

## Disaster Capitalism in the Wake of COVID -19

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted and impacted people's lives profoundly all around the world. The United Nations has urged all governments to embrace a cooperative and human rights-based approach, when adapting measures to cure and curb the worldwide pandemic. A plethora of subsisting commentary presents the view that moments of crisis generally elongate a state of exception for capitalist corporations and businesses to grow and evolve widely. Particularly, the in-depth analysis of 'disaster capitalism' by Naomi Klein presents the view that any crisis situation is manipulated by the largest corporations and businesses to put in place a series of desired free-market policies that may otherwise have taken decades to take effect. This article primarily examines the ways in which the responses to the COVID-19 of the neo-liberal governments favor the capitalist corporations' agenda that were deferred or deprioritized in pre-pandemic times. Based on the primary and secondary sources, it has been found that neo-liberal governments have attempted to manipulate this current global health crisis to serve the way that automatically boosts higher profits for corporations and businesses. Therefore, this study concludes that the current global health pandemic has extended the agents of capitalism another perfect chance albeit at an immense human and environmental cost.*

**Keywords:** *Capitalism, Free-Market Policies, Disaster Capitalism, Corporations, COVID-19*

### Introduction

The COVID -19 outbreak, the worst global health crisis since the Second World War has infected more than 76 million and killed approximately 1.6 million even before a period of one year has elapsed. The efforts to find an effective and safe vaccine for the benefit of the global population are still underway. The cascading consequences of the pandemic felt widely have

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made irrevocable change in the way people live, interact and work. As the pandemic continues to affect all aspects of human life in some way, democratic governments have been adopting various measures to soften the economic impact and to protect the wellbeing of people. Now, the expectation of many is pegged on the efficacies of governments' measures in response to the pandemic. The existing commentaries on 'disaster capitalism' by Naomi Klein present the view that disasters –natural or man-made provide a state of exception to spur economic and political reforms to serve the interests of capitalist corporations at immense human and environmental cost. Accordingly, in crisis situations neo-liberal governments prioritize the execution of the 'wish lists' of the agents of capitalism, so profound changes take place vigorously in the free-market policies of many countries. In fact, neo-liberal governments undertake every step to look after the best interests of corporations and businesses. In this context, the COVID – 19 pandemic merits serious scholarly attention to see how the current global health crisis offers such abiding opportunities to benefit the agents of capitalism.

Based on secondary sources, this article, aims to understand how the current pandemic situation yields a latent possibility for the largest corporations and businesses to put in place a series of desired reforms that may otherwise have taken decades to come into effect. The article presents the view that another perfect chance has been extended to the agents of capitalism to exert overwhelming pressure on governments to instigate unpopular free market demands such as deregulation, cutting social spending and privatization to affect the desired change. Evidence from countries including the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and India shows that while new opportunities for the big enterprise-technology companies have emerged in the wake of COVID -19, as usual, the largest corporations and businesses exploit the crisis to profit off from the pandemic.

The article is divided into three major descriptive and analytical sections: the first section briefly informs of the impacts and the responses of the government in combating the COVID – 19 crisis while the second section provides a brief on what is 'disaster capitalism' in the face of crisis. The

third section details how disaster capitalism is underway in the pendency of the current COVID -19 exigency with a brief section on how new openings have benefitted tech companies as people have started to interact and work virtually in the “new- normal” context. Lastly, while acknowledging the disadvantages of disaster capitalism, the conclusion offers some options and strategies to face the worst-case scenario and to bring an end to the concomitant issue.

### **Combatting COVID - 19: Responses and Impacts**

From the beginning of the origin of COVID - 19, rivalries between great powers began to visible in many global decision making forums. Notably, this became observable when a motion forwarded by the European Union and Australia became a resolution passed by 110 nations at the World Health Organization (WHO). This resolution was adopted to establish an independent review on the origins and the global response to the coronavirus. In a statement to the World Health Assembly of the WHO, Greg Hunt, Minister of Health, Australia stated on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2020, that “we are pleased to have support for an impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation of the global response” (Ministry of Department of Health, 2020). Many western countries pressurized the WHO to conduct the inquiry on the origin of the virus. Notably, the USA on several occasions has accused China directly and Donald Trump went as far as to call the Corona virus as Wuhan virus or China virus. Yet, China rejected the USA’s accusations vehemently and expressed its objections contending that the global community should first concentrate on the prevention of the pandemic, not the origin of the virus. In a media conference, China’s foreign ministry official highlighted that an investigation into the origins of the virus at this stage appears “premature”. While many Western countries aspire to expedite the global inquiry, the allies of China say no to such scientific research in the near future.

Under these circumstances, Harari (2020) explains in *Financial Times* that currently no one is available to undertake the leadership to fight against this global crisis. During the previous global crisis events including the 2014 Ebola pandemic, the USA remained a global leader to strengthen the global

health and economic recovery (Harari, 2020; Haas, 2020). Yet, for the current global health crisis, the Trump administration has not shown any interests in being part of the global combat against the Novel Coronavirus. The USA's indifference towards its permanent allies became evident when the President, Donald Trump banned all travel from the EU without prior notice. On top of this, by 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020, Donald Trump formally informed of the withdrawal of the USA from the WHO with effect from 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021. The USA's withdrawal would have an impact on the global response in the fight against the corona virus as it has been the number one donor for many years. Conversely, China intends to manipulate this pandemic to gain strength in world affairs. As a step toward this target, China extends financial and medical assistance to many countries which have been experiencing economic shutdowns. According to the Customs of China, between 1<sup>st</sup> March to April 2020, China exported medical supplies such as face masks, protective suits, thermometers, ventilators, test kits and protective glasses worth a total of 1.4 billion U.S. dollars. The government of Sri Lanka has also signed an agreement of US \$ 500 million with China (with concessional terms) to better fight against the corona virus. This is something that may promote China to a soft power in the global political arena.

While endeavoring to reinforce its soft power through extending financial and medical assistance to many countries of Asia, Africa Latin America and Europe, China pays close attention to the integration of Taiwan with its main territories. Yet, Taiwan repudiates such integration and aims to urge other nations to get international recognition in order to secure a greater visibility in the international arena. In response to this situation, China has put all its energy to resist the entry of Taiwan to the WHO or any other global forums. As Taiwan has fared well in its fight against the pandemic, a strong impetus from other WHO memberships emerged, to consider Taiwan in the global decision-making process with regard to handling the global health crisis. On 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the US Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee sent a letter to nearly 60 countries with the message of how China undermined the contribution of Taiwan towards the global response efforts. Not only the USA, but many countries in Europe directly extended their support to Taiwan's demand to attend WHO meetings. Although the above

circumstances show the unchanged balance of power between China and the USA, the current resentful US-China relations would lead to unwanted tensions counteracting the process of global response to the fight against the virus.

Besides this, since early March 2020, many countries including the major economies of the world had begun to de-globalize the supply of goods including medicines. According to the World Trade Organization in April 2020, “eighty countries and customs territories have banned or limited the export of face masks, protective gear, gloves and other goods to mitigate shortages” (Shalal, 2020). However, by October 2020, many countries, not all, have terminated the ban they imposed on medical goods. A few countries, such as Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Cyprus, Ecuador and Indonesia have still prohibited the export of medical supply products, sanitizers and raw material for masks to other countries. Under Regulation 13GI of the *Customs (Prohibited Exports) Regulations*, Australia prohibits disposable face masks, gloves, gowns, goggles, glasses or eye visors, alcohol wipes and hand sanitizer being exported. Despite the fact that every country is in need of taking care of their own territory, the countries which are import-reliant for medical products would definitely be distressed by this supply shock.

Along with the supply shock, the bans on exporting medical supplies have accelerated the tension between countries which will not help to mount the global response to curb the spread of the pandemic. For example, when India, one of the world's largest manufacturers of hydroxy-chloroquine announced the export ban of the aforesaid medicine by 25 March 2020, the USA reacted negatively. The insufficient stock and delay of getting ingredients for hydroxy-chloroquine from China were the reasons for the government of India to impose this ban. Yet, President Donald Trump after speaking to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with regard to the export ban, held a press briefing at the White House and stated that “If he doesn’t allow it to come out, that would be okay, but of course there may be retaliation” (Awasthi, 2020). The pressure from Washington made the Indian government rescind the temporary export ban on Hydroxy-chloroquine. This highlights another trend that this nature of diplomatic spat would generate

conditions for new rivalries and disputes between countries and prepare the governments to react negatively towards combating a pandemic that demands a great degree of cooperation between countries.

At national level, the adverse impact of COVID - 19 on segments of people in many countries including developed nations has been recorded to a greater extent. Women, minorities, people with disabilities (PWDs), refugees, migrants and the aged population are a few groups which bear the brunt of the impact of COVID - 19. Among them, women have felt the adverse impact in their lives. Particularly women who work in the informal sector have become victims as the state of emergency and lockdown regulations have heightened domestic violence and have deteriorated the conditions of their survival. Further, inappropriate housing facilities have further adversely affected women, refugees and immigrants in many countries. David Miliband, the chief executive officer of the International Rescue Committee warns that one million Myanmar refugees living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh would face severe challenges if urgent action is not taken to control the spread of the virus in such dwellings. On top of that, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2020) also records that pandemics tend to have the most devastating impact on the lives, health and well-being of the minority communities across the world. According to PEW Research Centre's Survey of 14 advanced economies, "in every country surveyed, those who think their country has done a bad job of dealing with the coronavirus outbreak are more likely to say that their country is now more divided" (p. 9). Abuse, discrimination and lack of access to health, education, and employment are some of the major issues experienced by racial and ethnic minority groups globally.

Omar Suleiman (2020) shows evidence from India and Sri Lanka of how COVID - 19 has institutionalized Islamo-phobia. When COVID-19 began to infect many Sri Lankan citizens since March 2020, the compulsory cremation for coronavirus-death has become a serious concern for Muslims. The critics argue that the "government's decision to make cremation mandatory for all victims of COVID-19 is thus not a public health measure but a blatant act of institutionalized Islamo-phobia" (Suleiman, 2020). The

Guardian highlights that the hashtag campaigns such as “corona Jihad”, “Corona Terrorism” and “CoronaBombsTablighi” appear as the popular trend in the internet and social media networks in India (Ellis –Petersen and Rahman 2020). According to these accounts, Muslims are being treated as the transmitters of the Coronavirus in India and Sri Lanka. An Amnesty International Report based on twelve European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania Serbia, Slovakia, Spain and the UK) released in June 2020 highlight that “the implementation of the lockdown measures to combat the pandemic has laid bare existing structural inequalities and discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, race, migration and socio-economic status” (Amnesty International, 2020, pp.4-5). Accordingly, lockdown measures such as mandatory quarantines enforced by armed police who patrolled Roma neighborhoods targeted Bulgaria’s Roma community in Bulgaria. Thus, the aforesaid evidence show how the coronavirus pandemic has magnified the existing discriminatory policies on minorities. Although, there have been numerous studies to investigate the responses and impact of COVID - 19 at a national and global level, an in-depth analysis is required to understand how the responses to the COVID - 19 in the neo-liberal countries always seemed to be beneficial for the corporations and capitalist elite over the welfare of ordinary people.

The term ‘neo-liberalism’ refers to a set of free market economic policies that advocate deregulation, privatization and austerity on social spending. Many writers including academics and economic experts have insisted that the core of the neoliberal agenda has not authentically worked best for many countries especially developing nations. Chang (2007) explains that the free market policies promoted by governments and politicians with conditionalities attached to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have led to disastrous consequences on the national economy of many developing nations since 1980s. The existing commentary on the tactics of neo-liberalism presents the argument that where there is a crisis, an opportunity is created for the sake of substantial benefits for the corporations and businesses. This idea is well explained in the famous works of Naomi Klein illustrating how neo-liberal polices dominate the world during opportune moments of great crises such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks,

wars, economic crisis, state failures, and military *coups* in her book *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). A number of studies, which are particularly apposite, have explained how the moment of crisis generally elongates a state of exception to the capitalist corporations and businesses to grow and evolve widely (Klein, 2007; Loewenstein, 2020). Yet, this article focuses on how disaster capitalism takes place in the pendency of the current COVID-19 exigency benefiting the capitalist elite and businesses focusing a few countries around the world. Before understanding how disaster capitalism takes place in the crisis of COVID - 19 pandemic, the next section provides a detailed explanation of the term and the ways in which it operates disaster capitalism' during or after a great crisis.

### **Disaster Capitalism**

The main thesis of Klein's Pandemic Shock Doctrine is very straightforward. Most early studies as well as the current work of Klein highlight the fact that disasters, natural or man-made set out the governments, corporations and politicians to impose neo-liberal reforms that could be resisted or opposed by the normal rules of democratic procedures. According to Klein (2007), "the original disaster - the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane - puts the entire population into a state of collective shock" (p.17). This is the first shock, Klein called. Generally, disasters cause high rates of casualties and material loss leaving individuals and groups unable to function. As a result, countries may have a fewer options as they become wiped out in the aftermath of the crisis. This situation sets the stage for individuals and groups to become more desperate and fear about the future. It is very common that the capacities and coping strategies to respond to disasters are varied across groups, societies and countries. Then, governments, corporations and politicians exploit the fear and disorientation of the people through economic shock therapy which facilitate the implementation of liberalized economic and political reforms to reshape everything. Klein called this the second shock. Since people become more vulnerable, they will not think much about the consequences of new policies. The people are also less inclined to resist new policies and reforms. This allows the capitalist elite to exploit the window of opportunity and if it

appears not possible, Klein shows evidence of how militarized security forces (police and soldiers) and prison interrogators would be used to control the situation. Klein calls it the third shock (Klein, 2007, pp-25-26). According to Klein, the corporations and capitalist elite hold tight any crisis. Ordinary people do not know that the new reforms implemented aftermath the shocks would reshape everything. In the process of recovery, the capitalist elite and corporations are made rich in the process of keeping the ordinary people in the struggle. The deliberate interventions of corporations and governments in times of crisis, of course completely intensifies inequalities and exclusion while enriching the capitalist elite and businesses. Chang (2007) rightly notes that “Bad Samaritans’ take advantage of others who are in trouble. Many of today’s Bad Samaritans do not even realize that they are hurting the developing countries with their policies” (p. xxiii).

In the recent decades, we have plenty of experiences of how the shocks have been exclusively taken as opportunities by free market oriented countries. Sri Lanka is not exempted from this global phenomenon. The reconstruction activities of post-tsunami in Sri Lanka is an example of how damages to the sector of tourism and infrastructure were matters for the World Bank and other international financial institutions. In the *New York Times*, it was asked “how quickly - if ever - can the devastated resorts of Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Maldives return to business as usual? (Kalis and Brooke, 2005). In Sri Lanka, under the direction of Washington, a Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) was established. It was exclusively made up of the country’s most powerful business executives from banking and industry to work for every aspect of developments of tourism and infrastructure in Sri Lanka (Muggah, 2008). No members from the civil society or grassroot organizations were included. Environmental experts or scientists or even disaster reconstruction specialists were not taken into the TAFREN. TAFREN took its first step to shape the coastal buffer zone for the areas affected by the Tsunami and requested the Sri Lankan ministries and related agencies to comply with the World Bank and ADB standards in developing guidelines and principles on resettlement (Muggah, 2008). Within two months’ time, the government had legislated a ‘No-build zone’ as a public safety measure to prevent another tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka. After the

presidential election of 2005, the new president, Mahinda Rajapaksha changed the name of his predecessor's tsunami response body from the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) to Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA) and in February 2006 the RADA revised the 200 buffer zone implemented for the coastal belt decided upon by TAFREN. However, the 200 meter buffer zone rule was not applied and the revised rules for 'No-build zone' varied for western, southern, eastern and the northern coasts of Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the revised rules had strived to promote tourism and to attract investors in the sector. As a result, the hoteliers were able to move in to the safety buffer zone, but no ordinary people were allowed to do so.

Even before the Tsunami struck Sri Lanka, Klein (2007) notes that the U.S. government was on the track of gradually influencing the government of Sri Lanka to make it a high-end tourism destination. As a first step, the government of Sri Lanka introduced flexible labor laws to hire laborers to the resorts. It was nearly finalized under the assistance of the World Bank in early 2003 (Klein, 2007). To implement this plan, "millions of people would have to leave their traditional villages to free up the beaches for tourists and the land for resorts and highways" (Klein, 2007 p. 393). Yet, by December 2004, the tsunami made it happen. *New York Times* refers to the Thailand situation that the tsunami cleared the shoreline like a giant bulldozer and offered a great opportunity to the developers to move quickly to seize it (Mydans, 2005). This is very much relevant to Sri Lanka. According to Klein, the economic shock therapy after a crisis is not limited to countries living in extreme poverty. For example, Klein highlights that Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster that struck the United States of America in 2005 provided an opportunity for reformers to privatize the educational system in New Orleans, yet this was not possible for Louisiana school reformers who had tried this for many years (Klein, 2007). Klein highlights that disaster capitalism takes place where ever a crisis occurs in order to stimulate free-market policies for the benefit of corporations and business, yet, it then leads to the failure of the practices of democracy, equality and justice.

As noted earlier, these efforts of neoliberalism are not only unique to natural disasters. This is very much relevant to the current health crisis that offers excellent conditions for the neo-liberal agenda to be executed. Currently, everyone is concentrating how COVID - 19 pandemic will impact the lives of people, not anything else. Yet, this has become a great fortune for the capitalist elite and businesses to bring new or delayed economic reforms and policies. The next section explains how this global health crisis has yielded a momentary sense of possibility for the agents of capitalism to profit off from this pandemic.

### **Towards Disaster Capitalism in the Wake of Coronavirus**

The wide range of containment measures including tax relief, wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, delay of paying utility bills and rental bills, mortgage relief, temporary financial support to households and financial relief to businesses have been adopted by many governments to tackle and to improve the COVID - 19 economic crisis (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). A series of studies conducted by economic institutions, economists and experts have detailed the devastating effect of the COVID - 19 pandemic on the global economy (World Bank 2020; International Monetary Fund 2020; The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2020; Cutler & Summers, 2020; Chudik et al., 2020). All these studies have highlighted that the COVID -19 pandemic has engendered a concrete global economic meltdown and particularly, the U.S. Congressional Research Service (2020) indicates the reduced rate of global economic growth to -4.5 per cent to -6.0 per cent in 2020 with partial recovery rate of 2.5 per cent to 5.2 in 2021. The swift containment measures have plunged the global economy into a sharp downturn (World Bank, 2020; International Monetary Fund, 2020). It appears pellucid that the pandemic has crippled the economy of many nations across the world. The government of Canada projected its immense budget deficits of \$253.4 billion since World War II, as government sources revealed in July 2020. The Ministry of Trade and Industry of Singapore indicated that Singapore's economic growth would drop to 7 per cent that the country hadn't envisioned for proximately six decades. Every country including the USA, Canada and Singapore has

undergone a severe economic crisis in the face of the Corona-virus pandemic. This has subsequently pushed the governments with capitalist interests to adopt new macroeconomic and structural policies to shield the economies and the communities from the severe impacts of this global crisis. Reduction of social spending, tax deferrals, restructuring state-owned enterprises and deregulating the regulatory framework have taken place in many countries in the wake of COVID - 19. If it were normal times, the aforesaid free market demands would be resisted by labour unions, voluntary organizations, human rights organizations, youth groups, women groups, environmental activists and other associations. Due to strict lockdown measures, the COVID - 19 prevented any public consultation, so it became a moment of opportunity for governments to enhance their free-market policies.

We have been witnessing massive financial deficits all over the world in recent months. Many governments have pushed the urgency of austerity again. In fact, governments have commenced to justify the adoption of inadequate and irrational investment on social spending in their budgets for the year of 2021. This can be seen clearly in the budget of 2021 of the Trump administration in the United States of America where welfare funds including Social Security, Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) have met a severe cut. In addition, there is a \$9.5 billion cut to the Department of Health and Human Services for the year of 2021 and a \$1.6 trillion cut over 10 years from mandatory health care spending. The federal budget cut of the health sector in America would make all the problems worse. In times of great public health crisis, more resources should be invested to secure the better health of Americans rather than cutting the federal funds of the health sector. When considering the education sector, the Governors across America have announced huge amounts of budget cuts to K-12 education spending. Yet, reopening public schools or continuing education through digitally connected networks during the pandemic would be expensive. In Canada, the education ministry of the government of Alberta also converted \$ 120 million of the funds to the province's

coronavirus response tasks in March 2020. In short, all these budget cuts would end up with jeopardizing the health, education, and wellbeing of millions of ordinary people living in those countries.

Furthermore, in the wake of COVID- 19, there is enough evidence globally to show how governments deregulate the inefficient regulations on the requests of the larger corporations to save their million-dollar businesses. Policy interventions have been made by governments to preserve big corporations and industries. For instance, the suspension of environmental regulations (green tape) has come into force in many countries. Yet, the deregulation of environmental laws would definitely accelerate climate change and environmental degradation in future with a great danger to the human communities. Critics have stressed the need for the strong protection of the environment while requesting the governments not to approve any projects that tend to harm natural resources and communities. However, governments including the United States of America, Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, India and a few other countries have altered the strong enforcement of environmental laws in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

In America, the Trump administration had accelerated the deregulation of environmental laws to ease the requirements of the energy companies, construction firms, and land developers. On 26 March 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced the temporary policy of the enforcement of environmental legal obligations relating to its compliance during the COVID - 19 pandemic. The temporary policy released by the EPA stated that it does not anticipate any penalties for violations of routine compliance monitoring, integrity testing, sampling, laboratory analysis, training, and reporting or certification of obligations in situations where the COVID-19 was the cause of the noncompliance. This allowed industrial facilities such as coal plants, oil refineries, and factory farms to decide whether they should comply with environmental laws or not (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2020). Also, the EPA's order stopped monitoring and recording of emissions of industrial facilities. In fact, this temporary policy of the EPA arrived only after 6 days of the request made by the American

Petroleum Institute on 20 March 2020 to the White House to consider temporary relief through enforcement discretion. The temporary policy was terminated with effect from 31st August 2020, still the impact of that policy appears great as hundreds of oil and gas companies were exempt from more than 3000 cases (Knickmeyer et al., 2020). Also, the industrial facilities sought exemption for serious issues considered violations under normal times. The relaxed laws have expedited the fossil-fuel companies to proceed with their projects that were previously halted by indigenous activists and environmentalists. The above account demonstrates the fact that the temporary policy of enforcement discretion has allowed industries to pollute the environment. The companies were allowed to work without fear as they could claim that the violations happened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Milman and Holden, 2020).

Another example for deregulation under the Trump administration are the changes made by the Department of Transportation to the standards of Safer Affordable Fuel Efficient (SAFE) Vehicles Rule to decrease the fuel efficiency of vehicles to be sold in America. These rules have reduced the emission standards for vehicles with effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020. Under the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) vehicle rule of the former President Barack Obama, automakers had agreed to produce fuel-efficient vehicles of 54.5 mpg by 2025. Yet, the new rules of the Trump administration brought down 54.5 mpg to 40 mpg by 2026. The recent changes to CAFE standards would permit automakers to manufacture cheaper cars that would enable 3,300 people to buy newer vehicles replacing their old models (Beitsch, 2020). On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, Elaine Chao (2020), The secretary of Transportation stated “our estimates show that these changes will save consumers more than \$1,000 per vehicle in the price tag alone. This means millions of new vehicles will be sold and this will be good for the economy as well” (US Department of Transportation, 2020). However, critics argue that the new rules would force consumers (drivers) to spend more dollars for pumping gas that would only favor the oil companies (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2020).

In addition, during the COVID - 19 pandemic, many US states including Kentucky, South Dakota and West Virginia passed new laws criminalizing the protests against fossil fuel infrastructure. Under the new rules, individuals, groups or organizations harming or destroying any property belonging to oil, gas or petrochemical pipelines or tanks will be subject to criminal and civil penalties. Critics state that politicians are more enthusiastic about protecting the interests of the fossil fuel industry than ordinary people or blacks. In fact, the COVID - 19 pandemic has removed the regulatory burden and enabled a huge victory for the capitalist elite and businesses.

In Canada, some provincial governments have also deregulated inefficient regulations, laws and policies related to the environment. The Alberta Provincial government in particular has exploited the COVID - 19 crisis to deregulate some legislations including Oil & Gas Conservation Act, Pipelines Act, Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, Water Act, Public Lands Act and the Technology Innovation and Emissions Regulations (TIER) to support the energy sector (Alexander and Stanley, 2020). Even, the Alberta Energy Regulator has suspended at least 19 environmental monitoring requirements for the oil and sand projects in Alberta (Riley 2020). Particularly, the requirements for volatile organic compound monitoring , fugitive emissions leak detection and bird monitoring at tailings ponds were indefinitely suspended (Riley, 2020). Critics argue that it is the 'Wish list' of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), because, the suspension of environmental monitoring requirements was given upon the requests made by CAPP to the Cabinet (Riley, 2020). A similar situation has been found in Brazil where between March and May 2020, the government of Jair Bolsonaro enacted around 195 infra-legal acts to nullify Brazil's environmental laws while this was just 16 in the same period in 2019 (Gonzales, 2020).

Furthermore, countries like South Africa and India have permitted energy and other industrial sectors to operate with new regulations during pandemic times. Upon the miners' lobbying the government of South Africa, the Disaster Management Act regulations were amended to allow the mining

companies to ramp the operation at up to 50 per cent of its production capacity during the lockdown period (Heiberg, 2020; Mine Technology, 2020). As the amendments have dismantled the usual environmental regulatory processes, the Mineral Council South Africa, a mining industry employer body appreciated the government's move. In India, the government under the cover of the pandemic has brought a set of policies "that is not just centralizing power, but is suppressing dissent, and is enabling it to do a range of things which would not normally be allowed" (Ghosh, 2020). The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), drafted on 23rd March 2020 by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change removes judicial control and attempts to exempt several types of projects from public consultation. Further, some Indian states including Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh have suspended some labour laws and have introduced new ordinance and notifications to free the companies from compliance with labour laws (Harshvardhan 2020; Obhan and Bhalla 2020). For example, Uttar Pradesh has exempted the compliance for a majority of labour laws for a period of three (3) years, while other States have issued notifications to grant certain exemptions under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 and the Factories Act, 1948 (Obhan and Bhalla 2020). In the cover of this pandemic, some factories have extended the working time from 8- 12 hours to boost the production of essential goods and services.

In addition, in the midst of this grave global health crisis, the countries driving with capitalist interests began to privatize the public sector to boost the economy and create more jobs. This can be clearly seen in India where structural reforms have taken place in the sectors of coal, minerals, aviation, power and space. Modi's government announced in July 2020 that 109 pairs of routes out of 151 across India will be operated by the private sector with effect from April 2023. In fact, for the first time, private entities have been invited to operate railways across India, yet this major decision of the government was not taken after consultation with its own workforce or Parliament (Srikumar, 2020). Minister of Railways, Piyush Goyal stated that the Indian Railways will not be privatized, yet the government attempts to introduce better services to the people through private sector. If railways

become privatized, the driver and guard of the existing Indian Railways would be kept while other employees would be recruited by the operating private company. Again, the fare for the passage would be decided by the private railway companies. As critics pointed out correctly, the government of India now wants to have world class trains, yet, even before independence acquisition of land, laying tracks, building the infrastructure, training manpower and arranging for signaling systems and safety measures were funded by the poor tax payers (Prabal and Raju, 2020). Also, by amending the Electricity Act, 2003, the proposal has been made to include the private entities into the power (electricity) distribution of the Union Territories. Union Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman stated that this move would bring better services to the consumers and would improve operational and financial efficiency and attract foreign investment into the power distribution of the Union Territories (Jai, 2020). The Airports Authority of India has also auctioned three airports to private entities in May 2020 as part of stimulating the country's economy hit by the COVID - 19 pandemic. Further, the government of India has allowed private investors to bid for 41 coal mines located in Madhya Pradesh (11), Chhattisgarh (9), Jharkhand (9), Odisha (9) and Maharashtra (3) with no end-use restrictions (Financial Express, 2020). Again, the government has eased restrictions on the utilization of air space by allowing private entities to use the Indian Space Research Organization facilities and other resources to encourage their participation. To boost private participation in space activities, geospatial data has been made available to private companies and startups. In short, the infrastructure of many services exclusively built by the tax payers' money in India is to be owned by the privately own companies in the near future.

Some more countries like the USA endeavor to give a new start to companies which were facing the worst crisis for years. For example, the Boeing 737 Max that killed more than 500 passengers and crew members in two fatal crashes in Indonesia (2018) and Ethiopia (2019), was able to obtain clearance from the Federal Aviation Administration on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020. After 20 months out of service, Boeing 737 Max, one of the federal government's biggest contractors expects to operate again from 2021 with a global work force of about 130,000 (Chokshi, 2020). Furthermore, some US

states have proposed to spend millions of dollars to clean the unused and abandoned wells of oil and gas companies. For example, North Dakota has proposed to spend \$ 66 million dollars from the Federal Coronavirus Aid for the aforesaid activity in order to create jobs and support the energy sector. On 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020, the Federal Government of Canada has also released 1.72 billion to Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the Alberta Orphan Well Association to clean-up the orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells. In the form of repayable loan, the state government of Alberta received a \$ 100 million loan for decommissioning 800-1000 abandoned wells while \$ 400 million for Saskatchewan, \$ 120 million for British Columbia and \$ 200 million for Alberta Orphan Well Association.

Further, many governments are underway to bailout big firms through adopting various strategies including the provision of stimuli package and tax deferral to avoid layoffs until businesses return to normalcy. The Trump administration created a \$700 billion dollar stimulus plan funded by taxpayers. The largest companies including airlines, hotels, cruise lines, coal-mining companies are in the queue to obtain the aid package. Further, companies have been provided with a short payroll tax deferral allowing them to pay it in the early part of 2021. Yet, delaying the Payroll tax would hurt the Social Security Trust Fund (Hanlon and Weller, 2020). Furthermore, the billion worth emergency funds have been given to big companies. Only 5 per cent of the small firms were able to get the emergency funds (Small Business Chamber of Commerce, 2020). In fact, about 600 larger companies that have ties with the Trump administration have received the small business' emergency funds, so critics argue that wealthy organizations have benefited at the expense of truly small firms (Ponciano, 2020). Further, governments elsewhere endeavor to transfer public money directly to private companies through the awarding of state contracts. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Department of Health and Social Care has awarded a £133m contract to produce testing kits to Randox Laboratories (private company) in which the Conservative politician, Hon. Owen Paterson serves as a paid consultant (Duffy, 2020). The commissioning rules were not followed. There were no advertising requirements that would enable other firms to bid for the work were

followed. By May 2020 out of 177 state contracts, approximately 115 projects worth of £ 1 billion were awarded to private companies under the fast track rules bypassing competitive tenders in the UK (Evans et al., 2020). These are just a few examples from around the world. These examples show how corporate lobbyists orchestrate this crisis to remove restrictions that were in operation during normal times. In the cover of the pandemic, politicians deploy many structural reforms to make this happen. Therefore, this global health crisis has given a promising chance to implement what corporations and capitalist elite desired prior to the crisis.

### **New Beginning for Giant Tech Companies**

Before the COVID - 19 pandemic, the larger tech companies set up the digital world through various technological innovations. Yet, these tech companies lacked the required input from governments and citizens to expedite the process globally. Thomas Friedman (2005) stated that technology has leveled the world making all countries partners and neighbors. Yet, he has mentioned that the process of flattening was in its infant stage. In the recent interview to *India Today*, Thomas Friedman stated that technology is getting better, stronger and cheaper, in the wake of the COVID - 19 pandemic, so his new book would be “The world is flatter than ever”. His accounts demonstrate the fact that people were already up to date with technologies, but COVID - 19 has forced them to rely more on the technologies to meet their everyday needs. Many tech companies such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google have jumped at the opportunity as many have approached them for developing Apps and software to work and study in remote settings. Notably, the use of prevailing technologies for employees to work remotely has been increased. In the United States of America, colleges have signed contracts with online proctor companies to invigilate the students’ exams through webcams and this has led to a new wave of student surveillance (Harwell, 2020). Even, tech companies have been pressured to establish software and programme to operate organizations in remote settings. While this has commenced, governments have also approached tech companies to develop Apps to track and monitor infected people. For example, the Australian government has contracted with Amazon to set up a new tracing app to trace and provide up-to-date

information on the Coronavirus spread in Australia. In Britain, in mid March 2020, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson invited nearly 30 UK-based tech businesses including Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple and Facebook to provide solutions to reduce the escalation of economic destruction due to the pandemic. Even, authoritarian governments have quickly set up new surveillance tools to control the spread of the pandemic. For example, the Chinese government used the Alibaba Group and Tencent Holdings to generate color-based systems to identify infected people and to record health information of individuals. The government of India has also deployed Aarogya Setu App to detect infected persons, yet this App cannot be effectively deleted once it is installed in the phone. The government of Israel has authorized Shin Bet, the internal security service to track infected persons and people by using cyber-monitoring technology typically used to locate terrorists (Givetash and Goldman, 2020). Most importantly, the Canadian government has also contracted with Amazon to deliver medical equipment. Although, many concerns have been raised over the way that the giant tech companies are dealing with the COVID - 19 pandemic, this health crisis has offered an opportunity for tech companies to benefit immensely at the expense of people's freedom and privacy.

## **Conclusion**

In today's contexts, the COVID -19 pandemic appears to be a crippling conundrum, which has made people believe that all human beings (as victims) are in one boat. This might be true to some extent. Yet, everybody knows that the impact of any crisis greatly varies among individuals, groups and communities across countries. Individuals experiencing economic strains and social economic vulnerabilities have become victims of this very grave global health crisis while the world, it appears, is preparing to ensure the survival of the fittest. In such disagreeable circumstances, many will probably inquire how it has come about that ordinary people have become the victims of such a crisis whereas the fittest have not? This article recognizes that capitalist corporations and business elite never allow a crisis pass without reaping profit. To a very great extent, disaster capitalists manipulate any crisis in a shrewd manner to execute their wish list to achieve manifold benefits. In order to do that, capitalist corporations and businesses

pressurize neo-liberal governments to undertake massive policy changes to deal with the pandemic-stricken world. In the current health crisis situation, governments' responses to economic recovery have systematically enriched the corporate elite and businesses across the world. Sufficient evidence from countries like the USA, Canada and India reflects the presence of the purest form of disaster capitalism with its essential features in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition, unlike in other crisis situations, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new opportunities for the larger tech corporations and companies as the people need technology to work and interact virtually in the wake of the pandemic. Hence, giant tech companies have found it an excellent opportunity to intervene officially and profit immensely. Yet, this shift has created troublesome issues for ordinary people which need to be dealt with carefully. In the past, after a crisis, governments concentrated more on infrastructure and development activities to bring about normalcy. Are these moves adequate to take care of the ordinary people affected by layoffs, poor health and welfare facilities they have encountered during this global health shock? Surely, it won't bring a great change. Therefore, government intervention is necessary to shield vulnerable households affected by this great shock. In fact, the government should play a better role by expanding its intervention in the public health and social welfare systems. Such intervention might ensure the future glory of Capitalism.

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