

# Opinion

## Guest Voices



... practical, and project assignments was proposed as a proxy to arrive at results, with an option to improve performance at a subsequent examination. The board must now come up with a model scientific scheme.

The decision to cancel the examination in 2021 may have resolved a prickly issue, but the question of national entrance examinations – such as NEET and JEE – need to be addressed. Importantly, the Centre must recognise that major factors such as non-availability of enough vaccine doses, absence of a systematic vaccine coverage plan, and poor understanding of where virus variants are spreading, contributed to the second wave, and may, in fact, cause a third. For instance, there is better comprehension in Britain of where the variant of concern is initially isolated from India, B.1.617.2, is spreading in that country because it has a robust genome sequencing programme. Such sharp insight, together with the availability of free and widespread testing, is crucial to stop waves of infections that threaten to hobble the country. The plight of students, which is engaging governments, has to become a top priority. Singapore has just approved mRNA vaccine coverage for children 12 years and older, just as the U.S. regulator *Pfizer has for 12 to 19-year-olds. Britain has thought of 100 extra tuition hours for schools from 2022. There cannot be an interminable wait for vaccines to trickle down to all. The Centre must take responsibility to provide them to everyone, including students.*

### Embracing children

Speedy implementation of relief schemes for children orphaned by COVID-19, is essential

Well begun is not always half done, and, in any case, half done is never good enough. The Centre's response to the Supreme Court that the modalities of the expansive assistance programme for children orphaned by COVID-19, announced by the Prime Minister, were yet to be formulated comes as a disappointment. While rightly feted for its announcement of a comprehensive programme for the most vulnerable section of the population during this COVID-19 pandemic, children, the Centre did not lay down procedural formalities for implementation. It is clear from the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights' submission to the Supreme Court that nearly 10,000 children are in need of immediate care and protection. They include children aged between zero and 17 years orphaned or abandoned during the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. The total was 9,346 children who have been affected, including 1,742 children who lost both parents, 7,664 who have lost one parent, and 140 who have been abandoned from March 2020 to May 29, 2021. It further told the apex court that these children run a high risk of being pushed into trafficking and the flesh trade. There is thus no doubt that time is of the essence here.

*Given the urgency of rescuing these children, the Government cannot afford to procrastinate and implementation*

part of such appeals to a narrative of a strong nation state rather than one of governance.

### Union encroachment

To be sure, such moves to erode the powers of State governments are not new. In post-independent India, the Centre, on several occasions, has used its powers to dismiss or use the Governor to intimidate democratically elected governments. During the Emergency, education was moved to the Concurrent list which was until then a State subject under the constitutional division of responsibilities. However, the adverse changes to federal relations at present are more systemic.

To understand what has changed, at the risk of repetition, there has been increasing centralisation in resource allocations and welfare interventions. The gap

the past enabled the rise and the visibility of regional businesses in post-reform India, the current dispensation is working towards centralising economic power in conjunction with political centralisation. It is becoming clear that aligning politically with the BJP is critical to do business. While the rise of yoga guru Baba Ramdev's business empire is testimony of this, the decline of business groups from southern India over these last few years suggest the reverse of this process.

We can also see the consolidation and expansion of a few big business groups into the rest of the BJP, probably at the expense of smaller players. On the one hand, the Centre has sought to limit the Indian big business from global competition by choosing not to enter into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

keep them in line. On the other, State governments, the Centre has now put State governments at a disadvantage in vaccine usage by fixing differential pricing for procuring vaccines for them. This means State governments to pay more even as they are deprived of their income shares.

### Institutional transgression

The second challenge is in the role of executive and legislative agencies. Central institutions are increasingly weakening the pillars of State institutions. Institutions such as the Income Tax Department, the Enforcement Directorate and the National Investigation Agency are being used to intimidate opposition, and politicians are not safe either.

For instance, the Centre has been involving members of the Intelligence Bureau in the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines.

### Sociocultural foundation

The third and crucial challenge lies in the social-cultural dimensions of federalism. The Centre has to ensure that the States have a plural India in terms of both culture and politics.

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## Close the vaccination gap

Immunisation needs cooperation and is a prerequisite for lifting the restrictions that are holding back our economies and freedoms.

Vaccination is also a prerequisite for lifting the restrictions that are holding back our economies and freedoms. These restrictions penalise the whole world, but they weigh even more heavily on developing countries. Advanced countries can rely more on social mechanisms and economic policy levers to limit the impact of the pandemic on their citizens.

As the vaccination gap persists, it is deepening the trend in recent years of declining poverty and economic growth. Such a negative development would hold back economic growth and increase geopolitical tensions. The vast majority of the world's population live in developing countries. We cannot afford to let the whole world suffer. Therefore, we need global multilateral action to increase the production of vaccines and accelerate the roll-out worldwide. Since the beginning of the novel coronavirus pandemic, this is the path chosen by the European Union (EU). It is now also the path defined by the G20 leaders at the Global Health Summit in Rome on May 21.

### A worthy goal

The pandemic is still killing thou-

peans can be proud of this record. India's "Vaccine Maitri" is another example of global solidarity.

In 2020, the EU supported the research and development of vaccines on a large scale and contributed significantly to the new generation of mRNA vaccines. The EU has been a major producer of COVID-19 vaccines. With, according to WHO estimates, of the doses used globally, the EU has also exported 2 billion doses to 90 countries, with about as much as it has received within the EU.

The EU has the capacities and financial resources what we call "Economic Superpower" – is also committed to its neighbours in need, particularly in the Western Balkans. It aims to donate at

Issue of licensing  
Voluntary licensing is the

Our European industrial partners have committed to deliver 1.3 billion doses of vaccines before the end of 2021 to low-income countries at no-profit, and to middle-income countries at lower prices. They have also committed themselves to further deliver over 1.3 billion doses for 2022 – many of which will be delivered through COVAX.

Supporting Africa  
All countries must avoid restrictive measures that affect vaccine supply chains. We also need to facilitate the transfer of knowledge

of its vaccines. This has to be a priority for Team Europe. It is launching an initiative to this end – backed by 1 billion funding from the EU and European development financial institutions – with all partners to boost manufacturing capacity in Africa for vaccines and technologies.

claration already foresees the ability of compulsory licensing have been listening careful countries complaining about difficult it is to use these technologies. To speed up these tech transfers, the EU will convene with a new proposal World Trade Organization work by early June.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that health is a public good. Our common COVID-19 vaccine action plan the vaccination gap must be the first step toward genuine

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December 10, 2024

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I have not written for National Catholic Reporter in weeks. I have a good excuse. I had a stroke. It deprived me of some of my abilities as a writer. As Joni Mitchell sang in "Big Yellow Taxi," "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you got, till it's gone."

Strokes can be fatal, but I'm blessed to be writing again. My neurologist told me the damage was minimal compared to other strokes of the same magnitude. I can still do the activities of daily living, such as dressing, bathing, eating and walking. But I have some serious problems to overcome. I cannot see well from my right eye, and my reading comprehension is poor. Also, I have trouble writing with a pen, though oddly I can still type. I guess it has something to do with "muscle memory."

I have a lot of trouble reading. It takes half an hour to puzzle my way through a page of type. Sometimes longer. Reading aloud is painfully slow. Often, I know the meaning of a word but cannot pronounce it. I cannot celebrate Mass, so I have not said Mass since this happened. Two weeks after the stroke, I went to a parish church near where I am staying. I could recite the parts I had memorized but couldn't read the missalette. It is the experience of being a child again.

I struggle to read the newspaper every morning. A single article can take an hour or more. I was moved to see in the paper that the president of Georgetown University, John DeGioia, has similar problems. He stepped down as president after 23 years following a stroke. He has my sympathy.

Beyond reading and writing, my most serious problem is my vision. My right eye has always been bad, but now it is very bad. My peripheral vision on the right is very poor. I cannot see people or things coming at me from the right until they are upon me. As a result, I cannot drive, unless I can arrange for all traffic to come at me from the left. This has made me very dependent on others. My friend Jorge has been wonderful about letting me stay at his house and driving me to appointments. I have become dependent on others to get to places.

I have often said, 'Once a man, twice a child.' Now I know it is true.

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I have not been back to my house for more than a few hours since the stroke. I miss my independence, but I am grateful to Jorge for his hospitality and kindness in doing so many things for me like driving and laundry. His kindness is a real blessing. As the book of Sirach in the Hebrew Scriptures says, "A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter, He who finds one, finds a treasure. A faithful friend is a lifesaving remedy, such as he who fears God finds" ([Sirach 6:14-16](#)).

Friends and family have been very helpful as well. My sisters, Brigid and Maureen, have helped me with appointments. Friends and parishioners have visited and brought lunch. Others have made old-fashioned voice telephone calls to see how I'm doing and have offered their help. Their gestures make me feel loved and cared for.

Technology is a big help, too. I have been able to attend meetings and prayer groups on Zoom and read the newspaper by playing the audio version on my laptop. But I still want to read for myself, just as I did before the stroke.

Ordinary things, like reading instructions on a package or turning on a television program, are sometimes beyond me. Then again, contemporary televisions are all too damn complicated. Remember when you just had to turn it on and select the channel?

Friends often forget that I've had a stroke and cannot read. They send me links to endless articles from The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal. I want to shout, "I've had a stroke and have difficulty reading!" It does not seem to make any difference. They just send more articles. They mean well, but a telephone call would be better.

It is very disturbing to be 74 years old and not be able to read or drive. It is the experience of being a child again. It is teaching me humility and dependence. It may finally give me the grace to accept help from others and love. I have often said, "Once a man, twice a child." Now I know it is true.

This is not my first health crisis. I have had two heart operations and two mini-strokes, called TIAs ([transitory ischemic attacks](#)). I think those were God's angel "tapping me on the shoulder" reminding me that life does not go on forever. As the Scripture says, "For all can see that the wise die, that the foolish and the senseless also perish" ([Psalm 49:10](#)). Every day is a gift. And even things we have taken for granted, like reading and driving, can be taken away at any moment. And in fact,

they were taken away from me, I hope temporarily.

No ability or material thing will mean much. In the end, as St. Paul says, "only three remain, faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love" ([1 Corinthians 13:13](#)). If it took a stroke to remind me of that, then it is a blessing.

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