

## THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC AND THE SOCIO ECONOMIC SECURITY THREATS IN INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The world for decades has been plagued by many problems, like minor economic recessions and major problems in the form of The Great Depression and the two World Wars. But, the Covid-19 Pandemic has posed unique problems the world perhaps has never experienced. It has triggered off various socio-economic security threats for the nations to reckon with and India is no exception to this.*

*Although India has been able to tide over the mounting number of affected persons as well as the rising death toll of the victims of Covid- 19, unlike the European countries, by a prompt decision of the Government to adopt a 'timely' lockdown all over the country, the policy has triggered off a number of immediate and long term socio -economic security threats. The immediate socio- economic security threat manifested itself in the case of the migrant labourers in India. Moreover, the temporary loss of jobs and apprehensions of further loss of jobs in future have made people all the more vulnerable. In the era of 'social distancing' the victims and the health workers like the doctors and nurses find themselves, in many cases to be socially ostracised.*

*The paper therefore, seeks to delve into the immediate and the long term socio-economic security threats India is facing and will also be facing in future. In conclusion the paper will also try to suggest some remedy for the same.*

**KEYWORDS:** Covid-19, Pandemic, Socio Economic Threats

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Global Economic Shutdown and the Related Internal Crisis in India**

The immediate crisis looms up from the shutdown of economic activities the various countries had to undertake to contain the virus. While the rich countries have come to a complete standstill under strict lockdowns, a recent study by the UBS, The Swiss Bank, found that most of the emerging nations have opted for a 'moderate' lockdowns. <sup>1</sup> Very few of the emerging nations like India have taken the risk of undertaking a 'severe' lockdown. Turkey has asked the people between the age group of 20 to 65 to be still on the job while Pakistan has kept its export industries including textiles open even though Confirmed cases are on the rise. <sup>2</sup> So it is evident that India has to receive the backlash in due course of time, in the form of joblessness, unemployment and poverty.

As the number of deaths and reported cases surge in the rich, developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere, the worst of the economic and financial fallout are being experienced in the warmer nations of the emerging world which are apprehensive of facing its first contraction in the post- World War II period. After the slowing down of the global trade

after 2008 many of the large emerging economies like Brazil, Indonesia, including India was partially shielded by resilient demand from domestic consumers. The pandemic has slowed international trade even further and has shut domestic commerce as well.<sup>3</sup> India thus, have to combat with various economic insecurities the primary one being that of joblessness and unemployment:

### **Joblessness and Unemployment**

Joblessness in poorer countries is yet another security threat as two million people face joblessness without benefits. Unemployment insurance in developed countries covers 6 out of 10 workers who lose formal jobs, compared to most of the people in the developing countries who do not hold formal jobs.

India's unemployment rate revealed a worrying figure of 8.7% in March, according to CMIE's monthly jobs data. The troubling facts were that the figure was highest on record since it began its survey three years ago and that the unemployment surged to a staggering 23.8%. This was an underestimated figure as survey based on households was likely to have missed out on the economic migrants, who left the respective cities when their workplaces no longer required them. Meanwhile news of manufacturers holding back payments to their suppliers began to trickle in which is likely to put further stress on jobs. Prolonged economic shocks and phased upliftment of the same can jeopardise India's economic poverty eradication programme which has always been the most important achievement over a generation. However, it should be remembered that the people who recovered from poverty have limited savings and are not in a position to sustain economic shocks. Relief measures can provide temporary assistance but cannot serve as a stand – in for lost jobs and livelihoods, especially in a country where there

Is hardly any social security therefore, the longer the shutdown will linger the trickier the task of revival will become.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Case of the Domestic Economic Migrant**

The immediate negative impact of the sudden economic shutdown manifested itself in the plight of the migrant labourers who had to trudge many a tired miles on foot to reach their home states reveals how the economic lockdown has not taken into consideration the hardships of the poor and needy. It must be remembered that the domestic migrants are needed for growth and development of the country. According to an interview published in The Times of India, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, by Chinmay Tumble, a Professor at IIM Ahmedabad, who has extensively researched on the subject of the migrants, these migrants generally come from the rural areas to cities in search of jobs like security guards, construction workers etc. Most of them leave their families behind as the cost of living are high in the cities and return to their villages in May- June across India for the sowing season. As it was around mid-April that these migrants left the cities many of them will not return to the cities this year. As a result cities will witness a massive labour shortage, especially in the construction industry. Eventually a hike only can allure them back to the cities.

Although 'Shramik' special trains were provided much later to take away migrant workers to their respective home states much later, the centre- state bickering regarding who should shoulder the responsibility of the bills came to the forefront. However, later the Centre clarified that it shares the onus with "sending states" to cover ticket costs. Perhaps the rationale behind this was to prevent a mass exodus of the stranded, desperate workers. Although a few dozen special trains have been made available, it has done little to provide relief to the workers as thousand odd train journeys are required by the labourers to reach their home states.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the plight of these hapless people continues and many are erupting in protest. A group of 50 migrant workers on their way back to their home state in Uttar Pradesh protested when they were stopped in the Kosamba District of Surat. They were left stranded there due to lack of 'valid permission'. Such communication gaps could have been avoided if the State Governments, which deal proximately with them and recognise their importance to local economies, were given greater power in handling the situation. <sup>6</sup>

### **Stigmatisation**

Stigmatisations against a particular class or community are practised out of ignorance and many a time to satisfy one's malice. It is one of the most important social security threats that the minority community and the lower strata of the society are vulnerable to.

Infectious epidemics give rise to widespread fear and history is replete with instances where this fear has been used to legitimise discrimination and violence against certain segments of the society. Such sections are usually the poor and disadvantaged who live in unhygienic conditions. They have limited resources and thus are unable to control the spread of any such diseases within their community and so, it is easy to stigmatise them. The Covid- 19 outbreak has unleashed hostilities against the South East Asians, Blacks and the Hispanics in the United States and Europe. <sup>7</sup>

Labelling of the spread of Covid- 19 in "Delhi as the "Tablighi Spread" is inherently divisive, inflammatory and counterproductive", as stated by Sumit Ray and Sandeep Kumar in an article in The Times of India, dated, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2020. Certain reasons have been sighted in this article, which can increase social vulnerabilities due to such stigmatisations:

First, it may fuel predictable hostilities in a country where religious fault lines are often exploited for political goals.

Secondly, association with a particular disease is a very visible aspect of public shaming and such naming assigns blame to the whole section of the population, making them easy targets for persecution.

Thirdly, it can make people fearful and they can shrink away from tests and seeking medical help. This way, they may suffer serious consequences and at the same time may contribute to the spread of the disease. This might lead to further marginalisation of these communities, resulting in aggravation of mistrusts on both the sides. While the majority of the population will stigmatise them, they in turn will be distrustful about them motives of the health care professionals and will not comply with the medical advices.

So the entire situation only breeds hatred and distrust and adds on to the already existing social security threats.

### **Social Ostracisation and Violence against Health Workers**

In the above mentioned articles the authors also stated, "The medical profession too is not immune to such a virulent animus which promotes "medicalised prejudices" and affects how it dispenses care." <sup>8</sup> Thus, overlooking the socio economic security threats under which our army of doctors, nurses and healthcare workers are working will jeopardise the situation.

First, the health care workers are working overtime and risking their lives striving to save the lives of others under unconducive environment as there is a dearth of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). In many cases the nurses and doctors have been ousted from rented accommodations and socially ostracised by neighbours in fear of contagion. In

many places violence erupted when the health workers visited certain contagious regions to conduct tests and they have been attacked and physically abused.

With a shortage nearly six lakh government doctors and two million nurses <sup>9</sup> steps must be taken as the number of positive cases and death toll rises. Cooperation from common people is the need of the hour to boost up their spirit apart from financial securities in the form of insurances.

### **Increasing Risk of Domestic Violence**

In a patriarchal set up as is prevalent in the Indian society, domestic violence is a natural phenomenon. The economic shutdown to counter the pandemic have resulted in a surge in domestic violence across the globe, as confirmed by the National Commission for Women in India which claimed that there has been a sharp rise in domestic violence related distress calls during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The associated economic insecurities like unemployment, limited resources and reduced income give rise to stress and frustration leading to domestic violence. Alcohol abuse is yet another reason. Lack of social support in times of monetary distress, stigmatisation and ostracisation by the society also leads to frustration and fear leading to domestic violence.

Another serious outcome of domestic abuse or family violence is the increase in domestic violence- related homicide. Moreover, households where domestic violence is perpetrated children are at a greater risk of suffering from physical and or emotional distress. <sup>10</sup>

### **Increase in Trafficking**

Lack of socio economic securities will push the migrant unorganised workers to become easy targets for the unorganised crime network of human trafficking. The migrant labourers without jobs in various villages across several states of India will soon become victims of acute deprivation and poverty and will soon be entrapped into the vicious web of debt and exorbitant interest rates for their daily sustenance. They will be soon forced to enter into bondage and wage less labour and children will be given preference as they are always vulnerable, innocent and incapable of voicing their protests.

Once the lockdown is lifted followed by the resumption of the normal manufacturing activities of the factories, the desperate unorganised workers, who will be in no position to negotiate wages or their rights, will serve as a massive pool for cheap labour. It can be well predicted that a large number of these labourers will be children forced out of school. Moreover, thousands of children will be trafficked to different states of India, where they will be forced to work with a meagre or no wage. They are also likely to face physical, mental and sexual violence too. <sup>11</sup>

Although the above socio economic threats to security will only be compounded by the shutdown, and many officials in the emerging world say that they cannot afford to copy the measures adopted by the developed countries, still some precautionary measures can be taken in India.

First, the citizens, in the coming days must realise that it is but a wishful thinking that the fight against the corona can be won without hardships. So the citizens must cooperate with the Government and not confront. The Government on the other hand, must assist the poor, especially those who are at the high risk of losing their livelihood and shelter. In addition to this, it will also be our responsibility to help the vulnerable to cope with the hardships of lockdown.

The Government must also try to minimise the damage to the long term prospects of the economy. The Indian Government have to seize upon the economic opportunities that the Covid- 19 will create. It can be well predicted that apart from Japan, even United States and other European countries will try to diversify production from China. India must take advantage of this situation in order fast track its economic recovery, much earlier than its Asian neighbours can capture the benefits. Prime Minister Narendra Modi Recently asserted that the present crisis is an opportunity to become self-reliant. ' Self-Reliance' should be recoded to mean "Transforming India into an export power house, for which a general openness to import is essential." <sup>12</sup>

Within the country the Government's Ministries must ensure that the supply chains are factored into decision making as agriculture, manufacturing and services exist in an intricate web of related economic activities. The need of the hour is therefore to ensure a phased return to economic activity even as the fight against Covid- 19 carries on. <sup>13</sup>

With regard to the migrants, the immediate priority of the Government must be to disband all the daily wage earners in the 21,000 camps which the Government has set up for these people. The Government must deal the situation in a very sensitive manner and take necessary steps to help them to return to their respective home states. If they would have acted sensitively the need for these camps would not have arisen in the first place. It must also be kept in mind that they do not have access to the rationed food, oil etc. because it is only available in their domicile. So arrangement for some portable welfare schemes for them is essential. <sup>14</sup>

For long term remedial measures the Government must take steps to reduce distress driven migration, like in the drought prone areas and must try to alleviate the living conditions of the people in these areas.

With regard to controlling of trafficking and sexual violence some prior preparations ought to be taken. Assessment and review of the existing legal framework and the existing criminal law on trafficking to meet the needs of the victims is essential. The lapsed anti- trafficking Bill also must be amended and passed in Parliament urgently. The enforcement and compliance of child labour and bonded labour laws along with combing exercises of the registered factories and manufacturing units to prevent child labour is very important. There also have to be an increase

In the budgetary allocation for law enforcement and victim rehabilitation to bring back the victims of trafficking and child labour to the mainstream. <sup>15</sup>

Lastly, The Government must need to equip itself to fight against the virus once the lockdown is discontinued. The virus will continue to pose as a potent threat for the Government and its people until and unless a definite cure for Covid – 19 in the form of a vaccine is found, which is likely to take up a year. For the time being, the Government must arrange for sufficient supply of N95 masks and corona test kits. Let us hope that India will be able to win the war against corona as South Korea in the post-lockdown period.

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