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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MOMENT OF RECKONING FOR ALL LEADERS

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

The world is fighting one of the worst battles in human history as it tries to navigate through the current Corona Pandemic. When the dust finally settles on this massive public health crisis, in a few months from now on hopes, the number of casualties across the world may count well below the number of people who perished in WW II, the deadliest military conflict in history (70-85 million constituting about 3 percent of the 1940 world population estimated. 2.3 billion). But what will set this pandemic apart from the earlier military catastrophes like WW I, WW II is the ambit of the threat today, which extends to nearly every citizen in more than 200 countries.

Unlike WWI and WWII when the threat was by and large felt on the war fronts and casualties were limited largely to combat personnel (millions casualties), Covid 19 is virtually knocking on every door, the world having gone into a complete lockdown to escape the wrath of the virus, which neither has a cure nor any vaccine till date. The current pandemic is different from the last major global health crisis Spanish Flu purely in terms of the speed of its spread though the later may have been several times more virulent in terms of loss of human lives, which was understandable given the weak healthcare system of the day and the lack of preparedness of the Governments in the middle of WW I. What makes everyone cringe in fear today is the complete surrender of the most advanced healthcare systems in US and Europe, which account for the largest number of deaths today.

Covid 19 is not merely a health crisis, though it may have sprouted as one in the first place. The ramifications clearly extend to every conceivable space of life – political, economic, social and spiritual. Lockdowns have brought economies –developed, emerging & developing alike - mercilessly to a grinding halt. Millions are losing their jobs and livelihood as companies of all sizes across sectors – small and big, formal and informal threaten to go down under, many facing real threats of irretrievable bankruptcies. The catastrophic impact can be gauged from the fact that over 36 million Americans have already queued up for their unemployment allowances and the US Government has already embarked on the largest economic rescue package in history amounting to \$2.2 trillion. EU has already agreed upon a over \$550 billion stimulus package. The Indian Government too has rolled out an economic stimulus package of about Rs 20 lakh crore (\$ 266 billion). International Monetary Fund predicts a global recession and a definitive de-growth in per capita income in 170 countries during the current year.

More than the debilitating economic impact, it's the self belief of the human race, which always prided itself as the 'Smartest being walking on this earth' not wasting any opportunity to underline achievements in the field of Science and Technology, almost assuming to itself God like qualities that has taken a bad beating. 'Stay Home Stay Safe' cannot be the cry of a Super Being but the pleading of a helpless ordinary mortal who has no clue about the enemy at the door. Unprecedented damage to the human spirit has been caused which may take decades to repair.

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In this environment of extreme pessimism and dwindling human spirit, it's Leadership that will enable Nations, societies and organizations rediscover their lost Spirit. As it is often said there is no better test of Leadership than Adversity. And no Adversity can be more adverse than the current one.

By and large the approach across countries affected by this pandemic has revolved around enforcing 'Social distancing' and resorting to total/ partial lockdowns. But what has really mattered is the timing of these lockdowns and the decisiveness of enforcement of these measures. Leaderships across countries have exhibited varying levels of gumption to take these extremely challenging calls as locking down economies not just mean immediate loss of economic growth but complete dislocation of entire supply chains and massive job losses and possible social unrest. Long term implications of prolonged lockdowns are intimidating. This explains why leaderships across Europe and America delayed their decisions leading to massive loss of lives despite having the best of healthcare systems.

In contrast India moved quickly off the blocks to impose a nationwide 3-week lock down on 25 March when the count of infections barely stood at a few hundred, a rather insignificant number for a population of more than 135 cr. The lockdown was later extended to May 17. What perhaps helped India was having a decisive leader at the helm, who backed himself to take the big decision even in the most adverse situation, and more importantly in the middle of a rapidly evolving environment and plenty of uncertainties. Times like this, unprecedented as they are, do not provide any tried and tested manual to fall back on. It's the leaders gut feel that shapes the Nation's course of action.

The Indian Prime Minister clearly elaborated the horns of the dilemma he faced when he first addressed the Nation on 24th March; the debilitating impact of a lock down on the economy/ livelihood and the possible loss of lives in not having a lockdown. He chose to save lives in the true Indian tradition, which always values human lives ahead of material progress/ wealth.

Over and above the call for lock down, Prime Minister's Address to the Nation was interspersed with pretty innocuous sounding calls to the public to clang plates in support of doctors and health workers, light diyas, candles, switching on torch lights at designated times. While eliciting some amount of derision from his political opponents and sections of the intelligentsia, his calls were responded to with great enthusiasm and fervour by the wider citizenry. For the critics these were merely gimmicks and acts of distraction and held little in them to contribute to public health in general or anything specific in the fight against Covid 19. Making a fair assessment of such acts intended purely to unite and inspire people in the face of a 'once in a century crisis', while still being in the middle of the crisis is a difficult task. More importantly such acts should never be judged through the prism of 'direct medical causality' but the wider psychological and social goals that they seek to achieve. The acts clearly achieved the basic purpose – 1. 'Unifying and Resurrecting the National Spirit in the fight against the Massive Unseen Force', 2. 'Eliciting support from the citizens for the Dos and Don'ts during the impending lockdown'. It communicated the value of 'Social Distancing', which has emerged as the only antidote to the Pandemic.

Locking down a densely populated country of more than 135 cr people can be quite complex. Large presence of migrant labour across major cities and different labour deficient states, most of them belonging to the daily wage earner variety, who largely come from labour surplus states like UP, Bihar, Rajasthan can potentially make any lock down a human tragedy. Desperate migrant labour in Delhi and Mumbai coming out on the streets in the wake of the lock down announcements to trudge back home on foot hundreds of kilometres away did highlight the desperation and stress. We have to give it to the political leadership both at the Centre and the states that such incidents remained few and far between as the state Governments too rose to the occasion to take care of their migrant labour force with timely financial support, public distribution of basic grocery items and provisioning of cooked food for the poor. The Rs 1.7 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana announced by the Central Government has worked as an effective safety net for the poor though it may legitimately be questioned whether it would be enough.

The real threat facing developing economies is the accelerated worsening of income levels at the bottom of the pyramid. Many Governments who prided themselves in the effective anti poverty programmes they run in their countries will find their decades-old good work diluted in a matter of months as millions run the risk of slipping back into poverty. The world today needs bold leaders who are ready to sidestep conventional economic wisdom to fund their stimulus plans.

The way the Indian states, being ruled by different political parties and leaders are working in unison under the leadership of the Central Government is a great example of a true 'Federal Leadership' in the face of an

extraordinary crisis. The regular consultations between the Prime Minister and the Chief Ministers to carve out a dynamic action plan against a rapidly evolving crisis would certainly go down as the perfect governance/administrative manual for any future crisis situation.

Political leadership at the Centre and the States can only do a 'directional' and basic framework' job as the real administrative action in any case have to be performed at the district/local level. The District administration, doctors, medical staff and the police force have stood like a rock to implement the most challenging administrative task in post independent India. Moving street by street to oversee enforcement of lockdown and containment zone guidelines and going door to door to enforce testing and quarantine can be a herculean task. Dedication shown by the district leadership in some of the 'hot spot' districts like Bhilwara (Rajasthan) and Kasargod (Kerala) will definitely be etched in our memories for a long time as far as emergency disaster administration is concerned. What is most commendable is the way the administration and health workers have worked in the face of violent behaviour of misguided citizens often risking their own lives to serve the wider cause.

Every society across the world have unequivocally expressed their gratefulness to the 'Corona Warriors' – the doctors and health workers - as they are being fondly addressed to for the selfless sacrifice they are making. The way these health workers serve their infected patients without bothering about the impending risk to their own health have elevated their status in the eyes of their fellow citizens.

Corona crisis has also come across as a great case of spontaneous community leadership as thousands of largely unsung or little known people and NGOs in neighbourhoods have either turned good Samaritans arranging daily ration and cooked food for the poor who are struggling to make a living because of the lock down. They have either collected small donations in their localities to make this possible or have worked as effective conduits to pass on government support to the needy. Crisis like this often help society to discover its silent benefactors who otherwise prefer to remain out of the limelight.

It was heartening to see the way Prime Minister's appeal to the Business Leaders to contribute to the PM CARES Fund was responded to enthusiastically. Many business organizations also declaring their No Retrenchment commitment during the crisis came as some relief to regular employees, though it still remains to be seen how the contractual employees are dealt with by their employers, who constitute the bulk of employment in the country.

Business leadership in the country have always been commended for the bold innovations they have ushered in, be it through introduction of new products and business models. The present crisis, one hopes, will also provide business leaders new ideas for new products and business models. In fact this sudden stoppage of economic activities and gradual opening up, which is unlikely to take any linear or easily predictable path may create many opportunities for creative business leaders. Businesses driven by too conservative leaders and ideas, who cannot think beyond cutting costs and sacking employees to tide over a temporary crisis may find themselves being overtaken by newer and more progressive bunch of leaders, who will instinctively look at opportunities in the ongoing crisis.

Societies across time and geographies have their own way of finding the right leaders as they grapple with any crisis. Some crisis because of their prolonged onset allow people time to find the ways and means to deal with them, but Covid 19, with its lightening entry gave little time to prepare against it. The sudden entry and subsequent mayhem paved the way for 'distributed leadership' and has made it incumbent upon every person in the administrative hierarchy right up to the citizen to act like a leader in his or her life space. Everyone can do his/her bit by adhering to the norms of social distancing and overseeing that the norms being respected around him or her as people go through their daily chores. It is becoming increasingly clear that societies with the most disciplined citizenry will emerge as the least bruised from the Pandemic as it runs its course. Given the inherent complexities involved as countries prepare to exit these lockdowns in an extremely calibrated fashion to guard against any rebound in infections, the role of 'distributed leadership' will continue to be important.

Crisis are known to bring the best out of every leader. No country will leave any stone unturned in this hour of crisis, be it stretching its healthcare apparatus to take care of the rapidly multiplying patients or running up unprecedented fiscal deficits to resurrect economy with bold and decisive action. As the curtain finally falls on the Pandemic - days, months or even years later, Leaders at the top in different countries will be remembered for their boldness or timidity they exhibit, hits and misses they leave behind, but what will finally hold the key to success will be how they have been able to inspire their people to weather this 'once in a century' storm.