

PARADIGM OF ECONOMY, EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN THE PANDEMIC-STRICKEN WORLD

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The covid-19 pandemic is characterized by the emergence of a new SARS-CoV-2 virus which brought the wheels of the globalized world to a grinding halt. The pandemic-induced lockdown has impacted entire global human community and its serious repercussions are here to continue even in upcoming decades. Though from the vantage of environmentalists, the pandemic may have paved a recovery path, regardless of time period, to safeguard the nature from anthropogenic exploitations, it has definitely inflicted immense pressure and sufferings to wider sections of the society.

Unfortunately, the most affected section of the population is from underdeveloped and developing countries like India where millions of people still continue to live in abject poverty. The street vendors, small traders and hawkers who are at the lower rungs of the society and similar daily wagers population suffered the most during this health crisis. Various governments have played their role in prevention, containment and curation through their increased expenditure, public health initiatives and schemes. We are now in a situation, where the virus has spread to all countries and the vaccination programme has been implemented with significant safety precautions and protocols with elaborate standard operating procedures (SoPs).

We must not forget to thank the medical fraternity for fighting this global pandemic with unyielding vigour and determination. The frontline workers and police personnel have risked their lives in their duty to prevent the spread of the contagion.

World's largest vaccination programme

In the later part of the pandemic, despite increasing testing rate the number of cases was lower. This can be attributed to aggressive testing, earlier detection and isolation steps undertaken by health officials. India's vaccination drive was initially aimed to cover the priority groups including health workers, police personnel, old age persons with co-morbidities and now have been gradually thrown open to any voluntary adult who register himself for the vaccination. There have been questions raised about the efficacy of the vaccine and few arguments suggesting possible reinfection even after vaccination. However, the effective and scientific way to curb the further spread and to achieve herd immunity is only through the vaccination programme.

Thus even if the COVID-19 vaccine is not considered to be a panacea, we must participate in the vaccination drive in masses to instil confidence in scientific accomplishments.

Impact on Economy and Poverty

Since independence, economic and social disparity remains a challenge for India even after slew of economic upliftment measures continuously undertaken by the government of India and state governments. The existing disparities has now been exacerbated by the pandemic, thereby eventually affecting the downtrodden, compounding the extant economic distress.

The government laid a comprehensive road map in the economic package named AtmaNirbhar Bharat to deal with the health and economic consequences of the crisis. It had also pledged to raise adequate funding to back the economic package. Meanwhile the unemployment has become rampant after covid-19 crisis, rendering at least one member from every five-household to be jobless.

Most affected families are the ones with a single-lone breadwinner and worsen case of him being a migrant worker. We can observe a persistent decrease in individual disposable income which directly affects the expenditure made out for basic amenities and necessities. RBI on its part took an accommodative stance and reiterated the banks to play a vital role in steering the economy towards greater resilience.

It has also announced number of rate cuts directing strict adherence by SCBs (Scheduled Commercial banks) and other financial institutions in order to spur economic growth by enhancing demand side capabilities and fostering public spending. We may expect further economic relief packages from the government and also RBI's Prompt Corrective Action framework to ensure last mile connectivity, financial stability and all-inclusive path to recovery.

Education and Digital Divide

Due to the pandemic-induced lockdown, schools and educational Institutions were closed across the country. The students who were earlier accustomed to a regular class environment were now made to acclimatize themselves to a new way of learning through the online platforms. The change in the teaching and learning systems was not observed in a equal and uniform manner due to the stark digital divide among students across different villages, cities and states. As per the NSO survey data, only one among the ten households have a desktop or laptop or tablet kind of accessories and startlingly 1/4th of households have internet facility either to mobile or broadband.

Major factor that influences and widen such a digital divide is the economic status of the households. For example almost 70% of households in the urban Himachal Pradesh have internet facilities while only 6% of rural areas are connected through internet. This digital divide has to be minimised through digitisation of schooling in all

areas and thereby efforts has to be made to achieve all-inclusive learning eventually eliminating uneven dissemination of educational information.

TN government's "Kalvitholaikatchi" initiative is a laudable attempt towards the aforementioned goal. However, we are long way behind the target of minimizing the existing digital divide in education and bringing in students from the disadvantaged and distant areas into the fold of online learning platform.

Employment-newer opportunities or entrenching disadvantage?

It is very crucial to critically review current employment trends and thus enable ourselves to embrace newer comprehensive reforms in consonance with changing global demand in this pandemic-stricken world. We cannot fight today's dynamic challenge with outdated structures.

Funds should be earmarked for imparting employability skills to the working population. Skill imparting programs and specialization courses has to made available and accessible even to the disadvantaged children in far flung areas. We may expect complete revamp of both the industrial and information technology sector and thus necessary job requirements has to be adequately met through due deliberation, wider discussion and public participation.

Though the service sector contributes larger chunk to the GDP of the nation, it is the agricultural and manufacturing sectors which have greater worker population within their fold. Most of the migrant labour crisis that resonated across the nation can be linked to the industrial and construction sectors. The timely implementation of One nation One Ration Card scheme helped to provide adequate palliative measures through available public distribution system. Steps to ensure employment in the rural and peripheral areas have been addressed through schemes like MGNREGA. Similar schemes can be emulated in urban areas to ensure livelihoods of urban dweller, street vendors and small traders. Presently, such street vendors are benefitting through PM. SVANidhi scheme by which loans extended to the registered vendors, to enable them to resume their business.

After multiple committee's recommendations to simplify and rationalise existing complex regime of labour laws, central government has now codified the entire gamut of labour legislations under four labour codes. Thresholds pertaining to workers count, working hours and other compliance criteria has been modified under the new labour codes.

The reforms are essential in the restructuring and recovery of any distressed sectors but the hastiness shown in their implementation could be avoided and detailed deliberation have to be made with all the stakeholders in the forthcoming regulations.

Conclusion

New threats require new agility from the public. The paradigm shift in the economy, education and employment is a stark message towards better understanding

of the current trend and also to equip ourselves to embrace the unpredictable future endeavours. Safety precautions are here to stay and the people who are venturing out even after pandemic lockdown should wear masks, maintain individual distancing and shall adhere to the safety norms to fight the successive pandemic wave.

In today's interconnected world, interdependency has become indispensable during COVID-19 like existential threat, therefore this pandemic has given a clarion call to devise mutually accepted multilateral solutions for tackling multiple challenges in different sectors like economy, education and employment in the society.

References

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