

PDS AND GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR PROTECTION AGAINST COVID-19

Ms. Minal Patil, Dr. Mamta Brahmhatt

Research Scholar, B.K. School of Professional and Management Studies,
Gujarat University
Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.
mppatil3569@gmail.com

Associate Professor, B.K. School of Professional and Management Studies,
Gujarat University
Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.
mamtabrahmhatt23@gmail.com

Abstract

In his famous novel, The Plague, Albert Camus discussed the idea of plague as being akin to a despotic rule under which everyone, starting from the warden to the humblest delinquent, was under a life sentence. This insight is true for any pandemic including COVID-19 because the infection spreading microbe infects both rich and poor people alike. The magnitude of COVID-19 pandemic was surely unprecedented in the early phase of the outbreak. The whole world was uncertain about how this once in a century pandemic was going to shape lives. The main duty of any government is to protect its citizens. When citizens are filled with uncertainty they look up to the government, hoping that they will get absolute clarity and protection from the government. This was exactly the case when COVID-19 outbreak began in India. The government had to live up to its pledge of protecting the nation of 1.3 billion population. The crisis has also highlighted the importance of state and local governments in the delivery of public services. Government's role began with the announcement of a nationwide lockdown as a one of protective measures. Efforts were subsequently made to create a mega economic package, which was announced in May under the umbrella of "Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan". The package focuses on land, labour, liquidity and laws. It caters to various sections, including cottage industry, MSMEs, labourers, middle class, and industries. The government also announced a new set of initiatives in response to the impact of Covid - 19 in the healthcare sector, education sector and food security. The present paper attempt to describe the government initiatives for protection against COVID-19. Therefore, taking this context ahead, the present paper will use secondary literature, information and data available in the context of COVID-19.

Key Words: COVID-19, Government of India, economic package, lockdown, Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan.

BACKGROUND

On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) received reports of a cluster of viral pneumonia cases of unknown cause in Wuhan, Hubei, and an investigation was launched at the start of January 2020. On 30 January, the WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)—7,818 cases confirmed globally, affecting 19 countries in five WHO regions. Several early infected people had visited Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market; the virus is therefore thought to be of zoonotic origin. The virus that caused the outbreak is known as SARS-CoV-2, a newly discovered virus closely related to bat coronaviruses, pangolin coronaviruses, and SARS-CoV. The scientific consensus is that COVID-19 has a natural origin. The probable bat-to-human infection may have been among people processing bat carcasses and guano in the production of traditional Chinese medicines. The earliest known person with symptoms was later discovered to have fallen ill on 1 December 2019, and that person did not have visible connections with the later wet market cluster. Of the early cluster of cases reported that month, two-thirds were found to have a link with the market. On 13 March 2020, an unverified report from the South China Morning Post suggested a case traced back to 17 November 2019 (a 55-year-old from Hubei) may have been the first person infected. The WHO recognised the spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 as Italy, Iran, South Korea, and Japan reported surging numbers of cases. The number of cases outside China quickly surpassed the number of cases inside China.

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The first case of COVID-19 in India originated from China and was reported on 30 January 2020. India ordered a nationwide lockdown for the entire population starting 24 March, with a phased unlock beginning 1 June. As of May 2020, India had the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia; as of August 2020, behind the United States and Brazil, India had the third highest number of confirmed cases in the world, with the number of total confirmed cases breaching the 100,000 mark on 19 May and 2,000,000 confirmed cases on 6 August 2020. On 10 June, India's recoveries exceeded active cases for the first time. As of 6 July, India's case fatality rate is relatively low at 2.8%, against the global 4.7%. In March, after the lockdown was imposed, the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) praised India's response to the pandemic as 'comprehensive and robust,' terming the lockdown restrictions as 'aggressive but vital' for containing the spread and building necessary healthcare infrastructure. At the same time, the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) noted the government's swift and stringent actions, emergency policy-making, emergency investment in health care, fiscal stimulus, investment in vaccine and drug R&D and gave India a score of 100 for the strict response. Also in March, Michael Ryan, chief executive director of the WHO's health emergencies programme noted that India had tremendous capacity to deal with the outbreak owing to its vast experience in eradicating smallpox and polio. Other commentators have raised concerns about the economic fallout arising as a result of the pandemic and preventive restrictions. The lockdown was justified by the government and other agencies for being preemptive to prevent India from entering a higher stage which could make handling very difficult and cause even more losses thereafter.

Government and crisis management

At an initial stage, government worked very hard to spread awareness among citizens from the grassroots level. Using all types of communication platforms. Government worked tirelessly to make routine among citizens such as wearing mask, maintaining Social Distancing (Do Gaj Ki Doori), washing hands thoroughly with soap at least for 20 seconds, use of alcohol-based sanitizer, temperature check at every public places. Government helpline numbers repeatedly flashed everyday in all the communication platforms such as newspaper, TV, Radio, Posters, Social Media, etc...

Historically, government at all levels—local, state, and national—has played a large role in crisis management. Indeed, many political philosophers have considered this to be one of the primary roles of government. Emergency services, such as fire and police departments at the local level, often play integral roles in crisis situations. Historically, politics and crisis go hand in hand. In describing crisis, President Abraham Lincoln said, "We live in the midst of alarms, anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read". Crisis management has become a defining feature of contemporary governance. In times of crisis, communities and members of organizations expect their public leaders to minimize the impact of the crisis at hand, while critics and bureaucratic competitors try to seize the moment to blame incumbent rulers and their policies. In this extreme environment, policymakers must somehow establish a sense of normality, and foster collective learning from the crisis experience. In the face of crisis, leaders must deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risks and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue. The necessity for management is even more significant with the advent of a 24-hour news cycle and an increasingly internet-savvy audience with ever-changing technology at its fingertips. Public leaders have a special responsibility to help safeguard society from the adverse consequences of crisis. Experts in crisis management note that leaders who take this responsibility seriously would have to concern themselves with all crisis phases: the incubation stage, the onset, and the aftermath. Crisis leadership then involves five critical tasks: sense making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning.

A brief description of the five facets of crisis leadership includes:

1. Sense making may be considered as the classical situation assessment step in decision making.
2. Decision making is both the act of coming to a decision as well as the implementation of that decision.
3. Meaning making refers to crisis management as political communication.
4. Terminating a crisis is only possible if the public leader correctly handles the accountability question.
5. Learning, refers to the actual learning from a crisis is limited. The authors note, a crisis often opens a window of opportunity for reform for better or for worse

Crisis as Opportunity

Hilburg proffers that every crisis is an opportunity to showcase an institution's character, its commitment to its brand promise and its institutional values. To address such shareholder impact, management must move from a mindset that manages crisis to one that generates crisis leadership. Research shows that organizational contributory factors affect the tendency of executives to adopt an effective "crisis as opportunity" mindset. Since pressure is both a precipitator and consequence of crisis, leaders who perform well under pressure can effectively guide the organization through such crisis. James contends that most executives focus on communications and public relations as a reactive strategy. While the company's reputation with shareholders, financial well-being, and survival are all at stake, potential damage to reputation can result from

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the actual management of the crisis issue. Additionally, companies may stagnate as their risk management group identifies whether a crisis is sufficiently "statistically significant". Crisis leadership, on the other hand, immediately addresses both the damage and implications for the company's present and future conditions, as well as opportunities for improvement.

Crisis leadership

James identifies five leadership competencies which facilitate organizational restructuring during and after a crisis.

- 1) Building an environment of trust
- 2) Reforming the organization's mindset
- 3) Identifying obvious and obscure vulnerabilities of the organization
- 4) Making wise and rapid decisions as well as taking courageous action
- 5) Learning from crisis to effect change.

Crisis leadership research concludes that leadership action in crisis reflects the competency of an organization, because the test of crisis demonstrates how well the institution's leadership structure serves the organization's goals and withstands crisis. Developing effective human resources is vital when building organizational capabilities through crisis management executive leadership.

Evacuation

The Ministry of External Affairs under Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Air India, the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy have been successful in evacuating many Indian nationals and certain foreign nationals from the virus-affected areas. The Government of India began a mega evacuation of distressed Indian citizens from across the globe called "Vande Bharat Mission" in early May. It deployed several commercial jets, military transport planes and naval warships in what is set to be one of the biggest-ever peacetime repatriation exercise in history. In the first phase, around 14,800 citizens stranded in 13 countries would be brought back by 64 flights. Ministry of Civil Aviation in coordination with the Ministry of External Affairs planned phase two of the Vande Bharat Mission to bring Indian citizens from nearly 31 countries around the world for which 149 flights will be deployed.

Prime Minister saluted country's valiant efforts in fight against COVID-19 in his Independence Day address to the nation and announced the National Digital Health Mission. India sets a new landmark, exceeds 3 crore tests total, while Tests Per Million (TPM) continue to rise, stand at 21,769 today. Expert group on vaccine administration for COVID-19 deliberated on strategy to ensure COVID-19 vaccines' availability and its delivery mechanism in the country • Union government has distributed more than 30 million N95 masks, 12.8 million PPEs as part of strengthening states' COVID-19 response • Health Minister lauded contribution of states in popularizing the tele-medicine platform "eSanjeevani" in country • As part of Make in India initiative, country exported 2.3 million PPE kits in July.

20 Days 20 Steps by Government of India

1. The government immediately introduced the Aarogya Setu mobile application to educate citizens about novel coronavirus and help them make informed decisions amid the crisis.
2. On dt.12/04/2020 an oil ministry spokesperson said that poor households using 5kg cooking gas cylinders will be entitled to eight free refills in three months as a relief from the disruptions due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The number of free refills will be limited to three for beneficiaries using 14.2kg cylinders.
3. The government said it plans to set up a chain of 20 lakh retail shops called 'Suraksha Stores' across India which will provide daily essentials to citizens while maintaining stringent safety norms, news agency PTI reported.
4. Union Human Resource Development Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal on dt.12/04/2020 launched a web portal YUKTI (Young India Combating COVID with Knowledge, Technology and Innovation) in New Delhi to monitor and record the efforts and initiatives of MHRD which have been taken in wake of COVID-19.
5. Under its Ujjawala scheme, the government is providing free LPG refills for the next three months to over 8.3 crore poor women.
6. Earlier this week, the finance ministry announced that it will make an immediate release of Rs 18,000 crore in tax refunds to individuals and businesses.
7. The government decided to double the collateral-free loan amount for women in self-help groups to Rs 20 lakh.
8. Under the PM-KISAN scheme, the finance ministry said that over 6 crore farmers have been benefited amid the lockdown. Rs 13,855 crore have gone towards payment of the first instalment of PM-KISAN.
9. Wages under MGNREGA to be hiked to Rs 202 from Rs 182. The move would bring in Rs 2,000 in addition to workers.
10. Last month, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a relief package worth Rs 1.70 lakh crore in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak.

11. Under a special provision, the government had announced that individuals could now withdraw three months salary from Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) account amid the coronavirus crisis. The EPF withdrawals have been exempt from service charge.
12. Under the National Social Assistance Programme, Rs 1,400 crore has been disbursed to about 2.82 crore old age people, widows and disabled people.
13. The last date for filing income tax returns for the financial year 2018-19 has been extended to November 30, 2020. The interest rate on delayed income tax payment has been decreased to 9% from 12%.
14. Over 2 crore construction workers received financial support worth Rs 3,066 crore under the Building and Construction Workers' Fund.
15. The deadline for filing GST returns for March, April, May has been extended to June 30, 2020. There will be no interest or penalty on late fee for delayed returns for companies with turnover up to Rs 5 crore.
16. Nearly 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders received Rs 500 each in their account. The total disbursement under the head was 9,930 crore, the finance ministry said.
17. Deadline for linking Aadhaar with PAN card has also been extended from March 31 to June 30, 2020.
18. The government has also released around Rs 30,000 crore in assistance to various sections of the society.
19. The government said it will release 12 million MT of food grain during the April-June quarter under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana amid the Covid-19 crisis.
20. The government is also providing medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh per person to health workers fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

Case Study: Gujarat Model

- Initiatives such as Dhanvantari Rath (mobile medical van), Anna Brahma Yojana for food distribution to non-ration card holders, hydrogen balloon-based surveillance, direct monitoring through the CM's dashboard, active awareness campaigns, migrant labour support team and fee waivers for essential utilities.
- Decision to establish exclusive Covid-19 hospitals in four major cities helped in timely treatment and boosted the recovery rate.
- Schemes for food and grain supply also benefited migrants and those outside the food security net.
- About 96% of corona warriors received the necessary protective gear.
- About 26% of India's total migrant workers were transported through 1,008 Shramik Special trains.

Public Health: A total of 2,200 beds were dedicated to Covid-19 at the onset of the outbreak. This included 1,200 beds in Ahmedabad, 500 in Surat and 250 each in Rajkot and Vadodara. The report also highlighted the public-private partnership (PPP) model of hospital sharing in cities to strengthen health infrastructure in the state. About 96% of the respondents from medical fraternity said that they had received protective gear. Researchers said that health, sanitation and hygiene campaigns yielded the desired results.

Law and order: The report lauds the role of Gujarat police, saying that the force quickly adapted to the challenging situation of enforcing the lockdown and curfew. 'The police force supplemented their strategy with technology to expand its capacity for enforcement and surveillance. Drones, hydrogen balloons, patrolling cars were seen at every nook and corner of the state, the report stated.

Use of technology: Initiatives such as the CM's dashboard, CCTV surveillance, coordination between various government arms and officials helped faster communication and effective surveillance. About 97% of administrative workers surveyed said that they had installed the Aarogya Setu app.

Handling the migrant labour issue: In a matter of 20 days, over 1,000 Shramik Special trains were plied from Gujarat to various destinations in India to transport 14.8 lakh workers, which was about a quarter of the total workers transported in India. 'It was made possible through mobilising an extensive network of local administrations, NGOs, police, and social groups. The fact that the Gujarat administration could reach out to such a vast number of migrant population and arrange for their safe travel along with sufficient supply of food and water is a case worth studying for public administration,' the report stated.

Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan

The government announced the "Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan" so as to revive every sphere of the economy from demand, supply to manufacturing, and make India self-reliant to sustain and tackle any Black Swan event in the future. The package is divided into four tranches, where each tranche has their own focus areas. The package's core focus is on MSMEs and agriculture and its allied activities. The world's biggest lockdown imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 has severely impacted the domestic economic activities as it brought nearly 70% of economic activity, investment, exports, and discretionary consumption to a standstill. And will eventually drag down the GDP growth of the country to negative single-digit band for FY21E. So, to improve the prevailing turbulent economic environment and to provide a boost to the ailing economy the current government announced the Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, a financial package of Rs 20 lakh crore equaling to 10% of the national GDP. The focal point of the concept is to make the nation self-reliant with more focus on

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local manufacturers and service providers. This will strengthen the economy, improve the standard of living and most importantly improve the trade deficit and the exchequer balance of the country. Making the country self-reliant in all spheres- from manufacturing to supplying. It will help the country to reduce its dependence on imports and may also give a boost to exports. The fall in imports will help reduce the trade deficit and will eventually lead to trade surplus. And will also ensure that the country is able to sustain and tackle any black swan event that may emerge in future. As per Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the fiscal stimulus will help revive every sphere of the economy- from demand, supply to manufacturing. The package will focus on land, labour, liquidity and laws, so as to achieve self-reliance. The relief measures were announced in tranches by the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan Package Breakup
Now, let us take a look at the complete break-up of the package launched to make India 'self-reliant' amid and post Covid-19 times.

Tranche 1-

These set of relief measures are worth Rs 5,94,550 crore and includes funding as well as loan guarantees for MSMEs, NBFCs/HFCs, discoms, contractors, real estate and salaried workers.

Tranche 2-

These set of relief measures are worth Rs 3,10,000 crore with focus on migrant workers, small farmers, street vendors and the poor.

Tranche 3-

These sets of relief measures are worth Rs 1,50,000 crore. The core focus of these measures is on the agriculture and allied sectors like dairy, animal husbandry, and fisheries so as to strengthen the overall farm sector.

Tranche 4-

These sets of measures are worth Rs 48,100 crore with a focus on 8 critical sectors which are Coal, Minerals, Defence Production, Airspace management, Social Infrastructure Projects, Power distribution companies, Space sectors, and Atomic Energy.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises-

The schemes major focus was on MSMEs sector and its development as there are about 67 million MSMEs operating in the non-agricultural sector in India, and provides sustenance to a large proportion of the population. The government will offer Rs 3 lakh crore as collateral free or unsecured loan to MSMEs with an annual turnover of Rs 100 crore or an outstanding loan of Rs 25 crore. The loan tenure will have tenure of four years with a moratorium period of 12 month. Additionally, Rs 20,000 crore loans will be provided to stressed MSMEs. The government has given a new definition for the MSMEs where it had done away with the distinction between manufacturing and service MSMEs and also increased the limit for investment in these units. The change in definition will allow these units to expand and at the same time avail the benefits of MSME classification. It has also disallowed tenders from foreign companies upto Rs 200 crore mainly to protect these small units from unfair competition. The boost to the MSME sector will consequently benefit a lot more industries, especially automobile sector as most of the auto companies are MSMEs. It will help resume businesses, strengthen the supply chain and will also help reduce dependence on other countries.

Power Distribution Companies-

The government will provide Rs 90,000 crore bailout to cash starved discoms and independent power producers. Discoms functioning in Union Territories are expected to be privatized, so as to strengthen as well as bring efficiency to the entire sector. Thus, provide stability to the stressed power sector.

Agriculture and allied sectors-

The fiscal assistance will focus on improving the farm gate infrastructure like warehousing, cold chains, post harvest management infrastructure, dairy infrastructure along with investment in cattle feed, beekeeping and herbal and medicinal plants. National Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development (Nabard) will provide financing facility for funding agriculture infrastructure projects at the farm gate and for cluster formation across all levels. Thus, addressing fund gaps in supply chain and also make value added local products reach global markets. It will launch Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana for development of marine and inland fisheries. This will help to fill in the gaps in the value chain and will also lead to an additional fish production of 70 lakh tons in next five years and provide employment to about 55 lakh people. It will also focus on formulating agricultural marketing reforms like barrier-free inter-state trading, the choice to sell produce at attractive prices, and also provide an e-trading platform for agricultural produce.

Civil Aviation-

The government will ease the restriction placed on the utilization of the Indian Air Space for commercial flights (currently 60% of domestic airspace is available), and will help these companies save about Rs 1000 in terms of operational costs.

Coal Sector and Minerals-

The government will be ending the monopoly of Coal India Ltd (CIL), by introducing commercial mining of coal. The government is focusing to reduce the country's dependence on coal import and be fully self-reliant in coal production.

NBFCs/HFCS-

The government has come up with special liquidity scheme worth Rs 30,000 for investing in investment grade debt paper of NBFCs, HFCs and MFIs. The scheme will be fully guaranteed by the government and will be especially beneficial for the housing sector. A partial credit guarantee scheme will also be allocated for NBFCs where the first 20% of the loss will be borne by the government. Thus, providing the required liquidity support essential for the smooth functioning of the sector.

Real Estate-

The government has extended the CLSS (Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme) for middle income households to March 2021. This will lead to investments of Rs 70,000 crore in the housing sector, thus boosting the already ailing real estate sector. The states and regulatory authorities have also been advised to extend the registration and completion date of real estate projects under RERA to de-stress developers and ensure timely completion of projects. The boost in real estate sector will lead to surge in demand of related sectors like steel, cement, transport and also lead to employment generation.

Conclusion

Protection doesn't mean only Physically Protection. But, Protection against livelihood, Protection against employment, protection against social status, Protection against pandemic crisis. As per Indian constitution Article 47. Duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health. The State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties and, in particular, the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health. One of the Report titled 'Management of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Gujarat: Understanding the government initiatives, leadership processes and their impact' by Prof Ranjan Kumar Ghosh of IIM, Ahmedabad, (IIM-A) and his team claims that Due to speedy rise in COVID-19 cases in Ahmedabad Government Of Gujarat initiated medical mobile vans to reduce the rush at OPDs in hospitals to creating new medical infrastructure especially for Covid-19, Gujarat largely did right things to contain Covid-19.

"The primary purpose of the exercise was to understand the decision-making process at the time of the epidemic, efficacy of the decisions along with cohesive and interconnected work by different arms of the government machinery," said Prof Ghosh, adding that this exercise should also be done for other states to create a rich repository for the future to identify best practices.

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