

Now is the time to panic

SALAAR KHAN

It started off as a crass joke: someone ate a 'bat-sandwich', and sent a billion and a half people into a frenzy. One hemisphere made Love in the Time of Corona jokes as the other snickered Corona Pyaar Hai. As the rest of the world alternated between orientalism and flat-out racism, our local Whatsapp brigade pronounced its retribution for the Uyghurs.

Today, Europe is the epicentre. Cool white marble glistens around the Kaabah, as the Pope addresses an empty Vatican. Azaans around the world urge people to stay home while Trump went from calling it a hoax to announcing a day of prayer. Jokes that were never funny to begin with are now on us. Unfortunately, if laughter is medicinal, it's no antiviral.

The first Nobel Prize given out for work related to a virus was in chemistry – not physiology or medicine. For something that barely verges on 'living' to have brought the planet to a grinding halt has been quite a humbling experience. It is as if the whole world collectively discovered a lump under the skin, hollowing out abstractions like dreams, deadlines and shareholder value. Really, it isn't Earth that has been brought to a halt – just us. Trite metaphors like blooming cherry blossoms, from DC to Islamabad, unfold unphased by our aesthetic sensibilities. Nature, it seems, will be just fine without us. Capitalists that once berated socialist breadlines entered supermarkets to find empty shelves. As markets asphyxiate from the demand and supply sides, alike, the DOW reported its second biggest single day drop in history. Millennials were introduced to the idea that the original context of the word 'viral' had little to do with memes. To some, history repeats itself; to others, it rhymes. But as the same, plagiarised script is broadcast from one country to the next, a few days apart, one thing is clear: when the right steps are taken, we see the curve flatten. When exceptionalism pervades, we dig mass graves.

In Pakistan, we are not paying attention. As the tin-foil donning Whatsapp club points at biological warfare or a Dettol conspiracy, they still acknowledge danger. Meanwhile, macho momins continue to believe they are either too pious or too robust to contract the virus, while Lahore's M M Alam Road pulses with apathy and privilege. Where every third person could give South Korea's notorious Patient 31 a run for their money, the one thing Pakistan needs is a shot of honest reality. But as the prime minister continued his transformation into an increasingly one-dimensional caricature of himself, he announced, "Ghabrana nahin hai" (and "ps: wash your hands"). Yes, we are a poor country. We are not Gal Gadot, crooning 'Imagine' atop a fi-

nancial cushion as plush as the bed she lazes on. We are the calloused labourer that leaves home thinking only that they must make it through another day. Faced with the sickness and hunger of his people, the prime minister chose option C: he asked them to choose for themselves. If this were really a clean choice between hunger and death, one would expect the Gadots of the world to stay home, with the rest thrust out of compulsion, not choice. But consider what followed. Indignant parents told their children they were overreacting as they shut the door on their way out. Toes continued to slip out of Gucci slippers into the frothing waters of French Beach. Millions stood shoulder to shoulder five times a day. At the Punjab Governor House, Usman Buzdar, along with over a hundred others led (others astray) by example.

At the end of the day, even 42 million rupees can only suppress facts for so long (it can, however, increase the national ventilator count by a full percentage point). The global case-mortality rate is above four percent. There is no discernible reason why we will be at this, let alone below it. Consider first the strong correlation between casualties and pre-existing conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and lung disease. Pakistan ranks fourth, twelfth and thirteenth in the world for these. Mortality rates vary – from 0.2 percent cases in Norway to around 8 percent in Iran, and the health of a population is only half of the problem. The other variable is healthcare capacity.

Imagine this: you are a country of 10,000 people. Let's say half (5,000) will be infected before we find a cure or become immune (common estimations of the 'attack rate' peg the number at between 40 percent and 70 percent). Of these, let's say 750 will require hospitalisation (while Imran Khan said the hospitalisation rate was 4-5 percent, China's is three times this and Italy's is over eight times this). Now let's say 150 will die despite your best efforts – a 3 percent mortality rate (we'll give the prime minister this one). You don't know which 150 won't make it, and want to make sure you hospitalise all 750. Unfortunately, you don't have 750 beds. You only have 250. This isn't ideal, but as long as no more than 250 people visit the hospital at the same time, you'll be okay. But what happens when 251 people arrive on a particular day. What happens when, right when you hit capacity, one is discharged but two more people show up? You have to choose who lives and who dies. Really, in not choosing between 'death by corona and death by hunger' the Prime Minister is only forcing someone else to choose instead.

Except, it's not just a one-to-one trade: the actual number of beds we have per 10,000 people isn't 100.

It's 43 in China, 32 in Italy, 32; and 28 in the US. In Pakistan, it's 6. Six beds per ten thousand – and around half of these are probably already occupied.

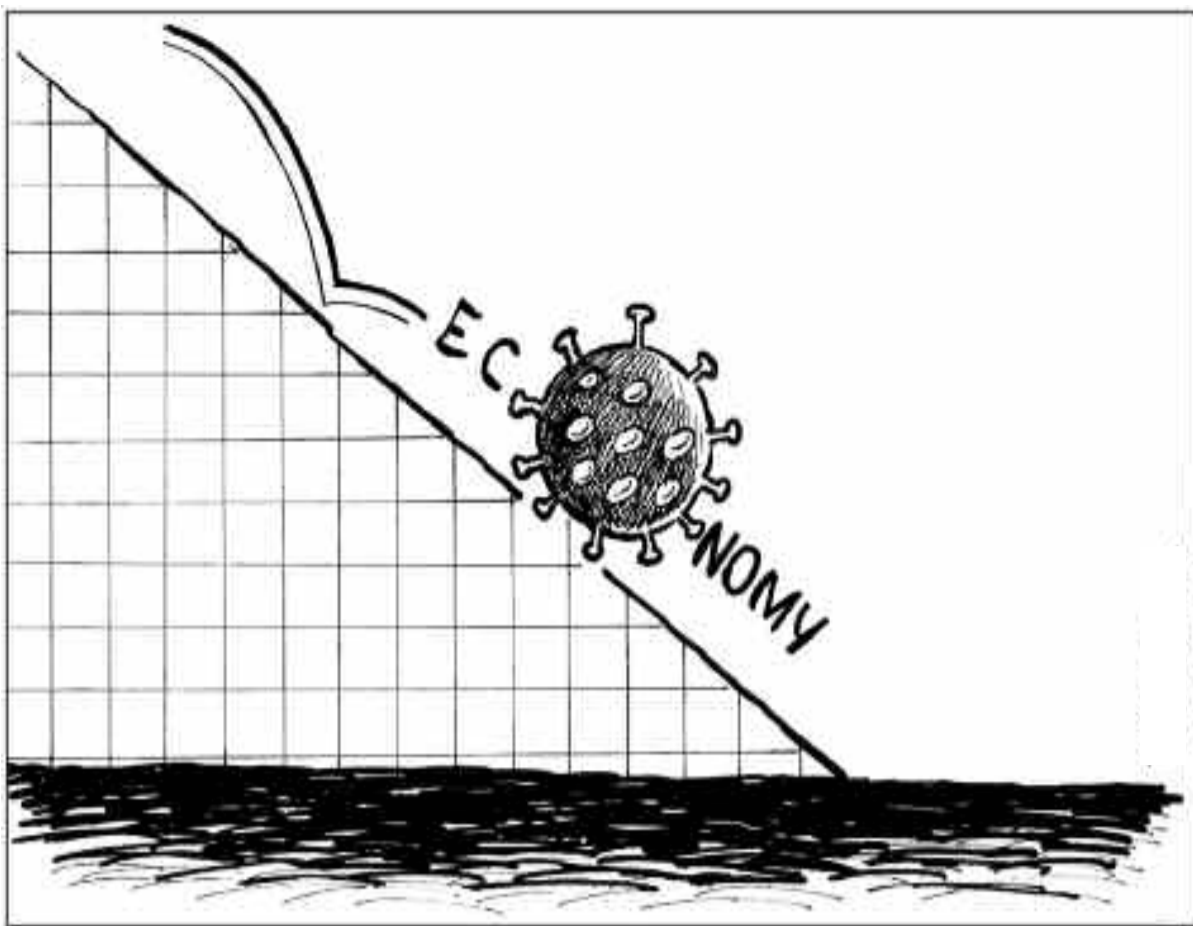
Also, the average patient spends a whole week in the hospital, not one night. At this rate, we will run out of hospital beds in a little over two months. Change whatever assumptions you want, but the number of infected people doubles every six days: you'll only delay the inevitable by a few days. So, now, the only way to keep the mortality rate at 3 percent, for a virus that we know is going to affect most of the country, is if no more than three people show up for treatment over any week.

But the number of infected people do not politely increase linearly; they explode exponentially. Soon, you have two football teams worth of people competing for one bed. And they're not just competing for a good night's sleep: they're fighting to stay alive. By the way, each one of these people represents 20,000 actual people. Now consider the math for ventilators, of which we have less than one for every 100,000 people.

So what do you do? You are a poor country. You can only buy so many beds and ventilators. See, for example, the terrifying presser out of PIMS in Islamabad, where we are told the government's emergency response included adding ten beds and two ventilators. How do you make sure no more than three people end up at the hospital during the whole week?

Definitely not what we are doing at the moment. Only, we don't have the time to keep experimenting. When every other country's graph will become our reality, we will be forced to accept there is no escaping this.

This is no time for partisan politics; it is a singularly difficult time to be Imran Khan. But this is no time for political pandering either. Difficult decisions must be made, as they are being made the world over. Reducing prayer time, like restricting Mall timings, will do nothing. The virus does not wait for two or five minutes, just like it does not need to abide by the family-only entry policy into a mall. All this is the equivalent of wrapping a time bomb in band-aid. Public gatherings, including congregational prayer, must be banned, as they are the world over. Quarantine and isolation will have to be enforced; no one is listening to suggestions, least of all the government itself. Continuing to act like feckless, passive spectators, will send us down Iran's path; rigorous, early testing will send us down Korea's. Yes, these are difficult decisions to make; but this thing doesn't care for our comfort or our convenience. We are living in a worst-case scenario. We must realise this. Full bellies are no good if they are to be lowered into



Today's India

HIJAB NAQVI

What is commonly known as the 'Two Nation Theory' became the fuel for the Indian Subcontinent's Muslim struggle for independence and their demand for a separate homeland.

Two Nation Theory is what forced Muslims to evaluate and reconsider themselves as a separate entity in the Subcontinent that could neither be subdued nor be shackled. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, is said to be its architect, as on March 22, 1940, while addressing a rally he said, "The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures."

They neither intermarry nor eat together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.

Their aspect on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Muslims derive their inspiration from different sources of history.

They have different epics, different heroes, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and, likewise, their victories and defeats overlap.

To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built for the government of such a state." Jinnah, once a staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity, let go of notion of Hindus and Muslims as being one nation, as he quit All India National Congress in 1920 after the realization that Hindus were a nation working solely for the extremist agenda of Hindutva and dominance.

Two Nation Theory, jolted the dormant society of Muslims to the realization of their glorious past and made them envision a similar future.

As Muslims of India woke to the idea of distinction, their struggle for a separate homeland got fervent.

Their intense struggle eventually earned them a separate land, one where they would prosper economically and would emerge as an independent, strong nation on the world map.

Today, India claims egalitarian treatment and protection of all the religious denominations living there, but innumerable public lynching and skirmishes with the minorities, particularly Muslims, have proved otherwise.

Minorities are discriminated and denied religious freedom, and are even forcibly converted.

Recent history is rife with incidents where Muslims were thrashed by wild mobs on the false pretext of bovine killing, all in the presence of law enforcement agencies that stood guarding the mob.

Even in legislative assemblies, minorities in general and Muslims in particular are denied the right of formulating legislation that pertains to their particular religious tenets, which means they are denied the right to defend themselves.

Women, particularly those belonging to minorities, are routinely harassed. According to recent reports, India has been declared as the most dangerous place for women in the world.

In contrast to this, minorities living in Pakistan enjoy full rights and protection from the state like the religious majority does.

Minorities in Pakistan are protected and enjoy equal status. In fact, protection of minority rights has always been the top priority of the State. No one in Pakistan is denied education or employment on the basis of faith.

Today, many citizens belonging to minorities are serving the country at top positions. Minorities here celebrate their religious festivals with the same zeal and live in harmony with the majority Muslim community.

The State grants special leaves and allowances to minorities on their religious occasions. Pakistan in general and Pakistani population in particular, have demonstrated religious tolerance and openness.

An example of this is that every year, in order to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, thousands of Sikhs from all over the world visit Pakistan.

Pakistan facilitates the Yatrees to every extent: from timely issuance of visas to operating special travel trains, from arranging the best lodging facilities to taking special care of their security. Whereas, countless incidents have been reported where Muslim tourists from Pakistan were assaulted and harassed in India.

Religious minorities in Pakistan enjoy same economic rights, whereas, Muslims are given wages lower than their Hindu colleagues in India. India claims to be secular.

Secularism, by most common definition is: "Principles that keep religion separate from the affairs of the

state." But the Indian government's most recent actions have overtly defied the very definition of secularism.

Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) unjust implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and implementation of National Registration of Citizens (NRC) is blatant renunciation of secularism and validation of Jinnah's Two Nation Theory, especially since this targeted, for the most part, the Muslim populace of India. BJP, in order to garner support, included in its electoral manifesto to grant citizenship to illegal migrants from its neighbouring countries.

In December 2019, it was announced, "India will grant citizenship to Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh and Parsi migrants who have entered India illegally, that is, without a visa, on or before December 31, 2014, from the Muslim-majority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and have stayed in the country for five years." This flagrant display of religious discrimination was a result of the NRC, implemented with the sole purpose of identifying the Muslim population, in order to put them under direct wrath of state. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights declared both laws as 'discriminatory', stating, "While the goal of protecting persecuted groups is welcome but this should rather be achieved through a non-discriminatory robust national asylum system."

All such actions demonstrate the Hindutva doctrine of dominance and distinction.

That accepts no one but Hindus as the sole inheritors of India. This means that extremist Hindus do not believe that minority sects are owed living rights. As India carries on with its agenda of Hindu dominance and isolates Muslim community from the rest, it proves that the extremist Hindu mindset has never considered Muslim as equal citizens. Indian government's exclusion of Muslims underscores that Jinnah's Two Nation Theory was indeed right and is still living: that Hindus and Muslim are two different and separate nations that can never be yoked together. Today, India, because of its imprudent schemes, has faded the identity of its citizens as 'Indian' and has instead dissolved the identity of its citizens into various sects of Hindus, Muslims and others.

Anti-Smog Measures

Growing concern for the environment has mobilised the government to take measures, particularly in reference to smog in certain areas of Punjab. This is certainly a step forward from last year's strategy of shifting the blame to India, to a more proactive role this year. The government with its anti-smog measures is doing everything to ensure that all those actions that can prevent and reduce the current amount of pollution can be taken instantly. Certain goals set by the concerned department include the conversion of old technology brick kilns to zig-zag technology, the installation of air pollution control

systems in industries, controlling vehicle pollution, checking air pollution from stone crushing and cement mixing plants and the installation of dust control systems.

This allows us to see the range of the work currently taking place, and due to the meeting of the cabinet sub-committee on smog for the implementation of anti-smog measures, we can identify how proactively this is being pursued. As many as 620 FIRs have been registered against violators of environmental laws. DPOs and CTOs have been instructed to take action against smoke emitting vehicles. Proper waste disposal is also included in the ambit alongside a

commitment to devise a strategy for the abolishment of resource recovery units and to eliminate fuel adulteration in Lahore.

These are significant changes in the system which, if they materialise, can improve the environment overall. Once these short-term goals are met by the government and all the stakeholders, plans should also be made for the long-term so that the overall setup is less harmful to the environment. This can include the development of a proper public transport system, so there can be fewer cars on our roads adding pollution along with the continuation of the plantation drives, that can naturally improve the environment.

Letters to the Editor

Work together

The United States of America – sometimes the guardian of the world and sometimes the global police man. Someone's destroyer and someone's supporter. It plays many roles in different regions of the world but when it comes to the majority of the mankind, its role has been cruel. US sanctions have killed more people than any other weapon of the world. It was the US that used two atomic bombs against Japan. It was none other than US that started wars – directly or indirectly – in Korea, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Iraq, Iran and other countries of the world where many innocent people lost their life. In times of a pandemic, when the world needs to get united to fight Covid-19, the US is stuck on its harsh policies against Iran – the epicenter of the virus in the Asian region – where there have been some 1500 deaths, while 50 people are being infected and 5-6 are dying every hour. Considering the situation, all states should be expected to put aside their petty differences and combine forces against the coronavirus – a foe that knows no borders. All the first world countries need to

help third world countries in this time of crisis. Financial institutions must play their role more effectively. The dire situation in the world, especially in Iran and Italy demands that the world community work together to fight the contagion and let essential supplies into the countries to save lives.

Khanesh Rathi
HYDERABAD

Online classes

Recently, the government has announced that has started online classes so as not to disturb the education of the youth due to the coronavirus. This is really a laudable step taken by the government and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) but knowing the fact of some areas in Balochistan where neither PTCL exists nor data internet, how can they attend the classes and gain something? A total of more than one thousands students from Balochistan are getting education in Punjab. So, the government must be creative and try and take better steps than this.

Adnan Maqsood
BALOCHISTAN

Deserted

In the wake of the havoc played by the deadly Covid-19, in many other parts of the world businesses are closed, and roads and streets are deserted. The situation in Pakistan is also not different. One virus can put everything at stake – be it human life, economy, geography of the country or global power ranking, among other things. Let's see what happens ahead. Perhaps a new world will emerge in the aftermath of this Covid-19.

Hashim Abro
ISLAMABAD

Miners' plight

Most of the coal is extracted in the Duki district of Balochistan, but unfortunately, the highest number of casualties also happens there. The number of fatalities in coal mines is 14 this year, while 40 workers were killed in coal mine accidents during 2019 in Duki. According to a report, from the years 2000 to 2019, more than 1300 miners in Pakistan were killed due to blasts, land-

slides and various accidents, including a number of accidents in Balochistan. Coal workers also suffer from lung, kidney and other diseases. In Balochistan, miners do not have facilities and they get very little compensation for the wages, with which they barely run their homes. The government of Balochistan should raise the salaries of the miners who have put their lives at stake so that they can run their homes.

Dilshad Baluch Sajidi
AWARAN

At a distance

Covid-19 has brought destruction around the globe and ended lives in thousands so far. This most deadly virus continues its unending journey from China and has advanced its network in more than 180 countries, including Pakistan. Sindh is the most affected province and the Sindh government is leading the fight against Covid-19 by taking prompt precautionary steps to end this pandemic. These steps are: closure of all educational institutions, banning public crowds, hotels cum restaurants, shopping centers, marriage halls and

sports events etc. This is done in public interest because this virus is very quickly transmitted. Experts are trying to get a proper treatment of Covid-19 but till then we must have social distancing with each other and follow government directions. Otherwise, if the situation goes wrong then we will not remain safe. I must also applaud the efforts of the Sindh CM and his team.

Imran Ali Detho
SHIKARPUR

Stay safe

Chinese volunteers in Pakistan have given some very useful tips. They say that everyone needs to stay at home; this is the best possible thing we can do to avoid Covid-19. They have also emphasised acts like washing hands and elbows thoroughly; keeping yourself hydrated with warm liquids like soup, warm water etc; and distancing oneself. We have a very poor health system. The best we can do is practise social distance and follow the above instructions fully.

Ali Faraz
JARANWALA