

WANTED, A COLLECTIVE NATIONAL ENDEAVOUR

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

The world's biggest ever [lockdown](#) has now been extended. We do not know though if it has been helping us contain the spread of [COVID-19](#). The Central government claims that if we had not locked down, we would have [800,000 infections](#) by April 15, not the [8,000-plus at present](#). We are not told how these projections have been made; they seem to have been conjured out of thin air to justify the lockdown.

We will in the end get the better of the virus. But how and at what cost? There is no toolbox on how to deal with COVID-19. Mistakes will be made but we should be able to admit failure, and change course when we have to.

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One, if there is a time for a national government, it is now. We are all in it together and representatives of all political parties should work together to deal with what we are told is the severest crisis since Independence. This is not the time to seek political gain, but a time when everyone will be more than willing to put aside their differences to tackle the crisis. The initiative has to come from the ruling party.

If a national government is not acceptable to the Bharatiya Janata Party, then we should make a collective national effort. We must open our doors as wide as possible to advice from the best minds and most skilled persons, whoever they may be and wherever they might be, in the government and outside, political friends and enemies.

Two, the Centre must have the State Governments as equal partners while taking decisions. The past week has seen a bit of a change, but it has taken weeks for the Centre to begin consulting the States.

The most productive effort will be an equal partnership between the Centre and the States. Some States began preparation well before the Centre woke up to the seriousness of COVID-19. There is little so far that the States have been able to learn from the Centre, but there is much that the Centre can learn from the States, and the States from each other.

[State-wise tracker for coronavirus cases, deaths and testing rates](#) | [Helpline numbers](#)

The Prime Minister unilaterally decided to impose the three-week lockdown and it is now said that it is the States that wanted an extension. Are the States then to take the blame if the strategy does not succeed?

Three, centralisation of decision-making in the Prime Minister's Office is the worst thing in a country-wide crisis. So far everything has been centred around the Prime Minister. The Union Cabinet is only busy tweeting in support of the Prime Minister. The Health Minister is nowhere to be seen. A small group of hand-picked bureaucrats is taking all the major decisions and directing the response. This should not be so.

Four, some forethought is advisable even in "big bang" decisions. We should have thought about *Jaan bhi, Jahaan bhi* ("Life and economy are both important") before imposing the lockdown, not now three weeks later. We should not have messaged the lockdown as an act

done in fear or as a “curfew” but as a difficult decision in which the government would be with the citizen right through. If it was cruel not to first assure the migrants that they would be supported during the lockdown, it has been worse not to have later quickly made amends.

Five, we can surely be more generous with how we can support the millions who have been brutally affected by the stop to most economic activity. Yet, it is amazing how stingy — yes, that is the word — the Centre has been so far with its relief measures. It should also be giving the States more resources for their health services and expanded welfare programmes. But it is unbelievable that even today the Centre is refusing to release the States’ share in Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenues.

There have been many suggestions on how to ameliorate the immediate despair, repair the supply lines and fund what needs to be done now and in the future. If only the Centre had an open mind.

Six, uncertainty and fear among the people calls for assurance from the highest levels on a regular basis, indeed every day, about what is being done. This would also signal that the Centre is sensitive to the difficulties that citizens are experiencing. The Centre can do this only if it sheds its dislike of the press, and not offer obfuscations by mid-level officials as is now happening. Yet, it went even further and asked the Supreme Court to place restrictions on how the media disseminates information on COVID-19.

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Compare this attitude with that of the Chief Minister of Kerala. Detailed daily press briefings have built confidence in the State Government’s efforts, so much so that the residents of Kerala have now shed their fear. In the process, a Chief Minister who was earlier seen as a polarising figure has united the State in this crisis, and he has come to be universally admired.

Seven, India must be unique in the world for increasing social tensions in such times. After many members of the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi were found infected, an intense wave of Islamophobia has swept the TV channels and social media. The Muslim community is blamed for waging a “corona jihad”. The result is social ostracism in parts of the country, economic boycotts and an open expression of hate. If the BJP leadership had used its enormous political capital to speak forcefully against this trend, the rabble-rousers would have fallen in line. Its silence should make us afraid of what is to come.

Eight, the path we have chosen of lockdowns and containment to slow the transmission of COVID-19 may call for more (even if shorter) lockdowns in the future. An extended lockdown may make sense in an advanced economy where organised activity is the norm, but in India where there is so much of day-to-day survival and so little social security? Can our society cope with such an assault on the fabric of livelihoods? Is it not time to ask if the cure we are administering is going to be worse than the disease? Should we not begin to discuss alternatives?

The economy cannot be operated with an off-on switch. It is going to be a long and hard process to rebuild the economy and rescue the livelihoods of millions of people in rural and urban India that have been weakened, if not destroyed altogether. That is why we need a collective national effort at reconstruction. Or were millions deprived of their daily earnings only so that COVID-19 would not spread to the clangers of pots and pans and lighters of candles, the more privileged among us?

[Coronavirus | Bracing for a rapid surge in cases, says government](#)

There are doctors, paramedics and accredited social health activists, or ASHAs, across the country who are working tirelessly. There are young medical graduates who have asked to work in COVID-19 wards. There are officials in the States who are working day in and day out on prevention and detection. We already have heroines like the nurse in Kerala who cared for an elderly COVID-19 couple, fell ill herself, recovered and now wants to rejoin duty. But there has been a larger failure of humanity in how the rest of us have responded. We can yet recover that humanity if the political leadership shows the way.

The propaganda machine tells us that we have been doing well. Let us not be fooled. We are in the middle of a humanitarian disaster that would have been worse but for the efforts of the State governments. If we want to, we can still rise to meet the crisis. For that, we need a largeness of political vision that would enable a true collective effort at all levels of government and by all sections of society.

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