

the death rate is as low as 3.02%. The country has succeeded in bringing down the pace of infection and the principal reason behind this is the timely and total lockdowns imposed by Prime Minister Modi. Several international rating agencies have revealed the reverence and popularity Modi enjoys worldwide. Public opinion-based approval ratings have showed that he holds the top position among global leaders involved in fighting the coronavirus disease. The *Morning Consult*, a US-based survey research firm, reported Modi has a net approval rating of 68, up from 62 at the beginning of the year 2020. The report revealed that PM Modi's popularity rose to the highest among all global leaders.<sup>68</sup> Prior to this, a *IANS-CVoter* Gallup International Association exclusive tracker on Covid-19 Wave-2 survey reported that 83.5 percent people from various states "trust in government" in handling the crisis.<sup>69</sup>

A latest survey reports that it has found an upswing in Prime Minister Modi's approval ratings since the beginning of the Covid crisis in the country. The survey app has recorded a significant spike of 8 percent in PM Modi's approval rating since February indicating people's approval of his performance during the pandemic. According to the survey, PM Modi's current rating stands at 3.9/5 against 3.5/5 in February. This is the third such report, showing people believe that the prime minister may be winning the perception war during the Covid-19 pandemic. Earlier this month, a survey conducted by *Ipsos* showed that an overwhelming 87 per cent of urban Indians gave high ratings to the prime minister and his team for their handling of the coronavirus. The survey was conducted from April 23-26 by seeking responses from about 26,000 people across 13 countries.<sup>70</sup>

Confirming the recent polls, the New York Times observed: "Mr. Modi's already high approval ratings have soared even higher, touching 80, even 90 percent. Unlike two of the populist leaders to whom he is often compared, President Trump and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, Mr. Modi seems to be thriving in this crisis." Taking a futuristic look at the unfolding of the pandemic, it further said, "If India continues to ride out the coronavirus in decent form, he may emerge with an even stronger hand ... Much as the brinkmanship with Pakistan last year helped strengthen his re-election campaign, the deadly pandemic is bringing many Indians to his side despite lingering concerns about his agenda."<sup>71</sup>

In combating the pandemic, the entire focus has shifted, once again, to the Prime Minister Modi, who by his prompt action, humane response and timely intervention, both at the domestic and international levels, has earned massive goodwill. The much-desired right coordination established among the various Ministries, State Governments and Overseas Governments is typical of the Modi-style of leadership, who makes all ends meet and work in tandem in accomplishing the assigned task. His capacity to think different and adopt a different course of action in unusual times is what makes the entire show Modi-centric. The display of the humanitarian aspect of India's foreign policy and the transformation of the Ministry of External Affairs from an elitist and power-structure to an agency committed to ensuring the safety of Indian nationals abroad has been underlined once again. In effecting far-reaching structural, operational and policy-level changes, India's foreign policy establishment bears a close Modi-impact.



However, notwithstanding the high public ratings and global accolades showered on Modi, critics point out the limitations of his approach. It is contended that beyond a certain point, his SAARC and the G-20 initiatives will not work. This was witnessed in the intransigent attitude and the opposition of the Pakistani government's representative at Modi's SAARC address. Pakistan will consciously see to it that India does not get an upper hand in Modi's attempts to steal the international show on the corona pandemic. Likewise, it is China who primarily stood to gain by getting an international platform at the G-20 virtual teleconference despite USA's understanding of China's hand in the creation and spread of virus, consistently calling it a 'Chinese Virus'. India will have to instill fresh efforts to contain its rivals' game plan.

Additionally, critics argue that the Modi government, which is trying to promote multilateralism to deal with the present crisis, stands seriously questioned and virtually rejected by the USA. Trump's persistent criticism of multilateral bodies, like the United Nations and NATO, and the most recent suspension of the US funding to the World Health Organisation for its alleged complicity with China in spreading the virus, speaks loudly about the fate of multilateralism in times to come.<sup>72</sup> Earlier, the USA withdrew from landmark international agreements- the Paris Agreement on Climate Change<sup>73</sup> and his abandonment of Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018.<sup>74</sup> Faced with a bleak prospect of multilateralism given USA's lack of trust in it, the next option for the Modi government is the bilateral approach, which anyway it has been pursuing with full vigour in recent years, not only with USA but with all major powers of the world. While not faulting Modi's

attempts at multilateralism, eminent scholar Kugelman points out its limitations when he observes, "Modi has the right idea to be pushing for more global coordination, but the obstacles he faces underscore the limit of multilateralism today- even amid a rapidly spreading pandemic that badly requires a global response. Modi's globally focused approach makes a certain sense. New Delhi is keen to assert its importance and place in the world."<sup>75</sup>

Critics also point out Prime Minister Modi would find it hard to get a suitable response to his global appeals given most countries obsession with countering the coronavirus mayhem on their home front. Like others, Modi too equally stands challenged to combat the virus domestically. The spurt in coronavirus-infected cases now running into more than hundred thousand with a corresponding increase in the number of deaths, poses grave concerns for the Indian establishment. If the trend continues, Modi too may be forced to curtail his international initiatives and retract his steps back to the national frontiers. According to credible information based on Washington-based COV-IND-19 Study Group of scholars and scientists, the number of confirmed cases in India could reach between 1-1.3 million by mid-May. The report apprehends a sudden spurt in the number of corona virus infected people in the month of May.<sup>76</sup> The projections are not off the mark as of today (May 21), India has reported more than one lakh cases of infections, including 44,029 active cases and 3,553 deaths.<sup>77</sup>

The present compelling crisis has forced the world to investigate the leakage of the virus from China's Wuhan lab and also to find out whether it is a natural virus, or a Chinese bio-weapon? Several theories are afloat, some calling the virus a result of



transmission from wild animals to humans from China's sea food market while others attributing it to China's lab-manufactured war weapon. Whatever be the nature of its origin, critics argue it is China's answer to counter its enemies, principally the USA. Countering western speculations, China has termed the virus of American origin, which specially travelled with the American forces to Wuhan. Separate from these speculations, the WHO adopts a middle-of-the-ground approach saying the exact path of the virus cannot be located especially till a complete investigation is conducted to ascertain it.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the resurfacing of fresh coronavirus cases in Wuhan, with commentators calling it 'Wuhan Part-II, has sent shivers down the Chinese dispensation, indicating the Chinese celebration of victory over the pandemic was premature and the war on coronavirus was yet not over.<sup>79</sup> In view of the above, the unraveling of the corona mystery may be long, arduous, painful and uncertain. Further, given the mistrust and power rivalry involved among big nations, possibility is also that the reality behind the coming out of the virus from the Wuhan lab may not ever come to the fore.

Notwithstanding however, atleast one thing is clear: that the world will not stop fighting against the virus, nor can it afford to; and statesmen like Modi, bestowed with a global vision; would continue working on both fronts- the domestic and international. India's domestic and strategic compulsions demand both kinds of initiatives simultaneously. Living in an inter-connected and a globalised world as we are, the challenge for one nation has become a challenge for all nations; a threat in one part of the world has become a threat to all parts of the world, and for shared threats, only shared solutions can be the way out. No nation can remain safe for long until a threat, be it an epidemic, pandemic,

or any natural disaster, is eradicated in entirety and from each nation.

In keeping with the Indian ethos and values of *Vasudhev Kutumbakam* (the whole world is a family), Modi, has repeatedly emphasized on a global and a united response, comprising of knowledge, expertise and data sharing, with a view to achieving the ultimate victory over the threat. Seen in this context, Modi's international outreach has been widely admired, cross-cutting ideological and geographical barriers. Even though his efforts may fall short, the lasting impact of it would not go unnoticed, unrecorded and unsung in the struggle against the corona pandemic. Kugelman, thus rightly remarks, "Modi can demonstrate that his country is not a global actor to be taken lightly. More broadly, New Delhi can telegraph a message that India is a responsible and collaborative global player with the capacity to spearhead global cooperation to address shared threats."<sup>80</sup>

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