



The Socio-Political Implications of Covid-19 Lockdown in India

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic is a multifaceted issue. Numerous methods for the diagnosis of SARS-nCoV-2 are discussed. Effective intervention and management strategies are proposed. Yet the issues related to the Covid-19 lockdown remain relatively undocumented. Hailing from India, we observe that the lockdown equally poses its own threat. Hence this paper ventures a detour from the technical aspects of this trend and traces the challenges implied by the lockdown onto the general public. It also suggests certain culturo-political interventions at an ethical standpoint.

Keywords

Covid-19 Lockdown, Indian economics, Informal workers, Surveillance, Misinformation, Migrants and Refugees.

INTRODUCTION:

The Indian government had extended the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown up to 31th-July-2020. It is also probable that the lockdown could be extended for even longer periods. India must consider the present Covid-19 pandemic with great caution, as this avalanche carries within it, a volatile undercurrent of hatred, anguish and fear [1-4]. One of the challenges in this respect is India's political and cultural diversity. We have concerns of religious

conservatism, state autonomy and other culturo-political polarizations across all the four borders, which could make us vulnerable to any sensitive issues. But, unlike China, the problems over political sovereignty, geographical vastness and severe border disputes are comparably trivial with India. This is the achievement of India all through its decades of democracy post-independence. Nevertheless, the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis took their toll upon various issues.

IMPACT UPON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE:

The Indian economy was severely undermined by this present pandemic. The recent shortage of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) from China [5] deserves a closer attention in this respect. The entire edifice of the Indian public health sector along with other state departments is to be consolidated to circumvent this dilemma. The limelight must focus upon the economic soft corners such as product outsourcing and their pitfalls, lest might they trickledown to other key public sectors.

But we must admit that there are various other issues at risk. The blockade of state borders, shutdown of industries, local factories and markets, and public schools could impact a detrimental blow to the public infrastructure. The restricted opening times for few retail shops would not make any considerable difference. But the government-subsidized liquor shops, interestingly, are allowed to function amidst this chaos.

While the IT-related professionals switched to 'Work from Home' mode, the conditions of workers from other sectors have become critically dismal. Farmers, small scale industries, self-employed workers, informal and daily-wage labours constitute more than half of the Indian population. The impacts of the nationwide curfew upon these communities and on the people dependent upon them are horrendous enough. But preventive measures such as Physical and Social Distancing could further exacerbate this dilemma undermining the public morale. These socioeconomic factors are highly implicit and, if ignored, could potentially subvert any intervention strategies.

Prior to the Covid-19 angst, the Indian government had subsidized schemes such as PM-SYM, and *Aam Admi Beema Yojana* for the welfare of workers from unorganized sectors. Necessary amendments of these schemes are compulsory with the current emergency. The small scale industries and the working class population must be given reasonable economic sanctions and substantial reimbursement for any financial losses they have sustained. In addition, organized efforts from every layers of the society are much needed at this very moment.

ON MIGRANT WORKERS AND REFUGEES:

Another problem unveiled by this pandemic is the issue on migrant workers and refugees. It is a common phenomenon in India that workers from states such as Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Manipur and Nagaland, would seek their livelihood in metro cities. However small may be the salary, the

employment they hold is their primary income, support and dignity, especially, when they have no viable economic solution. But following the Covid-19 threat, most of such jobs were cancelled. With the initiation of the lockdown and shutdown of the traffic, thousands of these workers were stranded in the streets having had nowhere to go. The conditions of the refugees from Nepal, Burma and Sri Lanka and other conflict-zones in this scenario could be much more challenging. Though similar situation was observed in other parts of the world [6-8], this particular problem in India must not be swept under the carpet. Temporary residential facilities could have been established with proper facilities. And earlier renewal of their working contracts must be ensured.

ON THE HEALTH OF THE PSYCHOLOGICALLY-CHALLENGED:

Roz Shafran *et al.*, [9] detailed the effect of Covid-19 upon the individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). But the conditions of the individuals with other psychological disorders during this lockdown deserve closer attention. Consecutive indoor isolation of individuals and patients with PTSD, Depression, and Anxiety disorders could escalate into acute stress episodes. Without any apparent outdoor activities, which are highly ameliorating in this case, their psychological conditions could aggravate into mania and even to suicide. Factors such as being homeless, poor and unemployed, being single or divorced and other personal problems could significantly compound to this predicament. The risk is manifold if the individuals or their relatives are diagnosed positive for Covid-19 not to mention the social stigma it brings along.

INTERNET AND MISINFORMATION:

Ahmed F *et al.*, [10] advocate online technologies for the dissemination of vital information during this current pandemic. Though we agree with this opinion, we do argue that without cyber hygiene guidelines, these efforts would not bear much fruit. The 'Six degree of separation' is a double edged sword. With smartphone in almost every hand, it is much easier for the public to succumb to Fake news and trolls. The marginal communities, who are already haunted by the socioeconomic challenges, could particularly fall prey to this façade.

The Director-General of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an Infodemic" [11]. And, we can't fight someone we don't see! Our cyberspace is saturated with click-baits, hate speech,

factory-made trolls and chatbots. The insidious flow of rumors circulating the public sphere could acutely aggravate any panic. Working closely with Google, Facebook, Twitter, Tencent, Pinterest and TikTok and other organizations such as UNICEF and International Federation of Red Cross, the WHO officials designed various online counter-measures, which could regulate this chaos at reasonable pace.

Unfortunately, all these online efforts did not prevent the onset of anti-muslim sentiment in India, which caused an abominable scandal and had subsided only with an acute international outcry. Anti-Chinese incidents also were observed at international levels [12].

THE RESILIENCE OF THE PHARMACEUTICAL AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRIES:

The Pharmaceutical industry had considerable opportunity to exploit the Covid-19 situation. Staggering amounts of Face masks, Gloves, Soaps and Sanitizers were quickly sold in a relatively shorter period of time. People stood in long queues, sometimes even unsuccessfully, to avail regular antibiotic, anti-diabetic and analgesic medications.

The entertainment industry had become relatively immune to any serious problems. In fact, it even tapped the power of broadband Internet. With virtually no mundane social interactions outside during this 'lock-up', the individuals and families had retreated to their television sets, laptops and cellphones. Television channels were broadcasting latest films and popular retro-series. Reality-shows exploiting online services such as Zoom and Skype were organized. The newly devised 'Covid-19 Porn' section in popular pornographic websites must be mentioned here. During this present crisis, if not always, the entertainment industry along with all news agencies had severely atomized the general public and had systematically suppressed any insightful counter-narrative on the issues related to the present pandemic.

THE THREAT OF SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMS:

The Snowden-Assange-Manning trilogy had demarcated a landmark in the domain of surveillance and cybersecurity. In India, at present, police forces are being deployed in every national highways and local neighborhoods to ensure social distancing. All the CCTV cameras were turned-on to enable complete surveillance. But the controversial attempt, in our opinion, is the engagement of surveillance drones [13] to ensure social distancing. Even the apps such as *Corona Kavach* and *Aarogya Setu*, which were designed by Indian officials to monitor social distancing in real-time, necessitate

patient medical records from smartphones embedded with GPS- tracking system. All these efforts are coming with a huge expense of individual privacy and freedom. It is unlikely that these technologies and strategies would be immediately dismantled following the demise of the current pandemic.

This present situation is reminiscent of the Los-Alamos period during the Second World War. The Physicists back then were stunned with the anti-fascist frenzy and begun working on the Manhattan Project. And they could not abandon this work even after the war ended officially. In fact, the situation got even worse with the conception of Neutron bomb and H-Bomb

Yet the Indian government is hardly to be blamed for these anomalies. The worldwide scene indicates that countries such as China, South Korea, Singapore and Israel suffer from similar dilemma [14]. We believe that digitization is a dead-end and would render the data vulnerable to intrusion at any moment. The recent data-breach on millions of Canadian medical records must be worth mentioning in this regard [15].

CONCLUSION:

If Corona virus cannot affect the common men *en masse*, the 'Coronaphobia' and the lockdowns would. In contrast to the unfathomable multitude of technical data on Covid-19 available in the public domain, we do not have any valid measure to assess the effect of the lockdowns upon the general public. We argue that this question must be addressed elaborately. We also emphasize that an honest democracy mandates the inalienable rights of the public to influence the state policy even during national emergencies. And these policies must be adaptable to any short- and long-term adverse consequences. The lassitude of the politically-uninformed and disengaged citizens must not be taken for granted in this regard. In addition, the political leaders and representatives must be ready to step forward to conceive and implement any necessary changes at humanitarian grounds.

At present, there is a concern over a possible second wave of Covid-19 ('Covid-20' or 'Covid-21') pandemic among the scientific community. Hence, contingent socioeconomic strategies must be devised, with the present confusion in mind. So the anguish and panic among the public over any future pandemic or national emergency situations could be mitigated.

On the hindsight, this is the moment of reckoning for India, to ensure the integrity of its nationwide health care system, economy, public welfare and other key areas. The officials must stay observant for any

possible threats both at technical and socio-economical levels. The lessons must be learned and the groundwork for, the hurdles which are not so distant, must begin immediately.

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None

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