

Finance Ministry Report

Why in news?

The Finance Ministry in a report said that while the pandemic was far from over in India, it may be past its peak of the COVID-19 case load.

What was the basis?

- This finding was premised on a declining case load from September 17-30 when the daily positive cases dipped from 90,000 to 83,000 a day.
- This, along with an increase in testing had led to a falling test-positivity and so was a sign that India ought to be 'further freeing up its economy.'
- [Test-positivity: The number of tests needed to find a positive case]
- The pandemic being past its peak in India is irrational optimism.
- The Health Minister said that India was far from any sort of herd immunity.

What does the decline in daily cases mean?

- The decline from 90,000 cases a day to around 75,000 for over a fortnight is certainly welcome but can be deceptive.
- In the United States, daily cases steadily plummeted from 70,000 in July to 24,000 in September, to ascend again to 50,000 in October.
- India's test positivity is declining but not substantially.
- As of October 4, it had fallen to 8.29% - an improvement but not close to the World Health Organization-suggested safety barrier of less than 5%.

What further complicates the projections?

- The projections are based on temporary undulations in cases.
- They do not take into account the dynamic nature of the virus itself.
- This further complicates the projections.
- The early optimism that its spread may be contained by changes in the weather, behavioural modifications and imposing a stringent lockdown has been belied.
- A complete shutdown could not stop the peak.
- So, allowing public transport and reopening public places in a season that is particularly conducive to viruses will catalyse the movement to a new peak.

How should the peak be inferred?

- The so-called peak is a statistical artefact closely connected to the number of tests a country administers.
- If testing were to decline, more cases would be undetected.
- Conversely, an increase in tests could push this point even further.
- Therefore, it is only after sufficient time has elapsed and in retrospect that a country's peak can be inferred.

What is next?

- India has been opening up the economy and this increases the average person's exposure to the virus.
- Countries with much fewer cases are far more cautious with opening.
- The lockdown had shown the disruption in the Indian economy.
- So, it is understandable if Finance Ministry officials seek a justification for opening up.
- But the officials ought not to be predicting outside their ken merely to revive economic sentiment.
- There are several alternatives based on fact and reason.

Source: The Hindu

