

# NAAVU BHARATEEYARU

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## **Inputs for an Exit Strategy Post Lockdown**

Media reports indicate that the centre and various state governments are looking at options of a graded exit from the lockdown. The state of Karnataka also has to take a decision on whether the lockdown will continue in its present form or whether there will be a graded exit strategy. This note lists certain factors to be kept in mind before deciding that strategy.

The decision to have a lockdown was taken in order to contain the spread of the virus. The lockdown has had several consequences that have been felt most sharply on – Urban Daily wage earners like street vendors, auto drivers including Migrant workers who are in construction, marginalised and stigmatised communities like sex workers and transgender communities, nomadic communities who earn as they move etc; frontline workers engaged in cleaning and health; Landed Farmers and landless farm workers .There has been a severe impact on food security, livelihood security and health. Apart from the more hidden issue of domestic violence that could not be addressed effectively since there has been no possibility for women either to speak out or access any support services. There have also been around a 100 deaths reported in the media, due to the lockdown<sup>1</sup>. Continuing the lockdown will severely exacerbate these impacts. **The measures announced by the state government and central government are nowhere near enough to overcome the impact of the lockdown.**

### **Impacts of the lockdown**

**Urban Daily Wage Workers:** These are people who are in two classes - migrant workers and locals. They earn on a daily basis. Almost all of them live in rented houses and need to pay rent.

A two phase survey looking at their situation was conducted. The first phase was conducted on March 21, 22 (pre central lockdown) and the second phase was on and March 27, 28, post the lockdown. The highlights of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the survey<sup>2</sup> are present below.

***Incomes have continued to fall:*** 83% have stopped work fully. Majority of daily wage workers have **no income at all**; some like app-based workers have seen a fall of over 50 percent in their daily earnings. Among monthly wage workers, most were not sure of employers would receive full salaries. It is most likely **that over 80 percent of workers will have earned half or less than half of their average monthly earnings.**

***Food Security:*** Lock down has meant that poor families are paying more but are eating less. Some families are on the verge of starvation. In the previous survey only 44% said food prices increased, this time **97% said that food prices had increased.** Only 66% had ration Cards, which leaves the rest without any rations.

Similarly a study conducted on the plight of migrant workers across North and Central India by Jan Sahas<sup>3</sup> highlights the alarming situation of migrant workers. On Food security it says “42 per cent of

<sup>1</sup> <https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/>

<sup>2</sup> Study conducted by All India Central Council of Trade Unions –Karnataka,(AICCTU), Karnataka Domestic Workers Rights Union, Garment and Textile Workers Union(GATWU), Savithri Bai Phule Mahila Sanghatane, Slum Janara Sanghatane and Concerned Individuals , available at <http://www.en.aicctu.org/article/2020/04/coping-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/survey-shows-42-have-no-ration-left-for-the-day-covid-19-india-updates-6335558/>

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the workers mentioned that they had no ration left even for the day, let alone for the duration of the lockdown". The lack of income is also having serious consequences , which might also lead to law and order problems says the media report quoting report - "31 per cent of workers" admitted to "have loans and they will find it difficult to repay it without employment." The highest proportions of the loans were from money-lenders, nearly three times more than who have taken loans from banks. While more than 79 per cent of those who have loans fear not being able to pay them back in the near future, "a disturbing fact is that close to 50 per cent of the labourers who had taken debt fear that their inability to pay can put them in danger of some kind of violence".

**Healthcare workers are continuing to risk their lives without health security or additional allowances:** .In the absence of public transport, they are spending more time and money and taking risks to travel back and forth from the hospital.

## **Impacts on the Public Health System**

The lockdown has hit patients with chronic illnesses hard as they haven't been able to access medicines and medical treatment. The draconian pass system of the police has contributed to turn non-emergencies into emergencies as well. Public hospitals have been turned into covid only centres impacting several thousands, who are not sure where to access treatment. Medicines and blood is in short supply, Nutrition levels of the malnourished are becoming worse due to lack of access to food. While the BBMP started some mobile delivery units for Bangalore, across Karnataka this still remains a problem. The entire handling of the public health system is threatening to make a natural disaster into a manmade disaster.

## **Communalization and criminalization**

Vested interests have used the lockdown and the pandemic to deliberately spread several fake news reports about Muslims. This has led to the criminalization of those who attended the Tableeghi Jamaat meeting; it has resulted in a loss of livelihoods and dignity to lakhs of Muslims in Karnataka.

## **Impact on women and children**

Due to the lockdown there has been an increase in cases of domestic violence and abuse. The National Commission of Women has reported an increase in the number of cases of violence against women. Children are also vulnerable to sexual abuse during these times<sup>4</sup>. The government did not put in place helplines to and mechanisms to rescue the women or for mental health issues that arise from being in a situation of domestic violence.

## **Rural Distress**

Farmer organizations like Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha have written to the Chief Minister of the issues, the Media has reported how farmers are leaving produce to rot in the fields, and of farmers spilling milk. On 01/04/2020, the New Indian Express also reported<sup>5</sup> that Chandrakant Biradar aged

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/domestic-abuse-cases-rise-as-covid-19-lockdown-turns-into-captivity-for-many-women-819653.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2020/apr/01/supply-chain-breaks-farmers-in-distress-2124166.html>

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about 47, who grew watermelon on his farm at Lad-Chincholi village of Aland taluk, Bidar district committed suicide.

The cases of farmer suicide and rural distress are likely to increase in the coming days. There is a large threat that food supply will also be hit.

These are the main issues farmers are facing right now –

## 1) Farmers unable to sell their produce

- Not able to harvest as workers are not able to come to work due to lack of transport or police harassment
- Not able to take produce to the market due to over-zealous clampdown by the police
- In some places when they go to the market, the mandis are closed/there are no buyers

## 2) Crash in prices

- In the cases where farmers are able to reach produce to markets as well, the prices of some products have crashed. The price of silk cocoons crashed from Rs 500/kilo to Rs 200/kilo. The rates of Maize has reduced from Rs 2200 to around Rs 800 per quintal.
- For some products like flowers, there is no market as there is no sale of flowers being allowed. Farmers are leaving the flowers to rot in the field.

## Failure of State government and central government schemes to alleviate issues

The main point to be noted is that while the state government and central government have a number of schemes for the migrant workers and urban daily wage workers, these have not succeeded in alleviating the situation. For instance, Karnataka government is doing a cash transfer of Rs.2000, but only to construction workers. For a family which just has to pay 4000.00Rs only in rent, a cash grant of Rs.2000 will help but will still leave a huge gap. The Central governments cash transfer is a mere 500Rs per month. Even on the question of food, the government schemes leave huge gaps. A report<sup>6</sup> by a coalition of social welfare groups highlighted that food security was fast becoming an issue. The Government of Karnataka has announced that it is supplying only rice and wheat to PDS card holder and absolutely no Dal. Similarly the Indira canteens have now begun charging for food. The issue also has been that several people who live far from Indira canteens have not been able to access the same as police have prevented them from walking; elderly and disabled have not been able access it.

A rapid survey by the People's Union for Civil Liberties – Karnataka has shown that there are several discrepancies in the supply of food from Anganwadis to children, Pregnant and lactating women and to adolescent girls. In fact only 13.75% of adolescent girls were being given food. All the PDS shops aren't open as yet and majority of them are asking for OTP verification even after government has waived it off. The PDS card holders are getting only rice in some places

Similarly the central government passed an order asking house owners not to evict tenants who are migrant workers, but the implementation of this has been a huge challenge. Workers do not know of this order and find it difficult to engage with the police and take their support.

<sup>6</sup> <https://epaper.newindianexpress.com/2622857/The-New-Indian-Express-Bengaluru/06-APR-2020#page/2/2>

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With the state unwilling to ensure a universal basic income of atleast Rs.10,000 a month, unless the lockdown is lifted and daily wage earners are allowed to resume their living, the food and nutrition issue will become worse, making them susceptible to the virus while making already poor health indicators worse <sup>7</sup>

In terms of rural distress too, while the movement of goods has eased a bit, the farmers have submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister saying they are simply unable to sell their produce. The government promised direct procurement but it hasn't happened. Truck drivers are not able to go without any roadside dhabas/mechanic/puncture shops open. Some mandis also remain closed. Agriculture workers are still not able to travel too.

The lockdown has impacted sowing for the next season thereby putting future food security at risk.

## **Suggestions for Process to exiting from the lockdown**

Prior to exiting from the lockdown, the government must hold wide consultations with civil society, especially those representing marginal communities such as farmers, workers unions, women's groups, transgender persons groups, Adivasi and Dalit groups etc. An all party discussion must also be held and suggestions sought from ULBs and panchayats. A task force has to be immediately set up that represents geographic, caste, class, trade, sexual identity, ability, gender and other such interests. Experts from other states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu can be consulted to learn from their experiences. This task force should be involved in planning the lifting of the lockdown and the longer term strategy

The government must also share publicly share credible information about the testing. Right now there seems to be a credibility gap. Reports point how, for every day over a week in the end of March, the difference between overall number of samples tested and the number of individuals tested remained exactly 890<sup>8</sup>. There is a lot of public debate also about the amount of testing done and whether it needs to increase, where the testing should happen etc. The government position on this is not clear as yet. Karnataka government announced that it would follow the South Korean approach and test more. However, whether this approach has been successful is not clear.

There has been no information from the government on how they have improved and prepared their readiness to handle the situation. In such a situation to extend the lockdown is not only unethical but pointless since it only serves at postponing and impending public health crises.

Fundamentally, the government needs to make public its road map of dealing with Covid 19 in Karnataka and the role of an extended lockdown in the broader strategy. Without this the extension of the lockdown will be arbitrary furthering the misery of the migrants, workers, daily wage earners, farmers, women and children in distress.

Therefore we therefore first expect the state to share publicly

- What it expected to achieve from the lockdown
- Whether those measures were achieved, if not what is required to achieve those objectives

<sup>7</sup> According to the NFHS4, the State has a high percentage of children from the SC community, who are shorter (stunting - 39.1%) and thinner (under-nutrition - 40.1%) than what is expected for their age. Percentage of children age 6 -59 months who are anemic in Karnataka is 60.9%!

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.indiaspend.com/for-days-samples-tested-were-more-than-people-tested-by-exactly-890/>

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- What it feels should be the approach to contain the spread of the virus
- Whether government has the data of hospitals had surge cases of people with pneumonia like symptoms / breathing issues who were not tested to indicate the spread among non-tested people?
- What is the strategy for testing? Will we need and if yes plan to have government testing centres in each district?
- Has the preparedness for a surge of cases improved over the lockdown?
- Many communities have not been able to follow physical distance during the lockdown since they live in cramped housing in slums or in workers colonies. What is the plan to ensure that these communities are safe, lockdown or otherwise?
- Many migrant workers moved back to their native places and we have testing centres only in few districts of Karnataka. How then do we ensure that the pandemic has not already spread to those districts? What is the government strategy for containing the spread there?

Post this informed decision can be taken up about the lockdown.

### Actual Exit from the lockdown

An exit from the lockdown is imperative for an economy like ours where several people are on daily wages, even some salaried like domestic workers are below the poverty line and the social security net is weak. How the government phases out the lockdown is to be decided on the basis of the health data which the government must make public.

The government measures on food security and income security have been severely limited. Any continuation of lockdown cannot be expected to happen, unless government can assure that it will ensure that ALL BPL families, all migrant workers and undocumented and marginalized communities like transgender community are going to be given a monthly income of atleast Rs 14,000<sup>9</sup> and assured food security<sup>10</sup>.

If the government is not able to make this grant, exiting from the lockdown while allowing for all daily wagers to work is imperative. It should be done with care, taking care to allow for and plan for elders to stay indoors; to avoid crowding but allowing people to earn an income and allow access for food. At the same time, all workers will still not have jobs therefore food security measures and income security measures must be in place. The loss of livelihoods for the weeks of lockdown needs to be compensated if they have to begin reconstructing their lives without a greater burden of debt that most are already under.

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<sup>9</sup> The minimum wage today for garment workers is around 11,000.00 a month and powrakarmikas is Rs14,400, therefore a basic income cannot be less than rs.12,000 for a family. In addition there will be people who may not be able to access this or cannot cook, so free food through Indira canteens must also continue.

<sup>10</sup> A 2015 survey among garment workers by the Garments and Textile Workers Union showed that the minimum household expenses for a family was atleast Rs 9970.00 a month.



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**Following are some indicative strategies that can be adopted while exiting the lockdown.**

(Actual strategies can only be finalized with the help of more information and consultations)

- 1) Street Vendors must be allowed access to playgrounds and stadiums and open spaces . At the moment some food related street vending is open, all vendors must be allowed to operate (for e.g. flowers, clothes, plastic items etc)
- 2) Full fleet of buses must be made available – This will allow for social distancing. Spain which is worse than India has allowed for limited public transport<sup>11</sup> . Autos, Ola and Uber must be allowed to ply with emphasis on using hand sanitizers before and after receiving a cash payment. This will allow for lakhs of drivers to have an income
- 3) A separate fleet for patients and patient careers must be provided with all safety measures in place for the drivers and the passengers
- 4) Inter-state transport of goods must be allowed ; Migrant workers must be allowed to go home after screening , safely
- 5) Malls, Cinema theatres large shopping complexes and Metro must remain closed due to concerns of over-crowding
- 7) Several migrant workers have returned to their villages. NREGA program must be expanded and the creation of assets for private use (tanks in private land) etc must also be allowed to ensure that everyone has a livelihood and that rural economy will improve
- 8) Food security - Community kitchens employing street vendors and SHG members can be set-up and free food provided for those in need, in addition to Indira canteens. These kitchens can be in slums, workers clusters so they do not have to travel far. A dry ration kit for all families must be supplied at the door step which will last for 2 months so that food needs are taken care of without going to stores. Fruits and vegetables should also be delivered to the homes and autos can be employed for both the measures providing livelihoods for auto drivers.
- 9) Government must source from farmers directly and encourage small scale industries as opposed to large industries.
- 10) Just the impact of this lockdown has meant that unless BPL families are given a onetime grant of atleast 25,000.00 Rs (at an income of atleast Rs.12000 a month for two months – March and April) and food security<sup>12</sup> they may not be able to recover. The minimum wage today for garment workers is around 11,000.00 a month and powrakarmikas is Rs14,400, therefore a basic income cannot be less than rs.12,000 for a family. In addition there will be people who may not be able to access this or cannot cook, so free food through Indira canteens must also continue.
- 11) Preferably the government should take over private hospitals for Covid 19 and not the government hospitals since this would deprive the marginalised communities of access to health care.

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/transport/coronavirus-response\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/transport/coronavirus-response_en)

<sup>12</sup> A 2015 survey among garment workers by the Garments and Textile Workers Union showed that the minimum household expenses for a family was atleast Rs 9970.00 a month.

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- 12) The government needs to focus on strengthening the public health system after identifying the gaps in public health system across Karnataka
- 13) A grievance redressal mechanism should be set up to address issues of denial of care and/or negligence
- 14) Blood banks, ambulances, immunisation services, emergency services, tertiary care should continue undisturbed and should not be compromised

From the experience of dealing with the direct fallout of the lockdown it is imperative that a clearly coordinated system to monitor and implement the exit strategy be put into place that involves all the concerned departments including women and child development, local governments as also the NGO's , civil society organisations that have been extensively involved in relief work and have abundant ground level data and information on the nature and scale of the problem.