

1. DoT's revised payment plan for AGR dues must be ratified quickly

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The DoT's proposed relief package, along with the earlier decision to give a two-year moratorium to telecom operators on pending spectrum payment should help in reviving the sector.

The Department of Telecom has finally woken up to the financial crisis faced by the telecom sector, by proposing a relief package under which operators will be allowed to pay their dues related to Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) over the next 20 years. In an application to the Supreme Court, the DoT has admitted that any adverse impact on telecom services will have repercussions on both consumers and the economy. Incumbent telecom companies, particularly Vodafone Idea, have been crying hoarse for the last several months that the Supreme Court's ruling on the AGR issue would force the closure of operations if the Centre did not intervene with a relief package. Vodafone Idea's exit would not only reduce competition in the telecom sector but also put tremendous strain on the surviving two operators as nearly 300 million users would be forced to shift out.

Telecom networks are at the heart of our digital future and affordable services are a key factor to enable the democratisation of data. The ongoing global crisis due to Covid-19 has only re-emphasised the importance of the Internet and communication networks. Millions have been able to buy essential commodities, do financial transactions and work from the comforts of home only because of digital access. One of the hallmarks of India's telecom market so far has been intense competition, which hitherto ensured consumers got the best deals when it came to tariffs. The telecom sector has proven to be the graveyard for over 20 companies over the last two decades leading to massive erosion of value and job losses. Another exit now would sound the death knell for the sector. The Supreme Court's ruling in October on AGR plunged the telecom sector into a severe financial crisis. Incumbent operators are already reeling under a debt of nearly ₹4 lakh crore and need to invest more into rolling out next-generation 5G networks by early next year. In this context, the DoT's proposal to offer fiscal relief should be ratified by the top court. This along with the earlier decision to give a two-year moratorium to telecom operators on pending spectrum payment should help in reviving the sector. However, to avoid any further complications DoT should quickly determine how much each operator has to pay towards AGR dues. Bharti Airtel,

Vodafone Idea and Tata Teleservices have come out with their respective calculations on how much they have to pay. But this is nearly 50-70 per cent lower than the initial estimate made by the DoT. While the operators should disclose their self-assessment calculations highlighting the areas of difference vis-a-vis the DoT estimate, there is a need for an independent audit.

Going forward, the very concept of AGR should also be done away with. When operators are buying spectrum through an auction mechanism there is no logic for collecting revenue share by the Centre.

2. For a floor test first: On Madhya Pradesh crisis

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The BJP might have been morally deviant, but Kamal Nath must prove his majority quickly

Propriety and law require the Kamal Nath-led Congress government in Madhya Pradesh to prove its majority on the floor of the legislature at the earliest. Delaying tactics by Mr. Nath with more than a little help from the Speaker, who has adjourned the Assembly until March 26, go against democratic principles. Equally, Governor Lalji Tandon's position that the government will be presumed to have lost the majority unless it takes a floor test immediately is untenable. The situation in the State raises other questions of morality and legality also, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) innovates questionable routes to power that it did not win in the election. The **Congress had won a narrow victory** in the State in 2018, after a 15-year gap. The **resignation of 22 party MLAs** has pushed its government into a crisis. These MLAs had won against BJP candidates. Their resignations, and the **defection of Jyotiraditya Scindia** from the Congress to the BJP, can be explained only as a high form of perfidy and shameless personal greed. That said, it is curious that the **Speaker accepted the resignations of six MLAs** while keeping the other 16 pending. The Speaker is expected to be non partisan. That he has found a rather ingenious excuse, the pandemic, makes the scene a bit complicated, but not defensible.

The BJP, the Congress and the rebel MLAs have all approached the Supreme Court which has taken up the matter with urgency. The BJP is replaying the script that it has perfected in other States, most notably in Karnataka last year to unseat the Congress-JD(S) government. The Court ruling during the Karnataka crisis was that a time-frame for deciding on resignations by MLAs could not be forced on the Speaker. The Court also ruled that MLAs could not be forced to attend the Assembly session by being issued a whip by the party they belonged to, weakening the lynchpin of the Anti-Defection law. The

Congress has alleged that the 16 **MLAs are under duress** and in detention by the BJP. While the judiciary will force some solution to end the current impasse, the larger question facing democracy is that of trust and transparency. Assemblies are elected for a five-year term, and the Anti-Defection law was brought to raise the threshold and stop the dismantling of a popular mandate through opportunistic manoeuvres, as it is unfolding in Madhya Pradesh. Engineered resignations of lawmakers have become a new tool for sabotaging mandates and camouflaging defections. When the top court adjudicates on the Madhya Pradesh petitions, this larger point must be taken into consideration. The situation demands new guidelines by the Court to deal with the now-familiar malaise, beyond setting a reasonably quick deadline for a floor test.

3. Epicentre shifts: On coronavirus spread

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Global efforts to counter the virus have been uneven, with Europe and the U.S. faltering

With 1,08,394 cases reported from outside mainland China as on March 17, there are more people infected with the **novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)** in other parts of the world than in mainland China (81,058). Also, as on March 17, the number of deaths (4,279) in the rest of the world is **more than in mainland China (3,226)**. On Monday, there was just one new laboratory-confirmed case and 12 deaths reported in Wuhan; outside Wuhan, no new case has been reported from Hubei province for 12 consecutive days. Even as Iran recorded 16,169 cases and 988 deaths so far, it is in Europe that the virus seems to be galloping. Besides four countries reporting a very high number of cases, all other European countries have recorded at least one case so far, thus shifting the **pandemic's epicentre from China to Europe**. Here, **Italy and Spain** have been the most affected, with 27,980 and 11,309 cases, respectively. On March 16, with 3,590 new cases, Italy reported the biggest jump in case load in a single day while deaths in Spain nearly doubled to 288. Germany (8,084) and France (6,664) have been the other two countries badly affected too. With 2,158 deaths, Italy has reported the highest mortality from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outside China.

There are big lessons that India and the rest of the world can learn from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea on containing the spread. **Taiwan began airport screening** even before China reported its first case of human-to-human transmission on January 20. Together with closing its borders by January-end, it raised awareness about the virus and the disease, and ways to minimise risk through handwashing and the use of face masks. Taiwan essentially cut the transmission chain even before the virus could gain a foothold in the country. Following the World Health Organization's guidelines to a tee, Singapore went after all suspect cases by testing all influenza-like and pneumonia cases and aggressively tracing contacts. Like Taiwan and Hong Kong, Singapore

too instituted travel restrictions by early February. Not only did it make testing and treatment free for all its residents, it paid \$100 a day to self-employed people to ensure none violated quarantine. Besides closing most of the border crossings with China and contact tracing, Hong Kong had a 14-day quarantine in place from February 5 onwards and containment measures — shutting down schools and asking people to work from home — in place by the end of January. South Korea's massive community-level screening, contact tracing and quarantining after the outbreaks in two churches helped in containment. Contrast this with how the U.S. floundered for weeks on several fronts, including the use of flawed testing kits. A lesson from the pandemic is how containing an outbreak is dependent on quick public-health responses.

