

## 5-G and its discontents

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/covid-treatment-governments-unscientific-attitudes-coronavirus-death-7320660/>

The Whatsapp message from an old acquaintance was the usual one which one receives nowadays- old friends asking about your and your family's welfare in these terrible times. Since I had tested Covid positive a few days ago and was in isolation, I replied giving my update. The person immediately called and after the usual enquiries about my health, urged me to give up all medicines and instead start using Coronil which will certainly cure me soon.

Coronil, for the uninitiated is the "wonder" drug for this disease which has been made by Patanjali, the pharma company of the famous yoga Guru Baba Ramdev. The fact that the drug had not gone through what is the standard procedure for approval of drugs for human consumption, namely Phased Control trials for safety and efficacy did not seem to bother millions of his acolytes who happily started imbibing it. The lies and half-truths that were being spread through the media and more effectively through social media channels about it only increased its popularity.

But why blame uninformed folks like my acquaintance for believing in an unproven and possibly harmful concoction? After all, we have been witnessing an astonishing lack of scientific temper among the senior functionaries of the present dispensation. Ministers (and the Prime Minister) have claimed the use of In-vitro fertilization techniques and plastic surgery in ancient times. A minister responsible for education publicly claims that the theory of Evolution is wrong and we shouldn't teach it. The Minister for Science & Technology claims that the Vedas had better scientific theories than Einstein. Department of Science & Technology funds projects to study the beneficial effects of cow urine and cow dung as claimed in our religious texts while another minister has claimed that cow is the only animal which exhales oxygen.

One could go on and cite many such examples. This display of lack of any kind of scientific temper, nay, a definite anti-science attitude might sound humorous and innocuous. Except that these are not statements on your family Whatsapp group but instead are well thought out proclamations by the people who are responsible for policy

in our country. And this has disastrous consequences, some of which we are witnessing currently.

The fact that many of our politicians, bureaucrats and indeed scientists privately believe in things which are patently anti-scientific and bogus is not something which is specific to this dispensation. The famous incident of a prominent scientist discarding all leftover food after a solar eclipse because it was contaminated is only indicative of the dichotomy which exists in most people between their private and public life. However, and this is important, never before have we seen this level of denigration of a scientific outlook as well as promotion of bunkum theories at the official level. Privately a Minister consulting astrologers or believing in *Rahu Kaalam* is her right and prerogative- the same Minister promoting astrology as a science is what is dangerous and objectionable. Policies guided by an anti-science and anti-rational outlook among the policymakers do not bode well for the nation- especially when we don't tire of making grandiose claims of being the next scientific superpower.

Interestingly, over the last few years, while we have witnessed this sustained attack on science on the other hand there is an almost talismanic belief in the power of technology. The promotion of technocratic solutions to all social problems as well as encouraging unbridled consumption based on "new and improved" technologies has proceeded apace with an antediluvian outlook towards science and rational thinking. The belief in the "T" in "S&T" while junking the "S" would possibly make an interesting sociological study.

The long term effects on our society of the official sanction of an anti-scientific outlook would of course be visible over the coming few years. However, even in this current crisis we are getting a preview of the kind of disaster such a world-view can bring about. As Aziz Premji has eloquently put it recently, ".....[actions] must be based on good science. Actions that are not based on science in reality have a detrimental effect on the cause. At the core of the idea of good science is the matter of being willing to accept and confront the truth. So, we must confront this crisis, its scale, its spread and its depth truthfully. Science and truth are the foundation on which we can tackle this crisis and ensure that it is not repeated."

What we are seeing instead is an amazing display of an unwillingness to acknowledge facts. Accurate data has to be the foundation on which all policy decisions need to be

made to tackle this unprecedented crisis. But the data that is being put out is so obviously at odds with what one is witnessing that its veracity is questionable. The intolerance towards any fact (data) which runs contrary to ones "belief" is widespread. When videos of mass cremations or people dying outside hospitals for lack of oxygen are circulated, the dispensation and its legendary team of Internet trolls term it as fake news. Worse, appeals for oxygen for your near and dear ones on social media can see an FIR being lodged against you.

Our scientific establishment, especially those in policy making roles have not covered themselves with glory either. Most of them have been either silent or echoed the official narrative about the crisis. A few brave souls who have had the courage and integrity to stand up to the falsehoods and point out the lacunae in planning and execution have been sidelined.

That this crisis is unprecedented is without doubt. That our historical neglect of health infrastructure has made the crisis worse is also obvious. However, it is the lack of a cogent, scientific and rational response to the crisis which has aggravated the crisis and resulted in tragedies in millions of households. The concoction of an anti-scientific and authoritarian mindset is a lethal one, the cost of which we shall be bearing for years to come.

After 14 days of isolation, when I went for my evening walk, I ran into my neighbour's teenage son. On finding out about my illness he had the following to say: " The whole thing is due to the introduction of 5G in telecom. The radiation from this technology is depleting the oxygen in the atmosphere and hence the disease is spreading". This was coming from a kid who is in his final year of B.Tech in Computer Science! When I said this is bogus, he looked at me disdainfully and said "It is true- haven't you seen the news?" Clearly, our prospects of being the next global superpower in science and technology are very bright!

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May 13, 2021