

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) and All India People's Science Network (AIPSN)

Response to Prime Minister's Address on 14 April 2020

The Prime Minister's address to the nation on 14th April 2020 came yet again 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.

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 strategy to contain Covid-19. The way the Lockdown has been conceived and implemented so far, and the announced extension, seems to be a uni-dimensional approach to treating the Covid-19 epidemic as a law-and-order issue evident from its reliance primarily on enforcement through policing, coercion and brutal force. 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. A truly 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 Covid-19 patients. These beds have been created in main public hospitals, displacing regular out-patients and in-patients, and essential secondary and tertiary care in a major way, and perhaps pushing such care into private sector. Further these beds are largely empty as of now, thus reducing the functional hospital beds in public sector. Since the government medical college or tertiary hospital is often the only place of care for the poor, the impact of this would be alarming, as it has already been widely reported. Total suspension of transportation has denied people's access to these essential health facilities.

The 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 are exhorted to hail with claps, vessel-banging, *diyas* and candles. Many have already tested positive and some have 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 repeatedly 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 Covid-19 epidemic, including taking care of the elderly, boosting immunity through unproven Ayurvedic treatments, using the highly intrusive Aarogya Setu App which flags serious concerns about people's right to privacy, 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) Assume accountability of providing adequate food/dry rations, proper and hygienic shelter enabling physical distancing, and financial support to migrant workers and workers in the unorganized sector in lieu of the wages they would otherwise have earned, and not shift this responsibility to voluntary efforts.
- 2) Ensure speedy acquisition and distribution of sufficient RT-PCR and anti-body "rapid" test kits, and quality masks, coveralls, PPEs especially from domestic manufacturers, for protection of doctors, nurses, sanitation and others.
- 3) Implement vigorous identify, trace, test, isolate, treat ; immediately resume essential OPD and IPD services of hospitals; provide all health services free; bring in private sector under a central government control.
- 4) Facilitate agricultural operations, including in 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 and assistance to 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 house-owners, including through unemployment allowance and financial assistance to SMEs, house-owners 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, persons with disabilities, with mental health issues and those with health and other special needs such as for survivors of gender violence.
- 7) Launch effective publicity campaigns accompanied with action as required against all forms of breach of privacy/confidentiality, stigmatization of Covid19 patients, positive cases, quarantine cases, health workers etc and against all forms of communalization of the epidemic.

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