

Lockdown, Containing COVID 19 and Dealing with Interstate Migrants

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People in India have by and large welcomed the lockdown for 21 days, given the gravity of the situation and the daily tolls being reported in different countries that have much higher level of economic wellbeing. The implications of the lockdown at community level, however, are not always clear. Does this mean everyone remains captive, not stepping out of the premises even for purchase of medicine, food and other essential items, household emergency or constitutional walk? If so, has a system of doorstep delivery and safety in transaction at the door been operationalised? Alternately, if the lockdown permits people to be out of the house or the colony within the city for genuine purposes, how its misuse will be detected and penalized? In case permission for travel beyond the city or state limits has to be allowed in exceptional cases, its modus operandi needs to be institutionalized. Twenty-one days is a long period for over 300 million plus households for assuming no grave exigency requiring them to step out. Relaxations, however, would open up the possibility of vested interest playing foul in our hierarchical society,

It is important to stipulate maintenance of the thin line between precaution and panic but difficult to observe in practice. One is noticing the line being broken and the distinction getting blurred in the policy pronouncements, administrative orders, and ground level management in dealing with COVID 19, affecting production and movement of essential commodities and services and of people. The most important requirement for this is availability of information and transparency of the management system, which unfortunately is a casualty.

Panic reactions like the ones during several earlier challenges like demonetization, etc brought serious problems but different groups with complimentary interests mutually cooperated, exchanged goods based on trust, relationship, etc. and saved the vulnerable from extreme misery. This is unlikely to happen in the present crisis. The state can't take care of the issues linked with lockdown single handedly without community help. Even helping nine poor families every day during Navaratra, as proposed, would mean exposing the households



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to unsafe interactions, unless it is institutionalized. The implications of all these must be worked out and addressed. Unless the logistic issues are sorted out immediately and communicated to the lowest level of administration and common people, there will be serious management issues, besides protest and intra group violence at the community level.

Involving the community or civil society in big way would be a challenge since this may compromise the safety concerns. Also, this results in ignoring the concerns of the people who have special needs or are trapped in an exigency like daily wage workers, those taking care sick/disabled and those separated accidentally from family.

For certain specific problems government, private sector and civil society partnership can be effective and in fact bring down the security risks. A major problem of movement in the period of lockdown is that of about 65 million interstate migrants, 33 percent of them being workers. By conservative estimates, 30 percent of them are casual workers and another 30 percent work on regular basis but in informal sector. This would mean about 12 million people, who are at the risk of losing employment, are residing in states other than that of their origin. The street vendors amounting to about 8 million can also be placed in this vulnerable category. Many among them have lost the means of their subsistence and started leaving their place of residence and have been stranded at different cities. The government which is rightly bringing back the Indians in Corona affected countries could have easily provided safe

transportation to the migrants who desperately wanted to go back to their homes, rather than allowing them to travel in jam packed vehicles or to fend for themselves.

The state governments must work with the private corporate sector and non-governmental organizations including those of the workers, to ensure that there is no massive loss of employment. Some Central funds could be used like the recent permission given to use to use State Disaster Response Fund of Rs 29,000 crore¹ along with that of private companies for this purpose while civil society organizations can be engaged in provisioning of travel, food, stay and medical checkup for the period required, under the safety supervision of state authorities. Attempts must be made to ensure that large majority of these people remain at their present place and are taken care of. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar account for 25 percent and 14 percent of the total interstate migrants, followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, recording figures over 5 per cent each. It would be very difficult to control the pandemic when they return home after all their travails enroute. They will be just another unemployed in the household. Taking care of them at their current locations would be a major step in ensuring that the COVID 19 does not make inroads into the interiors of the backward regions of the county.

¹ States can use Rs 29,000 crore SDRF fund...TOI, March 28 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/home-ministry-asks-states-to-set-up-relief-camps-for-migrant-workers-use-sdrf-funds/articleshow/74862858.cms>

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