

Modi must extend coronavirus lockdown, bad idea to allow industry to restart

Not enough done to test or check the spread; allowing manufacturing right now will take both lives & livelihood

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It is easy to argue, as many economists and those in industry are, that India is likely to lose more lives from the impact of an extended lockdown – since people won't have any money as economic activity grinds to a halt – than from the coronavirus. So, the argument goes, rather than extending the lockdown, as appears likely when the prime minister addresses the nation at 10am on Tuesday, allow manufacturing to restart, in a staggered manner, with appropriate social distancing; a refined version of this argument pitches for opening up manufacturing in areas that have a lower coronavirus infection level.

There are many problems with this argument; to begin with, in posing the question as a “lives versus livelihood” one. Without a lockdown – and all that comes with it, like social distancing and quarantining – there is no certainty that the virus will not spread like wildfire. The latest numbers from CDDEP are looking at 73 crore Indians getting infected by September and over one crore needing hospitalization; so it is difficult to understand how people believe livelihood won't be affected if lives are not saved. The purpose of the lockdown is to give India's overstretched medical infrastructure room to breathe.

At its peak, CDDEP is looking at 13.5 crore people being infected and 19 lakh requiring hospitalization in a moderate lockdown scenario; right now, India has 10-12 lakh beds, and several other diseases competing for these very beds. It is possible to argue – and quite convincingly – that models such as CDDEP's are full of assumptions that could just as easily go wrong, but who would have thought a country as advanced as the US would already have seen more than 20,000 deaths with the final number expected to be anywhere between five and 10 times as high.

Nor is it clear how this staggered exit is to be made. For one, the number of coronavirus-affected districts in the country has risen from 284 to 354 in just the last week, and this will rise as there is more testing and more cases are reported; so allowing units in certain areas to start operating is not really feasible. Also, any opening up of even what are termed 'essential' units will ensure the benefits of the lockdown will effectively kill the lockdown. Indian industry does not have the capacity to house even a fraction of its employees. So, if workers are coming to the factory every morning and leaving in the evening, just imagine what that does to the lockdown. In any case, as can be seen from the huge violations of the lockdown –

like politicians holding functions or the lack of social distancing when people line up to get rations – even a moderate lockdown is a stretch in the country.

Nor is it clear as to how the units that are to be opened up will be selected, even if you assume that they will work at 50% capacity with the workers rotated every alternate day; this will allow all of them to get paid their full salary. After all, if you allow a Maruti Suzuki to resume operations – larger units are more likely to be able to maintain ‘social distance’ between employees – how does it work if there are no supplies; this means smaller ancillaries need to be allowed to work as well. While indications are the central government is planning to leave the details to the states, this seems a bad idea because, over time, pretty much most of industry will be allowed to function.

Of course, a permanent lockdown is not a solution either, more so since there is no cure in sight for the coronavirus right now, nor is there any vaccine that has been tested; in any case, administering a vaccine across India’s population will also take several months even if you assume the vaccine is approved and produced in sufficient quantities very soon. Those arguing for an exit strategy are right in that India needs one, but this cannot even be contemplated till India has a better fix on controlling the spread of the virus and, more important, on being able to understand the size of the problem we are dealing with.

This requires, for instance, a dramatic scaling up of not just testing, but tracking of people the infected people have met, and then isolating them; as we saw from the Tablighi case, this is a very tough job. Indeed, there is a view that India is dealing with community transmission of coronavirus. A recent ICMR study of patients infected with Severe Acute Respiratory Illness – acute coronavirus cases show SARI-like symptoms – created panic as it showed that 40% of the patients did not report any history of either travel overseas or contact with a person who had coronavirus. Were there to be proper tracking of people the infected people had met, it may well turn out that they had been exposed to infected people and that community transmission has not actually begun.

Issues like this need to be studied in detail and, for now, the government’s attempt has to be to provide relief to crores of workers who have lost their livelihood and to find solutions to prevent lakhs of enterprises from shutting down; this involves a relief package worth of Rs 5-10 lakh crore and loan guarantees and moratoriums of all sorts for all manufacturing and service sector units. Pressuring the government to open the lockdown in a hurry is a bad idea.