

**A LONG ROAD: ON INDIA'S 21-DAY CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN****The unprecedented lockdown can work only if governments help people stay homebound**

India's unprecedented 21-day national lockdown is an unparalleled effort at stopping the march of a fast-spreading scourge that has overwhelmed the health infrastructure of several nations. Although the Centre seems to have thought of such a move in advance in a bid to flatten the curve of transmission of the novel coronavirus, the enforcement has left millions of people unprepared for the severe disruption. The janata curfew, on March 22, ahead of the lockdown was obviously a drill for the three-week imposition, but the government failed to anticipate the complex issues involved in confining over a billion people to their homes. Of course, as a public health measure, the full national lockdown announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being welcomed by the medical community as a necessary measure to cut the transmission chain of the virus. Fresh arrival of travellers from abroad has already been stopped, and three weeks is long enough to allow for symptomatic cases of COVID-19 disease to emerge. This should give the government sufficient time to plan a treatment response. But for the lockdown to serve its purpose, it should lead to wider testing of all suspected cases. Regrettably, the lack of planning on the lockdown resulted in another bout of crowding, with people rushing out to buy essential supplies and medicines. There were instances of mindless police violence against workers performing routine jobs. The virtual curfew could have been made far less stressful through prior discussion with the States, and unambiguous communication to the public. Clearly, State agencies did not follow the order issued by the Home Ministry under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, spelling out provisions on essential services.

If the prolonged lockdown is to be executed without too much trauma for the general public, there has to be a war room approach. Chief among the measures needed is reliable access to food, water, medicines and emergency assistance. Here, some States have moved early and announced cash relief and free rations. The challenge is to ensure effective implementation. Again, if movement is to be restricted, essentials must be delivered virtually at the doorstep. This is enabled explicitly by the Home Ministry's order. Allowing delivery of medicines by pharmacies is important and essential personnel must be given passes that protect them from police harassment and ensure movement of goods. There is also a deplorable trend of social discrimination against health workers handling COVID-19 cases, which must be sternly dealt with. The onus is on the Central and State governments to provide for everyone during the lockdown, and they should be working round the clock. Otherwise, people will be forced into a situation where breaking the curfew might seem the safer alternative to deprivation and suffering in isolation.

The efficacy of a protracted three-week-long countrywide lockdown in the fight against the pandemic aside, what is very clear is that the shutdown is set to bring the approximately ₹200-lakh crore national economy close to a shuddering standstill. The ramifications are already so wide-ranging that measuring the fallout merely in terms of lost economic output would be grossly inadequate. The hardest hit are the millions of daily wage earners, the self-employed and small businesses, and the rural landless poor. Vulnerable segments of the workforce face the immediate prospect of a lack of income as well as hunger. On a larger scale, with public transport services now withdrawn and private vehicular movement severely restricted to the barest delivery of essential services, it is hard to see how people employed even in vital sectors of manufacturing or the utilities would be able to reach their workplaces. While the Finance Minister on Tuesday announced a welcome slew of tax and regulatory compliance-related deadline deferrals as well as some credit-related relief to the MSME sector, the combined steps will at best be of marginal help to tackle the unprecedented economic crisis. Any package to address it therefore demands a set of mitigation and subsequent stimulus measures that would need to be of an exceptional scale and require implementation on a war footing.

For a start, the Centre must abandon its fiscal deficit goals at this moment of a worldwide healthcare and economic crisis that is set to tip the global economy into a recession, at the very least

in the near term. In keeping with what some State governments as well as most developed economies have already announced, the Centre needs to immediately release sizeable cash grants to all persons with Jan-Dhan accounts and BPL ration cards and use its various social welfare schemes including PM-KISAN and MGNREGA to ensure that the reach of such financial aid is maximised countrywide. The plan must also encompass a broad swathe of spending measures. These should include substantial investments in public health infrastructure targeted at COVID-19 treatment — for which a beginning has been made with an allocation of ₹15,000 crore — as well as provisions for free services to all financial aid recipients; loan repayment holidays and a wage bill subsidy to all MSME businesses that retain their workforce at pre-crisis levels; and once the lockdown is lifted, a huge public infrastructure creation backed spending push to generate jobs and restart economic activity. A modest doubling of the budgeted fiscal deficit figure for 2020-21 could see about ₹16-lakh crore being freed up for the Centre to both spend directly and provide capital support in the form of grants and subsidies to State governments and banks. The government would do well to use the crisis as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address both the economy's and the public's well-being. The lives and livelihoods lost to the pandemic should not be in vain.

### Meanings of difficult words:

- **coronavirus** (CoV)(noun) – a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.(Courtesy: **WHO**)
- **lockdown** (noun) – a state of isolation; confinement, restraint, encirclement.
- **unprecedented** (adjective) – not done or experienced before.
- **homebound** (adjective) – unable to leave one's house.
- **unparalleled** (adjective) – unprecedented, unequalled, exceptional.
- **march** (noun) – (steady & inevitable) progress, advance, development, headway.
- **scourge** (noun) – plague, affliction, misfortune, suffering.
- **overwhelm** (verb) – overload, engulf, flood.
- **bid** (noun) – attempt, effort, endeavour/try.
- **flatten** (verb) – make flat, make even, make smooth.
- **novel coronavirus** (nCoV) (SARS-CoV-2) (noun) – a new strain (type/variety) coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. (Courtesy: **WHO**)
- **enforcement** (noun) – imposition, implementation, execution.
- **curfew** (noun) – a rule which is instructing people to stay at home, typically at night.
- **anticipate** (verb) – expect, foresee, predict.
- **transmission chain** (noun) – the act or process by which something is spread or passed from one person or thing to another.
- **symptomatic** (adjective) – indicative, signalling, warning.
- **COVID-19** (noun) – coronavirus disease 2019.
- **regrettably** (adverb) – unluckily, sadly, unhappily.
- **bout** (noun) – spell, period, time; outbreak, outburst, eruption.
- **virtual** (adjective) – effective, practical, implied.
- **far less** (phrase) – much less.
- **unambiguous** (adjective) – unarguable, beyond doubt/question, unquestionable.
- **spell out** (phrasal verb) – explain, make clear, elucidate/clarify.
- **provisions** (noun) – supplies (of rations).
- **prolonged** (adjective) – lengthy, extended, protracted.
- **trauma** (noun) – torment, distress, suffering.
- **war room approach** (noun) – an approach in which all the vital information gathered in one place and brainstormed it with all the key people involved in it to solve a difficult problem.
- **virtually** (adverb) – effectively, nearly.

- **explicitly** (adverb) – clearly, unequivocally, without any doubt.
- **personnel** (noun) – staff, employees, workforce.
- **harassment** (noun) – persecution, persistent annoyance, coercion/intimidation.
- **deplorable** (adjective) – disgraceful, dishonourable, unacceptable.
- **discrimination** (noun) – prejudice, bias/bigotry, intolerance, narrow-mindedness, unfairness.
- **sternly** (adverb) – strictly, severely, stringently.
- **onus** (noun) – responsibility, duty, burden.
- **round the clock** (phrase) – all day and all night (without stopping).
- **deprivation** (noun) – poverty, impoverishment, hardship, neediness.
- **efficacy** (noun) – effectiveness, efficiency, power/ability to give estimated results.
- **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- **shuddering** (adjective) – unsteady, shaky, unbalanced.
- **standstill** (noun) – deadlock, impasse, stalemate/stand-off.
- **ramification** (noun) – result, aftermath, outcome, effect.
- **wide-ranging** (adjective) – extensive, broad/wide, expansive.
- **fallout** (noun) – adverse results; after-effects, repercussions.
- **grossly** (adverb) – flagrantly, obviously; extremely/excessively.
- **vulnerable** (adjective) – weak, feeble; unsafe, unprotected/unguarded.
- **prospect** (noun) – chances, potential, future.
- **slew of** (noun) – a large number of, lot, range.
- **regulatory** (adjective) – organizational, governmental.
- **compliance** (noun) – conformity, observation, adherence.
- **deferment** (noun) – postponement, delay, rescheduling.
- **at best** (phrase) – simply, merely, only, nothing but.
- **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- **mitigation** (noun) – alleviation, reduction; lessening.
- **stimulus** (noun) – impetus, boost, incentive, fillip.
- **exceptional** (adjective) – unusual/uncommon, abnormal, atypical, extraordinary.
- **war footing** (noun) – a state of preparedness (for war).
- **for a start** (phrase) – to introduce a first point of a series of points to be discussed/mentioned.
- **fiscal deficit** (noun) – the difference between total expenditure and total income of the government.
- **tip** (verb) – overturn, topple, fall, overbalance.
- **recession** (noun) – economic decline, downturn, slump.
- **at the very least** (phrase) – to put it mildly, without any exaggeration, taking pessimistic view.
- **in keeping with** (phrase) – in accordance with, in agreement with, in line with/true to.
- **sizeable** (adjective) – substantial, considerable, significant.
- **grant** (noun) – allowance, allocation, allotment, contribution.
- **encompass** (verb) – include, subsume, incorporate.
- **swathe** (noun) – a wide area (of something).
- **substantial** (adjective) – considerable, significant, large.
- **well-being** (noun) – healthy state, comfort/happiness, prosperity.
- **livelihood** (noun) – source of income, means of support, living, subsistence.
- **in vain** (phrase) – unsuccessfully, futile, useless.