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The Pandemic and the Humanitarian crisis:

Fixing Responsibility, Finding Solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has put governance of nations and international institutions to the test. Nations that have been able to contain the spread of the corona virus have only revealed the foresightedness of their leaders and the efficiency of their institutions of governance. Some nations have displayed high levels of preparedness and resolve to protect their people from the fast spreading virus and reducing the deaths caused it. However, many advanced nations have failed to deal with the pandemic effectively resulting in higher number of deaths.

Image Source: CNN

The Pandemic and Humanitarian crisis

India experienced the onset of the virus on 30th January 2020, when the first case of the corona virus was detected in Kerala from among students returning from Wuhan, China. Kerala, with a well developed healthcare system, was able to successfully contain the spread of the virus in the State. However, India did not take the onset of the pandemic seriously and allowed international flights to continue till 23rd March, in spite of knowing the possibility of infected people arriving in India from February 2020. After realising the gravity of the pandemic, the Prime Minister announced a 'Janata curfew' on 22nd March followed by a complete nationwide lockdown on 24th March giving the people of the country only a 4 hour notice à la demonetisation style. On 24th March there were only 564 infected cases reported from 175 out of the 739 districts in India. Since a majority of the districts were not affected by the virus, the necessity of a nationwide lockdown needs to be questioned.

All of a sudden millions of people were stranded as all modes of transport were suspended. At the stroke of midnight, millions of migrant workers, daily wagers, and informal workers lost their jobs, livelihoods, sources of income and shelter. Sensing that the Mahabharat analogy of defeating corona virus in 21 days will fail, thousands of migrant workers rushed to bus stations and sought ways to return home at the earliest. The foolhardiness of those who consider themselves 'wise' leaders was further exposed when they insensitively sealed the borders brutalising people walking home and decided to feed them in relief camps. This policy decision undoubtedly resulted in a humanitarian crisis that unravelled as an estimated 50 million migrant workers defied lockdown rules of the ruling elite and began risking their lives to reach home: trekking, walking on roads or railway tracks, cycling, getting on to cargo trucks, and any available means of transport. This was undoubtedly the largest exodus of people the world had ever witnessed in its history going beyond even the exodus due to the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947.

Heartrending scenes and stories of migrants travelling hungry and thirsty shook the conscience of the people of the nation. News of migrants dying of exhaustion, hunger, being run over by trains on the tracks or vehicles on the roads made many citizens hang their heads in shame and remorse at the

treatment meted out to migrant workers who once built and ran our cities. As the lockdown kept getting extended even into May 2020, the wisdom of the poor triumphed when the Government was compelled to arrange thousands of buses and trains as late as the first week of May to ferry millions of stranded migrants back home.

This late realisation of the need to reach millions of people home during a pandemic has only increased the spread of the virus as infected migrants are spreading the virus in the hinterland. As a result, the sudden national lockdown has turned out to be a big failure as even after over two months of lockdown, the economy of the country has been flattened but the rate of spread of the virus has not flattened but increased. In a desperate attempt to salvage the economy, the Government has resigned to opening up of the economy and all modes of travel from June regardless of the further spread of the virus and increase in the death toll.

The pandemic and the humanitarian crisis has been an eye opener on the type of citizenry, leadership, and governance in the country.

Citizenry

This pandemic and the policy induced humanitarian crisis that unfolded revealed four types of citizenry: 1) those who are opportunistic as they use the adversity and vulnerability of people to exploit them to their advantage. House owners who evicted migrant workers for being unable to pay rent for their accommodation, truck drivers who collected Rs. 2,500 to Rs. 4,000 to ferry migrant workers to their destinations, and middlemen who demanded money for railway tickets on Shramik trains are some illustrations of such citizens; 2) the large majority of people who remained at home trying to protect themselves from getting infected by the virus. Many of these are apathetic to the plight of the suffering masses and are more concerned about protecting themselves. Some are so paranoid of being infected that they ostracize and even engage in violence against medical personnel, and the dead; 3) those who faithfully remained at home but used the lockdown to engage in creative activities. Such citizens composed music, recorded songs, wrote insightful articles and reports, organised online programmes and engaged in creative ways of work and life within the confines of their home; 4) those known as 'corona warriors' who are at the forefront risking their lives trying to help people infected or affected by the pandemic.

The heroic witness of doctors, nurses, hospital staff, police, government officials, socially sensitive media personnel, social workers and members of non-governmental organisations engaged in relief work bears testimony to the better side of our citizenry. In this regard, Church personnel from many Dioceses, including Jesuits from across the length and breadth of India, reached out to the poor, especially stranded migrants, providing them food, financial assistance and other necessary materials for their survival.

Leadership

The global crisis caused by the pandemic brought to the forefront three types of leaders depending on their responses to the crisis: 1) One who has rhetoric but no substance. Such a leader makes tall promises that cannot be fulfilled. He likes to announce big economic packages that will actually amount to a trickle in terms of relief for the affected, engage in symbolisms

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Image Source: Free Press Journal

adequate and timely transport for those stranded and want to go back home, restricting travel, imposing restrictions only in areas where there are infected people, taking care of vulnerable populations, etc. 2) Moderately good governance, where the State is initially ill prepared to deal with the crisis but gradually gets its act together with timely measures that ensure the containment of the spread of the virus and care of the vulnerable. 3) Good governance, manifested in timely interventions to prevent the virus from spreading in communities, ensuring the economy is up and running, and the vulnerable are taken care of. For example, Kerala referred to the migrants as 'guest workers' and organised 15,541 relief camps for them. Community kitchens were functioning at the Panchayat levels to ensure that no migrant worker went hungry. Kerala also provided them with shelters, healthcare benefits, educational allowances for children, and financial support to transport the mortal remains in case of natural death.

Search for Solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the hidden contribution (up to 10% of the GDP) of the estimated 175 million 'invisible people' called migrant workers. Since they largely work in the informal sector, they do not have employment security, income security or social security.

Solutions, therefore, lie in greater investment in the labour force in India.

1. There should be a robust social protection mechanism, where every worker is registered with digital registration cards having inter-State portability to access benefits in any part of India. It should provide food security, health insurance, free education for children, access to financial institutions, access to skill programmes, house rent allowance, unemployment benefits, etc.

2. All labour laws must be inclusive to include all formal and informal workers, and should adhere to the decent work standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

3. There is a need for an Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme along the lines of MGNREGA to cater to the urban poor.

4. There should be publicly funded low cost housing for the poor in urban areas in the place of unauthorised colonies and slums.

5. Greater emphasis on sustainable agriculture and rural development is the need of the hour so that there is no distress migration to urban centres.

Let us hope that the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis that followed, are taken seriously and efforts are made to make India more caring of its vulnerable population, especially the migrant and unorganised workforce.

like invoking mythologies, lighting lamps, showering petals from Air Force jets, or the banging of pots and pans. Such measures neither contain the spread of the virus nor provide succour to stranded migrants. They only boost the image of the populist leader and his popularity ratings. Such leaders are more concerned about using adversity to get political mileage since in a crisis situation people normally tend to support an embattled leader to lead them out. They use the lockdown to consolidate their authority, target political opponents and weaken federal democratic structures and institutions. 2) Those that care more about the economy than the spread of the virus. Such leaders are against a complete lockdown. They prefer to live with the virus and keep normal life and business going, with certain precautionary measures, as the economy gets a priority. 3) Those who are concerned about both the economy and the health of the people. Such leaders act promptly by restricting international and domestic travel early, focus on testing, contact tracing, isolating infected people and treating them till they recover. They also ensure adequate protective equipment for health workers and the general public so that life can return to normal at the earliest. They also ensure that those who are vulnerable are adequately taken care of.

Governance

Governance matters in times of crisis. The type of governance is reflected in the ability to contain the spread of the virus and care for people. There are three types of governance that has been witnessed in this time of crisis: 1) bad governance, where decisions taken are ill timed, ill advised and often without scientific or medical basis. In such a case, there is little attention given to priority issues such as increasing testing, adequate protective equipment to healthcare workers,

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