

Is relaxing the Lockdown correct?

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On 24th March 2020, the Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered a nationwide lockdown, limiting the movement of the entire 1.3 billion population of India as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic. Since there is no vaccine available for coronavirus as yet, lockdown was the only way to curb its spread. The University of Oxford marked the lockdown as the most stringent in the world marking it 100 out of 100. Based on estimated models from various independent sources, it was predicted that lockdown process helped avert 14-29 lakh cases and 37000-78000 deaths. Therefore, the stringent lockdown had helped to contain the spread of a highly contagious disease in the 2nd most populous country of the world.

But all this came at a huge economic cost. Amid the lockdown, India's electricity demand fell to a 5 month as on 28th March 2020. The economic impact of lockdown has been largely disruptive. The World Bank and rating agencies had initially downgraded India's growth for the fiscal year 2021 with the lowest figures India has seen in 3 decades. The State bank of India research estimates a contraction of over 40% in GDP in Q1 FY21. Within a month, unemployment rose substantially. The Indian economy was expected to lose Rs.32000 crores every day during lockdown 1.0. Under complete lockdown, less than a quarter of India's \$2.8 trillion economic movement was functional and up to 53% of businesses in the country were projected to be significantly affected. Due to lockdown, more than 350 deaths were reported as of 15th May 2020 with reasons ranging from starvation, suicides, denial of timely medical care etc. The worst hit section of society is of daily wage workers who have no money left for their survival and are in desperate need of a job. This necessitated the need to relax restrictions under lockdown.

After staying for 3 months under lockdown, the Government is pushing the easing of restrictions in lockdown. In lockdown 5.0, a 3-stage strategy has been adopted by the Delhi Government to open the economy in a phased manner outside the contaminated zones. In phase-1, religious places, hotels and restaurants will be opened. In phase-2, educational institutions will be opened and in phase-3, international air travel, metro rail services and cinema halls etc. will be opened. Lockdown will be continuing in contaminated zones till June 30. But apparently this is not a good move as more or less it fails the purpose of a lockdown as it can be seen that as the government is easing the restrictions, the cases are rising more rapidly because when the lockdown used to be stringent, cases used to be within the range of hundreds but ever since the restrictions have been relaxed, daily cases have started to touch the above thousand mark. Though Delhi Government claims that it has arranged for sufficient beds for surge in cases but just arranging for more beds cannot be a solution for a disease which has no cure.

The motive of the government to unlock the country in phases has good intentions in regard to the economic welfare of country but it lacks a practical touch. In a situation where both economic activity and social distancing is important, resumption of only essential and semi-essential activities should be allowed. Non-essential institutions like religious places, cinema halls, entertainment parks etc. should be shut until the nation gets free of the pandemic. Till that time, compensation of losses of these institutions should be borne by the government. Only grocery stores, hospitals, educational institutions, sports facilities only for professionals etc. should be allowed to resume. Even for educational institutions, the help of E – classes should be taken to provide education and those who don't have access to such technology should be allowed to come at these places; for grocery stores, home delivery should be used to maximum extent and restaurants should solely rely on home delivery. Metro services should be resumed but only with strict social distancing measures. In offices, people only with very important responsibilities should be called and rest of the workers should continue to work from home. Contaminated zones should continue with current restrictions.

Though resumption of activities is very important, but we need to understand that it is not possible to 'live with corona' as the disease is fatal to both old and infants and also for people with co-morbidities. Therefore, restrictions of lockdown should continue and relaxations should only be allowed where it is possible for economy to stay alive without affecting the health of citizens. The government would have to incur great expenditures for non-essential industries but the duo of economic activity while slowing the spread of the disease would require such a cost. Therefore, the decision to 'unlock' the economy should not be taken to flourish the economy but only for its mere survival as during the time of pandemic where a simple movement from outside the homes can become a matter of life and death, survival should be the utmost task. By: Sarthak.S.Kain

College: Maharaja Agrasen College

Summary

At a stage where the world has come under a double-edged sword where resumption of economic activity would lead to loss of lives and saving lives could devastate the economy, the decision to save both seems to be quite tough. At this stage after staying in lockdown for 3 months, the government has decided to unlock the economy and bring back life to normal; but during the times of crisis where the country is facing its biggest challenge in decades, there is a need to adapt to the 'New normal'. This 'New normal' is something which can save the lives of people and keep the economy breathing. Therefore, the decisions of unlock 1.0 should go under consideration with only essential and semi-essential activities being allowed to resume as it can save the country from coronavirus until a vaccine is found.



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