Bend it like Italy: On flattening the COVID-19 curve

Context

* Five months after WHO declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern and three-and-half months after it called the disease a pandemic, its spread does not seem to be slowing down globally.

Spike in the cases globally

* Instead, infections and the death toll continue to rise alarmingly. After a sharp increase in March, the fresh cases reported have steadily increased, breaching the 10 million mark on June 29; the death toll too touched a grim milestone of 0.5 million.

* June alone accounted for 60% of all cases reported so far. The second half of June has been particularly bad with over 1,50,000 cases reported almost daily.

* The highest reported on a single day since the outbreak in China; U.S. (2.7 million), Brazil (nearly 1.5 million) and India (0.6 million) have been driving the spike.

* On July 1, the U.S. witnessed the single largest spike of nearly 50,000 cases, which is more than the total number of cases reported by Singapore, South Korea and other countries.

Cases in India

* The acceleration of fresh cases began in the first week of May and increased sharply in June. While Maharashtra has the most cases, infections in Tamil Nadu and Delhi have been steadily increasing.

* With over 92,000 cases, Delhi has surpassed China (nearly 85,000) while Mumbai (just over 82,000) and Chennai (64,689) are close behind.

* Delhi increased the number done per day to close to 20,000 with a concomitant increase in cases to reach a peak of over 3,900 before falling by nearly 40% in the last few days.

* Though belated, Tamil Nadu began aggressively testing in hotspot areas in Chennai a fortnight ago.
* Moving from a smaller number of targeted tests to increased community testing about two weeks ago has led to the test positivity rate reducing from 35% to about 20% in certain areas in Chennai.

* A test positivity rate of about 20% is highly suggestive of community spread in these areas.

**Way ahead**

* Equally important is tracing and isolating contacts. Tamil Nadu, however, has the lowest case fatality rate of 1.3% compared with 4.4% in Maharashtra, 3.1% in Delhi, and 5.6% in Gujarat.

* It is important for every State to take a leaf out of Maharashtra’s book and test large numbers daily unmindful of the rise in fresh cases each day.

* Dithering on testing, tracing, isolating and treating will inevitably lead to uncontrolled spread and increased deaths, undermining efforts to contain the pandemic.

After all, China, Italy, and Spain have demonstrated that it is possible to bend the curve through a comprehensive approach that is centred around testing.