

# Wash your hands, sure, but where's the water?

J. HARSHA

The consternation is there to see when celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan appear on television screens and appeal to citizens to wash hands with soap for at least 20 seconds to avoid Covid-19 infections. On 1 April 2020, a week into the country-wide lockdown, India recorded a staggering one-day increase of 400 cases of Covid-19.

Two weeks into the outbreak of Covid-19 in India, the appeal to wash hands with water and soap for 20 seconds appears pervasive in every form of media. Social media is abuzz with celebrities and politicians delivering similar tutorials for washing hands.

Further, places where incidences of Covid-19 occur need to be sanitized again and again and that needs large quantities of additional water. Hospitals require adequate quantity and quality of water; public places such as bus stands, railway stations, metro-stations etc., need regular sanitation and require more water than usual to thwart Covid-19.

The intention of these appeals for cleanliness are not in doubt. But the doubt is whether all our households possess enough water to wash hands for 20 seconds frequently or sanitize homes and public places to thwart Covid-19? Celebrities have no answer.

Two years ago, NITI Aayog projected an alarming scenario of the water crisis in India saying the country was suffering the worst water crisis in history with 60 crore or about 45 per cent of the population being vulnerable to high to severe water crisis. Twenty-one cities could run out of groundwater by 2020, it was projected. Yet in March and April 2020, everyone is issuing appeals to wash hands for 20 seconds several times a day.

What we have not understood so far is how do 60 crore Indians, two years after the NITI Aayog report, find enough water to keep away the highly contagious Covid-19? Probably, most of us have forgotten due to the ongoing hysteria that there even exists a massive water crisis in India cutting across states, demography, regions, religions and caste.

A rough estimate shows that one to two litres of clean water will be required for every hand wash per person for 20 seconds. At that rate, for several hand washes in a day, a household of five individuals would require at least 50-70 litres of additional water.

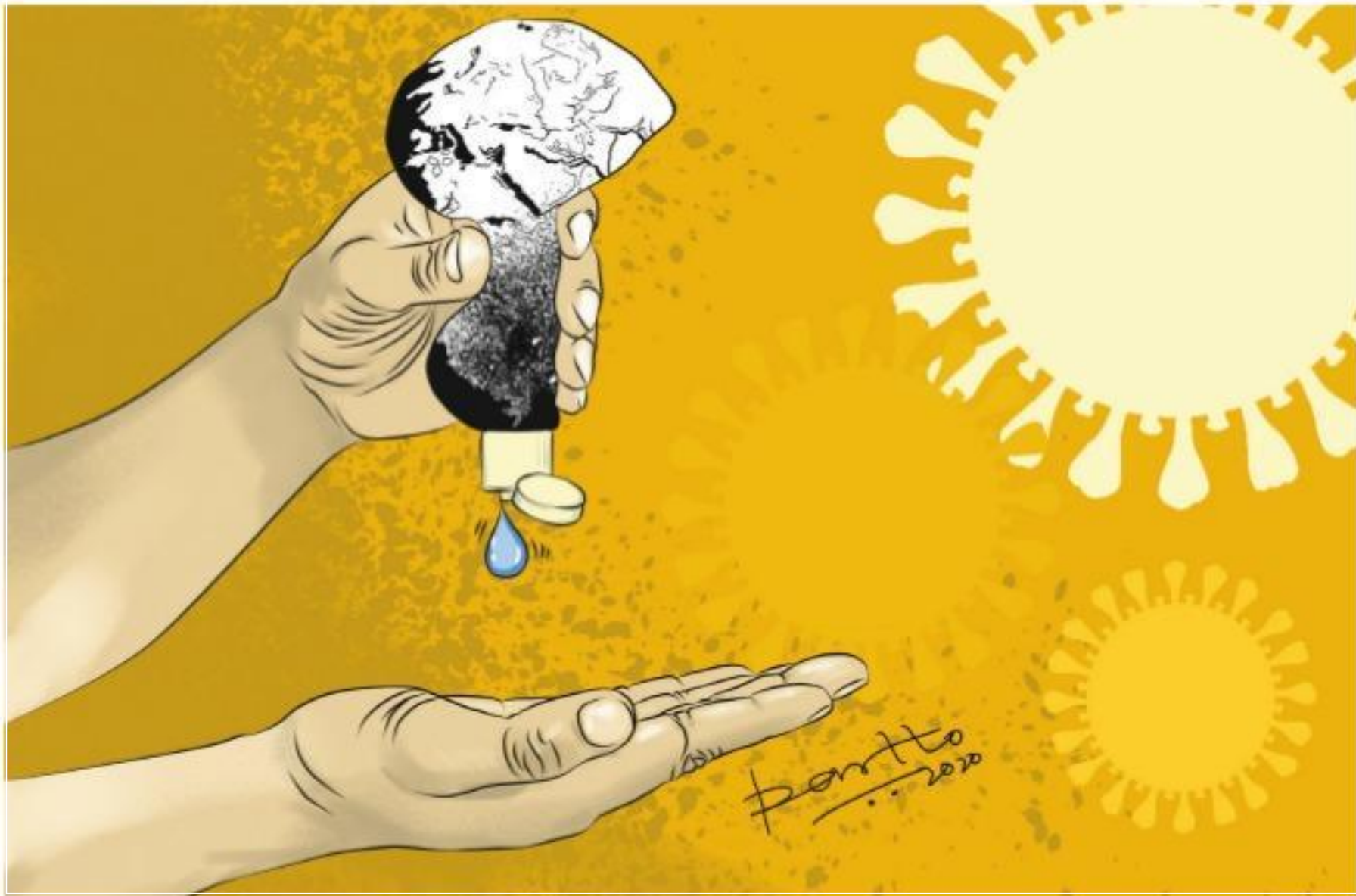
For the National Capital Region of Delhi with an adult population of nearly 20 million, the additional quantity of clean water required would be about 35-40 million litres per day (mld) for overcoming Covid-19 infections alone. For a chronic water-stressed city like Chennai the additional quantity of water required is 20 mld (assuming a population of 10 million).

When you add the water required for cleaning homes and public places, the additional quantity of water required is enormous, i.e. more than that estimated for washing hands alone.

Thanks to the bountiful monsoons last year, most of the water bodies across India now possess some water; else, the scenario of Covid-19 in India would have been catastrophic. Still most water bodies are polluted and unfit for washing hands. Such water from polluted sources is useless in the fight against coronavirus.

Large areas within India - covering parts of Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc., - are located in arid and semi-arid regions. These regions, typically characterised by low groundwater table, extreme temperatures, annual rainfall varying between 100 mm and 800 mm, face persistent water shortage. And these are also the regions where the Covid-19 maelstrom has just begun.

Data from the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation shows only 18.33 per cent rural households in the country possessed piped water connections as on March 2019. In urban agglomerations across India, the unaccounted water due to medieval-style water distribution systems amounts to 20-30 per cent. Most slums within urban agglomerations depend on tankers for water supply. And for such households, alcohol-based sanitisers are unaf-



fordable and inadequate.

The subtle but dire water crisis has a role to play in the spurt of Covid-19 infections.

It is fortunate that the rise in infections has been rather modest till date in India unlike countries in Europe, the USA and Iran. The slow progress in rise of infections could be due to countrywide lockdown declared by the government.

But dependence on lockdowns alone could be a disaster as lack of clean water could ignite the much-feared community transmission which government strategists are fighting hard to avoid. Unless adequate attention is paid to access of clean water, community transmission is like a powder keg waiting to explode.

World Bank estimates that 21 per cent of communicable diseases in India are linked to unsafe water and the lack of hygiene practices. So, at least 45 per cent Indians under a pernicious water crisis are at various levels of risk of not only from Covid-19 transmission but also other com-

municable diseases.

Most of the time, the lack of adequate, accessible and good quality water or the maladroitness of water management in India per se multiplies the threat of infectious diseases. So, even after several rounds of lockdowns of cities, towns and villages, the virus can spread within households and from household to household clandestinely.

Either the water scarcity will be accentuated by Covid-19 or Covid-19 will be accentuated by the lack of adequate, accessible and clean water. This is a vicious trap at least until the next monsoon arrives.

Water governance is concatenation of multiple disciplines and sectors including healthcare. Therefore, years of neglect of water infrastructure, chronic underfunding and lack of good water governance has put the nation and its citizens in danger of spread of Covid-19.

At this juncture, there is no panacea except ensuring adequate water supplies and adequate funding by governments to areas under

chronic water crisis on war footing so that the population can use water to disinfect households and public places frequently and arrest the mayhem of Covid-19.

In the long term, rhetoric and policies that confound themselves should cease and measures to increase water availability to the vulnerable population should be undertaken. To achieve this, not just funding, but incentives and accountability should be enhanced to overcome the hurdles of diverging policies and programmes between multiple levels of government.

Any procrastination in augmenting clean water to the vulnerable population will only weaken the nation's resilience to combat future disasters that are linked with water. Therefore, in addition to the appeals by celebrities, better water governance is fundamental for thwarting diseases like Covid-19 and other future healthcare challenges.

The writer is Director, Central Water Commission, Government of India. The views expressed in this article are personal.

## NOW AND AGAIN

### No Ming Ling

ARUN KANTI CHATTERJEE

“Do you know Ming Ling?” I was asked by this question by a child who resides in a neighbouring household. As we are going through a suffocating phase of quarantine regulations, the boy in his extreme inquisitiveness had to speak from their terrace. I was clueless but considered it the name of a Chinese person who may have become famous overnight for divulging the number of actual casualties or of a scientist who had discovered a cure for Covid 19. I assured him an early answer.

As my mind was riveted on Chinese names I kept on pondering. I looked up a few newspapers and took the help of Google to crack the name but nothing worked. It occurred to me that last year we had made a trip to Bangladesh when I visited a big agro industrial fair in Dacca. We were lodged in a hotel in posh Gulshan where many Chinese were present. I had received much literature on their activities. So I scoured this in my search for an answer. But to no avail. I turned to my brother who being an engineer associated with people around the world including in China. He immediately sent messages to his colleagues in Beijing and other big cities. I was skeptical. I knew that unless approved by the totalitarian government they would not reveal the truth. As I had guessed, my brother pleaded helplessness when the responses though timely yielded no clues. Exasperated, I took the help of friends who always keep themselves updated. Since social distancing posed a challenge in meeting them, I tried to gather information through social sites. The result was painful as few considered it as mere rubbish. Some trolled me for engaging in absurdity. I then rued the decision of the Government not to allow tea shops to do business as these places offer good sources of information. I could have got some good hints as Bengalis are always eager to provide opinions on any subject on earth.

When nothing seemed to provide me any clues, I rang up my friend who is a journalist working in an English newspaper. He broke into a loud guffaw, “Join the truncated parts and find out what we are restrained from,” was his apt and quick response.

## 100 YEARS AGO

### INTER-CASTE MARRIAGE BILL

To The Editor Of The Statesman  
SIR, - Mr. R. Palit's letter published in The Statesman of the 3rd instant on the Inter-Caste Marriage Bill, which is now on the legislative anvil, is to say the least amusing. Possibly he is a non-Hindu, as his letter betrays lamentable ignorance of the existing Hindu custom which he condemns and the improvement of which on western lines he advocates. Mr. Palit starts with the gratuitous assumption that Hinduism will not in the least be affected by the Bill, and then expatiates on the permissive character of the proposed legislation, pointing out that it will secure legal protection only for those who choose to marry outside their own caste and will not affect others in any way. He waxes eloquent on the adaptability of Hindu society to its changed environments, and then avers that social reform on occidental lines and political emancipation must go together. The supporters of the Bill, including Mr. Palit, do not appear to be quite clear as to what the expression “Hindu society” connotes.

B.M. GUPTA. Calcutta.

### THE PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

To The Editor Of The Statesman  
SIR, - One of the resolutions of the Zemindars' Conference as reported in your paper urges the Government to maintain and give pledges for the permanent settlement. The argument advanced is that the contribution of Bengal in income tax is proportionately more than that of other provinces. The implication, conscious or unconscious, is that Bengal is one unit and does not grudge income tax and prefers it to a land tax. While dealing with matters of taxation it is misleading to take one whole province as a single unit. Taking, however, class by class, we find that income tax is not paid by the zemindars as such, even the proposal to take into account their income as zemindars in assessing their other taxable incomes being repeated last year at the Imperial Legislative Council with uncontrolled votes. Here I point out the political danger involved in the zemindars' claim, based on the sentimental argument of legislation passed more than one hundred and twenty-five years ago.

P BASU. Indore.

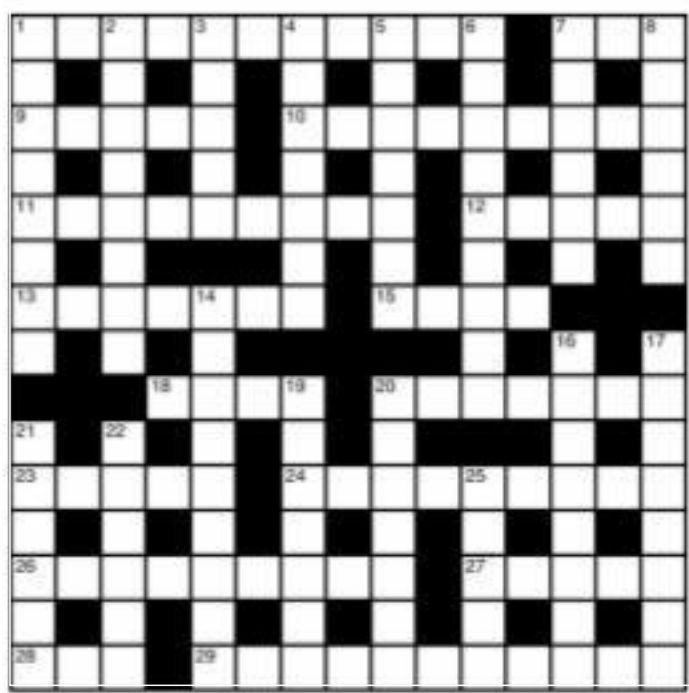
### “TOLERATION”

To The Editor Of The Statesman  
SIR, - May I call attention to a typical attitude of what is often called “toleration,” which appears in the European chambers' message to the Viceroy? We know, runs part of this message, how genuine, deep-rooted and intense is the feeling of Indian Moslems in the matter, - and afterwards we desire to dissociate ourselves from the views of those prelates of our Church who, necessarily ignorant of Indian Moslem sentiment, have entered into the controversy. Surely, if we are to adopt an attitude of sympathy and toleration towards Moslem thought, we ought to do as much for what is our own faith? And yet, while Indian Moslems are allowed deep feeling on the subject, English Christians are to be accused of mere ignorance if they express any feeling whatever. Let us be true to our policy of toleration, and in justice take as much account of Christian sentiment in this matter as of Moslem.

A CHRISTIAN LAYMAN. Eastern Bengal.

## CROSSWORD

NO 27912



### SOLUTION FOR 29 MARCH



#### ACROSS

- Smartphone I fixed for one who distrusts mankind (11)
- Charity starts to advance international development (3)
- Traveller is sensible to skip capital of Tunisia (5)
- No salt? Disgusting! (9)
- Hot-headed entertainer's achievement: concealing anger with the queen (4,5)
- Commotion perceived by ear (5)
- Frightened about

- conclusion of paper being marked (7)
- Hearing organs during rehearsal (4)
- Odd characters from Algerian city (4)
- Drain power during strike (7)
- Faith to decay after time (5)
- Convey delight (9)
- Larcenist's devious instruments (9)
- German city God loves? (5)
- Glimpse Canterbury, perhaps (3)
- King imprisons worthiest novel's unacknowledged author (11)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

## POLITICAL DIARY | KALYANI SHANKAR

### Virus will test political mettle

When I went to Gujarat years after the massive 2002 earthquake which shattered the state, people talked of “before the earthquake” or “after the earthquake” while referring to the developmental works undertaken by the Modi government in the state and were full of praise for his relief and rehabilitation initiatives.

Now the time has come to talk of “before Coronavirus” and “after Coronavirus” not only in India but also in the entire world. The pandemic is testing leaderships the world over. In the US, President Donald Trump is facing the music; in the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is under attack; Chinese President Xi Jinping is struggling with the system and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is just about managing the show. In India too, Prime Minister Modi is under constant watch and his handling of the pandemic will be his legacy for years to come.

Well-known columnist Thomas Friedman talks of the ‘unknown unknown’. Coronavirus certainly comes under this category. He points out, “Before 2004, Facebook was just being launched; Twitter was only a sound; the cloud was still in the sky; 4G was a parking place; LinkedIn was a prison; for most people, applications were what you sent to colleges, Skype was a typo and Big Data was a rap star. And the iPhone was still Steve Jobs' secret pet project. All these have really wired the world.” Today these tools come in handy when you are in isolation due to the virus.

The first test for Prime Minister Modi will be his handling of the post lockdown period. Last week's migrant worker plight is an example of how the Centre and the state could have handled things better. As Modi admitted this is only the beginning and there is a long way to go. He needs the help of the bureaucracy, media, public and community leaders. More than anybody else, the Prime Minister knows how difficult it is going to be to steer the country through the pandemic. Any gap in the chain for safeguarding people or providing food and shelter during the lockdown period will be remembered for long. It has actually hit the poor more than others.

At another level, it is clear that



nothing will be the same for the political leadership. The pandemic is likely to become a landmark in the future and a lot will depend on how they handle the crisis, which is the first real test for their leadership. After all, at the state level chief ministers have to think of their own leadership and winning the elections whenever it is due. Bihar Assembly polls at the end of the year will be the first test followed by Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Jammu and Kashmir in 2021. Chief ministers have already started demanding more money from the Centre for coronavirus relief in their states. It is good that the Centre has released Rs 11,000 crore from the State Disaster Relief Fund to help fight the health crisis.

Therefore the mantra for the Centre and the state is to cut red tape, activate the bureaucracy and goad them to deliver. This is not going to be easy and success will depend upon the political will of the leadership. Accountability and responsibility at all levels is the need of the hour.

The leaders of various political parties are also facing the test. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed emergency, most opposition leaders were put in jail but today it is the fear of the coronavirus which restricts their movements. Though in isolation during the

lockdown period, how they activate their workers is their first test.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi has activated Congress chief ministers to provide relief. At the party level she has set up a coordination committee and has activated the party machinery. For the Left parties, Kerala is a shining example.

The regional satraps have a lot at stake, as they run one-man shows. The BJP is already ahead in relief work with the full support of the RSS. BJP President J.P. Nadda is also holding video-conferences with office bearers, state presidents and BJP chief ministers daily tracking relief work. So they understand the problem.

Sonia Gandhi has put the situation succinctly in her address to the Congress Working Committee on Thursday. “Covid-19 does not differentiate between political ideology, religion, caste, age or gender. The choices we make today will have a direct impact tomorrow on our family, neighbourhood, community, environment and nation. How effectively we meet this challenge, how we protect all sections of our society, specially the most vulnerable among us will define us for generations to come.” Indeed, what she said applies to all other parties and their leaders.