

# Covid-19: What India has done right and what next

With the graded lifting of curbs, while remaining vigilant about the virus, the aim is to secure lives and livelihoods



As the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) spreads across the world, we are reminded of the frailty of the human condition and of a world that has been halted in time like a deer caught in the headlights. We hear about historic pandemics and biblical plagues, but seldom has there been such a challenge to modern civilisation, one that has pressed the pause button on lives and livelihoods. With over 2.3 million cases and over 150,000 deaths, this pandemic has put more than 100 countries and a third of the world's population in lockdown. Economists warn that the damage to the economy is likely to be similar — or worse — to the Great Depression.

How India, with one of the largest working-age populations in the world, battles Covid-19 will determine how the future unfolds for the world. While the West's policy sages are painting a grim picture of a post-pandemic world, India is charting out a path to recovery and redemption. The Government of India's (GoI) policy responses to Covid-19 have been stellar, and have evolved from precaution to prevention and now, to precision.

First, India was expeditious in taking precautions to curtail the spread of the coronavirus — from issuing travel advisories, introducing temperature screening of foreign travellers at airports, and establishing quarantine centres to being one of the first countries to ban international and domestic travel. These measures significantly contributed to reducing the case count. In fact, 46 days since the first reported case, Italy's daily case volume was over 1,000 times larger than India's. Similarly, despite similar case loads in India and the United States (US), 40 days since the first reported case, the daily volume in the US was 25 times that of India's two weeks hence. The growth rate of daily and cumulative cases in India has been consistently linear and lower.

Second, India undertook one of the boldest measures ever seen by implementing a lockdown of over 1.3 billion people to break the transmission chain of the virus. This move was implemented sooner than it was in China, the United Kingdom and Spain, and it has estimated to have reduced the number of people infected by about 150 times. India's three-week lockdown is showing results in terms of a flattened pandemic curve. Consequently, the growth rate of cases has declined by over 40%. At a national level, while the doubling of cases has slowed from three days before the lockdown to 6.2 days now, as many as 19 states and Union territories (UTs) have demonstrated progress with better-than-averaged doubling rates. India's federal setup is a model of cooperative partnership, bolstered by constant interaction and consultation between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the chief ministers.

Third, with the extension of the lockdown

till May 3, the GoI's focus is on precision policy, mapping out hotspots and moving towards restarting the economy. While the first phase of the lockdown focused on saving lives, the core objective of the extended lockdown is finding a balance between lives and livelihoods, particularly in rural India.

With the graded lifting of curbs from April 20, the guidelines provide autonomy to states and districts in charting out their plans. In fact, this decision indicates the GoI's willingness to ease the economic crisis for the hardest hit — the poor and the migrant workers. The GoI has disbursed almost \$4 billion to over 320 million people via the direct benefit transfer mechanism.

With states recalibrating the resumption of core economic activities, the latest guidelines follow a traffic light approach. There will be colour-coded zones — red, orange and green. The red zones (hotspots) will continue to have a lockdown; orange zones (with some cases) and green zones (with no cases) will witness a relaxation in restrictions on economic activities. So far, 170 out of 718 districts have been identified as hotspots. On average, about seven out of 10 cases in each state have been reported from three districts. Further, one in two districts in India has no reported cases and will be allowed to restart economic activities.

These guidelines allow for an ecosystem of primary and agro-based industries to restart production. This is significant considering the total area under the summer crops (including rice, pulses, coarse cereals and oil seeds) has jumped significantly, registering an 11.64 lakh hectare increase over the last year. The country is moving towards a bumper harvest in the coming months.

The coordination between a proactive political leadership, an agile bureaucracy, and a supportive public has led to a semblance of life returning to normal. The GoI has issued pan-ministry guidelines to dismantle supply chain bottlenecks, and beneficiaries in non-hotspot areas, particularly farmers and small and medium entrepreneurs, to kickstart economic activities.

Since the beginning of the lockdown, about ₹16,000 crore has been released, benefiting 8.31 crore farmer families. Similarly, about 4,000 MT of pulses has been dispatched for delivery to the states and UTs. The National Agriculture Market platform is being leveraged to debottleneck agri-logistics. The Indian Railways has been running special trains for transporting perishable commodities, and flights have been operationalised to do the same. Despite the easing of restrictions, there is a need to remain vigilant against and citizens must be self-disciplined in wearing masks and implementing social distancing. Contact tracing is being done through the Arogya Setu app, which has been downloaded by 60 million users within 15 days of its launch.

In his recent address, the PM said: "*Jaan hai toh jahaan hai* (Only if you are alive, will the world survive)". While the phrase captures our present struggles, India's strategies and evolving policy priorities will ensure the restarting of the economic engine so that *jaan rahe, aur hamara jahaan bhi* (our people survive, and so does the world).

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