

Vulnerability of the Indian Poor

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The global economy seems to be entering troubled territories as the second wave of COVID-19 spread to countries which remained unaffected so far. The economic impact, now no more limited to China, is evidently slowing down other economies including the US economy. Crippling down of world's two greatest economies is surely bad news for global economic health. Moreover, for India this trouble has surfaced at the worst moment, as the country is already trying very hard to tackle the problems of its domestic economy.

Amidst the existing economic crisis on 24th of March, the Prime Minister announced a complete lockdown in order to curb the sudden surge in cases of people affected with COVID-19. The lockdown was announced at around 8pm, leaving a minimal 4 hours for implementation. A move which seems rather drastic as none of India's neighbours, including China, went for complete lockdown, has been applauded by Indians who on the one hand are worried about their own lives owing to the panic that is created around the global pandemic, but on the other hand are sure that their monthly incomes will remain unaffected.

However, the lockdown is most unfavourable for the 37 percent of households in India that depend on casual labour. Those are the daily wage earners, the labourers, and the farmers who migrate to urban areas and live hand to mouth. The closure of all the essential services made it impossible for the daily-wagers to live in the rented places of urban areas, bringing about a last-minute scramble amongst the migrants who rushed to take trains and other transport to reach their villages. In the end, many made the journey on foot as the trains and buses were abruptly cancelled.



With the testing system still not in place, and the havoc created due to the lockdown, these people are certainly the most vulnerable to infection. If the virus hits them, where will they get tested, what health services will be provided to them, and where will the health services be provided? These are questions with no definite answers which are still looming in India.



There are more people in India now who are worried about dying of hunger than of COVID-19. That said, the government is making some effort to shield the poor from the effects of COVID-19 lockdown. For example, a relief package has been announced which includes direct cash transfers of 1500

rupees over the next three months into people's bank accounts (which were already in place due to the schemes like *Jan dhan yojna*, which targeted people living below poverty line).

However, there are implementation barriers to this. How, for instance, can these people withdraw money from their accounts during the lockdown? Consider also that, despite schemes like that mentioned above, the most food-vulnerable people such as street children, homeless, disabled persons, and remote and nomadic tribes, don't have either bank accounts nor cards.

Apart from this, on an informal level the Prime Minister has released a call to the people of India to take a pledge to feed at least 9 other families, but however noble and appealing it may sound, in a situation of panic where people are finding it hard to come out of their houses for things that are essential for their *own* families it is less likely that they will risk their lives for others.

Even in places where there are reports of food being offered, several thousand homeless people are waiting in line for more than six hours. Most of them have not eaten more than a couple of meals in the last three days, and the portions they got in charity were so meagre that they barely filled their stomach. The gravity of the situation can be understood from the stampedes that are reported at places where food is distributed.

Hence the impact of the economic slowdown due to the COVID-19, followed by the lockdown, is suffered most by the people working in the informal sectors, and especially the daily-wagers.

People in India, including a few policymakers, believe that there is no other efficient way to curb the pandemic and its good that India is taking extreme steps like the country-wide lockdown (which was avoided even by some of the most developed countries), leading to a higher rate of positive cases and death tolls. This understanding, though correct to some extent, cannot do away with the fact that the lockdown is surely unfavourable to the poor people and better planning could have been done, thinking more about the impacts it could have on the most vulnerable.

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