

# Challenges of the Pandemic

## Confronting Harsh Realities

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*Measures to control/mitigate the spread of the disease appear to be surprisingly ill informed about the living and working conditions of the urban millions who support the life and work of the city's privileged classes. Will these insights make a difference to future policies?*

COVID-19 pandemic has not only surprised the human race as regard its vulnerability but has exposed numerous dimensions of human living that are unfair and unequal in many ways. This pandemic surfaced as an urban phenomenon in the context of such unequal and unjust human living in urban space. While the urban space has typical features of greater density and differential access to basic amenities, with growing urbanization and competition for existence, basic living conditions have been compromised beyond imagination. Such a situation is overlooked under circumstances when there is distressed mobility towards the urban space that ensures a means of living howsoever difficult and cumbersome. This has led to overcrowding and disparate living conditions among people based on their ability to pay [1,2]. This viral infection has taken everyone by surprise with its potential to spread, as well as its virulent consequences. Another added anxiety relates to the absence of either a vaccination against this virus or a means of cure and therefore, the recovery from the infection can only depend on the strength of immunity to fight it. In addition those with comorbidities like diabetes and hypertension are less likely to have poor clinical outcomes [3,4]. So, in sum, this pandemic not only threatens people living in adverse conditions but has differential outcome among those with co-morbidities. On this premise, the scale of spread and the rising magnitude of cases each day only generates increasing anxiety regarding its consequences in the short as well as the long run.

Given the lack of treatment or any means of protection, the focus has been on its containment. The containment measures adopted involve lockdown, social distancing and adoption of proper hygiene practices for its prevention. While there is no denying the fact that these measures are consequential upon arresting its spread, how far are they suitable in the existing living environment of the urban space? The two measures like social distancing and lock down are measures emerging from a middleclass mindset, and its impact has been over-stated given that it has merely halted the spread of infection. Unless due measures are put in place as regard surveillance and detection of the carriers of this infection who will move during the post-lock down, the situation may go out of control especially in under-served areas.

Measures like lock down suggesting that people to stay home may sound relevant to reduce people interaction but they overlook the fact that the livelihood of millions in this country depends on going to earn a wage for a living. Such a measure neither had an apriori assessment of protection required to design a prolonged lock down to avert its consequences nor did it take into its calculus the vulnerable who do not have a means of living without budging from their homes. In that sense

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these measures can well be argued to have originated from a middleclass mindset that assumes a certain degree of resilience for survival to be universal across the country. This was not a correct assessment. The urban space bulged with the vulnerable, like migrant workers, daily wage earners and informal service providers ranging from conveyance, eateries, domestic work and many others.

This lack of preparedness and compensation for the vulnerable has led to the evolved circumstances of migrants walking home, many of whom are considered suspects carrying infection. They have been put in quarantine facilities and fed from community kitchens. These circumstances clearly indicate the lack of understanding of the prevailing reality of the informal workspace. In normal situations nothing of this kind will surface. This does not mean that we can assume that this major section of urban inhabitants, experiencing as they do the kind of day to day insecurities without any resilience whatsoever will be able to withstand the times of emergencies. This thoughtless measure might have produced a dividend of containing the spread, but at the end of the day, it revealed that this infection would have spread more among these vulnerable than those who protected themselves at the cost of making people go hungry, jobless and even restricted their mobility across physical boundaries. Such a containment measure has underlined the problem of prioritizing life over livelihood, and therefore, the greater price to pay in the long run.

Similar to the lock down measure, the restrictions like social distancing and home quarantining overlook the prevailing reality. Social distancing may be for those who have the luxury of living with minimum basic needs like water, sanitation and hygiene which is perhaps the least priority of those urban dwellers who compromise on all of this by using public facilities and share a common living space meant for one among four. To qualify, social distancing in a public space or a workspace certainly requires certain amenities which cannot be taken for granted given the nature of livelihoods in major urban centers of our country. While these desperate measures seem to have clear limitations as regard their implementation, it is an eye opener of the compromised human living which can serve as a threat not only for those who have accepted it but also for those who have ignored/overlooked it. This unequal urban space is a divide between two worlds: one compromising on basic living and another based on the services provided by the former. This is perhaps not sustainable as this pandemic threat envelopes all without any discrimination.

The biggest brunt of these containment measures are borne by the migrant labour, which is perhaps the most inhuman display of apathy of this century. The sudden and irresponsible declaration of lockdown measures restricting people's mobility without offering an opportunity for people's mobility is crude and unforgivable. A later thought, of feeding those stranded migrant workers and offering compensation for the loss of their earnings, is an indication of the naïve understanding of the characteristics of the huge informal workforce in the country. In addition, migrant identity has now become associated with livelihood vulnerability on the one hand, and as agents spreading the infection, on the other. Such discriminatory affiliation to migrant identity makes it clear that the

migrant belongs nowhere neither the at destination that identifies the migrant nor at the origin that send her/him out in search a better living.

An assessment of the desperate measures adopted to contain this unexpected enemy makes an exposition of our vulnerability in modern living and the hidden inter-dependence between class of people. The emergence of COVID-19 brings home another message of greater relevance that echoes against the ever-rising inequality which cannot be sustained without it presenting a threat to the human race. When inequality in ends are often part of a developmental transition, the inequality in means can threaten human existence. The wide disparity in basic means of living may well be explained and even justified with population growth and crowding, but commitment to basic means of human living is perhaps not a greater ask for an evolving society with technology and innovation offering a solution to ease human living. In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed numerous limitations of human living along with related vulnerabilities of a large share of our population contesting the celebration of reduced poverty and improved living condition in recent times. Lessons learnt may well redefine the ideal and bridge the gap in means between 'us' and 'them' that defines the societal order of today.

#### References

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