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RETROSPECTION OF VULNERABILITY OF THE 270,000,000 INDIAN POOR DURING THE WORLD'S FIRST QUARANTINE EVER

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INTRODUCTION

Amidst this situation of crisis, where the pandemic COVID -19 has taken all over the world, Corona Virus now seems to have perpetrated in every corner of the globe. The world is now taken by a pause and in this panic-stricken situation, the most vulnerable are the disabled, the poor, and the needy.

The extent of adversity in developed nations, with great infrastructural facilities, has been realized with the rising death toll caused due to the pandemic. Now let's carefully examine the fact that this is the scenario of high-income countries, with lesser poverty and the rich and poor gap as compared to India.

Now, considering the World Bank Report¹ of 2016, the following statistics are drawn:-

- Every 1 out of 5 people in India is poor.
- Approximately a population of 270 million resides in India.
- 80% of the poor reside in rural areas.
- 7 low-income states shelter 62% of the poor.

The above stated were just a few facts related to the scenario of poverty in India. This somewhat gives us an idea of the gravity of the situation. The fact that this is the world's first-ever complete lockdown gives us an idea as to how tensed this situation today is. Now, that this is the case of poverty in India even in the best of the country's times. Let's now just consider how

¹<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2016/05/27/india-s-poverty-profile>

difficult it is to get when the entire globe will be facing, shutdowns, there will be a lack of product lack of access even to essentials including food, clothing, and shelter.

This situation of lockdown and its continuous extension in the Indian subcontinent to prevent the further spread of the pandemic has most adversely affected the unorganized labour class. It thus becomes important to address these issues of accessibility of essential commodities to the poor and the aid so provided to them to save their interests. In this article, we are, hereby going to deal with the moves of the respective state governments and the central government at large and as to how they plan to manage the current situation.

INDIA'S STAND ON CURBING THE EPIDEMIC

Talking about the world scenario currently, Coronavirus has taken the world by a toss, whether we talk about the world's superpowers like the United States or highly developed countries like Spain, Italy, France, Germany, or maybe the fast-developing nations like China and India. However, it cannot be denied that India despite not being a developed nation yet has taken measures to curb the virus that not even developed countries have been able to take. The Indian Government in consideration with World Health Organisations recommendations has adopted the aggressive strategy of complete lockdown in the nation. Only activities required for conducting all essential services will be performed with necessary precautions and with the lesser labor force. Not many countries, as of before the Indian Government, took to, the complete lockdown of the nation except a few European nations like Italy, Denmark, El Salvador, and few others. This has certainly led to a huge economic loss, however, it looks like India shall soon emerge as a world superpower after the termination of the pandemic. This is because the steps taken by the governments are impeccable and are discussed are follows.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES FOR AIDING THE POOR

The Indian government has been working hard to lessen the impact of the pandemic by providing necessary facilities to the poor. The primary focus for the government as of now is to ensure that there is enough supply of essential commodities and their easy access to all and particularly to

the vulnerable in the society. The foremost concern that we can observe in the making of policies by the Central government is ensuring provisions for temporary shelter homes and an adequate supply of food for the needy. Their area of concern also extends to the migrant labour class who has been left stranded in different parts of the nation due to the recent lockdown.

To lessen their sufferings during this lockdown, the Indian government is working both at the Central as well as State levels. It has assured the poor 5 kilograms of rice or wheat along with their preferred pulses each month, for 3 months per house under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Scheme, which covers under its ambit more than 80 crores poor of the nation. Moreover, a relief package of Rs.1.7 lakh crore was dedicated to the same. The scheme also includes under its purview payments made to different fractions of the society including widows, women running self-help groups, and in fact farmers who are covered under the MNREGA scheme too and several others who need consideration.

The Government has taken down to the streets, providing cooked food to the poor and the homeless, particularly. It has taken measures to provide proper medical insurance to the workers who are at a greater risk to be affected with the virus, of up to Rs.50 lakhs individually including ancillary and sanitary workmen along with nurses. The government assures women of more than 8.3 crores below poverty line families free gas connection for three months, under its Ujjwala scheme.



Moreover, the government has been lately working on its core which is to strengthen its Public Distribution System. Cheap grocery is being made available, fruits and vegetable vendors are now being tied up with to provide for its doorstep delivery. The same has been the case for medical facilities, especially for the poor. Free medical help is now being extensively offered by the government. It also aims to provide cheap and easy access to medicines to all.

VARIOUS STATE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

With the ever-increasing positive cases of corona infected people in India, a sense of fear is created amongst all citizens, thereby creating an alarming situation for all authoritative bodies, primarily being the respective state governments. To ensure the accessibility of essentials to all

and protecting the needy various efforts are being done at the state level, thereby complementing the union.

The Delhi government has taken a significant step for providing ration to the needy who don't own ration cards along with greater quantities of ration entitlements than normal. A pension of Rs.4000-5000 to beneficiaries shall also be paid for the purposes.

The Bihar government has also been talking about the implementation of Direct Cash Transfers for transferring finance to the ration cardholders and a month of free ration to them. Health workers will also be entitled to bonuses amounting to a month's pay.

The Kerala government has promised free cereals and subsidized cooked meals of the poor along with an allowance of delayed water and electricity bill payment.

The Uttar Pradesh government has also made provisions for a month of free grains allotted to the construction workers.

Maharashtra government has set up advisories consisting of members of the labour department to recommend businesses and shop owners to not lay off its employees during this period and such other parameters.

The Tamil Nadu government has also pledged the month of free ration for all ration card-holders.

The Karnataka government can be seen to be quite proactive in this case. It has not only assured free food and clean drinking water to those without shelter and who are in need of it, but also with terms spoken about waiving of loans of the poor in metropolitans and cities. Moreover, it has guaranteed advance wage payments to all rural employees.

The Andhra Pradesh government has ordered to all entities, whether owned by the government or by private entities, to pay wages and salaries to all their employees hired or employed in the nature of a contract or on outsourcing. This shall be the scenario at least till the lockdown

reopens. The violation of the command would render one liable under the Epidemics Diseases Act, 1897.

States like Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and a few others have also promise Rs.1000 support to the economically weaker sections.

These states have proved to set an example in the entire world for coming out of the situation and that it is the residents and their welfare that must come first for all governments. Above mentioned were just a few examples of aid so provided by the respective state governments. Other states too have been working hard on the same level to combat this situation.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The foremost implementation lack can be seen by the scope of the PDS (Public Distribution System). The PDS has low coverage amounting to only near about 50% and does not extend its ambit to the urban poor. As of now, just the Delhi government is offering rations to those who do not have ration cards. It can thus be suggested that the government takes respective steps to include in its preview the other needy who probably are not yet served by the PDS.

It must also be noticed that where the prices for essentials are expected to rise, the small amount so dedicated to pulses might prove to be a threat to the nutritious needs of the poor. Most states here face major challenges. Some states have, however, started providing for prepared food kits now.

Another area of concern is that the ration cards so provided under the PDS are not mobile and neither are they divisible. It thus does not allow the picking up of different quantities of commodities, in the permit, by other family members at different locations. This thereby defeats the entire object and purpose of the system in case seasonal immigrant workers. The government, in order to curb this situation, must take steps to implement its policy of One Nation- One Ration Card along with making provision of divisibility of portions.

Canteens and food stalls so set up by various state governments are bombarded with the public which is a greater risk to the health of the visitors there, as principles of social distancing are not followed at such places thereby increasing the chances of the outbreak.

India, as of now has been focusing on the quantity of food instead of quality. We as a nation lack adequate inventory and efficient transportation facilities. This could prove to be a threat to the effective implementation of the policies. Preservation and good quality food must thus be ensured by the PDS.

Another negative impact that could be seen shall be on the vulnerable itself. This is a result of basic economics, however, it is going to hit the small farmers and small businesses hard in the long run. This is because the extra grains that are injected in the economy shall result in falling in prices of grain thereby affecting the small farmers and small businesses eventually.

The haphazard restrictions on travel, lack of supply of emergency goods and red-tapism in terms of excessive paper-work, shortage of testing kits with delayed productions in the nation, low rates of testing and lack of transparency in the process and denial of community transmission may prove to be a threat to the implementation of policies, thereby.

CONCLUSION

Every 2 out of 10 people in the world are Indians, lockdown in the world's 2nd largest populated nation, therefore brings along a lot of challenges economically, socially, culturally, and most importantly in terms of infrastructure. Moreover, 2 out of every 10 Indian is poor or belongs to the economically vulnerable sect, particularly the unorganized labour, lockdown on whom shall have adverse effects, affecting their basic needs of food and shelter thereby resulting in economic ruin.

Yet India has taken substantial steps to provide a huge safety net to the poor. Undoubtedly, we are going to meet several implementation challenges. None the less the efforts made by the Government cannot be denied.

Accessing the current situation amidst of the crisis and seeing government initiatives towards the largest democracy in the world we see that the institution has pushed forth the effort towards curbing the spread of the lethal virus however without hard control over the fake news via media while simultaneously providing the essentials to the poor the state is a ticking time bomb ready to blast open the spread exponentially.



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