 2 weeks from April 15 & COVID19 case numbers are still high, will you seek yet another extension? India's economy can't sustain such a long shutdown. @narendramodi

Prof. Steve Hanke@steve_hanke

Sledgehammer policies like #Modi's #LockdownWithoutPlan are worse than the disease. The poorest & most vulnerable in #India aren't just worried about #COVID19. They're worried about being #Jobless & #Hungry. This is #ModiMadeDisaster is more #GovtFailure.

Rupa Subramanya@rupasubramanya

By April 30th (assuming lockdown ends), 75% of the Indian economy will have been shutdown for a month and 10 days. Economic devastation will be brutal. There's no science, evidence or modelling that backs this total lockdown. No other country has implemented anything this draconian

Chetan Bhagat@chetan_bhagat

Glad a balance of precaution vs economy is now being considered. Have always felt that tough and delicate balance has to be maintained. n

WADHAWAN FAMILY'S ESCAPE TO MAHABALESHWAR

Amit Malviya@amitmalviya
Maharashtra's health department is busy under reporting Covid numbers. Chief Minister is happy getting celebrity endorsement for a mere speech. While the Wadhawan family, some of who are wanted in the DHFL/Yes Bank scam, are being treated like state guests... Friends of Pawar?

Shekhar Gupta@ShekharGupta

Shock in Mumbai Police as 'honest' top cop gets blamed for scandalous Wadhawan family trip

Abhishek Singhvi@DRAMSinghvi

Ridiculous tht accused on bail with such serious charges r holidaying in luxury with 23 family frm #khandala 2mahabaleshwar! Full inquiry within 3days must fix guilt, starting frm #PrincipalSecy! Pub confidence must b restored! #wadhawan #Maha accounts affity % deaths in India!

BORIS JOHNSON'S CORONAVIRUS BATTLE

Luke Edwards@LukeEdwardsTele
Glad he's ok and on mend but I don't care what Boris Johnson is doing in his hospital bed. We have had the worst Coronavirus daily death figures of any country in Europe twice and they don't include those dying in care homes. This is a national scandal not a triumph of leadership

Piers Morgan@piersmorgan

I'm delighted Boris Johnson is improving in hospital. We all should be. But let's not be distracted from the shocking fact that nearly 1000 #coronavirus deaths were recorded in the UK yesterday alone. Govt. Has serious questions to answer about our preparedness for this crisis.

Kenneth Roth Boris Johnson@KenRoth

The ironies: UK PM Boris Johnson, having led the anti-immigrant Brexit campaign, is now being treated in a hospital system where the eight UK doctors who have died from the coronavirus were all immigrants.

Tackling hunger during the Covid crisis

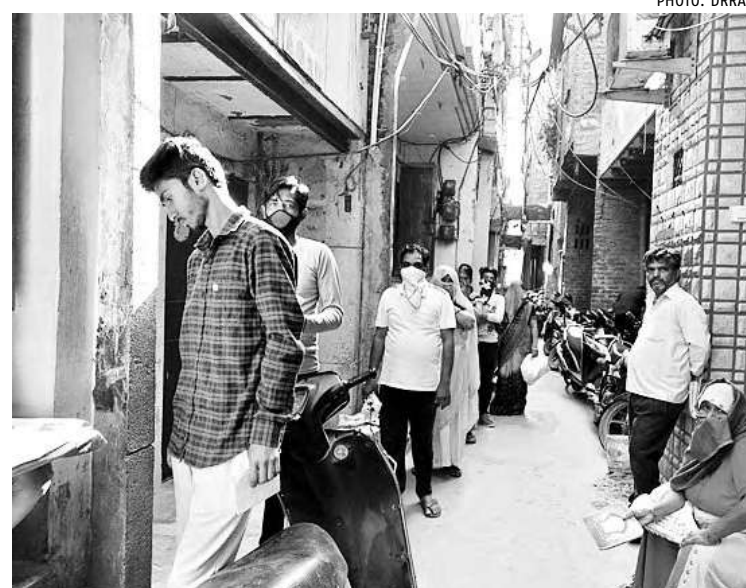
Food insecurity is on the rise as subsidised food distributed via govt-run ration shops is not easily available to everyone

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

Napoleon once famously said that an army marches on its stomach. Many argue that the present countrywide lockdown is causing widespread poverty and consequent hunger, making it that much harder for the nation to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, the work of Dilli Roti Adhikar Abhiyan (DRRAA), Right to Food Campaign in Delhi, is notable. For the last few years, this group of activists, academics and frontline field workers has been advocating on issues related to food security and monitoring Delhi's public distribution system. Today, however, the good folk at DRRAA are working overtime. "In the last few weeks, even we, who have been working on food security-related issues for so many years, have been taken aback by the extent of economic vulnerability of the country's lower income groups," says Annie Raja, member of DRRAA. "In the last two weeks, the food insecurity we've witnessed even in the nation's capital, has left us shaken."

She recounts how when they took relief supplies to a migrant labour colony in Kirti Nagar in Delhi, it nearly resulted in a riot. "The number of packets was just not enough," she rues. "We realised that there was only so much that organisations, corporations or individuals could do; food is every citizen's entitlement and the



People queue up outside a ration shop in Delhi

government's responsibility!"

Consequently, DRRAA has been monitoring the state and central government's relief measures and highlighting the gaps in the process. "The idea isn't at all to simply criticise the government," says Raja. "We believe that if the government plugs the loopholes that we identify, public health and food security infrastructure can be strengthened."

To this end, DRRAA has been monitoring the functioning of ration shops and feeding centres through a network of volunteers and ration cardholders. Till April 5, 150 on-ground audits were conducted on 34 ration shops. "We found that 10 of the 34 (29 per cent) shops were closed during working hours," says Anjali Bhardwaj, member of DRRAA. "Of the 15 shops which were open and distributing grains, 14 were found to be distributing grains in accordance with the enhanced entitlement of 7.5 kg per

person on priority category ration cards and were following some system for social distancing."

DRRAA activists aver that there is no system of grievance redressal, so for example, people don't know where and how to complain if their ration shop is closed. Further, Raja points out that although Delhi government has announced that PDS subsidised foodgrain will be available even to people without ration cards, the procedure for access is difficult. "They have to fill an online form with 25 questions to get an e-coupon!" she says. "As many don't have the means to do this, we believe that this exercise could end up being one of exclusion rather than inclusion." Adding to this is the fact that Aadhaar is still mandatory for accessing any government social security scheme.

Based on their findings, DRRAA is advocating certain changes. "Information about ration available,

the timing of functioning of ration shops and the quantity of free ration to different categories of cardholders each month should be disseminated widely in local languages through boards at ration shops, display of posters and public announcements in low-income settlements," says Bhardwaj. "Also, there should be a helpline number for complaints displayed prominently outside ration shops."

DRRAA is also advocating that access to food be further simplified and during this present economic and health crisis, food should be available to all who ask for it.

Some of this advocacy seems to have reached the government's ears. "In the initial days of the lockdown, we had highlighted that by shutting down schools, children dependent on the school midday meal would be deprived of it," says Raja. "The government has agreed, in principle, to do something about this."

Meanwhile, the hunger crisis that they have witnessed on the ground has been so severe that DRRAA members have been forced out of their watchdog role to do relief work. "Much of our present effort is directed towards ensuring that people don't starve during the Covid-19 lockdown," says Bhardwaj.

"DRRAA has responded to SOS calls for food requirements of over 35,000 people and has been able to raise over ₹8 lakh, which has been directly transferred to those in need."

Going forward, DRRAA will have its work cut out. "Many more are going to need government support in the form of food, pensions and scholarships after this lockdown," says Bhardwaj. "We'll do what we can to ensure their voices are heard by the government."

Follow *Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan Delhi* on Facebook. To contribute towards their food relief campaign or get involved in monitoring the ration shops in your area, email at delhiritf@gmail.com

Pakistan's grudge

Earlier this week, Pakistan stayed away from the regional trade officials' video conference on Covid-19 because as per the neighbouring country, it should have been managed by the secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), not hosted by India.

Trade officials of all Saarc countries (except Pakistan) met via videoconferencing to discuss the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on intra-regional trade and the effect of travel restrictions. In the virtual conference, the trade officials broadly agreed to identify new ways to "sustain and expand" the intra-regional trade to offset the huge economic cost of the coronavirus pandemic. The meeting was a follow-up to the SAARC leaders' video conference, that was convened by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 15, in which the special assistant to prime minister on health, Dr Zafar Mirza, represented Pakistan. Pakistan feels Saarc should have coordinated. It is now contacting health ministers of all Saarc countries, except India and Afghanistan, to convene a parallel conference on the same issue.

Pakistan also has issues with the fact that India forwarded the suggestion to set up a Covid-19 emergency fund. All member countries have pledged contributions to the fund, except Pakistan, which has been insisting that the fund be placed under the control of the Saarc secretary general and modalities for its utilisation be transparently decided.

India allegedly scuttled a Saarc meeting that Pakistan was to host in 2016. Islamabad has not forgiven Delhi for that.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?

"CORONAVIRUS IS THE BIGGEST THREAT THAT THE HUMAN RACE HAS FACED IN MORE THAN A CENTURY. LIFE WILL NOT BE THE SAME... WITH OUR SACRIFICE AND THE BLESSING OF LORD JAGANNATH, THIS TOO SHALL PASS."
Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik

**OPINION**

SONIA GANDHI

'It is imperative for us to rise above partisan interests'

The Covid-19 pandemic, sweeping across the world, has caused serious public health concerns, anguish and apprehensions across our country. It has imperilled lives and put at risk the lives and livelihoods of millions, particularly, the most vulnerable sections of our society. The entire nation stands as one in solidarity in the fight to halt and defeat the corona pandemic.

The 21-day nationwide lockdown announced by you as a measure to fight the coronavirus is a welcome step. As president of the Congress, I would like to state that we will fully support and collaborate with every step taken by the Union government to ensure the containment of the pandemic.

At this challenging and uncertain time, it is imperative for each one of us to rise above partisan interests and honour our duty towards our country and indeed, humanity. It is in the spirit of solidarity and cooperation therefore, that I would like to suggest some measures that I believe will help us to address the massive health crisis we are about to face and ameliorate the immense economic and existential pain that vulnerable sections of our society will soon be subjected to:

■ It has been announced that the Union government has allocated ₹15,000 crore to fight the coronavirus, including meeting the requirements of doctors, nurses and health professionals. I would like to re-emphasise the urgent need to arm our doctors, nurses and health workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), including N-95 masks and hazmat suits.

Let us ensure the opening and scaling up of manufacture and supply of these items so that not a single health professional faces the predicament of contracting or passing on Covid-19 owing to unavailability of the PPE. Announcing a special "risk allowance" for doctors, nurses and health workers for a period of six months retrospectively from March 1, 2020, is imperative. Health professionals and their support teams risk their lives to work at the front line of the battle against the Covid-19. I believe we owe it to them to provide protection and incentive.

■ Over the last few weeks, there has been much uncertainty about designated hospitals and their locations, number of beds, isolation chambers, ventilators, dedicated medical teams, supplies etc. This has been caused by a paucity of information. Disseminating all essential information, including the locations of designated hospitals and their emergency phone line numbers is essential to facilitate management of the pandemic. A dedicated portal for sharing these and all other necessary information is one way forward.

■ Given that even the most advanced and developed health care systems in the world are facing an overload of patients and crumbling under the weight of the sheer numbers of affected persons, the Union government could immediately commission and begin construction of temporary facilities with large numbers of intensive care units and ventilators in geographical areas where the outbreak is expected to be concentrated in the near future.

■ Daily wages, workers under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), factory labourers, construction and unorganised sector workers, fishermen, farm labourers and many more form the most vulnerable sections of our society. It has been recently reported that many businesses and companies are laying off and retrenching a large number of regular and temporary employees. It would be in order for the Union government to immediately put in place broad-based social protection measures including Direct Cash Transfer to these sections to tide over the period of difficulty. I have suggested some such measures in the succeeding points.

■ The 21-day lockdown comes at the peak of the harvesting season. Crop is ready for harvesting in most states by the end of March. With nearly 60 per cent of India's population being economically dependent on agriculture, it is imperative that the Union government should take necessary steps to enable harvesting and procurement of crops at MSP. This is also the right time to suspend all recoveries from farmers for a period of six months and consider indebtedness relief liberally.

■ I sincerely believe that implementing the Minimum Income Guarantee Scheme, that is, 'Nyay Yojana' proposed by the Indian National Congress is the need of the hour. At this time of immense distress for the poor who are going to weather the major economic fallout of this pandemic, it will give them a basic economic resource to fall back on.

Alternately, a cash transfer of ₹7,500 to every "Jan Dhan" and PM Kisan scheme account holder, old-age/widow/differently-abled person's pension account and MGNREGA worker's accounts, as a one-time special measure to tide over the 21-day lockdown period should be considered.

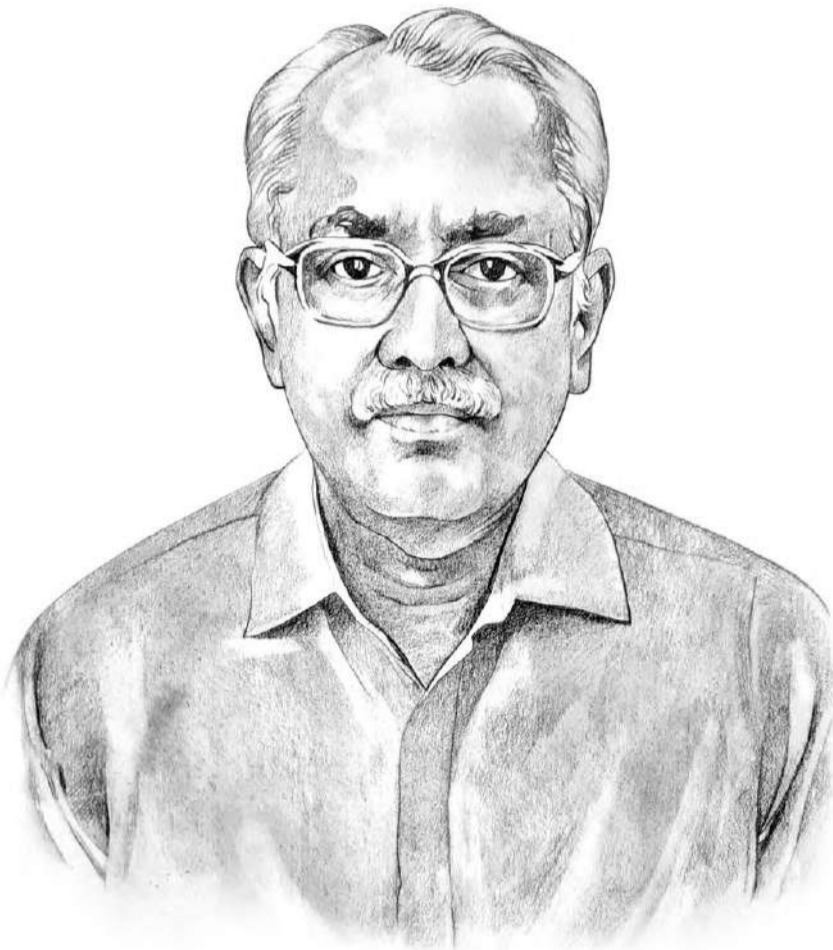
May I also suggest distribution of 10 kg of rice or wheat per family member to every ration card holder through PDS free of cost as a special measure to tide over the difficulty...

■ Salaried class is also bearing the brunt of the harsh measures required to contain the spread of the disease. The Union government might consider deferring all EMIs for a period of six months. The interest being charged by the banks for this period may consequently be waived. Similarly, all loan installment deductions from the salary of government employees may also be deferred for six months.

■ All businesses, particularly micro, small and medium, have been facing unprecedented distress from before the onset of the pandemic. The pandemic has increased their distress manifold. The Union government must consider announcing a comprehensive sector-wise relief package including necessary tax breaks, interest subvention and deferment of liabilities.

Mr Prime Minister, if implemented, these measures will reaffirm our commitment to each and every one of our citizens when they most need support and protection. We in the Congress party stand with the people of India at this time of national crisis and we extend to the government, our full support and cooperation.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi's letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, April 7, New Delhi



Dr Jayaprakash Muliylil, former principal of Christian Medical College, Vellore, is one of the country's leading epidemiologists. He has served the Indian Council of Medical Research in various advisory committees in the past and his work involves decades of extensive research in the area of infectious diseases. Muliylil tells **Somesh Jha** that the days of eradicating the disease is over

'We have to achieve herd immunity'**How should the government proceed ahead in the second phase after the current 21-day lockdown period gets over?**

The principle of this line of thinking is based on an important recognition, that is by searching cases and isolating them alone, we will not be able to contain it. So the question of containing the virus is out. What is the next course? The next strategy is to say, ok, infections will continue and we need to take care of people who fall ill and require medical help.

However, there is something uncomfortable about this line of thinking because the spread of virus is going up in an exponential fashion, so we will not be able to take care of people who need health care as the system will be overwhelmed by the number of severely sick who will land up in hospitals. Now we have to ask, given the circumstances, what do we do? We have to ask: Is there any other way to contain this problem? In 2009, there was an epidemic of H1N1 influenza. What happened to it? It came in and stayed

for two-three months and spontaneously disappeared. Nothing that we did at the point of time was of help. It went away. Why? It is because of a certain level of herd immunity that was produced by the infection. So, our only hope is that this virus head that way. Unfortunately, we are not sure what percentage of population would be infected before we reach that so-called protective level. From then, it will all come down magically.

But then the problem would be to determine what should be the right ratio. Let's say it's 50-60 per cent, but for that we need good data coming from the system and it's vital. Because in a battle, we cannot fight enemy without information and if it is given to us properly, then we will be able to study. Now that we have said that, we have to ask: By the time 60 per cent of the population is infected, how many will die?

That will not be an acceptable proposition. Immediately, you will realise there is another solution. The interesting thing about this disease is that the virus causes a mild

A small wonder**Three school students in Delhi have come up with a robot that can aid health care workers in their fight against coronavirus, writes Swarnami Mondal**

What do a bunch of teenagers do when schools are closed and exams are postponed amid a fast-spreading contagious pandemic that has taken the entire world in its sway?

Instead of just spending leisure time on social media or OTT platforms, they come up with a prototype of a robot that can reduce the contact of healthy persons or health care personnel with the infected people; more so when the number of health care professionals, catching Covid-19 from patients, is rising day after day.

Consider these: On April 7, two Mumbai hospitals were cordoned off. While 26 nurses and three doctors of Wockhardt Hospital were tested positive for the Covid-19, Jaslok Hospital had 10 coronavirus positive staffers, including six nurses. On April 9, 30 health care workers, including doctors and nurses, of AIIMS in New Delhi were advised quarantine after they came in contact with a 72-year-old patient who was Covid-19 positive.

With steep and steady rise in the number of coronavirus positive cases over the past few days in India, health care professionals, who are at the front line of the battle against the pandemic, are most vulnerable, especially with dearth of Personal Protective Equipment.

There were news reports, which said doctors in West Bengal and Haryana even resorted to raincoats and helmets to protect themselves.

Taking cue from countries like China, Thailand and Israel where a remotely-controlled robots tend patients, three Class XII students of Delhi schools have come up with their own Robot Prithvi. In China's Wuhan — where the disease originated — a robot, Cloud Ginger, tended patients at a makeshift hospital. In places like Thailand and Israel, robots are being used for doctor consultations via video conference.

Robot Prithvi has been designed by Nishant Chanda, Sourav Maheshkar and Aditya Dubey (an examinee of Class XII boards, which have been postponed). The robot aims at minimising contact between a Covid-19 positive patient and health care workers.

Maheshkar said the prototype of Prithvi was conceptualised, designed and built after a nationwide lockdown was announced on March 22. "It has been developed to protect the front line workers so that they don't fall sick in such times."

Chandna said the robot had been designed to dispense food and medicines to patients and can be controlled remotely through an

CHECKLIST**THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: COVID-19 ACROSS THE WORLD**

■ **Germany:** Cabinet has approved draft legislation that will make it easier for authorities to prevent foreign takeovers of strategic companies. The proposal predates Covid-19 pandemic, but the German government has vowed to "stand by our companies" in the face of foreign investors who might seek to take advantage of the crisis to acquire companies more cheaply.

■ **The UK:** Across the world there is a surge in pet adoptions. Battersea Animal Shelter says it has received an increase in offers to foster an animal, but it has suspended new applications in order to prioritise working with the existing staff and volunteers. The Dogs Trust said it has received "an overwhelming number of enquiries... not only to rehome dogs permanently, but also to foster our dogs on a temporary basis".

■ **China:** The divorce rate in China has zoomed. The city of Xian in central China and Dazhou in

Sichuan province have reported record-high numbers of divorce filings in early March, leading to long backlogs at government offices. In Hunan province's Miluo, "staff members didn't even have time to drink water" because so many couples lined up to file divorce, according to a report in mid-March on the city government website. Clerks struggled to keep up, processing a record number in a single day, it said. "Trivial matters in life led to the escalation of conflicts, and poor communication has caused everyone to be disappointed in marriage and make the decision to divorce," the city registration centre's director, Yi Xiaoyan, was quoted as saying.

■ **The USA:** Chinese American leaders say there has been a big drop in business in San Francisco's Chinatown and for local Asian American-owned businesses, a huge increase in xenophobia following the Covid-19 outbreak.

disease in people in the younger age group and among those above the age of 60 years, the mortality is high. If you look at the country's population statistics, about 12.5 per cent are above 55 years of age.

It means roughly 87.5 per cent are people whom I call young. So if you take care of the elderly and allow the transmission in younger population, but not too fast, just slow down a bit, it can work.

Let it happen. Don't do overcrowding, try to keep distance from each other. Work has to go on, industry has to be restarted, agricultural activities have to start and at the same time, young people will recover from the infection. When the immunity level is attained to the so-called protective level, or herd immunity, we can say that the epidemic has been seized. But that doesn't mean it won't come back again. It may come back in another year or so but by then, we may have a vaccine.

But is it plausible for any government to target "herd immunity" to counter such a disease?

What is the other solution then? Suggest something else?

Some countries, such as South Korea, did a lot of testing, for instance...

The cost of testing a person for Covid-19 is ₹4,500. Then, you test everybody — healthy and unhealthy. Will it be possible to test 1.3 billion people? The disease is going to be there — whether you like it or not even if you ramp up your testing. Remember, most of them are sub-clinical cases.

The United Kingdom tried to experiment with "herd immunity" but didn't seem to quite succeed. What are your views?

The more the mobility, the rate of the infection spread will be higher. We have to understand how epidemics normally work. When a new viral epidemic comes, people are not immune to it. There will be lower resistance initially. It goes from person to person and you cannot stop it. And since it's most sub-clinical, it becomes difficult to isolate that person. But when the virus reaches a particular level of saturation, it automatically stops because it can't find a host. It depends from virus to virus. For measles, around 90 per cent of the population needs to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity and for influenza, it is 40 per cent. But one has to stagger the process of reaching the herd immunity and slow down the spread of the infection so that you can handle much more efficiently and not lose too many patients. That's not what the UK did.

But in India, where there is a problem of lack of space, will it be possible to protect the elderly from the younger population?

Keep the elderly in a room and how much distance do we need? Two metres. You don't need to have social discrimination, but only physical distance. In other words, don't hug your father, keep a distance and let them be there. There is a possibility that they might still get infected, but it will reduce the spread. In some areas, it will certainly be a problem, like for the elderly people in the slum. But the population in slums is by and

large young and middle-aged.

In villages, we do have lack of space and a large number of people still living together under one roof.

You encourage your old men to sleep under trees. It is about what people have to do to devise ways to protect themselves and their families. Don't militate. Let them do it. We are a democracy. People have the right to do what they want. Can we stop the disease from spreading? No. Now, it will reach an exponential phase and the fact is that even where you slow it down and you don't have protection within the community, known to be herd immunity; it will come back.

The current strategy of a lockdown was to ensure that we "flatten the curve" and buy time for adequate medical facilities to be in place. Do you think this has helped us?

We did a short strategy for three weeks, advised by some people. We tested it out. During this period, at least people have learned that there is a disease known as the coronavirus that exists and they have learnt how to protect themselves, by

keeping a distance. They have realised crowds are bad for health now. In three weeks, we were able to educate the nation. We have probably bought ourselves a few extra weeks for the disease to exponentially rise. But it will come back when people will start moving and there will be contacts. We can't do anything about it. We cannot run away to the moon. Can we? There is a virus, there are people and the only way to protect is the way you behave to some extent. One more thing, if you get the infection once, you are protected forever.

When the national lockdown comes to an end, what should we do?

There will be more cases. We will have to look after them. Even if we don't have ventilators, we will be able to give some support through oxygen. We need to remember that our health system is not as advanced as the United States. If they are suffering, how much more will we suffer? No wishful thinking. Ventilator, you know, requires a lot of expertise to manage. We will have a problem of training people. I think what's hindering us is the fear for the disease. For those below the age of 55 years, it's a mild disease. We will lose a few, but that will be a small percentage. In older people, the mortality will be higher. So take care of yourself, your family and your parents. That's the basic principle.

So you are suggesting that the lockdown should be lifted and people be allowed to go back to their lives?

I told you a framework. We have to decide: How crowded can the buses be? Can we have a cricket match? Even when we go back to normal lifestyle, you cannot afford the rush of cases. You need to slow it down. There should be a kind of understanding that there will be a continued infection, however, the days of eradicating it is gone. We have to achieve herd immunity. In building it up, we have to reduce mortality by keeping the elderly people away.



A prototype of Robot Prithvi

app. "It has a cardboard body and comes with a tablet mounted top so that doctors and nurses can hold conversations with the patient via the screen and camera."

He added Prithvi came with an in-built Bluetooth and that it could also work seamlessly on Wi-Fi. On Bluetooth, Prithvi has a connectivity range of up to 50 metres.

They also plan to add another feature in form of a temperature gun, besides incorporating radio sensors for the bot to function smoothly.

So, how did they build this?

Maheshkar said at school, they had been exposed to the basics of robotics. "Robot Prithvi has been built using those ideas. We

have tried to keep the designed as simple and ergonomic as possible so that one and all can use it without much training."

Made of cardboard, basic motors, and a programmable board, building the robot Prithvi cost them ₹5,000.

Maheshkar hoped if they could launch Prithvi at hospitals, sturdier material could be used to build the bot.

"We will use plastic, which can be sanitised easily and frequently as needed. Prithvi will reduce the number of touch points with the patients who are isolated, thereby reducing risk for health care workers," he says, hoping to make their little contribution in this war against the coronavirus.



THE OTHER INDIA

The climate 'dividend'

Lockdown highlights the criticality of climate change agenda

Clean air, unrestricted views of mountain ranges hidden for decades, and the return of thriving bird life in urban areas have been unexpected upsides of the lockdown, and they offer a more compelling case for climate change activists than any scientific model. This unexpected environmental dividend offers a useful template for climate-change policies. The critical caveat is that no agenda can be predicated on the cessation of virtually all economic activity, given the hardships it imposes on the poor. However, it is possible to imagine a sustainable future even with India's massive

and growing population. As an article in *McKinsey Quarterly* points out, thanks to large stimulus packages there should be cheap money available to invest in climate-friendly energy and infrastructure.

In terms of a domestic agenda, two elements suggest themselves. At the policy level, the priority must be enforcing the challenging 2020-30 targets India, a coal-fired economy, has set for itself under the Paris climate change accord. India set three major goals: To increase non-fossil fuels' share to 40 per cent of electricity generation capacity; reduce the emission intensity of the economy by 33-35 per cent from the

2005 level; and create an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent through additional forest and tree cover. If the government's claims that it may outperform these targets are correct, then re-focusing on this agenda is critical when the lockdown ends. This will involve urgently addressing long-standing anomalies in the solar power eco-system, the main renewable energy source. Most solar companies are in the red on account of the aggressive (some say unrealistic) price bids by new entrants at progressively lower levels, which discourages distribution companies from buying from existing producers. The scrapping of bids for solar capacities through 2019 and the early months of 2020 do not bode well for the target of achieving 100,000 Mw of solar capacity by 2022 (the country has achieved about a third of that target so far). Creating a carbon sink is a big-

ger challenge. The India State of Forest Report of 2019 suggested that the supposed increase in forest cover is misleading because the term includes plantations and masks a marked decline in the Northeast with its rich biodiversity. Enforcing no-go areas for manufacturing in endangered forest areas is vital not least because it will also extend some measure of protection to the rights of India's disenfranchised tribal population.

Beyond the larger agenda are granular policies for the Centre and states to consider. Support to industry on revival could be linked to adopting pollution-free processes and recycling. It is fairly easy, for instance, to adopt waste-water recycling in modern industry. The prime minister had highlighted the perils of plastic in several radio broadcasts. It is vital that this initiative, which has yielded some positive responses,

should not be reversed in a low oil-price regime (petrochemicals being the basic input for plastic). Equally, cleaner, urban air owing to lower vehicular movement should spur state and municipal administrations to strengthen public transport capacities, including e-buses, to enable gig and migrant workers better access to their workplaces than ad hoc, polluting private options. Getting started on setting up e-vehicle infrastructure (charging stations and so on) would also go a long way toward encouraging more people to examine this mode of vehicle ownership. At the corporate level, encouraging enhanced telecommuting, a reduction in air travel, and partial work-from-home policies are obvious solutions to lowering air pollution, with all the concomitant benefits on public-health outcomes. Learning from the Covid-19 experience is as vital as coping with it.

We're more civilised now

The benefits of modern medicine have led people to demand more from the State, and to value every life. Even a modest death toll caused by an epidemic today is unacceptable



A magnified coronavirus germ displayed on a desktop computer monitor during coronavirus patient sample detection tests at a virology research laboratory in Belgium

DIPANKAR GUPTA

Look at the bright side. If isolated attacks in Indore on health workers enforcing quarantine has gained so much publicity it only shows how civilised we have gradually become. In Russia, Britain and Germany, right upto the 1830s, massive cholera riots broke out which would put Indore's prickly little one-day flare up to shame. In those days doctors too were beaten up, governments and kingdoms shook, all kinds of rumours were rife, including the poisoning of wells for devious reasons of power. In the 14th century, Jews were rounded up and killed as suspected agents of epidemics. Compared to such cataclysmic events, the Indore news is a minor, indoor affair.

There is no doubt then that we have progressed along the civilisational route. We are now more caring of others, more observant of the public good and, most importantly, more trusting of our governments. The Europe that trembled during the cholera epidemics has gradually accepted quarantining and today there is no sign of violence against pandemic measures anywhere in the West. Britain was a leader in the administration of quarantine from the 1860s onwards, and by 1892, all of Europe formally accepted the British model. Indore is a blip on this historical map; it lasted a few hours, but that too has passed.

This clearly demonstrates that we have evolved as citizens and that our States today have much greater popular endorsement than they had in the past. To a large extent, this is because the modern administrative apparatuses are more effective, control systems more centralised and delivery mechanisms more grounded. People expect what is generally promised and often get it; leaders have greater ability to oversee and finer methods of surveillance, but most of all, the ordinary person believes that the State is the helper of last resort.

Look at it another way. The Spanish Flu killed 17 million in India alone and over 100 million worldwide. The bubonic plague in past centuries decimated half the population of many countries. So far Covid-19 has killed less than 100,000. A mere sneeze in comparison to earlier pandemics, but the difference is that governments everywhere don't see it that way. In India too, our sensitivities are on high alert but the death toll has just crossed 200. The nationwide worry lines today are probably much deeper than when 17 million died a hundred years ago in India from the Spanish Flu. Our expectations from governments today are way higher than ever before in human history. This is because they are acting as if every life counts. This is something very new.

All States today are straining themselves to the limit to contain Covid-19 and win hearts, even if that means hurting their economies

inside a Hallmark "get well" card. Nevertheless, this statistic is in the air. Therefore, like it or not, our threshold of tolerance for pain and death are much lower today than what it was even a hundred years ago. The human body has not evolved, our nerve ends still hurt when inflamed; so the only thing that has changed mightily is our capacity for governance. This is a result of not just greater power, as some pro-Nietzscheans might say, but because science, at all levels, has grown phenomenally and proved itself via the State.

This quantum jump in scientific development has

also brought home the fact that inter-laboratory collaboration, oftentimes across national boundaries, has made the old crackpot genius scientist working out of an ivory tower as much a fairy tale as Rapunzel is. Research on Covid-19 has scientists everywhere sharing findings and putting a lid on parochialising information. A laboratory based in Pittsburgh is collaborating with an institute in Paris and an Austrian company. They are probably in talks now, as we read, with the Serum Institute of India, one of the largest vaccine manufacturers in the world.

Knowledge generation today is a mammoth affair, with conspiracies and rivalries, no doubt, but the end product is more awe inspiring than ever before. Nor does scientific credibility spring from an individual's talents as it does from an institution that sponsors such minds. Harvard University, or the Mayo Clinic, or the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences has greater charisma than any of its alumni and experts. Even at the level of primary health, the home and neighbourhood are no longer relevant, but departments of governments and specialised agencies are.

The phenomenal rise in State credibility has also powered us to scrutinise governments and ask for greater accountability. Have you ever heard of a lockdown during the 1890s plague epidemic in India or the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic? Not even a suggestion. But today, we are outraged when a few hundred die because we value lives more than we ever did in human history. All States today are straining themselves to the limit to contain Covid-19 and win hearts, even if that means cutting off their economic legs.

Yes, we are becoming increasingly civilised. So now, will you now be my Quarantine?

The writer is a sociologist. He was formerly professor, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Why the pandemic will hurt girls' education

SAFEENA HUSAIN

Women, especially girls, play a critical role in the social fabric of the world. Educating girls is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has a positive impact on at least nine of the 17 SDGs, be it in health care, immunisation, child marriage, HIV, income generation or inequality, because an educated girl is twice as likely to educate her children.

Girls' education is the key to breaking the inter-generational cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Globally, girls' education is the biggest lever that can lead to a reduction in carbon emissions.

An educated woman has the skills, information and self-confidence that she needs to be a better parent, worker and citizen. Research shows that an educated woman is likely to marry later and have fewer children, impacting world population. An educated woman can help a country with its socio-economic growth, and reduce the incidence of domestic and sexual violence as well. As she stands up against gender inequality, she becomes key to changing patriarchal mind-sets.

However, despite the many positive implications of girls' education, millions of girls around the world are being denied their right to education, simply because they are girls. Their chances of getting a quality education are smaller if they come from a poor family, living in a rural area. Girls are just disregarded. The root cause of girls not being in school are the two Ps of poverty and patriarchy, because of which they are exploited, discriminated against or just pushed into disparate gender roles.

Impact of Covid-19

With the worldwide outbreak of Covid-19 crippling global education systems, existing gender inequalities are getting further intensified. As cases of coronavirus continue to grow, the effort to limit its spread has kept over 290 million students out of school globally.

In the absence of education, and connection with friends and teachers, disadvantaged children — especially girls from the most marginalised communities — will be the hardest hit; especially in nations where patriarchy, illiteracy and poverty are combining to trigger regressive mind-sets. Over 111 million girls affected by school closures are living in the world's least developed countries, where getting an education is already a struggle.

As the Covid-19 situation aggravates, girls will face the worst economic and social marginalisation. Disrupting global education systems is literally threat-

ening the right to education of the most vulnerable girls.

Girls in rural India

In India, the spread of the virus has already hurt marginalised communities disproportionately. As the household work burden increases for all families, girls are regressing to their earlier routines — taking up cooking, cleaning and other household chores, while caring for their younger siblings and elders; working on farms, grazing cattle and engaging in activities that can help their families survive through these tough times. With limited last-mile health facilities in rural India, those who are affected but yet not critical are being cared for at home, putting the girl child at greater risk of becoming infected.

As families lose livelihoods, face scarcity of food and other basic needs, the health and education of girls, their learning requirements and well-being are getting sidelined. Based on their gender, girls get to eat last. With no access to mid-day meals in schools, as families struggle to buy rations, girls' nutritional needs will be unmet, impacting their physiological development. Increasing pressure to care for their families will have a direct impact on their emotional growth. As patriarchal families return to their earlier gender norms of girls working within households, they will prevent them from going back to school, affecting their learning levels in the long term.

With families staying at home amid economic hardship, the incidence of domestic violence, drunken behaviour and child abuse are rising. If this persists, the risks of child marriage, physical and sexual exploitation of girls, trafficking, and unhygienic and unhealthy lifestyles will continue to surge. Stuck in this situation, girls will continue to lose confidence and lose the motivation to return to mainstream education, making them ever more vulnerable.

The way forward

While a coordinated policy effort by way of communication, quarantine and treatment is a must to contain the adverse impact of this pandemic, there is an urgent need to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable communities, especially girls, are taken into consideration. For that to happen, all countries of the world need a strong gender lens on how to build a holistic response to Covid-19 that includes relief measures from both economic and societal angles. Without intentionality, girls will regress to patriarchal mind-sets, far away from education. They will be the first to be forgotten and will be pushed further into hunger and violence as the pandemic grips the world.

The writer is founder and executive director, Educate Girls, a non-profit organisation

OTHER VIEWS

The evidence suggests that the rupee is overvalued

RBI should let it fall. This will aid export growth when global trade picks up

With continuing uncertainty over the spread of the coronavirus and its economic impact, there has been a sell-off globally in risk assets as investors are seeking refuge in safe haven assets such as the dollar. Most emerging market currencies have fallen in this period, and while the Indian rupee has also fallen, it has fared relatively better than others. The Indian currency has fared relatively better despite a massive sell-off by foreign investors — FIIs have withdrawn around \$14 billion in March. Through this period, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been actively intervening in the currency markets. Foreign exchange reserves fell by \$10 billion in the week ended March 20 — indicating the extent of the intervention. But, notwithstanding the intervention needed to iron out excess volatility, the evidence suggests that the Indian rupee continues to be overvalued and should be allowed to fall. The currency's recent fall, to that extent, corrects for this overvaluation.

When the uncertainty over the economic disruption caused by the coronavirus begins to recede, and economic activity begins to crawl back in, global funds will start flowing back towards emerging markets, including India. This would exert upward pressure on the rupee. While the RBI's stated policy is



that it does not target any particular level, at a time when countries will be fighting to grab export market share in order to boost growth, the central bank must ensure that the currency's value does not affect the country's export competitiveness.

The Indian Express, April 10

Will containment zones work?

The benefits far outweigh the costs

State governments have begun experimenting with the idea of containment zones to deal with the coronavirus disease (Covid-19). The mechanism is straightforward. Those clusters which have seen a rise in cases — and have shown traces of rapid transmission — are sealed. Not only is the lockdown in the identified cluster enforced more strictly, there is also a complete ban on the movement of residents. There is also aggressive screening and enhanced testing in these clusters.

The strategy is based on the belief that this would allow authorities to identify each person who is infected, offer isolation and treatment, and reduce their interface — and the interface of all those they may have come in con-

tact with — with the outside world. This would, thus, contain the infection to a specific geography and eventually diminish its spread. It is broadly inspired by what has come to be known as the Bhilwara model of "ruthless containment". In Rajasthan, the state government pioneered this method to tame the infection after health workers in a hospital first got infected. It will need time. But if, within a fortnight, cases in these select clusters diminish, those who have got infected get treated, deaths are avoided or kept to a minimal, and the chain of transmission is broken, it will emerge as a model whenever the lockdown is eventually lifted.

Hindustan Times, April 10

E-commerce to the rescue

The way India shops may change

There will be several societal and behavioural changes in the next few years that we will be able to ascribe to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Personal hygiene changes will almost certainly become a norm. Everybody will wash hands more often and carrying a small personal hand-sanitiser will become a must. But what about shopping? With major outlets closed, traditional retail has taken a hit across the world, which coupled with the rise of online commerce, might make it difficult for the industry to recover. But some of the changes in online commerce, especially in India in corona times, are noteworthy. One is the support that some online chains, from Amazon to Zomato, are getting from the public authorities in

deliveries, especially to quarantined zones.

The other major change is the way delivery services are working. Small kirana outlets are making local area deliveries of bread, milk and eggs as well as fresh produce like fruits and vegetables. While some parts of major cities have decent access to provisions despite the lockdown, the fact that certain hotspots are being sealed as well as the news that the lockdown might continue for several more days mean that such deliveries are becoming ever more vital. These new models, which marketing experts would describe as "competitive collaboration", might be the way forward for the growth of e-commerce in India.

The Pioneer, April 10



PHOTO: PTI

11,500 ICU beds reserved for virus patients: Centre

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, 11 April

A total of 586 hospitals in the country have been marked as dedicated coronavirus disease (Covid-19) hospitals, with a capacity of over 100,000 isolation beds and 11,500 ICU beds reserved for patients, the Union health ministry said on Saturday. Addressing a press briefing, the health ministry's Joint Secretary Lav Agarwal said the government has taken preemptive action to identify Covid-19 hotspots in the country. In the absence of a lockdown and other containment measures, there would have been over 820,000 coronavirus cases in the country till April 15, he said.

According to the health ministry, 1,035 fresh Covid-19 cases and 40 deaths due to the disease were reported in the last 24 hours across the country, taking the total number of cases to 7,447 and deaths to 239 nationwide.

Agarwal said: "586 dedicated Covid-19 hospitals have been earmarked at the state and Centre level. 100,000 isolation beds and 11,500 ICU beds have been reserved for coronavirus patients across the country. This figure is being augmented every day, based on the evolving situation." He further added: "We had done an analysis on the rate of growth in cases. We observed Janta curfew on

March 22 and went for lockdown from March 25. According to statistical analysis, in the absence of lockdown and other containment measures, there would have been a 41 per cent increase and 820,000 coronavirus cases by April 15," Agarwal said.

He asserted that measures such as social distancing, lockdown and other containment efforts are important in fighting the battle against coronavirus. "The response of the Government of India has been preemptive, proactive and to the extent of being over-prepared and through our graded approach, we have aligned our response with the evolving situation. Ministry of AYUSH has prepared a set of guidelines on respiratory health and to boost immunity. Districts have been asked to incorporate this in the district-level contingency plan as well," he said.

Agarwal also asserted that there is no shortage in the country of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, cited by many as a viable therapeutic solution to counter the coronavirus infection.

Responding to a question, a senior official of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said, "500,000 antibody testing kits ordered by ICMR have not been received yet".

The ICMR official said over 1.7 lakh samples have been tested in country so far for Covid-19, of which 16,564 samples were tested on Friday.

Edtech firms' moment in the sun

Closing of educational institutions during lockdown offers promise of huge gains

ANJULI BHARGAVA
New Delhi, 11 April

Free online classes, virtual classrooms, UPSC prep sessions live, career guidance, IIT and JEE coaching sessions...the list goes on and on. As the country came to a standstill, education technology (edtech) and online education companies in India moved into overdrive, leaving no stone unturned to grab the attention of students, parents, academicians, teachers, schools and the media.

Ever since the 21-day nationwide lockdown became an imminent threat, edtech players — both for-profit and not-for-profit — started gearing up for the big race. What's new in this race is that it includes players who are hoping for some prize money and others just for a trophy. Those running the race are being watched by all their regular fans, but also by those who previously ignored them. And the race that began in real earnest in mid March promises to stretch out for a while (at least till July), giving everyone a fair chance. With a captive audience of at least 50-100 million students (most players are targeted at the upper end of the market), in the first two weeks of March, several online and edtech offerings either began to offer their existing products free or launched new products aimed at pulling in users at a time when getting their attention was relatively easier. The idea was mainly to cast their net wider: Target an audience that it might have previously ignored. The net now includes those who may have been fence sitters in normal times because of the cost of subscriptions or those who cannot easily afford their products but can do so at a pinch.

The race now also has new observers who were earlier averse or even wary of this alien animal. This includes state governments, who are now scrambling as they begin to grasp the magnitude of the crisis and its impact on already abysmal learning outcomes. It also includes budget private schools, which don't have the luxury of offering an online or distance learning platform like their elite counterparts.

What is making the whole grim prospect of millions of children at home rather exciting in a way is the fact that traditional education is one of the sectors most resistant to any kind of change. That's where the saying how many teachers does it take to change a light bulb emanates from, hinting at the fact that a task that can be performed easily by a child cannot be managed by teachers who are notorious for resisting change at all times. The crisis presents a massive opportunity for players who get their messaging right and have strong products on offer, says Gouri Gupta, director, edtech for Central Square Foundation (CSF).

A further opportunity presents itself since both schools and state governments across the country are struggling to find the right resources. While learning at later stages can be delayed or staggered — the Western concept of a gap year is catching up in India too — the gap for students at the foundational stage can be quite daunting to bridge, a fact that schools and increasingly even



Ashish Dhawan, founder of Central Square Foundation, which offers edtech solutions

state governments in India are aware of. As a result, both the for-profit and not-for-profit players are engaging with governments and private schools to see if they can increase their portion of the total pie.

The frenzy of the 4,600-odd private players in the edtech space has been evident in an endless stream of tom-tomming of unverifiable achievements on a daily basis with PR companies in overdrive. To cite a few instances, Bengaluru-headquartered Byju's, the industry leader, made products free till end of April. Students in classes 1-3 can access math and English lessons and students in classes 4-12 can learn math and science concepts on the Byju's app. After freeing content, Byju's added free live classes, where students can attend 3-4 regular sessions per week. The company claimed that there was an overwhelming response to the free lessons on their learning app with 6 million new students learning in March alone. Bengaluru-headquartered Vedantu said it typically adds approximately 50,000 new paid users to its platform annually. However, during this crisis, it claims it has added 130,000 new users (again a company claim) over just 15 days. The company said it was seeing a 10x growth in users signing up in the first week (March 12 is when it opened up its platform for free to students). After creating awareness amongst the students through media, they say there has been a surge of 52X in the number of users signing up till date.

Bengaluru based Educational Initiatives (EI) also saw its usage and engagement with Mindspark surge after the lockdown. Mindspark is one of the only products with independent impact assessments available in the market. According to the company, their Mindspark school student numbers doubled while the retail numbers (business-to-customer) rose by 10x after the commencement of the lockdown.

Mumbai's Toppr made video classes, covering 17 subjects for 5th-12th classes, free and these will

'Covid-19 led to ₹4K-cr fresh NPAs'

Punjab National Bank's (PNB's) integration with Oriental Bank of Commerce (OBC) and United Bank of India (UBI) came at a time when the country was in lockdown to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19). On the eve of PNB's 126th foundation day, the bank's Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer SS MALLIKARJUNA RAO tells Somesh Jha about the pandemic's impact on customer outreach programmes related to the amalgamation. Edited excerpts:

Which sectors have been most affected by Covid-19?

We have seen an impact on apparel and textiles, auto and auto components, aviation, tourism, and financial sectors — including non-banking finance companies (NBFCs), building and construction. We do not have huge exposure to aviation, except Jet Airways, which is already a non-performing asset (NPA). The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) segment will have a problem. In the apparel sector, the issue is that they import raw material from Bangladesh, manufacture it here and export. It will take more for them to come back to normalcy and their accounts will be under stress.

What is your outlook?

There can be an impact on profitability as there will be more NPAs. There will be some slippage, which will have to be accounted for and it will impact profitability. I am expecting that things will improve from October 1. So, there will be an impact of 6 months.

How long can we afford a lockdown?

It is not a question of affordability. We will continue to support our customers in the crisis, but there will be an impact on the credit off-take.

How have your targets changed for this year?

We had planned for credit growth of 8 per cent, but because of Covid-19 it will be around 6 per cent. On NPAs/slippages, we are keeping our fingers crossed to see how the first two quarters pan out. We have seen an impact of ₹4,000 crore, majority of which are MSMEs and retail accounts, for the bank in March, which otherwise wouldn't have been there.

How is the employees' morale given they have to report to work during the lockdown?

There is no doubt that there is pressure to work under these circumstances. The reason is we are providing services to citizens. Footfall in branches being less, we are operating with 50 per cent staff so that we can protect their health. We are maintaining electronic channels efficiently so that customers continue to use it and switch from cash mode. We are regularly communicating with employees and I am myself boosting their morale by appreciating their efforts in these tough times. There are some sporadic incidents across the country such as crowds being high in front of the bank branch during the direct benefit transfer, which is a cause of concern for the state authorities, who call up branch managers asking for an explanation or for closing branches.

But by and large, it's been extremely smooth.

Can the operations of branches be rationalised during lockdown?

In some parts, it can be done, but our branch operational ratio right now is 92-95 per cent across the country.

How are you preparing for lockdown extension?

As far as banks are concerned, there are no problems as we have sufficient cash; we are calibrating branch activities, too. The impact is on amalgamation. Effective April 1, certain activities, such as customer and employees' outreach, human resource deployment, which we had planned to complete by April 15-30, will be pushed back by a month.

Were some product launches also delayed?

As of today, all our products have been harmonised. Even though database is different for three banks, we have customised. For example, human deployment, changing of the name boards, which was to start from April 1, has been postponed by a month.

How have many customers availed the three-month moratorium on loan repayment?

We have given the facility to all borrowers, except NBFCs. Opting out is automatic if customers pay the money. So far, loans outstanding of around ₹4 trillion, out of the total ₹7.5 trillion, have been postponed for the merged entity (PNB).

Is the bank helping its borrowers in any way to deal with the situation?

We have released four new products: For farmers — 25 per cent of their existing KCC limits to the maximum of ₹50,000, we can give money to them by application. They can repay in a span of 3 years. We have also introduced Tatkal Sahayata Rin for self-help groups, under which we are extending loans to the tune of ₹5,000 per member and ₹1 lakh for group, repayable in 3 years. The third product is personal loan, equivalent to three times of average monthly salary, up to ₹3 lakh, and the fourth product is for the bigger group, additional funding to the extent of 10 per cent of working capital without insisting on margin. These were launched last week and will address cash flow problems.

How are you monitoring slippages of good loans into bad?

If borrowers categorised as Stress Mention Account (SMA)-2 as of March 1 have not paid money till March 31, they are categorised as NPAs. We are



impressing upon such borrowers that since additional demand for interest is not there for March, April and May, the overdue amount as of March 1 can be paid till May 31 so the account remains standard. Because of the lockdown, we are trying to reach out to such borrowers by April 30.

How many such borrowers are there?

The SMA-2 accounts, outstanding as of March 1, that have become NPAs for PNB till March 31 are to the tune of ₹2,000 crore and for the combined entity, are around ₹4,000 crore. This wouldn't have happened if the Covid-19 pandemic hadn't hit the country. But quarterly slippages would not be high. This loan amount of ₹4,000 crore has the potential for upgrade so we are reaching out to them.

How are you monitoring your accounts in these circumstances?

We will launch a campaign known as 'each one, reach ten, each day' on Sunday, which is our 126th foundation day. We are not conducting any programmes as such, but reaching out to all our customers through employees — every day 10 customers will be targeted by an employee. We want to understand the requirements of all customers and act accordingly.

The industry wants the banking system's help to pay three months' wages of employees by enhancement of working capital loans. How do you see this?

Our fourth product, released three-four days ago, is actually covering wages for up to 6 months for firms. Now, we have to reach out to customers as they have to be aware of the product. By April 30, we will have a good number of customers availing it.



Medics use a drone to spray disinfectant at a slum in Noida, UP PHOTO: PTI

ALL IN A DAY

► Council of ministers to start working from offices on Monday

► India could've seen 820,000 Covid-19 cases by April 15 sans lockdown: Health ministry

► Services at Delhi State Cancer Institute suspended till further notice as 21 people test positive at the facility: Official

► Shipment of hydroxychloroquine to the US likely to start next week: IPA

► 200 cases registered, over 3,500 detained for defying lockdown norms in Delhi

► Railways converts 5,000 coaches into isolation

wards

► Worst-affected Haryana districts, including Gurugram, to fall in red zone: Khattar

► Doctors of Indian origin form global collaborative to fight coronavirus

► Helpline facilitates over 3,000 stranded J&K residents across India

► The Union Territory of Puducherry reported its first Covid-19 death with a 71-year old man, hailing from Mahe, succumbing to the infection at a hospital in Kannur

► Around 2,000 NCC cadets

deployed in 12 states, UTs to help administration amid lockdown

► The Union Health Ministry asks all states to prohibit use and spitting of smokeless tobacco in public places to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

► Allow states to carry out economic activities within borders, says Chhattisgarh CM

► 52 out of 102 people who stayed at 13 mosques at the Chandni Mahal hotspot test positive

► Pray on Easter that world emerges victorious in fight against coronavirus: Vice President Naidu

► Private doctors asked to help with treatment protocol

► UK to receive first batch of 3 million paracetamol packets from India

► Singapore thanks India for facilitating evacuation of its residents

► 51 Indians among 191 new coronavirus cases in Singapore

► Red, orange and green zones may come up during extended lockdown

LOCKDOWN, SOCIAL DISTANCING MOST EFFECTIVE 'SOCIAL VACCINES' TO FIGHT COVID: HEALTH MINISTER



Centre sets up control room to address workers' issues

SOMESH JHA
New Delhi, 11 April

The Union labour and employment ministry has set up control rooms across the country to receive and look into the grievances of workers who have been denied wages, or have been retrenched during the national lockdown, on a war footing.

The labour ministry has made public a list of 60 officers, who are labour commissioners in 20 regions across the country, along with their email address and contact numbers. It will deal with distress calls of workers who are working under the central sphere. This comes at a time when there is growing discontentment

among workers who are living in shelter homes or relief camps in various states. "We understand that the workers are going through a period of stress and as the lockdown extends, they will be more anxious with the prevailing situation. The control rooms are aimed to listen to their problems and address them at the earliest," a senior labour and employment ministry official said, requesting anonymity. The official added that the micro, small, and medium enterprises have shown concerns of poor cash flow, specially over paying salaries to workers.

Ever since the national lockdown was put in place, the office of the chief labour commissioner (CLC), under

the labour ministry, has been receiving distress calls from workers complaining about retrenchment or delay in receiving salaries. A few days back, Chief Labour Commissioner Rajan Verma had told regional officers to do a follow-up of all the complaints and had taken a status report.

The ministry reached out to employers in some cases, where the latter had deducted wages of workers or laid them off. However, the CLC can only monitor the activities of industries belonging to the central sphere. This includes all central PSUs and private sector units in the civil aviation, banking and finance, telecommunications, insurance, ports, dock, and mines sectors.