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By Wasantha Rupasinghe

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India's calamitous lockdown, punishes poor while undermining efforts to halt spread of coronavirus

The sudden, disorganized nationwide three-week shutdown announced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi starting at midnight March 24 is causing immense hardship, especially for hundreds of millions of workers and rural toilers, manifestly undermining efforts to halt the spread of the deadly coronavirus.

For weeks, Indian authorities, including Modi himself, had boasted that India had the coronavirus pandemic firmly under control. They based this claim on the relatively small number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, blithely ignoring medical experts who warned that the small infection rate was in all likelihood a function of the tiny number of tests administered.

Then last Tuesday evening, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government abruptly shifted gears. Having wasted two precious months, during which they had focused India's anti-coronavirus efforts almost entirely on bans on entrants from foreign countries, Modi announced an unprecedented shutdown.



Migrant workers with their families

Claiming that if radical steps were not taken to “break the chain of infection” many would die, the prime minister ordered virtually all of India’s 1.37 billion people to remain in their homes for the next 21 days. In an act of criminal negligence, he did so without explaining how people, in rural areas and many urban slums, would get access to food and water—let alone how they would pay for them, if they could not work.

The result has been chaos, including large disorganized movements of people, opening up conditions conducive to the rapid spread of COVID-19 cases, both in number and geographically, from urban to rural India.

With the government giving people only a few hours to procure food, medicines and other essential items before the lockdown took full force, millions of people rushed to retail shops and markets.

Although the government claimed at the outset that the supply of goods would not be interrupted, shops in many cities had either run out of essential items or they were being quickly depleted. In many cities and towns, promised online deliveries were not functioning. There were numerous reports of police preventing trucks carrying food and other key supplies from crossing state borders. Even manufacturers of medical equipment needed to fight the virus said that they were struggling to get raw materials, and that some of their staff were being prevented from reporting for work.

Particularly poignant is the plight of millions of migrant labourers, who having lost their jobs and bereft of any savings, have undertaken to walk hundreds of kilometers to their native villages, clutching their children and meagre belongings. They are walking because the government has shut down all public transport, including train service.

Many of the migrants are in miserable circumstances, some having been forced to depart without receiving back wages. According to press reports at least 22 migrant workers have died on their way home. These include 38-year-old Ranveer Singh, who died from a heart attack on the Delhi-Agra highway on Saturday morning. He had already walked 200 km from the national capital toward his village in Madhya Pradesh's Morena district. Four other migrant workers, who were walking home after they had lost their jobs, were crushed to death and three others injured Saturday, when a speeding truck ran over them at Bharol village in Vinar on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad Highway.

Amid mounting popular anger over the government's inaction and callous indifference, the BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh announced Saturday that it would arrange thousands of buses to ferry migrant workers who had been held up at the borders of the country's most populous state. Again due to a total lack of forethought, the government's "social distancing" policy collapsed as more than 100,000 migrant workers jostled against each other as they sought to secure a bus space.

Media headlines gave an inkling of the social disaster now playing out across the nation. "In Covid-19 shutdown, many of Delhi's poor and homeless are being forced to starve" (*The Print*, March 27); "Not China, not Italy: India's coronavirus lockdown is the harshest in the world—The biggest human migration on foot after [the 1947] Partition" (*Scroll.In*, March 29); "Mumbai Cops Opened 2 containers trucks, found over 300 migrant workers" (*NDTV*, March 26); " 'Hunger can kill us before the virus': Migrant workers on the march during lockdown" (*The Wire*, March 27).

This disaster is all the more bitter because the disorganized, ill-conceived lockdown is undoubtedly helping to spread the virus because India's dilapidated and nonexistent public health infrastructure, desperate poverty, and high population density threaten to cause a catastrophic loss of life numbering in the millions.

Two days after Modi ordered the lockdown, Finance Minister Nirmala Seetharamanan announced a 1.7 lakh crore rupee (US \$22.5 billion) package of relief measures, equivalent to just 0.8 percent of India's GDP. In per capita terms, this is about \$16 per person.

But even this meagre sum is largely smoke and mirrors. A March 27 NDTV opinion piece cites an analysis by research firm CLSA that shows that the central government money is only providing about 400-500 billion rupees of new money (less than a third of the total

package). “The rest will come from state governments or through the rescheduling of already existing entitlements.”

Meanwhile at the government’s urging, the Reserve Bank of India has taken steps to inject 3.7 trillion rupees (\$49.4 billion) into the country’s financial markets to boost the fortunes of Indian and foreign capital.

Seetharamanan claimed the paltry relief measures will mean “No one will go hungry”—this in a country where the government recently conceded that more than 90 percent of children under the age of five are undernourished.

The BJP finance minister claimed that as the result of the government’s measures, 800 million people will get 5 kg of rice or wheat free for the next three months, “over and above the 5 kg they already get,” as well as “1kg of preferred pulses.” She added that “ration card holders can take the food grains and pulses from the Public Distribution System (PDS) in two installments.”

But Seetharamanan’s statement raised a very large question mark over whether even this meagre support will in fact reach most of the 800 million poor, since, according to reports, there are only 230 million ration-card holders. Many migrant workers cannot access the PDS system, which is linked to where their families reside.

As part of the government’s “relief package,” she announced that hundreds of millions of rural farmers will immediately be given 2,000 rupees (\$26.65) through “direct cash transfer” under the existing PM Kissan Yojana program in the first week of April. However, many commentators pointed out that this is in fact the first installment in a scheme announced just before the 2019 elections. Underscoring the Modi government’s contemptuous attitude towards the rural poor, the package also provided a pitiful 20 rupee increase in the daily wage paid to those employed under the state’s MGNREG scheme, which promises to provide 100 days of menial minimum-wage work to one member of every rural family that requests it.

Seetharamanan also said that the government will provide medical insurance coverage of up to five million rupees (\$66,796) for all healthcare workers. This is an attempt to cover up and financially “compensate” for the Modi government’s criminal failure to provide basic protective gear for healthcare workers on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19. Reuters has reported that a four-page internal document dated March 27 from the Invest India agency noted that India needs at least 38 million masks and 6.2 million pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE) as it confronts the spread of the coronavirus.

However, the quantity of masks available from the companies canvassed was just 9.1 million, while the number of PPE body coveralls stood at less than 800,000.

Chillingly, the Invest India document related to the needs of just seven of the country's 36 states and federal territories, "meaning the total demand for such equipment required could be much higher."

On Sunday, the total number of COVID-19 cases in India surpassed 1,000, and the death toll rose to 27.

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