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ijirset@gmail.com

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The Functioning of Government in Response to Covid 19 Pandemic

¹Dr. Vijay laxmi Mishra, ²Dr. Reena Chaturvedi, ³Aarif Khan, ⁴Aakanksha Tarunnum, ³Garima Sharma

¹Asst. Professor, Dept. of Public Administration, SS Jain Subodh PG Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jaipur, India

²Head of Dept. of Psychology, Stani Memorial PG College, Jaipur, India

³Research Scholar, Dept. of Biotechnology & Microbiology, MJRP University, Jaipur, India

⁴Research Scholar, Dept. of Botany, MJRP University, Jaipur, India

ABSTRACT: On January 17, 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare acknowledged the emergence of a new coronavirus (COVID-19) that was spreading across China. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 disease to be a global pandemic. As of April 7, 2020, there are 4,421 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in India. Of these, 326 patients have been cured/discharged and 114 have died.

All state/UT governments have been directed to: (i) arrange for shelter and food for the needy, including migrant workers, (ii) quarantine migrant workers for at least 14 days, (iii) direct employers to pay wages during the lockdown, and (iv) ensure landlords do not demand rent from workers and students for one month.

I.INTRODUCTION

Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana to provide relief against COVID-19

On March 26, the Finance Minister announced a relief package of 1.7 lakh crore rupees under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor.[10] Key features of the package are:[1]

- Insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh will be provided to health workers (such as doctors, nurses, paramedics and ASHA workers) who are treating patients of COVID-19.
- Five kilograms of wheat or rice and one kilogram of preferred pulses will be provided for free every month to poor families for the next three months.
- Women account holders under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana will get Rs 500 per month between April and June, and poor families will be given three free gas cylinders over the next three months.

Extension and relaxation in payment of taxes

The Taxation and Other Laws (Relaxation of Certain Provisions) Ordinance, 2020 was promulgated on March 31, 2020.¹⁰ The Ordinance provides certain relaxations, such as extension of time limits and waivers of penalties, in relation to specified laws. These include the Income Tax Act, 1961 (IT Act), some Finance Acts, and the Prohibition of Benami Property Transactions Act, 1988. Key provisions under the Ordinance include:

- **Extension of time limits:** The Ordinance extends the time limits (for the period between March 20, 2020 to June 29, 2020) for compliance of certain actions such as: (i) issuing notifications, completing proceedings, and passing orders by authorities and tribunals, (ii) filing of appeals, replies, and applications, and furnishing documents, and (iii) making any investment or payment for claiming deductions or allowances under the IT Act. [1]
- **Interest and penalty:** Payment of any tax, made before June 30, 2020 (or any further date specified by the government), will not be liable for prosecution or penalty. Also, the rate of interest payable for the delay in payment will not exceed 0.75% per month.
- **Donations to PM CARES Fund:** Donations made by a person to the PM CARES Fund will be eligible for 100% tax deduction.
- **GST compliances:** The central government may notify extension to time limits for various compliances under the Central Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017.

Measures by RBI to address the financial stress caused by COVID-19

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) also announced several measures to address the stress in the economy caused by COVID-19.[2,3] Key measures are detailed below:

- **Cutting Policy Rates:** The repo rate (the rate at which RBI lends money to banks) was reduced from 5.15% to 4.4%. The reverse repo rate (the rate at which RBI borrows money from banks) was reduced from 4.9% to 4.0%.
- **Liquidity management:** Measures are being taken to expand liquidity in the market to ensure that financial markets and institutions can function normally. These measures include the reduction of the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) for all banks from 4% to 3% till March 26, 2021. CRR is the amount of liquid cash that banks have to maintain with the RBI, as a percentage of their total deposits. These steps are expected to inject total liquidity of Rs 3.74 lakh crore.
- **Relief to borrowers in repayment of loans:** All banks and financial institutions (including NBFCs) are permitted to grant a moratorium of three months on payment of all term loan instalments (including agricultural, retail and crop loans) and interest on working capital loans (such as overdraft facilities), which are due between March 1, 2020 and May 31, 2020.

PM CARES Fund

The central government has set up a national fund to deal with emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. The public charitable trust known as the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) will provide relief to those affected by COVID-19. The trust is chaired by the Prime Minister and includes members such as the Defence Minister, Home Minister, and Finance Minister.[5]

Donations made by a person to the PM CARES Fund are 100% tax deductible.[6] Non-residents can also contribute to the Fund through foreign inward remittances.[7]

Health measures

COVID-19 testing

Currently, government facilities are offering free of cost diagnosis to all individuals with COVID-19 symptoms.[8] Further, the government has approved certain private laboratories to test individuals for COVID-19. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has also laid down guidelines for those who may be tested at these laboratories. These include: (i) symptomatic contacts of those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and (ii) symptomatic persons with a travel history to COVID-19 affected countries, (iii) symptomatic healthcare workers, and (iv) persons with severe respiratory diseases.[4]

Containment plan for large outbreaks

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has created a plan to contain the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Some of the measures suggested in the plan include:

- **Geographic quarantine:** This strategy requires the restriction of movement of people to and from a defined geographic area where there is a large outbreak.
- **Cluster Containment:** This strategy will contain the disease within a defined geographic area by early detection of cases. Cluster containment will include geographic quarantine, social distancing, testing all suspected cases, and awareness amongst the public. [5,6]

Restrictions on export of medicines and medical equipment

The central government placed restrictions on the export of certain medical equipment and medication so as to ensure its availability in India. For example, the export of ventilators, surgical masks, diagnostic kits, and medications such as paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine is restricted.[2]

II.DISCUSSION

The government of India has initially responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country with thermal screenings of passengers arriving from China, the country from which the coronavirus disease 2019 originated, as well as other countries. As the pandemic progressed throughout the world, the Indian government began issuing recommendations regarding social distancing measures and also initiated travel and entry restrictions. Throughout March, several shutdowns and business

closures were initiated, and by the end of the month, the Indian government ordered a widespread lockdown. Efforts were subsequently made to create an economic package, which was announced in May.[7,8]

Travel and entry restrictions

On 3 March 2020, the Indian government stopped issuing of new visas. Previously issued visas for the nationals of Iran, South Korea, Japan, and Italy were suspended.

All visas were suspended on 13 March, except for diplomatic and other official visas, as well as the visa-free travel for Overseas Citizens of India. Indians returning from COVID-affected countries were asked to be quarantined for 14 days. These measures were expanded to citizens from Europe, Gulf countries and Asian countries including Malaysia on 17–18 March. [3]

Closedown and curfews

Over the month of March, multiple states across the country began shutting down schools, colleges, public facilities such as malls, gyms, cinema halls and other public places to contain the spread.

- **On 15 March**, Ministry of Culture closed all monuments and museums under Archaeological Survey of India.
- **On 23 March**, Chief Minister of Maharashtra ordered a statewide curfew and closure of state borders.

Lockdown

On 22 March, the Government of India announced complete lockdown in 82 districts in 22 states and Union Territories of country where confirmed cases were reported. 80 cities including Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Chandigarh and Kolkata were put under lockdown. Some states sealed their borders barring inter-state movement.

On 24 March, PM Narendra Modi announced a complete 21-day national lockdown to contain the pandemic. By 6 April, the doubling rate had slowed to six days from earlier figure of three days.

While generally regarded as necessary, the implementation of the lockdowns was also criticised for worsening the problems of the people.[2,3]

Zonal classification

The Government Divided the entire nation into three zones – Green Zone, Red Zone, Orange Zone. Relaxations would be allowed accordingly.

- **Red zone (Hotspots)** – districts with high doubling rate and high number of active cases
- **Orange zone (Non-hotspots)** – districts with fewer cases
- **Green zone** – districts without confirmed cases or without new cases in last 21 days

Aarogya Setu

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology launched a smart phone application called **Aarogya Setu** to help in "contact tracing and containing the spread" of COVID-19 pandemic in the nation. The World Bank lauded the early deployment of such technology to combat the pandemic. Amid growing privacy and security concerns, the government released the source code of the app, making it open-source on 26 May. The Government has promoted voluntary adoption of the app in its guidelines and standard operating procedures.

III.CONCLUSIONS

We find that to be successful in containing the pandemic, the center of government should be performing similar functions – and yet the actual mechanisms will adapt significantly to country context. The four basic coordinating functions at the center include:

1. **Policy-setting and decision-making.** This includes setting up a center of command, close to the chief executive and tasked with high-level oversight of the whole-of-government response. For example, Cambodia set up a National Response Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, responsible for identifying national policy and strategy in response to COVID-19 and leading the implementation plan.
2. **Operational coordination.** This includes oversight of action plans, underpinned by budgets, as well as inter-agency coordination systems. Response plans with concrete targets should be activated. [9,10]
3. **Information gathering and monitoring & evaluation.** This is achieved through dashboards and monitoring routines, whereby responsible agencies feed the data into dashboards at regular intervals. Problem-solving mechanisms should accompany the monitoring, as should internal communication mechanisms to keep various

parts of government on the same page. For instance, Brazil created an Inter-secretariat Data Committee that developed a detailed Risk Matrix, a public Data Dashboard with live updates, and a comprehensive and evidence-based strategy for reopening economic activities.

4. **External communication aimed at consensus building.** This can take various forms, from daily press briefings with high-level officials to diligent communication campaigns on multiple platforms promoting handwashing, social distancing, and face covering. Transparency about infections, hospitalizations, and mortality is also important to reinforce trust and therefore compliance. The Premier of Victoria had daily press conferences for more than 110 days, and only stopped them when there were no more deaths or cases.

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