

Sarthak edit

On Tuesday, the government doubled down on the need for precautionary and preventive measures against Covid-19 such as distancing, hand hygiene, mask-wearing, etc, during the coming festive season and the winter months, warning that respiratory diseases tend to get worse during this period. Last week, even prime minister [Narendra Modi](#) had tweeted stressing these measures, as he launched the public campaign (Jan Andolan) for Covid-safe behaviour; the PMO had said that the campaign was launched in the light of the festive season and the winter months, apart from reopening of the economy. Consensus still eludes scientists on what can be expected of the virus in the winter months, given the numerous variables involved. The epidemiological data from various places have also confounded understanding since different geographies have seen their respective peaks occur in diametrically opposite weather conditions. Nevertheless, researchers have gained some knowledge, from lab experiments, of how certain key variables—lower temperatures, low relative humidity, and different indoor conditions—are likely to influence transmission. A University of Basel researcher, quoted in an article by David H Freedman in the MIT Technology Review (MIT-TR), says that factors typical of winter look like they will “potentially accelerate the virus’s transmission”. Research from MIT, Harvard, Virginia Tech, and the University of Connecticut indicated SARS-CoV-2 is more infectious in low relative humidity (the cold, dry air of the winters), flourishing at anything below 40% levels.

Seasonal flu makes the outlook worse—the influenza virus is already proven to thrive in low relative humidity, especially indoors where the cold, dry air from the outside becomes dryer if there is heating. A research letter published in the Journal of the American Medical Association had found that nearly a fifth of the Covid-19 patients in the US studied by the researchers in April had a separate concurrent respiratory infection, and, predictably, suffered worse than those who tested positive only for SARS-CoV-2.

Against such a backdrop, it is ironic that the government, which has launched the Jan Andolan, should have relaxed the constraints placed on political rallies in the run-up to the Bihar elections. Last week, the home ministry notified the removal of the 100 person cap for political gatherings, allowing up to 200 people in indoor venues and any number of people for outdoor venues (“keeping the size of the space/ground in view”). That it insisted on the use of sanitiser, thermal scanning, strict enforcement of distancing, and mask-wearing is hardly a consolation.

Given how 250 FIRs have already been filed by local authorities against political leaders and functionaries of different parties in Bihar for flouting Covid-19 restrictions—this is for the period when the restrictions were stricter—the writing is already on the wall. While the government notification says the relaxations were to be in effect till only October 15, there is no guarantee that these will not be extended.

But why blame the Centre alone, when the West Bengal government is somehow comfortable with its contradictory messaging of the need for social distancing and the call to celebrate Durga Puja with gusto. The removal of any limit on outdoor venues in Bihar—where the PM is to have 10-12 rallies—is equally worrying. It is true that research from Japan shows that infected people were 19 times more likely to spread the infection in indoor conditions than outdoors, and analysis of data on 1,500 ‘super-spreader’ events done by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, as reported by the MIT-TR article, shows only three of these happened in outdoor conditions. But, if social distancing is not maintained in the rallies—and doing so is very difficult—these could well become super-spreaders as well. The Centre, the political parties in fray for the Bihar polls and the [Mamata Banerjee](#) government in Bengal need to keep in mind that cases in Maharashtra surged in the week leading to Ganesh Chaturthi, with the rise reaching 32% a week after. Add to this Bihar and West Bengal’s questionable record on testing, and poor healthcare infrastructure and the rally-focussed relaxations/“Puja as normal” talk are an invitation to disaster.