

# The Hindu & BL Editorials 16<sup>th</sup> Sep. 2020

## Better safe than sorry



### **A Covid vaccine cannot be hurried. Science calls for patience**

The pausing and restarting of the AstraZeneca-Oxford Covid-19 vaccine trial is a reality check that science cannot be hurried. That the testing was stopped because a single trial participant took ill shows the rigorousness of the vaccine-development process and the commendable seriousness with which the developers have taken the event. Though the pausing caused some alarm and despondency, it is a reiteration that the development of the vaccine is on the lines it should be. It emphasises the importance of the stage-by-stage safety tests involved in vaccine development, and red-flags their possible circumventing by the Russian and Chinese candidates. By all accounts, such stoppages are quite normal in the development of any vaccine. The note last week from a set of pharma companies that they won't be hurried makes sense.

'Hurry' is indeed the issue, here. The Covid pandemic has had such a sweeping impact that there is a desperation for a vaccine. With the death toll on the rise, and economies — rich, middle-income and poor — roiled, governments are desperate for a preventive medicine. In the absence of a sure cure, governments are relying on a vaccine so that infections will drop, which will embolden people to head to work without fear, and economies will recover. For them, it is literally a race to find an antidote, and push they will for that. As US President Donald Trump did, when he demanded a vaccine by November, essentially as a booster dose for his presidential campaign. While there is *per se* nothing wrong in accelerating the development of a vaccine, due processes cannot be ignored in the desperation for an antidote. Just because Phase 1 and 2 of the Covid vaccine were done quickly and were successful, too, can be no guarantee for a repeat in the more crucial third stage, which involves a far larger number of participants. In fact, many experts even put a question mark on the efficacy of the first set of vaccines when they do emerge.

While the pausing of trials was hopefully only a setback, the reality is that even the most optimistic do not expect a vaccine for mass use before early 2021. That is still five-six

months away. Till then, instead of waiting for a vaccine, perhaps, governments should push people to follow practices that are well-recognised as slowing the Covid infection — social distancing, wearing masks, maintaining good hygiene. Yes, one objective of governments, to get people back to pre-Covid normalcy, will not be achieved, but the other — a more crucial one, really — of saving lives will be. Already, governments must be getting some comfort from the fact that even as the infection rate is rising so is the recovery rate. ‘Better safe than sorry’ is the line governments must take and allow science and its practitioners the time and freedom to develop an efficacious vaccine.

## **Ill-advised move: on threat of contempt proceedings against Suriya**

**By seeking contempt action for an innocuous comment, HC judge has set off controversy**

Given the embarrassment and adverse publicity suffered by the Supreme Court because of its verdict holding advocate **Prashant Bhushan guilty of contempt** for a couple of tweets, one would have thought the superior judiciary would avoid wading into needless controversies by invoking its contempt jurisdiction. However, Justice S.M. Subramaniam of the Madras High Court seems to believe that anyone criticising judges should be dealt with by the threat of contempt. In an ill-advised move, he has written to the Chief Justice, seeking permission to **initiate contempt proceedings against prominent Tamil actor Suriya** for an innocuous comment on recent judicial orders declining to interfere with the conduct of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for medical courses. The actor, responding with anguish to recent suicides by MBBS aspirants out of fear of failure, had remarked that “a court that dispenses justice through video-conferencing out of fear of the coronavirus is ordering students to write an exam without fear”. The judge claims that the actor had questioned the integrity and devotion of judges and that such a remark, if unpunished, would undermine public trust in the judiciary. It is only petulant resort to contempt law without necessary cause that would make the layman lose trust in courts. No reasonable person who reads Mr. Suriya’s statement would construe it as contempt of court, as it does nothing more than state an obvious fact: while the pandemic has resulted in virtual hearings, the court has allowed an examination involving a million-and-a-half students.

As pointed out by six former judges of the High Court in a letter to the Chief Justice asking him not to act on Justice Subramaniam’s letter, the judge’s construction of the actor’s comments is off the mark. Besides, no one would believe that the actor had interfered with any judicial proceeding through his comment, or that it hindered the administration of justice in any way. That a judge should show unbelievable alacrity in shooting off a letter to the Chief Justice, within hours of the actor’s statement being aired on television, evidences an alarming level of intolerance towards criticism and a monarchical understanding of how courts ought to deal with public opinion. The actor, who also runs a voluntary organisation dedicated to increasing access to education for under-privileged

children, has commented in the past, too, on matters related to education. There is no reason to abridge his constitutional right to do so, especially on an issue of public importance. Further, Justice Subramaniam's request is also impermissible in law. The High Court does not have jurisdiction to initiate contempt in respect of an order passed by the Supreme Court, going by the apex court's verdict in *Vitush Oberoi* (2017). There is no reason for Chief Justice Amreshwar Pratap Sahi to permit initiation of contempt action against Mr. Suriya.

## Venus in focus

### International collaborations can help probe the dense atmosphere of Earth's neighbour

Venus, the hottest planet in the solar system, has not enjoyed as much recent attention as Mars, as far as space missions are concerned. With surface temperatures of above 460° Celsius that can melt even a metal like lead, and a heavy atmosphere of carbon dioxide, the planet was considered hostile to life. This despite its being similar in size to the Earth and rocky, so much so that it is often called the Earth's "sister planet". There was some excitement when the European Space Agency's mission, Venus Express, found signs of ozone, made of three oxygen atoms and considered a biomarker, in the upper atmosphere of Venus, in 2011. But the recent **discovery of traces of phosphine**, another biomarker, in its atmosphere has just given the search for extraterrestrial life a shot in the arm. Phosphine, a compound of one phosphorous atom and three hydrogen atoms, is given out by some microbes during biochemical processes. In an atmosphere rich in carbon dioxide, it is likely to get destroyed soon. However, the researchers estimate that phosphine forms about 20 parts per billion of Venus's atmosphere. This fact, when added to the hostile conditions on its surface, yields tantalising possibilities — of phosphine's survival through extraordinary chemistry and thermodynamics or the stubborn triumph of biology and life.

This finding was the result of years of careful study by a team of international astronomers led by Jane S. Greaves of Cardiff University and was announced in a paper published in *Nature Astronomy*. Prof. Greaves first identified phosphine in Venus's atmosphere in 2017, using the James Clerk Maxwell Telescope in Hawaii. Further study and precise observations using the Atacama Large Millimeter/sub-millimeter Array facility in Chile confirmed the suspicions of the researchers in 2019. The very caution exercised by the researchers in announcing the fact underlines the lack of knowledge about these systems and the need to make sure before celebrating the discovery of extraterrestrial life. This can now only be taken further by making *in situ* measurements in the atmosphere of Venus. This poses its own challenges. Apart from the high surface temperature and dense atmosphere, the presence of sulphuric acid in the atmosphere of Venus makes it a highly corrosive environment. Perhaps flying at a height and sending down drones or balloons would be more feasible than a landing. Missions to Venus have been planned by NASA and ISRO. While NASA's mission is slated for launch next year, ISRO is looking at 2023

right now. As is not uncommon in space missions, a spate of collaborations may well improve chances of efficiently probing the dense atmosphere of the planetary neighbour.