**WILL INDIA FACE RECORD-BREAKING COVID-19 NUMBERS?**

India versus COVID-19:

The pandemic is prevailing.

As of March 25, 2020, the Central Government of India imposed a national lockdown in the fight against the novel coronavirus pandemic. With its epicentre in Wuhan, China, it was only a matter of weeks before the disease and its impacts were felt all over the world.

As of June 13, there have been over three hundred thousand people diagnosed with COVID-19. While close to half of them have successfully recovered, most of them are still writhing in worry and agony. The number of deaths recorded are 8,500 in number and counting.

The global fatality rate for COVID-19, as declared by the World Health Organization’s Director-General briefing, is estimated at 3.4% - a 66% increase from the initial approximation as of February 10.

India is facing a current fatality rate of 2.8% - lower than the global average estimate, but a high number nevertheless. As a parallel reference, the flu – one of the most common global disease – is reported to have a <1% fatality rate.

Most countries around the world are either rolling down from the peak of the curve, or have flattened it considerably. Countries like New Zealand and Papua New Guinea have displayed their prowess by eradicating the virus from their countries completely. As of today, nine countries have been successful in completely wiping the virus off the face of their lands.

Bihar Election 2020:

Preparations are well underway for Election Day 2020 in Bihar.

During the month of October 2020, the Bihar Legislative Assembly election is planned to take place. If successful, this will result in a new five-year term for the 243 members elected into the assembly. The competition is focused between two major political parties, the Janata Dal (United)-led National Democratic Alliance, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal-led United Progressive Alliance.

The Chief Electoral Officer, Bihar, Sh. H.R.Srinivasa, has issued various reports and orders regarding the planning and processing of the upcoming election. In accordance with orders from the Election Commission, all EVMs and election booths are currently under physical inspection.

According to a video conference between the Chief Electoral Officer of Bihar and the Deputy Election Commissioner of the Central Election Commission, among other officials, there has been sufficient inquiry about the work in progress for the election.

The Chief Electoral Officer has reported that the physical verification of all 72,000 booths can be expected to be completed by the 21st of June, 2020.

Why does an election pose a threat?:

COVID-19 is an extremely communicable disease. With human bodily fluids being the matrix in which the coronavirus embeds itself for transmission, it is very easy to catch it from a simple sneeze happening a metre away.

As of June 12, India’s COVID-19 numbers are still on the rise. With no end in sight, there is an overall mixed expert opinion about whether or not the country has flattened the curve successfully. While the rate of the infection is growing linearly, India has done comparatively better than most other countries when it comes to Day 0 statistics.

Elections in India are a communal event. And what better way for a deadly disease to easily spread than such a gathering?

The physical act of casting a vote has been the tradition in democratic India, since the first elections in 1951-1952. While the method of casting may have changed, the process has been firm when it comes to the act of casting one.

The announcement that Bihar Election 2020 will take place in the months of October and November irrelevant of the pandemic scenario is a worrying statement for the voters of the state – here’s why.

Experts have suggested that India may face its coronavirus peak around the months of June and July, but have not affirmed their opinions, With a large population base, of which a high percentage are potential disease carriers, the situation in India – even in a locked-down scenario – is worrisome.

Amongst all this, various reports showcase the fact that the current Bihar government has done little to prevent the number of cases from increasing – with immigrants pouring into the state with high COVID-19 rates, facilitation of services to stop the spread of the virus is yet to be seen.

Solutions to the election issue:

According to The New Indian Express’ publication of an interview with the Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, Sushil Kumar Modi, there is high probability that the election process may be made an online phenomenon.

“It is not impossible to conduct polling online. We can take an example of polling held in South Korea, while maintaining proper safe [sic] social distancing”, he quoted, referring to the strict measures undertaken by the South Korean government when it came to casting a physical vote on election day.

Mr. Modi’s exemplified election happened during the month of April, where the citizens were required to follow protocol and wear masks and gloves, and stay disinfected regularly.

“The Election Commission of India ought to develop a digital polling method also for Bihar polls, as it would not be prudent to put the voters beyond the social distancing [sic] to got to polling booths to vote”.

History of COVID-19 in Bihar:

The first COVID-19 positive case in Bihar was reported on the 22nd of March, 2020, in the municipal corporation of Munger. The state government has hence responded to the pandemic outbreak by following a model of contact-tracing, testing, and home-to-home surveillance. The government has faced a lot of criticism for its poor handling of COVID-19 positive immigrants and migrant workers.

With zero green zones as of the month of June, Bihar is suffering with a concentrated amount of red zones (six cities) and a wide range of orange, non-hotspot zones. The quarantine seems to have done little in containing the infection within specific areas.

The number of new cases per day has been steadily increasing in the state, the rate kept almost linear. The highest number of recorded cases per day was on May 23, 2020, with a mind-blowing 311 positive diagnoses. Currently, 2.216% of the entire state has shown to be COVID-19 positive.

COVID-19 versus Bihar voters:

It is an obvious conclusion that the elections of Bihar cannot be guaranteed to be safe for both voters and election officials working to make it a fair fight, if it is let to proceed like any other election from the past.

Given the current situation, the government and administration must adapt to provide a safer experience for the voters while keeping it hostile enough for those willing to exploit the loopholes of the election system. The example of South Korea is a big deal – it resulted in a turnout of 66% of voters, the highest seen by the country!

While we cannot follow the same model of election to the T, it should serve as an inspiration to come up with better ideas to provide an overall safe and protective experience for people that showcase their beliefs in strong democratic systems.

Better late than never, the government must take mitigation measures to ensure that the election process goes safely and smoothly, and result in a democratic event never before seen in the history of the nation – a safe election for all.

The people of Bihar must also be required to follow strict protocol, as their cooperation is very much required in any process that involves their commitment, let alone such an event.

Once in five years, people get to choose who represents their community and constituency. And now is the time for those representatives to exhibit the reason why they can be trusted by their sectional communities, and others.