

Global War Against COVID – 19

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has impacted all aspects of life – education, economy, religion, family, physical and emotional health, environment



BY J. FELIX RAJ

Governments in India – both Centre and States and various public and private agencies have responded to the crisis with several guidelines including social distancing and lockdown as measures to combat the killer virus.

1. Alarming Spread and Severity:

More than 213 out of 251 (as recognized by UN) Countries and Territories, including the smallest Country in the world, Vatican, have reported cases of Coronavirus. Vatican, with a total population of 1,002 (2019), has reported 4 cases so far.

As on May 7, the total number of cases infected in the world was 38, 22, 989 with 2, 65, 111 deaths which is 6.93 per cent of the total infected cases. On an average the global increase of the infected cases is around 88,400 and of deaths is 5,900 per day. The rate of growth of infected cases is 2.48 per cent and death rate is 2.36 per cent.

In India, as on May 7, there are 53, 045 confirmed cases out of which 1,787 (3.37 per cent of the total affected cases) have died and 15, 331 recovered. The average increase in the affected cases is 2,917 and death is 85 per day. And the rates of increase in affected cases and death are 6.87 per cent and 5.41 per cent respectively.

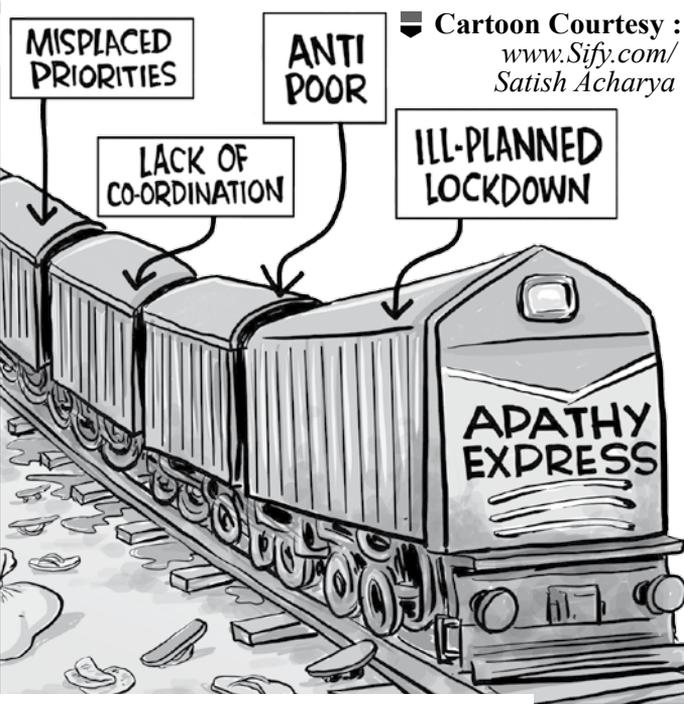
2. Education Process Interrupted:

Most Governments around the world have temporarily closed all educational institutions as a lockdown measure to prevent the spread of COVID 19. Over 90 per cent of world's student population has been adversely affected by the closure of these institutions.

Closure of educational institutions has interrupted the education process, it has created stress and anxiety both among teachers and students, in most Asian countries, parents are not sufficiently equipped for distance and home learning, it is a challenge especially for the underprivileged families, for the marginalized.

In India, 921 universities and around 50,000 colleges have been closed. As a result the combat measures will have varying degree of impact on 36.5 million students and 1.55 million teachers in the higher education system alone.

Global network and coalition have emerged with the support of international organizations to provide distance education and online learning. During the lockdown period, most institutions





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have initiated remote and digital teaching-learning through various social media to maintain the continuity of education.

Many countries have installed national learning platforms and tools. For example, MHRD in India has suggested a collection of platforms for online learning during the health crisis and has created a National Digital Library. Many agencies and institutions are engaged in promoting innovative methods of teaching-learning in Schools and Colleges.

COVID – 19 has fractured the global education system. As the state governments have ordered closure of schools, colleges and educational institutions as a precautionary measure against the disease, many institutions have shifted their operations to online teaching-learning. Online classes are helping the institutions beat the coronavirus lockdown to continue the academic calendar.

Many educationists and parents have expressed concern about the virtual mode of conducting classes. They have raised alarm about the potential dangers of continuous internet exposure to young people. It is also felt that the digital shift might leave out the economically challenged students who may not have the access to digital technology.

The crisis has also raised concerns among educational institutions about admissions of freshers for the 2020-21 session, a student's choice of courses, conduct of examinations, commencement of new Academic Session, fee structure and so on.

Lockdown measures - inter-state entry/exit restrictions, travel bans and shut-downs of bus, rail

and air services will disrupt mobility of students. Study-abroad programmes or migration to other metros within the country will suffer severe disruptions for the next one or two years.

Educational institutions are centers of social activity and human interaction. Social distancing and digital learning miss out on social contacts that are essential and integral to learning and development.

3. A Human cum Economic Tragedy:

The COVID -19 outbreak is both a human and a socio-economic tragedy, affecting not only hundreds of thousands of people, but also having a prolonged impact on the global economy.

The pandemic has sent economic ripples around the world. Economists fear a slump in Asia; for the first time, since the Great Depression, economies in Asia may not see growth. The service sector will be the worst affected.

Lockdowns across the world have grounded airlines, stopped bus and rail services, shut down factories, shops, hotels, restaurants and malls. All economies including that of China have contracted. GDPs have collapsed. The reduced global demand will bring many economies to the edge of extinction

According to IMF's global growth projections, in 2020, the global economy is expected to plunge into the worst recession since the Great Depression, far worse than the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. In this situation, India is among the handful of countries that is projected to cling on to positive growth (at 1.9%).

International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that globally more than 25 million jobs would be threatened due to the spread of corona virus. It is estimated that four out of five people (81%) in the global workforce of 3.3 billion are currently affected by full or partial workplace closure.

The IMF has declared a recession and the Banks are under pressure. RBI announced an array of measures in the context of COVID-19 focusing on providing liquidity to several sectors including banks and state governments.

Making an assessment of the current economic situation, RBI Governor said that 'the macroeconomic and financial landscape has

deteriorated, precipitously in some areas; but light still shines through bravely in some others.’ The governor noted that ‘the IMF is projecting positive growth for India, highest in G20 economies, despite the global economy being in deep recession.’

A CMIE report says India’s urban unemployment rate soars to 30.9% even as overall rate rises to 23.4%, indicating covid-19’s impact. The current nationwide lockdown has been the biggest job-destroyer ever in the history of our Country. However, these estimates only reveal the impact on jobs during the lockdown period, and should not be considered as permanent loss of livelihood. Many of them may be able to get back to employment after the resumption of normalcy. However, many of them, such as informal workers who are involved in casual or contractual work and those who have returned to their villages may not get back to work.

According to the PLFS (Balwant Mehta and Dr. Arjun Kumar in TOI), about 90 % or 419 million of the total 465 million workers are engaged in informal sector with 71%, and 29% in rural and urban areas respectively. In magnitude, the informal workers in rural areas (298 m) comprise almost 2.5 times higher than urban areas (121 m). This is primarily because of large number of informal workers are engaged in farm or agricultural activities (62%) in rural areas compared to only 8% in urban areas.

In urban areas, about 93 million informal workers are involved in five sectors that are most affected, namely, manufacturing (28 m); trade, hotel and restaurant (32 m); construction (15 m); transport, storage and communications (11 m); and finance,

business and real estate (7 m). Out of total 93 million informal workers in these sectors, 50% are self-employed, 20% are casual workers on daily wages and 30% are salaried or contract employee without any social safety net.

Lockdown measures have incapacitated the marginalized communities of the migrant workers and daily-wage earners; they are without proper livelihood, food, shelter, health care and other basic needs. Thousands have been left stranded with rail and bus services shut down. Again, the forceful act of disinfecting some migrant workers as reported in the media was an inhuman act to be condemned by all. COVID and lockdown measures have badly hit the migrant workers throughout the country.

According to Dun & Bradstreet study, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimates may fall by 0.2 per cent for 2020 to 4.8 per cent and by 0.5 per cent for 2021 to 6 per cent. The pandemic is a severe demand shock which has offset the green shoots of recovery of the Indian economy that were visible towards the end of 2019 and early 2020.

According to an EY statement, Private equity and venture capital investments in India which have touched record high in the past few years may decline up to 60 per cent in 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. Fund raising activity, which typically influences future investments, has also gone “cold”.

4. Places of Worship closed:

The COVID-19 has impacted religions across the globe in various ways. Churches, Mosques, temples and all places of worship are closed. Even God has been quarantined! Worships and prayer services have been called off. People have been advised to pray and worship from homes and participate through social media - Webinars, TVs, livestream and so on.

All major religious centres have opened up online channels to stay connected with their devotees. Priests and clerics have been live-streaming services on websites, Facebook and YouTube. For many religious leaders, the decision to shut their doors was difficult. The Vatican cancelled all Easter services for public.

■ **Cartoon Courtesy :**
www.indiatoday.in/ Satish Acharya



Pope's public audiences were suspended. Easter, Ramadan and all other festivals were celebrated within the four walls of home.

Many religious organizations and groups have responded to the crisis with supplies of powered air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, and food and other aids to affected areas and villages. People have also conducted prayer services for a speedy end to COVID – 19. There have been prayers for those who have died, who have been affected by it as well as for strength to doctors, nurses and health-workers, the frontlines in the war against this pandemic.

The lockdown is a testing period of all religious sects and denominations. Religious leaders are divided on the issue of COVID's impact on religions. Will the lockdown confirm Marx's claim that religion is opium of the people or herald its revival? History can repeat. After every crisis, there has always been a revival of religiosity. There are also people who predict that COVID -19 is a serious threat to religions particularly Christianity. 'The killer disease will speed up the fast dropping Churchgoers and the churches and parishes will soon struggle to survive.'

Stephen Bullivant, whose book, *Mass Exodus*, studied Catholic attrition in Britain and America, offers three reasons why he believes churches will shrink after the pandemic. First, he says, churchgoers (both lay and clergy) tend to be elderly and therefore more likely to die of coronavirus. Second, many churches rely on a steady influx of immigrants. With the world in lockdown, that supply has, at least temporarily, dried up. Third, churchgoing is a habit, and once that habit is broken it is hard to revive it (Luke Coppen in *The Spectator*).

Livestreamed services are proving a poor substitute for the real ways of worship. They lack the vital communal dimension of worship and even the most pious Christian will admit they are, at times, excruciatingly dull. Worst of all, believers are unable to participate in the Eucharist. History teaches us that it's foolish to write off religion. It is observed that the virus's

impact on religious practice is overwhelmingly negative. COVID 19 is consequently a blessing in disguise.

'For decades now, observers have declared that Christianity is dying. Rampant secularization coupled with coronavirus will only seem to bring forward the obsequies. But Christianity began amid suffering and death. And, if Chesterton is right, this won't be the end, rather a new beginning.'

5. Blessing in Disguise:

COVID-19 has also come as a blessing in disguise. After so many years of hustle and bustle of life, there is quiet all over. Nature has cleansed herself, people have discovered time; they have rediscovered their families. A new way of interrelatedness has emerged.

The family is the nucleus of civilization and the primary unit of society. Stronger familial bonds ensure stronger society. Difficulties and tragedies can be transformed into opportunities, of spiritual and personal rebirth of communities.

As all institutions, factories and work places have been shut down; people have quarantined themselves within the four walls of their dwellings. We are apprehensive of each other; we are even suspicious whether the other is a carrier; we maintain a safe social distancing of two meters from each other including dear and near ones.

The pandemic makes senior citizens and children most vulnerable. It is much more than a health crisis – a human and social calamity. It is attacking societies and families at the core. It poses challenges that make big changes in everyday life in families. People experience fear and anxiety, living under the ominous shadow of an unseen enemy.

Children may ask questions to their parents about lockdown, social distancing or financial burdens. Parents need to be highly sensitive to their children and also to older members in the family and respond to them with utmost care and concern. Adults need to protect every member of the family and take pragmatic measures to combat the virus.

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