

All India People's Science Network AIPSN

Response to PM's Announcement on 14 April 2020

The PM's address to the nation on 14th April 2020 came as a major disappointment and a painful blow to the basic needs, indeed perhaps even survival, of a majority of the Indian people, especially the poor and otherwise vulnerable sections of the population. Government's assurance of a Rs.1.7 lakh crore, which accounts for 0.87% of India's 2.6 trillion dollar economy, is too insignificant to fight the widespread distress that the poor have faced.

The Government's decision to extend the 21-day lockdown by an additional 18 days, of which the first week till the 20th April would be under even more strict enforcement of restrictions, has cited no epidemiological evidence or data as a basis, only a mistaken notion that a Lockdown is the only or main weapon, a *brahmastra* or *laxman rekha* if one follows the PM's favoured style of mythological reference. The way the Lockdown was conceived and been implemented so far, and the announced extension, seems to be a uni-dimensional approach treating the Covid19 epidemic as a law-and-order issue and relying mainly on the police to enforce lockdown restrictions, who often act as if the people, and not the epidemic, are the enemy. This is directly contrary to the PM's claim that his government has adopted a "holistic and integrated approach."

The claims made in the PM's speech that the "country has greatly benefited from the Lockdown," even if it "looks costly" from an "economic only point of view," are contrary to the facts, and also betrays an outlook from the viewpoint of the well-off. Migrant workers and workers in the unorganized sector continue to suffer untold hardships including lack of food or dry rations, overcrowded accommodation with no possibility of physical distancing thus exposing them to infection, and no opportunities to earn an income. An integrated approach would not have permitted this to happen.

Getting 1 lakh beds and many hospitals ready has been claimed as a major accomplishment of the Government. But these beds and hospitals are pre-existent facilities merely earmarked for Covid19 patients, thankfully now unused, but unfortunately unavailable for patients of other serious ailments who have been denied hospital facilities except for extreme cases and even OPD services. Total absence of transportation also denies people access to these essential health facilities.

PM also did not mention measures his government has taken to overcome the acute shortages of N95 masks, coveralls and PPEs putting at serious risk, even the "Corona warriors," who the people were exhorted to hail with claps, vessel-banging, diyas and candles, many having already lost their lives. Nor did the PM address the abnormally low levels of testing in India, or the gross inadequacy of testing kits.

Regrettably, when the nation needs to stand as one which the PM repeated stressed, PM did not condemn the growing communalization of the Covid19 epidemic and demonization of the entire Muslim community.

In his speech, the PM called upon the people to do 7 things to help the fight against the Covid19 epidemic, including taking care of the elderly, boosting immunity through unproven Ayurvedic treatments, using the highly intrusive Aarogya Setu App, taking care of the poor especially with food, being compassionate towards employees and not depriving them of livelihoods, paying utmost respect

to our Corona Warriors especially doctors, nurses, sanitation workers and police. As civic minded organizations and citizens, we are confident that the people will rise to most of the PM's expectations.

At this time of crisis, we urge the Prime Minister and his Government to urgently do the following 7 things:

- 1) Take on the full burden of providing adequate food/dry rations, proper and hygienic shelter enabling physical distancing, and financial support in lieu of the wages they would otherwise have earned, and not leave so much of this task to voluntary efforts
- 2) Ensure speedy acquisition and distribution of quality masks, coveralls, PPEs especially from domestic manufacturers, for protection of doctors, nurses, sanitation and other "Corona Warriors"; also open up minimum OPD and other health facilities to meet peoples needs
- 3) Ensure acquisition of sufficient RT-PCR and anti-body "rapid" test kits, again especially from domestic manufacturers and quickly scale-up testing to required levels
- 4) Facilitate agricultural operations, including fisheries, poultry, dairy and NTFP sectors, and related procurement, agro-processing, transportation, and marketing, all while maintaining physical distancing norms, along with rapid scaling-up of MNREGA works with suitably amended norms so as to assist farmers, farm and non-farm workers and the rural economy
- 5) Enable unorganized sector workers and self-employed workers to resume work, extend legal protection from dismissal or lay-offs, and eviction by landlords, including through unemployment allowance and financial assistance to SMEs, landlords etc
- 6) Ensure free inter-state and local transport of all essential goods, currently facing poor implementation of government exemptions and disrupting supply chains including of medicines and PPEs; also facilitate provision of necessary transport facilities especially for the elderly, disabled and those with health and other special needs
- 7) Launch effective publicity campaigns accompanied with prosecutions as required against all forms of stigmatization of Covid19 patients, positive cases, quarantine cases, health workers etc and against all forms of communalization of the epidemic