

THE LOCKDOWN HAS HIGHLIGHTED STARK INEQUALITIES

**Instead of embracing the welfare state path,
the BJP government is encouraging greater privatization**

The novel coronavirus is a global threat, but the pandemic has had an uneven impact across countries and within countries. Historically, social inequality has always been extreme in India. However, the lockdown has sharpened the edges of inequality even further, especially because of the way it has been implemented. Many countries have imposed lockdowns but not as stringent and severe as the Indian one. What is more, the largest lockdown in the world with hardly any safety net was imposed at a four-hour notice. The sudden decision deprived countless people of jobs and livelihoods. This has strained the fragile social and economic fabric far more than it needed to.

A disastrous decision

Nobody is safe from the virus, but some classes are more protected than others. Class and wealth inequality means COVID-19 may pose greater risks to some as it poses a double threat to them. In India, the lockdown favours the “balcony classes”, with no regard of its consequences for others. The pandemic has exposed the precarious existence of millions of migrants who operate the levers of the informal economy. It required no rocket science to anticipate that India’s huge army of informal labour would be the most badly hit by the lockdown. Repeated extension of the lockdown has caused economic devastation to workers in the informal economy as it has left them with no income, no food and no shelter. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy estimates that about 140 million people have lost jobs since the lockdown. In brief, pervasive unemployment or underemployment, a feature of the Indian economy before the lockdown, worsened after it, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Worldwide, the defining images of India’s lockdown are the caravans of migrant workers walking hundreds of kilometres to reach their homes. Bereft of substantive support from the government or their employers, they want to escape the city and get back to their villages and families. Several hundreds of them lost their lives in their desperate attempt to reach home during the lockdown. The SaveLife Foundation, a non-profit organisation working to prevent road accidents, has recorded nearly 2,000 road crashes and 368 deaths from March 25, when the lockdown began, to May 16.

The Union Home Ministry had asked shops, industry and commercial establishments to pay wages to workers during the lockdown but it offered no financial support should this not happen. Social activist Harsh Mander asked the Supreme Court to order the government to pay wages. As expected, the apex court refused to intervene. However, the Court intervened and asked the government not to resort to any coercive action against private companies that have not paid their workers full wages during the lockdown in accordance with a government order in March. Since then, the government has dropped the crucial order. Clearly, the Court has readily accepted the government’s assurance that it was looking after migrant labourers. But all that the government had done was take small steps such as providing dry rations and a paltry sum of ₹500, the first of the three instalments of a sum of ₹1,500 relief, to Jan Dhan accounts of women.

Putting the onus on citizens

The Sangh Parivar believes that society has to take care of itself through self-regulation. Given this world view, it is no surprise that the BJP government is offering little by way of a safety net. Rather, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in one of his national addresses, asked each citizen to help nine poor families during the lockdown. This puts the responsibility for containing the consequences of the pandemic/lockdown squarely on the citizens, instead of instituting a government-backed social support system. While the call to compassion is unremarkable, it has two implications — it minimises the urgency of state intervention required to deal with the economic crisis and it passes on the responsibility to citizens with an emphasis on citizens’ duties as against citizens’ rights.

Quite the reverse is happening in many other countries which have introduced huge relief packages involving large amounts of government expenditure to provide money for workers' wages for up to three months, giving money or rebates to companies, unemployment allowance or direct benefit transfers. The Spanish government unveiled sweeping reforms that led to nationalisation of all private hospitals. The U.K. extended a worker furlough programme that pays people idled by the pandemic till the end of October. This is similar to the Paycheck Protection Programme in the U.S. Both seek to preserve jobs rather than resorting to mass lay-offs.

In India, transfer of cash in the past two months of lockdown could have mitigated the most heart-breaking migrant crisis since the Partition in 1947. This was the basic requirement of justice. But the government failed to transfer money to the distressed people or to small businesses and commercial establishments. Failure to do so has exposed the heartlessness of the BJP government. It refuses to embrace the welfare state path adopted by most governments which believe radical change is essential for restoring a social balance underlying the welfare state of earlier years. Even governments ideologically committed to conservatism are loosening their purse strings. But the BJP government has done nothing of the sort. In the event, acute distress and disempowerment of the most vulnerable has further deepened existing social inequalities of Indian society. The government's lack of sympathy and concern for the stranded migrant workers clearly shows that the system doesn't work for everyone. No wonder, migrant labourers across India have told reporters they won't return to see such humiliation again.

Greater privatisation

Seen against the scale of distress, the government's economic stimulus package is niggardly based on minimal fiscal cost and minimum social spending. Just about everything is included in the fiscal stimulus ranging from repaying tax refunds to loans. At this rate, even a good monsoon can be considered fiscal stimuli. The immediate relief to the people is not more than 1% of the GDP. The stimulus package has been rightly dismissed by almost everyone outside the government as too little, too late.

Most shocking is the slew of controversial reforms announced by the Finance Minister in the last episode of her five-part serial on the government's stimulus package. Instead of addressing the migrant worker crisis, the government has embarked on greater privatisation and further opening the economy to foreign capital. It has thrown open coal, defence production, space travel, among other areas, to the private sector. These contentious pieces of economic reforms wouldn't be counted as rescue package anywhere; moreover, it is wrong and unethical to push them under lockdown without parliamentary oversight.

The much-derided Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and National Food Security Act (NFSA) have come to the rescue of the people. Ironically, both schemes are legacies of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government and both were hugely criticised by the BJP. MGNREGA was described as a "living monument" of Congress failure in addressing poverty. Now the government has decided to allocate an additional ₹40,000 crore to MGNREGA. This is welcome as it will provide a semblance of relief during distress in rural India. But in cities migrant workers do not have even this modicum of social security. The one important lesson that this pandemic has underlined is the urgent need for an urban employment guarantee scheme. In the meantime, generous cash transfers can provide economic security. However, for this to happen, we need a more humane government responsive to the basic needs of its people.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/ encirclement/ isolation of a person by the authority.
- ❖ **stark** (adjective) – clear, distinct, evident, obvious, striking.

- ❖ **inequality** (noun) – Inequality is simply defined as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities; imbalance, unevenness, disproportion, disparity.
- ❖ **embrace** (verb) – welcome, accept, adapt, take up.
- ❖ **welfare state** (noun) – a form of government in which the state protects and promotes the economic and social well-being of the citizens, based upon the principles of equal opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for citizens unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. A system wherein the government agrees to underwrite certain levels of employment, income, education, medical, social security and housing for all its citizens.
- ❖ **privatisation** (noun) – transfer of a business, industry, or service from public to private ownership and control.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **social inequality** (noun) – it occurs when resources in a given society are distributed unevenly. Inequality is simply defined as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities.
- ❖ **stringent** (adjective) – strict/stern, severe, tough/rigorous.
- ❖ **what is more** (phrase) – moreover, in addition, furthermore.
- ❖ **hardly** (adverb) – scarcely, barely, not much.
- ❖ **safety net** (noun) – something which gives protection against misfortune or difficulty.
- ❖ **deprive of** (verb) – dispossess, strip of, deny, prevent from having.
- ❖ **livelihood** (noun) – means of making a living with the basic necessities (food, water, shelter and clothing); means of support, subsistence, source of income.
- ❖ **strain** (verb) – damage, impair; overtax/overburden.
- ❖ **fragile** (adjective) – vulnerable, insecure, unreliable, feeble, unsound.
- ❖ **fabric** (noun) – the basic/fundamental structure.
- ❖ **far more** (phrase) – a lot more, much more.
- ❖ **disastrous** (adjective) – terrible/horrible, shocking, unfortunate, ill-fated, detrimental.
- ❖ **with no regard of** (phrase) – with no considering; inattentive, negligent, neglectful, indifferent, unconcerned.
- ❖ **consequence** (noun) – outcome, ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **expose** (verb) – reveal, uncover, lay bare.
- ❖ **precarious** (adjective) – uncertain/unsure, insecure, unreliable/risky.
- ❖ **lever** (noun) – handle, grip, knob.
- ❖ **informal economy** (noun) – informal sector, grey economy; it is the part of an economy that is neither taxed, nor monitored by any form of government.
- ❖ **rocket science** (noun) – (informally/humorously) used to say when something is very difficult to perform or understand.
- ❖ **anticipate** (verb) – expect, foresee, predict.
- ❖ **devastation** (noun) – destruction, damage, havoc/wreckage.
- ❖ **shelter** (noun) – a place giving temporary protection from any danger.
- ❖ **in brief** (phrase) – in sum, in a nutshell, in short, to put it briefly.
- ❖ **pervasive** (adjective) – prevalent, extensive, ubiquitous, omnipresent.
- ❖ **underemployment** (noun) – it occurs when a person does not work full time and when a job does not use the worker’s skills fully.
- ❖ **foreseeable** (adjective) – expected, predictable, inevitable.
- ❖ **defining** (adjective) – explaining, interpreting, elucidating, describing (reality).
- ❖ **caravan** (noun) – a group of people travelling together.
- ❖ **bereft of** (adjective) – deprived of/stripped of; lacking, deficient in; wanting, in need of.
- ❖ **substantive** (adjective) – important, meaningful, considerable.
- ❖ **get back** (phrasal verb) – return, come home, come back, arrive home.
- ❖ **desperate** (adjective) – final, last-resort, last-minute, last-chance; hopeless, despairing.
- ❖ **activist** (noun) – relating to a person who supports a political or societal change/cause.
- ❖ **resort to** (verb) – use, utilize, turn to, have recourse to.
- ❖ **coercive** (adjective) – authoritarian, overbearing, tough/harsh, high-handed.
- ❖ **in accordance with** (phrase) – in agreement with, in conformity with, in line with.

- ❖ **readily** (adverb) – without difficulty, without delay, without hesitation, quickly, easily.
- ❖ **look after** (phrasal verb) – take care, manage, provide for, support.
- ❖ **dry ration** (noun) – the dry (raw/uncooked) ration consists of rice, wheat, dhal, flour, pulses, sugar and etc., (distributed under the public distribution system (PDS)).
- ❖ **paltry** (adjective) – small, meagre, inadequate, insufficient.
- ❖ **onus** (noun) – responsibility, duty, burden.
- ❖ **self-regulation** (noun) – self-monitoring; the ability to understand and manage your behaviour and your reactions to feelings and things happening around you.
- ❖ **world view** (noun) – ideology, principles, values, school of thought.
- ❖ **it is no surprise** (phrase) – as expected, as anticipated, as predicted.
- ❖ **by way of** (phrase) – via, by means of, as a form of.
- ❖ **address** (noun) – speak, talk, discourse.
- ❖ **squarely** (adverb) – precisely, exactly, directly.
- ❖ **institute** (verb) – set/put in, establish, begin/start.
- ❖ **government-backed** (adjective) – supported by the government.
- ❖ **call** (noun) – appeal, request, plea, demand.
- ❖ **compassion** (noun) – concern, consideration, humanity.
- ❖ **implications** (noun) – consequence/outcome, ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **emphasis** (noun) – insistence, priority, stress.
- ❖ **reverse** (noun) – a complete change of direction; a total change of action.
- ❖ **Comprehensive Relief Package** (noun) – a comprehensive package should have simultaneous reliefs across different realms (area of activity) (for instance, tax compliance, relief for poor, RBI monetary policy interventions, and relief for middle class in terms of EMI, internet rate subvention and most importantly an increase in investment in health infrastructure).
- ❖ **government expenditure** (noun) – government spending, public spending; money spent by the government.
- ❖ **rebate** (noun) – allowance, reduction, discount, refund.
- ❖ **unveil** (verb) – present, announce, disclose/ make public.
- ❖ **sweeping** (adjective) – decisive, thorough, complete/ total.
- ❖ **nationalisation** (noun) – nationalisation happens when the government takes ownership of private assets.
- ❖ **furlough** (noun) – involuntary break/ temporary leave.
- ❖ **idle** (verb) – do nothing, be inactive, kill time, languish.
- ❖ **Government furlough programme** (noun) – it means the government is now paying the wages for more than a quarter of UK jobs.
- ❖ **Paycheck Protection programme** (noun) – The U.S. government's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) is intended to "provide economic relief to small businesses nationwide in adversely impacted under the Coronavirus Disease 2019. This program will give small businesses "forgivable loans" to continue to pay employees and cover other business expenses during the COVID-19 crisis.
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – try, attempt, strive/work towards.
- ❖ **preserve** (verb) – maintain/keep, protect, safeguard.
- ❖ **lay-off** (noun) – unemployment; dismissal, discharge, redundancy.
- ❖ **mitigate** (verb) – reduce, lessen, decrease, make less severe.
- ❖ **heart-breaking** (adjective) – distressing, upsetting, painful.
- ❖ **distressed** (adjective) – anguished, devastated, despairing, suffering.
- ❖ **radical** (adjective) – comprehensive, exhaustive, sweeping, thorough, complete.
- ❖ **underlying** (adjective) – fundamental, basic, primary.
- ❖ **ideologically** (adverb) – dogmatically, conventionally; in a method which relates to an ideology.
- ❖ **(fiscal) conservatism** (noun) – a political position that calls for lower levels of public spending, lower taxes and lower government debt.
- ❖ **loosen the purse strings** (phrase) – to increase the spending of money.
- ❖ **of the sort** (phrase) – something like (just) mentioned.

- ❖ **disempowerment** (noun) – the condition/state of being disempowered (less powerful).
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – unprotected, unguarded, helpless; relating to a weak/neglected person who is in need of special care/support.
- ❖ **deepen** (verb) – increase, intensify, heighten, exacerbate, aggravate, worsen.
- ❖ **lack of** (noun) – absence, dearth, deficiency/shortage.
- ❖ **stranded** (adjective) – stuck (in difficulties), helpless, abandoned, deserted.
- ❖ **no wonder** (phrase) – it is not surprising.
- ❖ **humiliation** (noun) – indignity, dishonour, insult, offence.
- ❖ **stimulus package** (noun) – an attempt by the government to boost economic growth and save their country from a financial crisis by involving tax cuts, lowering interest rates and increasing government spending.
- ❖ **niggardly** (adjective) – tight, illiberal/ungenerous, close-fisted.
- ❖ **fiscal cost** (noun) – the amount of government spending/expenditure that contributes to GDP.
- ❖ **social spending** (noun) – government expenditure or government spending on social welfare schemes.
- ❖ **fiscal stimulus** (noun) – Government measures, normally involving increased public spending and lower taxation, aimed at giving a positive jolt to economic activity.
- ❖ **dismiss** (verb) – reject, deny, banish, shrug off.
- ❖ **slew of** (noun) – a large number of, lot, range.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **embark on** (phrasal verb) – start, begin, initiate/commence.
- ❖ **foreign capital** (noun) – the inflow of capital in home country from abroad.
- ❖ **throw open** (phrasal verb) – make something accessible/attainable suddenly & fully.
- ❖ **contentious** (adjective) – controversial, disputable, debatable.
- ❖ **count** (verb) – consider, regard as, judge.
- ❖ **rescue package** (noun) – bailout package, revival package; the set of loans, investments, or other financial advantages that are offered to a company, economy, etc. to save it from financial failure.
- ❖ **parliamentary oversight** (noun) – Through its core oversight function, parliament holds the government to account on behalf of the people, ensuring that government policy and action are both efficient and commensurate (appropriate) with the needs of the public. Parliamentary oversight is also crucial in checking excesses (uncontrolled/unrestricted behaviour) on the part of the government. There can be no democratic system of government without transparency and accountability.
- ❖ **much-derided** (adjective) – much-ridiculed, much-dismissed.
- ❖ **ironically** (adverb) – paradoxically, unexpectedly, strangely.
- ❖ **legacy** (noun) – something received from a predecessor or from the past.
- ❖ **monument** (noun) – example, exemplar, model. (living monument – current/contemporary example of something).
- ❖ **semblance** (noun) – appearance, approximation; likeness, similarity.
- ❖ **modicum** (noun) – little bit, small amount.
- ❖ **underline** (verb) – emphasize, underscore, highlight.
- ❖ **generous** (adjective) – liberal, free-handed, unstinting; kind, big-hearted.
- ❖ **humane** (adjective) – compassionate, considerate, sympathetic, kind-hearted.
- ❖ **responsive** (adjective) – reactive, sensitive, sympathetic.