

The Suno India Show

How will COVID-19 transform Global Health?

This is a Suno India production and you're listening to The Suno India Show.

Today I am instructing my administration to halt funding of The World Health Organisation while a review is conducted to assess the World Health Organisation's role in severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of CoronaVirus. Everybody Knows what's going on there.

Last week US President Donald Trump announced the US is cutting its funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO) – a decision that will have major implications for the global health response to the coronavirus pandemic. He said that the funding has been suspended pending an investigation into what he called its “role in severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus.” This decision by President Trump is catastrophic for WHO as it throws several key health programs that are partly funded by US contributions into disarray. This includes WHO’s emergency fund to help at-risk countries across the world fight the coronavirus pandemic. The US contributes more than US\$400 million to the WHO per year. It is the organization’s largest donor and gives about 10 times what China does per year. Trump has accused the organisation of mishandling and covering up the initial spread of COVID-19 in China, and of generally failing to take a harsher stance toward China.

What will Trump’s decision to cut funding mean for the organisation? What will this mean for WHO as an organisation? And what does it mean for countries which rely on global health financing including India? To seek answers for these questions and more, Suno India editor Padma Priya reached out to Dr Madhukar Pai, Director of McGill Global Health Programs, and Director of the McGill International TB Centre.

Padma Priya (Host): Hi, I am Padma Priya, Editor Suno India and Host for this Episode of The Suno India Show.

Host: Dr Madhu thank you for doing this, can you give a brief introduction of yourself to our listeners.

Dr Madhukar Pai (Guest): Thank You, my name is Madhu Pai, I am professor at McGill University in Canada where I am the director of McGill Global Health Programs and Director of The McGill International Tuberculosis Center.

Host: Thank you so much Dr. Madhukar. I actually wanted to sort of Kickstart this Conversation by asking one How are you doing? How is the situation in Canada, how are you there? How difficult has it been for you to see the pandemic spreading in the world?

Guest: Well, that's surreal like it is for all of us, Canada thankfully is not on the same rapid explosion pattern as the US or the UK, nevertheless cases are rising. We seem to be at least tending to flatten out in the last few days, but then essentially isolating at home and anxiety is what will happen if we go to work or school. Nobody is quite sure when and how to release from lockdown and that's how big anxiety is. The Canadian health system given that it is 100% public universal health coverage, at least no one here is anxious about medical healthcare or anything. We have social benefits here, while there are no big stars in Canada. Everyone is doing their jobs, all our provinces, it's not flamboyant but it is steady and everybody is pulling around, people are cooperating. So, I feel that Canada will come out OK. My biggest anxiety is India as you can imagine, where my family is and my wife's family is and we are constantly worried about India. All my TB research is in India, and I am very stressed about how COVID will damage the already fragile TB infrastructure and TB care resources in India.

Host: Also, how has it been for you as an epidemiologist to watch your subject suddenly become the star and everybody now wanting to talk about flattening the curve, the statistics, everybody now seems to be interested. How has it been for you?

Guest: Well, it's interesting and nice in some ways that public health is in discussion and everybody seems to be aware, everyone has gotten a jolt. I think, including our politicians, that if you ignore health, it will come back and bite you. So, I do see that this pandemic has some positive lessons, for global health and public health that people will finally appreciate its importance, even though it's invisible, people will realize that you need a solid public healthcare system to protect you. All that makes me happy because for years, we used to plead you know for some attention to public health, surveillance, handwashing, vaccines, how many times we pleaded with people to take a vaccine and now everyone wants a vaccine right. So, it is a pandemic for people to wake up and see what was obvious for decades. So from that perspective it is good but as I have written in my article in Forbes, I see a lot of negatives for this pandemic in the area of global health and backlash against WHO is one of those.

Host: Coming to the point about the backlash to WHO, I think since the beginning of this Whole Pandemic which even before it was classified as pandemic, there was a lot of dissatisfaction being thrown up about WHO handling this situation and now more recently, that he will be withdrawing, US will be withdrawing funding to WHO, How do you think, this is going to play out just in terms of the role of WHO as an international organisation and also in terms of global and public health.

Guest: So, I think it's worthwhile trying to understand what WHO is as an agency. WHO is a United Nations agency and it is an agency explicitly tasked by the United Nations to look after global health. There is no other body, which has the mandate that WHO has and who owns

WHO is the member states. Right, they are supposed to contribute based on their GDP, a certain fraction of money every year, it's called assist contribution and then they hold WHO accountable, so the united states does contribute to WHO, cause US is a member state, India contributes to WHO, india is a member state and the US, India, China they all have a right to hold WHO accountable. So, there is no problem here. unfortunately, for decades actually, member states have not been contributing enough to WHO, so what happens is for the need that WHO has, the proportion of total budget that comes from member states got smaller and smaller and though WHO had no choice to go out and raise their own money through voluntary contributions, voluntary contributions are like gifts and donations and grants and small contracts and whatnot, so if you look at it now. For example- Gates foundation turns out to be a big contributor to WHO, gates foundation is not a member state, gates foundation is private philanthropy foundation run by two individuals. But by giving those voluntary contributions or gifts or charity donations, these agencies that are giving that kind of money have an oversize influence on the WHO agenda. The agenda of WHO should ideally be decided by countries, which is why the world health assembly happens every year. Accountabilities should be to countries,agenda should be set by WHO head but in practice, the budget is so external to member states, other groups have a big influence on How WHO works and what they end up doing, for example-if i gave money to WHO nad say use the money only for TB, but then WHO is dealing with Covid. But now can they take my money and use it for Covid? No, because i have earmarked it for just tb, or polio or whatever and WHO is struck because they don't have enough discretionary power because most of their budget is struck in this box which is different from main country core contribution, so this depletion of WHO core budget has not been a new thing, it has been pointed out for decades when one doctor said this is his biggest challenge where he needs enough discretionary power of budget, so that when the next crises come he doesn't have to go around begging, he would have enough money from his core resources, this is what happened with ebola. When ebola hit west africa, WHO was found seriously short on resources because they could not muster enough people, enough resources to go and do something, so they delayed it and it cost whole of world a lot and they got slammed and they publicly admitted that they have failed, this time around when COVID hit WHO explicitly out out a statement, that we need X millions of dollar, today the world has paid trillions to deal with this Covid, if countries had sensibly given WHO the money that they needed right at start of COVID, maybe things would not have been this bad, right this is one of the points. Is WHO perfect, not by a long shot. It was never perfect and it will probably be perfect, because it is answering to 100's of bosses and each country is a boss. Each one pulls and pushes WHO based on what they want, what is correct for them. So, china does push WHO, india can push WHO, United States for sure is pushing WHO, so imagine yourselves working for 200 bosses with limited amount if money or discretion ability and i ask myself what would i do in that situation, it is impossible task to make all countries happy and then you have this crises where every crisis that come and crises keep on coming, it was ebola then it will be something else, next it will be climate change and if you don't have enough resources, how do you expect agency to react. So, i am not trying to defend WHO, i am just

trying to tell what their realities are, it is so easy to critique an UN agency but then even United Nations as a body is fundamentally flawed because we can see that with UN security council, all such as big political decisions are reprimanded but UN has no ability to actually punish any country, no matter what crazy stuff that country does, so the security council itself is dominated by the richest countries like the US, so other countries don't quite have a voice and even the most populous countries in the world don't have a voice, so all the flaws of the UN system is also reflected in WHO, which is a UN agency but is there an alternative legitimate body in the world is answerable to countries in world, other than answerable to donors, or private individuals or countries or whatever. So, the world needs a sensible honest code breaker who is not beholden to corporations, not beholden to individuals but is responsible to member states and as of today there is only one such organisation that is WHO. So, we can either strengthen it or we can kill it. But, if we kill it, what will we replace it with? That is the question everybody should be asking.

Host: Thank you so much for the very subtle explanation of how WHO hands are so tight. Those who have worked in Public Health have always known the health in equity is always in global funding, have always been there. You have countries divided into HIC's- High Income Countries, Low income countries, middle income countries. Now, if you look at how the covid pandemic is panning out, as you also mentioned in your article very rightly, we see the LMIC is doing much better than those who fall in HIC. Going forward while WHO is one big aspect of it. Countries also give aid to one another. So, after this pandemic, post pandemic world as its being called now, how do you think this relationship between countries will look like, and will that distinction will now just blur away, will be no longer have these distinctions or these distinctions will remain, and the inequalities will just worsen.

Guest: You are absolutely right. The world is quite inequitable right now. If you look at global health funding, it is dominated by the highest income countries. The United States for example is the biggest contributor to international aid or development assistance. UK, Australia, Canada, European governments and then the Gates Foundation and these are all main contributors. So, Trump's tweet that US gives a lot of money to WHO, but WHO is seemingly taking China's side is a dramatic example of how high income countries think that they own WHO, they think they own global health because of putting money on table and in fact the easiest way to control the agenda is to give money and when you give money you attach strings to it and you make sure that you control the agenda. So the global health has always been a colonial type of enterprise, in the past it was out and out colonialism where countries like UK, European countries colonised parts of Africa, Asia and so on and so forth, extracted resources and they held all the wealth, today it is a form of colonialism where high income countries hold all the strings and expect all of global health to serve them. So, global health is dominated by high income countries, every aspect funding, research, publications, credit, you name it, training in global health, everything is controlled by high income countries and notably US and UK. And within those countries it is dominated by men, older white men in elite institutions. This is a sad reality of global health. Even women don't have a great leadership role. 70% of the major global health agencies, CEO are men,

hardly feminine seats in leadership roles. so, if you look WHO is an exception, Tedros is from ethiopia, but otherwise if you look at all other big agencies, global fund none of them are led by people from LMIC's, none of them are led by women, this is the extremely inequitable nature of global health scene and Trump's tweet makes that so blatant that we own you and you should do what we are asking you to do, which is essentially asking we are giving you money, we should be first on papers, we are going to take credit, global health is our baby and LMIC's are merely our sites for doing research. So, it is nowhere close to being equitable or reciprocal, nor or HIC is willing to learn from LMIC's. Even in this pandemic crisis, when they could be taking some valuable lessons on how south korea managed to control the epidemic, what taiwan did, there are a lot of lessons but they went on blundering their own way of worsening the crisis and highest income country US has watched uo their epidemic response so so dramatically that they found a way to blame WHO for it. So, this is the nature of global health and long sided nature. Now, will this fundamentally change, I am worried on multiple fronts. Even before COVID, you could already see that the world was trending towards an extreme form of nationalism, which India is a great example of, the United States is an example of, China is an example of, it's been like that. Not just nationalism, it has been authoritarian nationalism, isolationism, Trump building wall, banning travel, all of these are examples of isolationism. America first, make in india, its all about us and our country which totally goes against global solidarity and other principles we have talking about for decades and then all of this led to Xenophobia, for example an institutionalised racism, for example since Trump has been calling this an chinese virus, there have been all sorts of attacks of people of asian origin or chinese origin within the US, acts like presidrnt of a country promoting racism, and this is not trivial and its a very real issue, already Trump has muslim ban. He banned muslims from a lot of countries, we know what's happening in India with communal tension and religious tensions, all this means even before pandemic, this is a very deadly mix of authority nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, racism and anti- scientific attitudes, Trump is a great example of someone who genuinely doesn't care for science, he has completely sidelined his best scientific brains. When Us has some top notch scientists in the world, why are they not leading the outbreak response right now? They have sidelined CDC, CDC is the world's foremost epidemic diligence service. 70 years they have been teaching the whole world how to control outbreaks,where they are now and the anti-vaccine movement is a great example of growing distress of science and expertise, we know what's happening in India, promoting cow urine, promoting all sorts of products that are untested right. The anti science goes well there is authoritarianism, and xenophobia is. This cluster is a deadly cocktail and when a pandemic affects, the last thing you want is this cocktail in place because this really weakens your response and india, us and even uk has completely failed in trusting their best scientific brains and acting on time, and they are also into this brexit and there isolation is they are also on their way, to becoming isolated through brexit. So, this contraction into oneself, one small country, on the border, putting ourselves ahead of others fails when you have a pandemic that's gonna sweep the whole world. So when you have a weak spot anywhere in the world, it will come back and haunt you, which means every country needs to watch out

for other countries. There is no place on earth that is safe. Nobody is immune, every country has to think about the whole world, and i fear that the next crises we will deal with which i predict will be climate change will have dramatic severe effects on all of us, again the world will be found wanting because we think we can wall of ourselves from impact of climate change which is just bullshit. Climate change affects the whole world, the whole planet is affected. So, this pandemic and climate change are test for humanities abilities to think beyond our narrow little lives, think beyond our cities, our countries ,our province and think about globe as a whole and have a more coordinated approach and who will coordinate the whole world if there is no central organisation like WHO, because politicians are incapable of coordinating. We have learn that, they cannot even communicate properly in the midst of a global crisis.They are taking potshots at each other, trying to steal chloroquine or supplies from each other, everything in this pandemic is exposing, how incapable our leaders are of thinking globe as a whole and how in a crisis we all become tribal in our mentality. We retract to our most basic unit. We want to hold toilet papers for our families, we want to stock up on food , even if it means, emptying out stores. What we are doing at an individual household level, are politicians doing at country level and if each country does that then you will have a fractured world, that is completely fragmented and disunited. And disunity is going to be our biggest challenge in coming decades because the pandemic has exposed our weakest spots or the fact that we don't invest in health, we always speak of the economy, but we don't invest in the health of people who are supposed to be in our economy. We don't care about public health. We don't care about solidarity and everyone of this is coming back to bite us right now.

Host: Do you think that the pandemic would fix something, something like you say, pharma supply. Can now use this opportunity to find a model in Pharma or even in R&D in development of a vaccine, so that it is spread in a more equitable fashion, like if one country is unsafe from like Covid, does the world would be safe. Do you think this pandemic would perhaps fix that.

Guest: I mean tte pharma model is so broken that i am just absolutely astounded that even in a pandemic situation, somebody said, some american companies are gonna make a killing on chloroquine, chloroquine was developed more than 50 years ago, it is off patent, it a cheap generic drug that shouldn't cost more than cents and yet in a midst of a global crisis, there are some corporates making schemes to profit from this. If that is how bad the situation is imagine, when a new covid vaccine comes out next year, how affordable will it be, who will get it first, Trump has already tried to make sure that no country other than the US has access to it. If you had it this way, he will hold all the vaccines and he will make the whole world beg for it and pay for it. Is this a standing time in our humanities history when we learn that the pharma model will never serve us, they will serve themselves and their shareholders which intend to do, that they are incapable of delivering something for the common good. So, I was actually shocked that so many people have been campaigning already saying when the new covid vaccine comes out, or medicine comes out, we want it to be affordable and free for all, so forth. You would think man, nobody needs to be

campaigning for this to be given. It is far from given because we know the track record of Pharma companies. They are built to maximise their profits. They are incapable of breaking that mould because wall street will punish them if they do not protect their shareholders interest and because everything in that model is rigged to maximize the profit on returns. They are not the right group to even think about making global good products. So, now comes the question: in an extraordinary crisis can the government mandate using compulsory licensing and other instruments available for them through declaration and so on and so forth. The answer is absolutely yes. The countries did it in the AIDS crisis, there is no reason why countries cannot do it now, especially in an emergency countries have extraordinary power to do so and so there is still hope that countries can still work on it. Could countries also do things using public sector enterprises. Again the answer is Yes. Why has the public sector completely moved away from vaccine manufacturing. I mean India has some public enterprise. We could leverage all of them, so if India wanted chloroquine, lets say chloroquine worked, I personally don't see any evidence that it is working, but if it does work, it will take 10 days for India to set up companies that will manufacture million doses as necessary. That is kind of an ability India and countries could have. They could just make it on their own to save their people who are in crises.

Host: It's interesting that you talk about India and its major role as a pharma of the world, but I would like to get a quick snapshot if your mind, the discussion that has been going on regarding, should testing be made free or not free. There was a brief moment where it seemed like the supreme court of India said , private companies should not charge, it should be free and then they reversed the order saying that those who can afford still have to pay 4500 rupees. What's your take around this testing, should it be free, should it not be free. I mean in the public sector in india, it is already free, when you go to private sector, i mean it's going upto 6000 rs. with taxes per test, which is lot because it needs what 3 or 4 times this test and if you are a family of 3 or 4, it just multiples, so what's your take on this?

Guest: For a country of India's size and potential and capability, why hasn't India build enough public laboratories that can step up and do this kind of work, which goes to a bigger question, why has India underinvested in Health for decades and why has india allowed private sector to dominate to an extent it is right now. If the Indian public health delivery system was strong enough then much of the testing initially could have and should have come from the public sector and so the fact that India does not invest even 1.5 % of GDP on health, year after year, decade after decade is one of the biggest failures that needs to be discussed. There is no question, we cannot discuss anything in India if you don't acknowledge fundamental failure to invest in health, so that extreme privatisation has exposed India's weaknesses, just like Covid has exposed America's health systems fundamental Flaws, it is also revealing india's fundamental flaws that India has a very weak public health system which is not able to step up in public health crisis and now you have to go begging to private health Sector. Now private health sector, is so used to calling their own shots, they are mostly unregulated that they cannot understand why anybody is telling them what they should be doing, what they should be charging, it is simply not a system

that has been made to work for India people, the Indian private health system is made to work for those who can pay, it is not used to responding to a national interest beyond just making their money, so, if India wanted to they could have said, everybody will offer the test free, public system, private system but for the private sector, we will reimburse them the actual costs. Whatever the costs are, it shouldn't be a huge amount of money but you can at least cover the core costs of running the test, so it is not a for profit test, it's an act cause test. So, if that proposal is made, at least some private players would have stepped up in a crisis. They have said OK, we don't mind if we don't make money but we cannot lose money. Some sensible way could have been taken care of, so the government should still have paid for everybody's test but at least the cost incurred by private labs would have been reimbursed to them which would have been a sensible move right from get go. Now it has become all muddled and political and makes this whole thing more difficult, but it also goes to the fundamental issue that you cannot wake up and regulate private sector in middle of a pandemic, you already need to have clarity of thought, that this is India as a whole and all 1.3 billion people needs healthcare, you need affordable healthcare. For some it will be paid and delivered by the public healthcare, for others it will be delivered by the private sector but it will be effectively regulated by the government. Regulation of the private health sector is fundamental otherwise you will end up with, pandemics gauging, you will end up with an exploitative healthcare system, you end up with a private healthcare system that is completely unaccountable to anyone and it's like the wild west. All sorts of people are practicing medicine. Unqualified people are practicing medicine. The same procedure can cost thousand rupees in one hospital, 25000 in another hospital, 2 lakhs in another hospital, that kind of crazy mad variations in prices, lack of transparency, I mean this is not the first time, India has faced all this and yet in the middle of the crises. I think India can use this crisis smartly and creatively to make sure the private health sector is accountable to the government. This is not the same as taking over the private sector. It is making the private sector deliver on common good which is healthcare for all in India. Countries have to think about all their residents citizens, not just those who come to the public sector. You have to think about the millions who go into the private sector and protect their interest. That is a job, setting norms, setting tariffs, setting guidelines is the job of the government and making all sectors accountable is also the government's job. It's on one hand India must increase its health expenditure, post pandemic if India continues to underinvest this 1.5% rubbish, nothing will ever change because next pandemic will be worse, these are the hopeful lessons that the world will learn that you cannot deal with a pandemic without universal health coverage as a lynchpin, a robust health system is required to having a pandemic preparedness. Right it's a requisite for a pandemic preparedness. Let's go back to the other issue that you just said what is likely to happen to International Aid dependence. So, India's is no longer a low income country, India still accepts aid loans from the World Bank and so on. But India is also a donor country, India has given money. But there are many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa I should say that are LIC and they are genuinely aid dependent. The big concern that I articulated in my blogpost is that you will have because of Covid, a deterioration of health status of like for example we just talked how deadly TB has become,

how cholera might come back, how measles might come back, how everything we have worked hard for is getting degraded as we speak. So, LMICs will be dealing with massive health problems in coming years because COVID. LMIC economies are also getting smashed. We are already talking about a substantial contraction of Indian Economy. Economists are predicting a growth of no more than 1 % - 1.5%. The Indian economy has shrunk and the whole world is in recession, so you have this deadly mix of LMIC going into recession, yet the need for money has gone up because you have bigger problems of TB and malaria and 50 other things to worry about. At the same time, HIC are dealing with trillions of dollars of economic losses, HIC are dealing with millions of unemployed people right now. Canada alone, more than a million people suddenly became unemployed overnight. US, 5 million plus people are asking for emergency unemployment benefits. Now, when HIC are faced with devastation of their own economies, how will they continue to give international aid to poorer countries? This is absolutely deadly on both sides. On one hand the need for aid has dramatically gone up in poorest countries but HIC abilities of willingness to give have dramatically shrunk. Can you imagine now Trump justifying to his voting base why he should send money to Sudan or to you know. I mean he says make america great again, see he is trying to kill WHO funding, the last thing he is gonna do is increase International aid, he will try to in fact kill International aid. Everyone is first concerned about what's devastating within our borders, before you start sending money overseas. Already some canadian people are tweeting that we should kill International aid and put that money into reviving canadian economy. In a crisis, everybody starts looking for themselves and this means huge drop potentially in development assistance or help and I fear many more countries will move from MIC to LIC or fail to rise from LIC to LMIC bracket. Economic growth in this devastation will empower many countries, and make them even more aid dependent which means HIC will be even more powerful, in the global health arena. Already they are dominating global health. But now since whatever resources are HIC's will be infinitely richer than LIC's. They will still control all the power . This further polarises global health in favour of HIC. The true ability of LMIC to come to the leadership is I think is dramatically weekend.

Host: The other aspect I think I really like to sort of talk about and really like to sort of talk about and sort of cling on to is the nature of government itself. For instance in India what we have seen, that for example the delhi incident, one that is there is a lot of communalising the incident itself that has happened but apart from that, there are now criminal cases being slapped against people who have been affected by the Covid-19 themselves and there is now like a stronger case being made to sort of use this for surveillance of the population and the public, do you think in some way there is an element of weaponizing the pandemic that is happening and do you think in coming days more resources will also be diverted towards the security aspects of global health because there is still a huge chunk of people that believed this was gone wrong. How do you react to this?

Guest: I mean it's also a massive concern that I highlighted in my blogpost. When this pandemic settles, every country will start investing in global health, as much as it protects their national interest. So, there is a risk, global health being a solidarity exercise that the

poorest countries are also our members and all countries need support and health is a human rights issue and therefore we all need to help each other. On that novel idea, global health can contract to its bare minimum which is we will invest in global health so long as our borders are secured. So, in that case we will only invest in you know a pandemic threat but we won't invest in maternal or child health because maternal and child health are not a pandemic issue right. So, this is securitization but it could take on an extreme form of securitization post pandemic. Everything is viewed through the narrow prism of security risks and then we already saw in this pandemic a gregarious violation of human rights and international health regulations. Country after Country has closed borders, banned travels, put in surveillance systems, lockdowns, everything that people have worked hard for have been smashed to pieces overnight. Stamping people hands, monitoring them on apps and i am blown away by the kind of human rights violations that have been happening and this erosion of social liberty and we know every leader makes use of a crisis to make them more powerful, this is exactly how facisism arose in Germany and so we know this is nothing like a crisis for global leaders to become intolerant, more authoritarian, i mean that is exactly the form of authoritarianism that we speak about. So, all of us who care about human rights will have our task cut out to push back against this to kind of descale this in the post pandemic world. Right now nobody is even able to do anything because of lockdowns or muzzling of india, there is relentless attack on media in many countries is also an example of this that you don't want any accountability in crisis. We are in a crisis leave us alone you know, we know what we are doing and if that means monitoring you, so be it, you are not allowed to ask a question. It's gonna be a phenomenal big challenge for human rights to kind of push the pendulum back towards the centre, that we all agree that we need to have some erosion of liberties to make the country safer or whatever. Just like all of us agreed that post 9/11, that airport security has to be much higher, we cannot do whatever we want, we agreed that it is an erosion of our liberties in some way but we all said fine, we will make airline transport safer and we will accept all these hits. Same thing will happen I think, we all have to accept some things or some checks on us. But how far the pendulum will swing toward this authoritarianism and big brother state is what I think where opportunity is.

Host: In a sense this is an opportunity to fix things that were broken but then it also feels like things have been that badly broken that it is not the time to fix it and we just look at how we survive this crazy virus which has brought the world down to its knees. So you personally and professionally, where do you think world is heading, say 2 months down the line when hopefully all this may be over or maybe not, how do you think things will be in the healthspace, do you think it will continue to gain same kind of headlines and primetime news slots that it is finally getting and do you think things will just fall back into some sort of normalcy.

Guest: You know there are days when i am optimistic, there are days when i am very pessimistic, i think that's our life in this crisis. The optimistic me hopes that humanity as a whole will come out of the pandemic stronger than we will choose to go with global

solidarity as opposed to isolationism. In thought, as I already said that if we are disunited it will be going to make next pandemic even more harder to deal with because we are already distrusting each other right now. For example- these days very few countries seem to have trust in China or what China says but China is a very important country in global scheme. So, how will this unity help us when the next crisis comes and crises like planetary health and climate crises? Disunity will simply not cut it because we will not be able to survive that big crisis if we don't unite as planet Earth. I am also hoping that the countries would have learnt a great lesson from this pandemic that we must invest in health. I mean health is genuinely wealth and we cannot simply talk about economic growth and not invest in people's health. I think this is a phenomenal lesson especially for the United States and India, both countries have failed in investing in health and both countries have to take a step up and make universal health coverage a reality and we also need to understand that global health cannot be fighting pandemic one after another, we need to have a decent health system that prepares us for all future crisis. We cannot go from one crisis to another. I also hope that rich countries will not give up on foreign aid and development assistance. This will impede so many poor countries that are simply not ready to take devastation that is coming their way. And I also hope that everyone will understand the need for a social safety net. If you have people who don't have sick leave, they don't have paid leave, they are living on hourly wages with no profits, then they simply cannot endure a lockdown or a quarantine or any of these crises. Also, for the good or the bad, we only have one WHO, and there is no real alternative in my opinion even if other agency is created, it will have to be called something like world health organisation. There is only one central coordinating body. So, we could kill it, then we would be left high and dry, so there will be no sensible or honest broker to guide us in a crisis. So, strengthening WHO, giving it the real world resources they need, empowering them to hold countries accountable, empowering them to you know enforce international health regulations which belongs to WHO. I hope there will be an outcome but, looking at what the US did to WHO, makes me skeptical whether that will happen or not. So, these are some of my hopes and I also hope that we will use this crisis to clear up this rubbish pharma model because if the pharma model will not serve a common good in the crises. We know that, we already knew that but it has just become so clearer that even today countries are not able to think out a common good ahead of corporate interest. So, some good can come out of it, I hope. As I said I am optimistic some days, I am very pessimistic some days but I want to really see the world survive this crisis. I hope my country India will survive this crisis. India can ill afford to take a big hit given the precarious nature of India's health but to not invest in health after this crisis will be such an opportunity lost for India.

Host: One more last question, I am also asking because you are an epi and because this is the most discussed and debated topic in India. Do you think India is testing enough?

Guest: Absolutely not.

Host: What would testing enough mean for a nation like India?

Guest: It is not a hard line in the sand right, the general trend that any country that has tested an adequate number of people has done better than countries that have not tested. Now what testing does, testing adequately means that if someone is negative you can get them back into the community to do other things, you don't have to be held up at home. Think of testing as a way of getting out of a lockdown. Lockdown only buys you time. Lockdown is not the real solution, it's a temporary solution to buy time and to buy time for the health system to become stronger, for beds to be created, for PPE's to be purchased, for medicines and other supplies to be done, for healthcare workers to be found. It is merely a way to make sure that we don't have an influx of thousands of people into our hospitals. but a lockdown comes at a tremendous cost, poorest people are most likely to die of hunger than coronavirus in a lockdown. So, lockdown only buys us time, testing, isolating only positive people and their contacts, targeted isolation rather than mass isolation. You want to move away from 1.3 billion people from lockdown to only those who need to be isolated temporarily and any of us can get covid, from british prime minister to candaian prime ministers wife, everyone can develop covid. Trump might have covid for all you know. There is no reason to stigmatize people with Covid. It's you, me, every single one of us is susceptible. I don't know, I might already have it, so what. People can't be stigmatizing something simple, think of a common cold, you stigmatize someone with a common cold, how rubbish is that. CoronaVirus is like a common cold virus except that it is dangerous and that nobody is immune. It is one of the different types of common cold like virus. So, there is no need of doing stuff like quarantining, punishing people and zero reason to think that some communities muslims, hindus, have nothing to do with anything. It has nothing to do with religion. It has something to do with how crowded the environment is. Whom you get exposed to, which bus you were on, which train you were on, that's got nothing to do with anything. So, you know we need to calm down and focus on what needs to be done and what is scientifically accurate and move away from this way of brutalizing and weaponizing a virus , we cannot do that.

Thank you for listening to this episode of The Suno India Show. To know as and when an episode is released, subscribe to our newsletter on sunoIndia.in. You can also follow us on any podcast app of your choice.