

Urban Polity Under the Clout of Corona: The Policy Responses

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Prologue:

The COVID-19 crisis that has hit the whole of humanity and its impact is unprecedented in terms of scale, spread and spill having a far-reaching effect on the well-being of the population. The pandemic brought the entire nation to a halt leaving the government with no option other than a lockdown to contain the spread and posed immediate challenges on people's health, lives and livelihood, while its long term effects are likely to be deep and wide-ranging. Its total cost in terms of human lives and drudgery is yet to be unfurled. The world is witnessing an economic downfall along with deepened health crisis.. Disruption in livelihoods and jobs with cascading social implications on a sizeable population is apparent. Isolation of infected individual and groups linked with social distancing has imposed an inordinate social and economic cost.

The existing policy triad – social distancing, quarantine and isolation of target population/area along with total lockdown have plunged the economy deeper into the crisis. Ceased production and consumption activities, crashing markets, closure of business leading to massive layoffs in the informal sector has created hardships before the working population moreover, the urban poor. Restriction on movement, lack of transport and sealed borders have interrupted the local-global value chain. It further added drudgery and plight for the migrant workforce of the cities. Almost two months-long lockdowns have badly affected even those also who are slightly above the poverty line and do not receive support under any welfare schemes targeted for poor households. This population of “non-poor- poor” in urban areas are also facing acute problems caused by Corona led lockdown.

Strategy to Quieten Clever Corona: Not Yielded Desired Result

The current subduing strategy has not brought transmission rates down to the expected level and breaking the chain of infection in many major cities. If we fail to quieten it spread will increase in geometric progression and at the peak level of a pandemic the total cases would touch 1,65,122 on May 31, 3,95,727 on June 15, it will rise to 11,22, 839 on June (Ghosh, 2020). On average, India has reported 6,102 cases over the last five days. The corresponding number for the previous five days was 4,753. The data, which is based on official figures from

states, shows that about a third of the total cases have been reported over the past week (HT, 2020). The Centre and State governments have been trying hard to check the spread of coronavirus by tracking, isolating and treating the infected persons, even then the gradual rise of the pandemic in cities is worrisome.

It appears that preparedness for caseload must be the highest priority at this time. The state must expand bed capacity, oxygen flow masks and tanks and ventilators (Eili Klein, 2020). It is a high time when government and private health care providers may take a call to provide health care access in most under-served areas. Data on access to health services and COVID-19 testing locations can help cities to pinpoint hotspots. For example, the Government of Delhi has prepared an online map indicating population density and health infrastructure available excluding Mohalla Clinics. This has enabled the government to visualize the problem and preparing a plan to solve it. This map also highlights which areas would benefit most from emergency clinics.

Urban Agglomerations: The Epi-centre of Coronavirus

Global data provided by worldometer.com discloses that Coronavirus spread is largely mega and million+ cities centric. The deep impact of it has been largely felt in the larger urban agglomerations and most urbanised nations across the globe. The European countries like Italy (71%), Russia (73%), Germany (77.31%), France (80.44%), Spain (81%), United Kingdom (83%), have more than three fourth of their population residing in urban areas along with Brazil in South America (86%) and United States of America (82.26%). Among Asian countries, China and Turkey house 60 and 70 per cent urban population respectively in their urban spaces. Putting the infected population of these ten countries together (42,38,943) reveals that almost 66.03 % of Coronaviruses infected population of the world (64,19,294) reside here only as on the 2nd of June 2020.

Indian story related to the magnitude of infection is not different from the world. As per coronavirus-India-update-state-wise-total-number-of-confirmed-cases-deaths as of 2nd of June 2020, the more urbanised states like Delhi (98 %), Tamil Nadu (48 %), Maharashtra (45 %) and Gujarat (43 %) have nearly 1,31,542 cases of infection which accounts for 66.2 per cent of the total infected population cases (1,98,706) in the country. Desegregated data of larger cities of India mainly Mumbai and Delhi alone have about 31.62 per cent of all the cases in the country.

The story of Madhya Pradesh is not different from the national. As of 2nd of June 2020, the Madhya Pradesh reported a total of 8283 Corona versus infected cases. Only three cities namely Bhopal (1641), Indore (3570) and Ujjain (680) have a total number of 5891 cases which accounts for 71.12 per cent of the total number of infected persons.

The concentration of infection in larger urban agglomeration maybe because of higher population density, lack of adequate sanitation and hygiene slum areas. Using common facilities like a water tap, toilets and urinal these areas demean the social distancing and isolation strategy to check virus spread. The pattern of settlement in these areas makes it impossible to maintain social distance. reported in the state.

The Economic and Social Aftermath of Coronavirus

COVID 19 has triggered the global economic recession. The global economy is likely to experience a historic decline in output in the second quarter of 2020. J.P. Morgan expects a double-digit contraction in global growth in the first half of the year, with GDP contractions through the second quarter or until the outbreak fades. India being no exception has also received the brunt of the blow. By all counts, the macroeconomic and financial conditions are grim. Two months-long lockdowns have a severe impact on domestic economic activities.

India's six most industrialised states having a larger contribution (60%) in the industrial output are either in red or orange zones. A collapse in demand across both urban and rural segments is evident. Private consumption, which accounts for about 60 per cent of domestic demand received a serious blow. Electricity and petroleum products consumption – indicators of day to day demand – have plunged into steep declines. A twofold blow in terms of losses of both demand and production has, in turn, taken its toll on fiscal revenues. The production of consumer durables fell by 33 per cent in March 2020, accompanied by a 16 per cent decline in the output of non-durables. Similar indications are reflected in surveys of the fast-moving consumer goods space. In the production sectors, industrial production shrank by close to 17 per cent in March 2020, with manufacturing activity down by 21 per cent. The output of core industries, which constitutes about 40 per cent of overall industrial production, contracted by 6.5 per cent. The manufacturing PMI for April recorded its sharpest deterioration to 27.4, spread across all sectors. The services PMI plunged to an all all-time low of 5.4 in April 2020. Uncertainties imposed by the COVID 19, GDP growth in 2020-21 is estimated to remain in negative territory (Das, 2020).

Urban India facilitates radical changes in technology, innovation in the mode of production, the pattern of consumption and linking product and services with the global market. All these provide ideal condition to macro-economic forces to grow. The total lockdown has created turmoil and impacted social and economic fabric as well stopped primary sector activities abruptly and put it in disarray. Slowed down economic activities in urban areas has effected rural economy as well in terms of loss of rural incomes which were accruing by migration and daily-wage labourers.

Measures to Combat the Impact of Coronavirus

The Government of India announced policy measures to revive the economy. These policy announcements are largely production centric (agriculture, industry and MSMEs) and in the form of an economic booster to counteract the impact on individual, family and community. However, there is a need to broaden the existing policy response in light of the association between work and poverty. Varied aspects of “work and poverty”, more specifically – social, economic and health must be analysed in the right based framework. Urban poor represents existing development dichotomy in urban areas. They act as a centripetal force in industry and service sector but urban design and other factors propel centrifugal forces and spill them over the fringe of the urban entitlement. With the relaxation in lockdown, industries are set for production but centripetal forces for production is missing. Urban areas have not cared enough for them and they were forced to leave urban centres. On-going reverse migration is now a new worry for the urban centre. The present scenario necessitates a detailed plan of action to protect the larger interest of the urban poor. This will prevent the breakdown of the larger economic system and the urban political economy. The present crisis requires non-conventional responses and to manage and capacitate the size of the economies to recover growth after the shock.

Distribution of free ration and direct transfers of benefits to the households by the government has made spending more efficient and may produce a larger aggregated impact on consumption. However, existing targeted schemes may not be optimal while the majority of the population are facing severe hardships. The national and state governments may have to scale up welfare programmes through Universal Basic Income (UBI) Programmes. The most important aspect of a UBI is that it is universal. Everyone, irrespective of their economic positioning is eligible to receive exactly the same amount of cash. UBI is unconditional. Against criticisms that such schemes would dis-incentivise work, studies have shown to the contrary. Indeed, one pilot run by the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in

Madhya Pradesh revealed that giving money to everyone in the study area led to improvements in health, educational and productivity outcome (Roy, 2020).^[1] Protecting and empowering creates more sustainable and thriving environments for everyone.

Existing heterogeneity in social, economic assets and holdings, income, access to public health, essential basic services and many other associated social aspects leads to vulnerability for individuals and households in an economic and social lockdown of this kind. People engaged in the informal sector, small and micro enterprises, women in precarious employment conditions, excluded groups such as slum dwellers and economically deprived women and children would require positive discrimination. It has also been reported that during the lockdown, strenuous time spent in the family has contributed to the vulnerability of those who are exposed to abuse (women and children especially the girl child). The total lockdown made it more difficult for them to seek help and assistance from formal and informal institutions. Social distancing measures have heightened the incidence of domestic violence that includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Morgan, 2020). Non-availability of mid-day meal in Schools and Aanganwadis to children of low-income families and total shut down of schools to maintain social isolation and distancing may increase the dropout rates in the schools.

The Coronavirus teachings for the Indian cities emerged as the need for deeper and more trusted partnerships with communities to respond to such challenges and protect their economic, political, and cultural rhythm. Community and citizen are the main source of energy and have the ability to shape their response. To harness community and citizens' potentials cities will have to adopt more responsive policies, strategic actions, budget allocations and channels of communication. It would need to creating a system to generate comprehensive data of infrastructure, identification of high-risk locations in terms of water, sanitation and overall basic amenities. This exercise may reduce future public health risks and will facilitate informed decision and action in urban planning. A trusted partnership with citizens' and community may help in closing the urban services divide and facilitate in build back better and more equitable urban society which may withstand better in such a crisis.

In the 1990s, a plague outbreak in Surat, led to the setting up of a citywide health monitoring cell in the municipal government. Today it is helping the city in combating COVID-19. Likewise, East Asian cities like Hong Kong and Singapore have been able to respond better to COVID-19 in their part because of public health surveillance systems set up in response to the SARS outbreak from 2002-2003. It has become helpful in checking the COVID 19. Partnership with citizens' and community help to understand better the ground situation and effectively

communicate key health messages. It also provides community solutions, such as donation distribution networks and public campaigns.

The growing number of Resident Welfare Association (RWAs) in cities reveals a pattern of “intertwine urbanism”. RERA clause has given RWAs control over the “affairs of their gated space”, which included management of sanitation, water, street light, maintenance of the park and common spaces including resident welfare activities. Amidst COVID 19, most of the RWAs (Resident Welfare Societies) have become more active in terms of sanitation, hygiene and well-being of their residents. Thermal screening, providing sanitizers, provision of washbasin at common areas, circles made of chalk outside their provisions shops at strictly-guarded gates are seen in many RWAs. Some RWAs have quickly acted to check the spread of fake news within their gated communities while others have actively been involved in the dissemination of safety measures to be taken in their respective spaces.

They are also joining hands to provide food and rations for the out-of-work daily-wage labourers in their neighbourhoods, witness the extraordinary instances of community spirit. Many of them are becoming the first line of defence against the coronavirus pandemic and found a greater call to serve humanity. It seems that they can be an extended arm of local and civil government in combating Infection-control and an effective agency in preventing opportunistic, environmentally-related infections in immune-compromised populations.

Refocusing Urban Planning

Jesse Wentz, an outspoken advocate for Indigenous rights recently said on CBC Radio One, Canada “A pandemic doesn’t care about social inequalities, but it does follow them,” By saying so, he has articulated the need to refocus thinking and action in urban planning. The urban-centric nature of pandemic has urban poor vulnerable victims. The present principle and belief of urban planning revalidated inequitable distribution of basic civic amenities in urban areas. Lack of public utilities and spaces for those who are living on economic and spatial margin is quite apparent. Long term, large-scale investments in social and basic services infrastructure such as water, sanitation, housing and health care is essential. Need not to reiterate that population hinging on spatial margin is the important driver of urban development and enjoy their monopoly as the provider of essential services. They are the dynamo of the city, the powerhouse of the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourer, engaged in multifarious unorganised activities such as loaders and unloaders (Hammals), tricycle pullers, auto and taxi drivers, barbers, washer(wo)men, plumber, electrician, *safai karmi*, garbage pickers, street

vendors, newspaper vendors, domestic help, brick kiln workers and construction workers and so on so forth. They are largely migrated from villages to cities and towns and producers of all kinds of cheap consumer articles. In the words of a humanist–sociologist Jan Breman (1994 and 1997), they are “wage hunters and gatherers” and “footloose labourers.” (Kannan, 2020).

Shaken Real Estate

The real estate industry is also facing great uncertainty due to COVID-19. At an individual level, social distancing precautions have reduced house views, a key part of the selling process, and both buyers and sellers are having to reconsider their plans. Increasingly, sellers are looking for reassurance regarding the health of potential buyers coming to view properties (Maria Nicola, 2020). Some brokers are offering house tours via Skype and FaceTime to minimise the risk of infection propagation. Brokers around the United States are also asking potential buyers to preregister for viewings to gauge their level of interest and likelihood of purchase (Kaufman, 2020).

Conclusion:

Benevolent, strong and resilient leadership in healthcare, business and government in the demand of the day. Rebalancing and re-energising the economy and society is a daunting task before them. Medium and longer-term socio-economic development plan including sectoral plans and its implementation in letter and spirit of the plan is the first and foremost task. Creating an ecosystem that encourages entrepreneurship and allows them to flourish. It is prudent that governments and financial institutions constantly re-assess and re-evaluate the state of play and ensure that the ‘whatever it takes’ promise made in policy announcement is faithfully delivered.

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