

Covid-19 Insights: Analysis from Ethics, Human Rights and Law Perspectives

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Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan: Abdication of State Responsibility | Ravi Duggal

The State Response in India to Covid-19 was as per the now classic Modi modus operandi – surgical strike on people without notification. Surprise and awe characterise Modi’s tactic, whether it was announcement of demonetization, introduction of GST, Balakot air strike, Article 370 abrogation and lockdown of Kashmir and now the Covid-19 lockdown. Each of these surgical strikes is followed by a media blitz that praises Modi as an effective nationalist leader, followed by the Modi supporters taking over ground zero, often indulging in violence.

When Covid-19 began to spread globally as a pandemic, India’s response was tardy. When the response came, it was like a surgical strike on people and with no strategy to handle the consequences. This way, a public health crisis turned into an economic and humanitarian one.

Unfolding crisis

When the first lockdown (a total lockdown) was announced for 3 weeks, without prior notice, from midnight of 24th March 2020, people were caught unaware. It created anxiety and panic. Daily wagers, domestic workers and other informal workers (nearly 90% of our workforce) lost livelihoods overnight. Businesses were shut and the entire economy was brought to a standstill.

As weeks passed by the cases had increased 25-fold from 500 at the start of the lockdown to 12370 cases by 15th April 2020. At the same time, a bigger crisis was unfolding. The poorer sections of society had become restless and upon learning that the lockdown would be continued for the coming months they panicked. This led to the great exodus across the country. People under pressure from lack of livelihoods, were forced to begin their journeys on foot for 100s of kilometres in the scorching summer heat to return to their hometowns and villages from their place of employment. The states failed miserably. Not only was the state unprepared for this, but also did not support them with transportation or any assistance. It was only in the latter half of May that states began to provide buses and trains, but in a very disorganised manner and at a cost.

Initial announcements

Between March 2020 and latter half of May 2020, the states and the national government were only making announcements, proposals, and calling people to clap their hands, bang

thalis, light candles and torches and shower flowers on health workers from helicopters. One such announcement was the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) which was allocated 1.76 lakh crores as under:

- 5 Kgs of wheat/rice and 1 Kg of pulses for 3 months to 80 crore people
- Cash transfer of Rs. 500 for 2 months to 3 crore widows, elderly and disabled pensioners
- Rs 50 lakh insurance cover to 22 lakh health workers and *safai karmacharis* in case of death
- Rs 2000 per farmer under PM *Kisaan Yojana* for 8.7 crore farmers
- Rs 500 each for 3 months to 20.4 crore women *Jan Dhan* account holders
- Free gas cylinders to 8 crore households for 3 months under *Ujjawala*
- PF contribution of employer and employee share to accounts of establishments with less than 100 workers to employees earning less than Rs 15000 per month by government for 3 months
- Rs 20 hike in MGNREGA daily wage rate benefiting 13.62 crore families
- Limit of collateral free loans for SHGs increased from Rs.10 to 20 lakhs benefiting 6.85 crores households
- Permitting withdrawal of upto 3 months wages for Covid related reasons from the EPF accounts as non-refundable advance
- Cash assistance of Rs 6000 for construction workers from the Building and other construction Workers Welfare Fund for 3.5 crore workers
- Use of District Mineral Fund for Covid related testing and treating

The above was announced immediately after the first lockdown on 25th March but there is very little evidence of its roll out, except for some *Jan Dhan* beneficiaries and PM *Kisaan Yojana* payments. What is interesting is that all the above are existing schemes and have existing allocations so there is not any significant or additional commitment even if all these benefits are rolled out fully.

Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan

When things went out of control before the end of lockdown 3 in mid-May; Prime Minister Modi offered a 20-lakh crore economic relief package, the *Aatmanirbhar (self-reliance) Bharat Abhiyaan*. By now, the country was in the middle of its worst health, humanitarian and economic crises. These announcements were too late.

Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan was announced with huge fanfare and was a disappointment for several reasons. The overwhelming part of it was in liquidity support and loans being offered to people and businesses which were brutally battered. The actual fiscal dole out was a pittance and that too most of it was piggybacking on existing welfare schemes.

After mid may there were some additional announcements -

Rs 40000 crore additional allocation for MGNREGA in anticipation of increased demand due to returning migrants

- Increased public investment in Health and Wellness centres, setting up infectious disease units in district hospitals and setting up laboratories in each Block. Immediately Rs 15000 crores over three years was allocated to specifically deal with COVID 19.

- Technology driven *eVidya* as a digital platform for education

All the above announcements add up to at most Rs. 2.17 lakh crores or just 1.1% of the GDP and 10% of the *Aatmanirbhar* package. All the rest were liquidity related instruments like enhanced fiscal deficit limits for states from 3% to 5% of GSDP, ease of doing business, liquidity for MSMEs and RBI injected liquidity for the financial sector and Corporates. So clearly the direct benefits to affected people was very limited and even if all gets delivered it would have little value in relief as it did not reach people when they needed it most. And as said earlier all these benefits were related to existing welfare provisions and mostly coming from already allocated budgets with very little new commitment or additional fiscal burden on the state exchequer.

If we did not witness a catastrophe in the country during the pandemic, it is thanks to civil society organisations, trade unions, peoples movements, community based organisations, resident associations, and individual Samaritans who pitched in with rations, cooked meals, soaps, sanitizers, masks, etc and also support for transportation for those who wanted to leave. All this while, the states were sitting on tons of food grains in the warehouses.

Potential Alternative course of action

To conclude, the state should have announced the benefits for people including cash transfers and free essentials prior to the lockdown. Second, for those who wanted to return home, they should have given a notice period. South Africa gave 72 hours, and assured proper transportation so that there would be no panic. Third, the complete lockdown should have been at the maximum confined to the Lockdown 1 so that the system got time to prepare for dealing with the public health crises. Fourth, the continued lockdown should have been confined to only the hotspots so that concentrated attention to these areas would be given. Fifth, testing should have been done on a much larger scale in April and May itself (New Zealand had a testing ratio of over 60000 per million). And finally, the decision making for all actions should not have been left to bureaucrats but included epidemiologists, public health experts, medical and biological scientists and social scientists and civil society leaders. The Task force that was set up was weak and the few non-bureaucrats who were there on it, were completely side-lined. It will certainly require us to become *aatmanirbhar* as a result of the government failure in preventing a crisis at multiple levels.

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