

Corona Pandemic and Indian Response

By

**Anand Sharma, MP, Dy. Leader, CPP
& Former Union Cabinet Minister**

The Corona Pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis for the entire world resulting in fear and anxiety across communities, countries and continents. COVID 19 has descended and spread rapidly catching Governments, local administrations and Public health systems unprepared. All countries – rich and poor have been adversely affected and systems of governance overwhelmed.

A crisis of such an enormity has not confronted humanity in living memory. The spread of the contagion has brought the world to a grinding halt extracting unaffordable social and economic costs.

For India, this has posed critical challenges. A country populated with 1.3 billion people, a vast country of rich diversities and social and economic disparities. A vibrant economy with Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) of \$11.4 trillion but also has hundreds of millions of poor, unemployed and underemployed labour and millions of subsistence farmers.

India has been under a total lockdown since March, 25 which has now been extended to 17th May. The virus is still spreading and the lockdown restrictions have to be extended further. On March 25 India had only 627 confirmed COVID 19 cases spread over 130 of India's 736 Districts. On 3rd May - the last day of Phase II of lockdown, the number of affected districts stands at 401 and 42836 confirmed cases, now rising by over 2000 a day. Though the mortality rate for India at 3.2% is lower compared to US, UK and other countries in Europe, more than 1389 people have died and infections are doubling every 11 days.

The Indian lockdown, has been arguably the harshest. It was supported by all major Political Parties and elected Governments in India's 28 States of which 11 are controlled by the Opposition – Congress and Regional Parties together. This bipartisan consensus, was made possible in a federal country as containment of virus was considered necessary and a national priority.

The lockdown has helped in slowing the spread and flattening the curve. Tracking the suspected cases, the contacts and testing them has been relentlessly pursued. This period, has also provided a breather for the National and State Governments to prepare the logistics, ramp up testing facilities, strengthen a fragile Public health system for a possible post-lockdown surge.

The Pandemic has brought to fore the glaring shortcomings of the Public Health System and overdependence on Private Hospitals. Over the years, there has been a tendency to favour an insurance based private hospital model and not increasing Government spending to expand Public Health care facilities.

Two thirds of hospital beds in India and almost eighty percent of available ventilator equipped ICU beds are with the private hospitals. They are handling only ten percent of the COVID load. For a country with a large number of poor and socially vulnerable citizens private health care is neither accessible nor affordable. Ironically, in this time of crisis it is the Government hospitals that are taking the burden with Doctors and Healthcare workers being the frontline warriors. Many have contracted the infection and died in the line of duty.

It needs to be reminded that there remain a large number of Indians, who suffer from Non-communicable diseases and ailments ranging from TB, Diabetes, Malaria, Cardiovascular diseases and Cancer. They need regular evaluation and many require urgent hospitalization. Such patients are severely affected in the lock down period.

This pandemic should be a wakeup call for Government and Policy Planners to allocate more resources for public healthcare infrastructure.

The Shutdown of the economy has inflicted unbearable social and economic costs. Millions of workers have lost work and wages. Estimated 122 million jobs in formal and informal sectors are lost and unemployment rate has risen to an all time high of 27.1%. Informal sector which employs 90% of workforce and the MSME's (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) together accounting for two-thirds of India's production are worst hit. As Industrial Production has crashed, India is feared to have permanently lost over 7 percent of its GDP and is likely to register negative GDP growth this financial year.

Lockdown was hastily imposed by Central Government without any advance preparation or coordination in a country spread over a large geographical area. There were no consultations with the State Governments. Abrupt cancellation of trains, buses and ban on movement of all vehicles led to

confusion and despair. Millions of poor people were stranded without food and money. Untold suffering were inflicted on them.

The fallout on large numbers of casual workers and migrant construction and farm labour has been severe. Migrant labour desperate to return to their native villages were stranded and trapped in harsh conditions. They were denied their dignity and rights as equal citizens of the republic. Thousands of migrant workers deprived of their livelihoods were forced to walk back to their villages some as far as 500-700 km. The heartrending images of men and women - many pregnant, carrying their belongings and children, the elderly and young ones, starving and crying will remain forever frozen in our memory. There are many tales of remarkable courage, endurance and also human tragedies.

The enforcement of first lockdown by Centre without consultations with States raises fundamental questions. India is a federal country and in the constitutional scheme of things Healthcare is a state subject and contagious diseases is on Concurrent list. Also, Trade and commerce within the State and Industries are state subjects.

India is staring at a prolonged recession and massive unemployment. The financial package given by the Government is very small. The stimulus of 0.80% of GDP cannot make any meaningful impact. A financial package of 5% of GDP is a must to revive the economy. Government has directed the Industry to pay full wages to workers but for that MSME's in particular must be given Government guaranteed finance at zero interest to enable them to pay workers' wages. Fiscal deficit and inflation issues can be put in abeyance until April, 2021.

For the poor – 75 percent of rural and 50 percent of urban households, food security has to be guaranteed. It is a matter of survival. Fortunately, the granaries are full with 77.5 million tons of buffer food grain stocks.

A phased exit from the lockdown has started. Industrial activity including production of essential goods, medicines etc. movement of cargo and limited retail trade has resumed. That would help to balance the twin objectives of saving lives and livelihoods. However, the revival of the economy and jobs will face challenges. Industries, Construction and Pharma sector will face crippling shortage of labour. Demand and Consumption will take long to revive.

Lockdown has definitely slowed the spread of virus, which will resurface once the lockdown is eased and there remains a possibility of an exponential growth. Scientists, virologist and Research Institutions of India are working

to find a drug for treatment and develop a vaccine. Until a Vaccine is developed and a drug for treatment is made available, the virus will abate only after it has been through a substantial part of the population and herd immunity is developed.

The virus spread, it appears now is beyond the ability of state to contain by quarantine. Ensuring Personnel Protection Equipment (PPE) for Doctors and health care workers and providing required resources and logistical support to the Government hospitals is essential to prepare for the next wave.

India has to be prepared for a long haul and be ready for a roadmap of recovery post the bruising Pandemic. A pragmatic approach, patience and calm resolve is the need of the hour.
