

Lessons from COVID-19 and Lockdown: “Development” Prevails over Justice?

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 became an obstacle for India moving forward within the mainstream “development” framework. It has had implications not only on the economy of the country but on the daily lives of people. In a recent webinar on “Lockdown and Rural Distress”, Mr. P. Sainath brilliantly articulated the different aspects of the lockdown due to COVID-19 and the implications of it on certain groups of people. The document summarizes the lecture given by Sainath and tries to bring out the major aspects with regard to vulnerabilities of people from UNNATI’s work and the challenges that the country is about to face in the recent future.

Introduction

A number of people view the COVID-19 situation as a great leveler in the country. However, that can never be true. The impact of crisis is never equal. In fact, like all other disasters in the past, COVID-19 presents a vivid scenario of neo-liberalism and capitalism in its full might, that exposes the vulnerable society when there are talks about economic growth as if the economic equality doesn't exist at all. There is very less distance between food insecurity, hunger and starvation. It has been observed all over the country how difficult it is for the vulnerable groups (tribal groups, Dalits, others) to access the public schemes in normal time. And at the time of such crisis, it gets worse. The term "social distancing" has become very popular amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, only to reinforce the Indian form of social distancing that is - caste, which has been around for centuries now.

In a study conducted by UNNATI recently in Bhachau(Kutch) and Poshina(Sabarkantha) blocks of Gujarat, it was found out that through Direct Benefit Transfer, a sum of amount was deposited in the bank account of people, however with the lockdown in place, to withdraw that money from the bank was nothing less than nightmare for people. They stood in long queues for 5-6 hours in the heat, who traveled minimum of 10-12 kilometers to get there in the first place. A sum of rupees 500 was deposited to the Jan Dhan accounts of women and they were expected to travel the same distance amidst the lockdown and withdraw the money from the banks. Many people do not have their documents or updated phone numbers linked to their accounts, because of which they are not even aware of the received money. The Banking Correspondents have not been able to go to the GPs and distribute the money because of the fingerprint verification in the biometric machine due to the risk for COVID-19.

The fate of migrant workers

With a lot of attention given to the movement of the migrant workers across the country, one big question that is around the corner when the workers get back to their native places is that of their food security. People are entering the villages in large numbers and daunting threat of hunger looming over them. This is at the same time the government has decided to use major yield of rice for making ethanol for the production of hand sanitizers. It doesn't end there, almost 48 hours of work needs to be finished in

10 hours. With the rules in place and the speed required for the job, laborers have to work these ten hours in the scorching heat ranging from 43-46° Celsius. Not to mention, the rice eating states are going to be severely hit by this decision. With some states announcing extra hours of work for laborers (from 8 to 12 hours), states like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have no provisions of overtime for these extra hours, which suspends a major part of the labor laws in the country. With food security in question, water security cannot be forgotten. A good number of districts in the country are already entering their annual cycle of water scarcity, while people are expected to be washing their hands 6-8 times a day.

In the 2011 Census, urban India added more humans to the 2001 tally, which is around 46 million people shifting from rural to urban areas, showing the massive distress migration in the countryside in the last decade. Sainath points out that in the previous years, India witnessed 3.15 lakh farmer suicides, which presents the collapsed agriculture sector and allied activities. Now with the migrant workers going back to the native places, they are going back to the livelihoods that do not exist anymore. In Gujarat alone, around 20 lakh migrant workers had registered for travelling back to their homes. It is also important to stress that not only inter-state migrants, but workers from other districts (approx. 3.94 lakh) have also travelled back to their home towns/ villages. With that being said, the rural to rural migration cannot be ignored.

What about the non-migrants?

People who are engaged in other livelihoods like weavers, crafts persons (handloom and handicraft), toy makers, pastoral nomads, fishermen/women to mention a few, have been suffering and are on the verge of starvation in many areas.

Fisher folks: Sainath explained the plight of the fishing community. April 15 to June 14 is considered to be the breeding season for the fishes, which means that two weeks before April 15, is their peak earning season. However, that period was under complete lockdown. Still these people took the risk of their lives and got some fish for eating and selling if some was left. People have bought those fish at one-fourth of their price, citing that they have got news that the fish came from China carrying COVID-19 and other baseless information shared on social media.

Weavers, crafts persons and pastoral nomads: The handicraft market is the second biggest employer in India. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, the big chains have cancelled major bulk orders. At many places, the products were already produced. Similarly, toy makers of Varanasi are not very far away from starvation. Pastoral nomads who were out with their flocks have been stuck in different terrain; for example, in the high altitudes of the Himalayas.

According to the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE), 122 million jobs (non-farming) were lost in April, 2020 itself. Out of these, 93.5 million were those with small stores, street vendors, small restaurants and likewise. It is most likely that 30-40% of these will not be able to restart or come back. To add to these, even thousands of journalists have been laid off in this period. Countries like the United Kingdom are providing 80% of the wages to people. In the Indian context this is also possible but not being done. In that case, at least MGNREGS should be implemented effectively in such times of crisis.

Health and Education

The front line “warriors” of COVID-19 apart for the doctors are the nurses, the sanitation workers, ASHA workers and others who have been working day and night to respond to COVID-19. More than 5 million sanitation workers are on contracts, who were earlier government employees and hence, have no additional benefits and their pay is also less. On the health front, a need for a National Health System (NHS) is required. For example, countries like Spain and Ireland have nationalized all private facilities till they are dealing with COVID-19. In India, only Maharashtra has taken that step that too very recently, where they have roped in 80% of their private hospitals. Sainath points out that this should have been the very first step. The lockdown was not planned and strategized resulting in current adverse scenario in the country. Another issue that is pressing is that of the risks in slums like Dharavi in Mumbai for example. While some are raising questions with regard to people not following the lockdown rules, staying at home in a slum like Dharavi is itself a violation of those rules. To maintain physical distance is almost impossible and the risk of transmission of COVID-19 is extremely high.

Talking about education, Sainath states that most private schools are going leaps and bounds to make their classes and curriculum online and use the digital platform in a

steady manner as soon as possible. However, the question is what about the government schools? The education sector being the worst funded sectors in the country, what resources are available to them to make these changes? What about the students who do not have access to smart phones or other devices required for accessing such form of education? He raised these questions with utmost concern trying to articulate the challenges that the government education schools and their children are going to face in the coming future.

The need of a “Justice Framework”

When the rest of the countries are realizing that may be they went a little too overboard with privatization, India is moving further ahead with privatizing facilities. Given the fact a Boston Consulting group is analyzing COVID-19 in the government control room in Delhi, which raises an alarm in that direction. Hence, Sainath carefully explained that to go ahead through the prism of the mainstream “development” framework would be a complete failure. By the mainstream “development” framework, he means the capitalism. What is needed at this point is the “justice framework”. Justice in every aspect: health, food, livelihood, education. He gave the example of the work of Kutumbhashree who believe that the producers must never go hungry. He brought in the concepts of health justice and food justice citing the work of Kutumbhashree. The neo-liberals conveniently blaming the poor for being poor as they don’t work hard enough; a whole generation being brainwashed by the media; and priorities that serve only a few, needs to be curtailed. He concluded with stating that a well-informed citizenry needs to be developed for addressing all sectors mentioned above.¹

¹ References and other details/reports, etc. can be found on the website of the People’s Archives of Rural India



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