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The World Health Organization declared that the novel Coronavirus infects people irrespective of caste, religion, class and gender. We also know this from the list of people who got infected or died of infection. The determinants of the number of deaths among the infected population, however, depends upon the nature of inequalities in each country, how accessible the health system is to marginalized and the minorities, the resources and the strength of the public health care system and the level of discrimination in that society. The USA and Germany give us two contrasting scenarios of the unfolding COVID crisis. In the US, testing was poor and the health care system inaccessible to many. In New York city which is currently the epicentre of COVID in the US and elsewhere, poorer African Americans dominate the list of the dead as many of them were turned away from the hospitals and were not even admitted. In contrast, Germany tested widely, increased awareness of this virus, made health care facilities accessible and prevented discrimination and as such has less number of deaths.

Despite repeated warnings from WHO and the ICMR that a simple lock down strategy is not sufficient to contain the virus, the Telangana government has focused only on the implementation of the strict lockdown and did not pay heed to this advice. We were told that many hospitals have been converted into COVID hospitals and that 10,000 beds are available; that 1000 ventilators have been ordered etc. But when a nurse in a public hospital tried to raise the issue of insufficient PPE through the media, both she and the journalist who raised it were indirectly warned of consequences. We have not been told if there are enough doctors or staff who can operate these ventilators after they have been bought. Apart from lack of good public education programmes to reduce fear and panic, we are getting to know that even ASHA workers fighting on the frontlines are not being protected or sufficiently educated. Despite people jumping to death due to fear of quarantine facilities and isolation wards, no helpline has been set up to offer counselling support to COVID patients and suspects, as in Tamilnadu or Kerala. Our Health Minister is unresponsive to the suggestion of this helpline be set up with out of work doctors and medical students. He believes that there is no necessity for such a helpline due to less number of cases in the TS!

Telangana State has done a very small number of COVID tests. It has ignored the suggestion of ICMR that clearly said, twenty days ago, that the testing should be expanded beyond contract tracing of COVID patients and those returning from abroad. According to public health experts, testing should be done for those frontline health care workers and other essential services workers as well as those coming to health care centres and hospitals with mild and severe symptoms. They have pointed out that unless it is done, it is not possible to know the level of community level infection, which in turn

should determine the lock down relaxations. Our government has remained immune to these suggestions and advice. It has stopped testing even in hotspots such as Suryapet, according to news reports. It has not yet prepared rural or urban health centres to face COVID patients or suspects. It has not placed any information in the public domain too. But it does get very upset if any questions are raised about testing!

Why? Till now, the government focused mostly on Markaz returnees, making people believe that the virus spread solely due to them. While it imposed lockdown referring to thousands of foreign returnees and the spread of virus among them, it later adopted the line that the virus spread in the state only due to the returnees from the Markaz meeting in Delhi. Telugu television channels too contributed to this skewed analysis by showing Old city residents going for tests as COVID infected and not revealing later that they tested negative. The government also did not provide any concrete evidence except spouting a figure to demonstrate that the Markaz patients constituted the largest among those who are tested from a similar kind of population with a history of foreign travel. While the entire Markaz returnees, including a large number of asymptomatic ones were tested aggressively, we do not have figures of how many among the asymptomatic and symptomatic people from foreign returnees and their close relatives got tested and how many tested positive. By not revealing the information about testing, it successfully projected the picture of Markaz as the sole cause of Corona infections while leaving the rest of the population to their fate. Led by this propaganda, the non-Muslim population of the Telangana State ended up in believing that the infection spread only through Muslims and if they maintained social distancing from Muslims, they would be safe! A tragic unintended consequence of a tragically ill-informed government stance.

This has caused immense harm to Telangana society. Communal virus has spread widely and deeply in society. Propaganda in the social media with fake videos of Markaz patients spitting on the doctors or stripping in the ward has led the non-Muslims to make the entire Muslim community as responsible for the viral infections. Many more now believe that it is legitimate to blame Muslims and discriminate against them. Unfortunately for them, this same stigma, targeting and discrimination prevents Corona patients and suspects from accessing the public health care system and makes it spread. A counterintuitive effect of focusing on Markaz returnees and their families, testing and quarantining them is that most non-Muslims now believe that they are immune to Corona virus. The government, that did not inform the public about the number of health personnel, PPE sets, facilities etc and which refused to educate the public but focused on Markaz returnees has precipitated combustible combination of hatred, ignorance and discrimination. No wonder a (non-muslim) young woman lost her life in the containment zone of the city as she and her family, fearing quarantine and isolation, did not reach

the hospital in time and seek medical help.

It is high time the Telangana society came out of these Markaz illusions, took a hard look at the information that the government is making available and demand the following:

- 1. TS government should immediately delink COVID in Telangana from Markaz returnees; recognize that such propaganda leads to hatred, ignorance and discrimination and risk for others from the disease. They should put a stop to it.**
- 2. It should broaden and increase testing in Telangana in line with ICMR suggestions. Testing should be provided for those with Corona symptoms. Information about testing numbers and protocols should be made available to the public.**
- 3. PPE should be provided in adequate numbers to the health care workers on the frontline. Public health care system should be strengthened. Serious attempts should be made to reduce fears and panic about isolation and quarantine facilities.**
- 4. A helpline with volunteers from doctors, medical students and others should immediately be set up to offer support to all those in quarantine facilities and COVID patients and the help of civil society should be taken where necessary to set it up and maintain it.**

The TS government should let go of the illusion that it alone can handle everything, acknowledge the immense contribution of the civil society during this crisis and partner with the civil society to increase awareness about COVID. It should fulfil its constitutional responsibility of treating all citizens as equals in these difficult times, not merely in words but in deeds!

TV links for reference

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYJ94k0xnZA&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMPKO7ESfto&feature=youtu.be>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=125d_5AWEOA&feature=youtu.be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEXGQLX9Z6c&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wED3XQw-TsM&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88kooBO84Oo&feature=youtu.be>