

COVID-19 Fiasco - Did the Indian government know that lockdown wasn't an effective strategy against COVID-19?

In January, the world was informed by WHO of a novel coronavirus which had begun to spread rapidly in Wuhan, China. The novel coronavirus was previously unheard of and very little was known about it. In January the outbreak was limited to China and had caused nearly 10,000 infections already. Soon China took a never-before-heard measure to tackle the outbreak- locking down the entire province of Wuhan with a population of over 1 crore. People were not allowed to move out of their homes and soon photos and videos of China's mass quarantining facilities began to emerge. For those of us outside China, the measures taken by China seemed over-the-top and draconian. Fearing the outbreak would spread more, many countries announced travel bans of passengers from China; others warned their citizens from traveling to China.

It was around January 21st that India announced that it would begin thermal screening of all passengers coming from China at 7 airports across the country. In January and February, the Indian government repeatedly assured that it was prepared to tackle the outbreak if it spread to India. Around the same time, India was also playing host to President Donald Trump even as massive communal riots broke in North Eastern Delhi in February leaving over 60 dead and more than 200 injured.

Since health is a state subject, many states took measures to monitor airport arrivals and to quarantine the suspects. Then as the outbreak began to intensify and escalate in other countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, Spain, the Indian government expanded the list of countries with its thermal screening. India reported its first four COVID cases at the end of January in southern state of Kerala.

Fast forward to March 18 and India had over 151 cases. On March 19th, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that a Janta Curfew would be held on March 22nd. This was a precursor for another announcement made by the PM Modi the next day that the entire country would be put under lockdown starting March 24th. It was the same day that India reported over 100 cases in one day. The PM's announcement regarding the lockdown came abruptly, giving 1.3 billion people just 4 hours to gear up and stock up for what is to be the longest lockdown ever seen in independent India. Interestingly, this decision was taken 10 days after the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had publicly stated that COVID-19 was not a health emergency.

So what was the scientific basis for the nationwide lockdown that began in India on March 24th and subsequently extended on April 12th till May 3? Was the government assured by its own scientists that the lockdown would help curtail the spread of COVID 19?

A new investigation reported by Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava of The Reporters' Collective in association with Article14 reveals the government was informed in the first week of April that the countrywide 21-day lockdown ordered by Prime Minister Modi would have a very limited and temporary effect to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. You can read the investigative series in English on their website www.article-14.com I am Padma Priya and in this special episode of The Suno India

Show we bring to you an exclusive interview with Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav on what their investigation revealed.

The information was based on an internal assessment carried out by Indian Council of Medical Research, government's premier agency of scientists and epidemiologists to deal with the highly-contagious coronavirus infection.

Niti Ayog Member and one of the top advisors to the government on the pandemic Vinod K Paul had also informed the government that "Generalised transmission to be obvious in coming days,". Generalised transmission refers to community transmission which means that covid-19 would soon be spreading widely making it impossible to trace who was infecting whom in the country. Till date it refuses to admit in public that such wide-spread transmission has begun.

Nitin: we still don't know what kind of legal advice the government got in the first place to impose a nationwide lockdown. We know that different districts, different pockets have done this but a nationwide lockdown. We don't know what kind of scientific advice the government got. What we do know from my investigation is that in the first week of April, which is about seven to eight days into the lockdown or the first phase of the lockdown, the ICMR conducted a projection based on a modeling exercise, which was not made public, but the results of that were presented to the government. The results in summary, said this they said that the lockdown as the government had already imposed was rather ineffective, it would at its peak at its best, reduced the number of cases that come in daily by 20 to 25% at the peak spread of the infection, the ICMR's projections and study also said and we saw the results of that, that this was not an effective way of controlling the pandemic.

This is Nitin Sethi who talks about what their investigation revealed. They reviewed internal documents, presentations and records of meetings. Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav also spoke to over a dozen highly placed sources in the central government, its public health agencies and state governments as part of this investigation.

According to an ICMR presentation reviewed by them, the lockdown which has caused tremendous economic hardship to many millions especially the poor would at best reduce the peak number of people who show symptoms of the disease on a given day by 40%. "Best use of lockdown is preparedness for" these measures, Paul conveyed and indicated the government still needed a week's time to prepare to put these measures in place.

Nitin: "This information from ICMR was taken to the government by a member of Niti Ayog Mr. Vinod Paul, who we believe did not convey the entire import of the ICMR study to the government. Our impression is because if the Prime Minister's decided something then it's very difficult to tell the Prime Minister that what you've done is scientifically silly or incorrect. But even Mr. Paul then went on to advise saying what is the right thing to do and said that the only thing that perhaps lockdown did was buy the government some time to do the right scientifically mandated things, which to us showed that the government was not prepared, even as late in the day as the first week of April, and was therefore forced to extend the lockdown yet further."

This is what Kumar Sambhav had to say:

Two most important things that the ICMR study said it categorically says that large scale, infection and community transmission that we know it, now they had said that that's inevitable in India, and lockdown would probably buy them time to prepare the infrastructure to deal with that kind of large scale transmission.

What their investigations reveal regarding the inevitability of community spread in India is interesting in itself because quite the opposite was being communicated to

the media and public by ICMR and Ministry of Health in daily press briefings. < add Lav Agarwal quote about community transmission here> The Ministry of Health Joint Secretary Lav Agarwal had in fact refuted statements made by Punjab Chief Minister and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister that community transmission had begun in their States.

Nitin: The word I would use is appalling. If any government believes that suppression of information would actually lead to a better management of this pandemic, then there is experience to show from World over that that does not happen. I think Kerala shown us the way that if you admit to the crisis and there is no machoism in saying that we've kept the numbers down or not, in this early stage, I think medical science tells you a pandemic spreads in a certain way. You have to deal with it by confronting and saying, yes, this is a crisis. This is the proportion it's reaching, and this is what we're doing. I think what the government has done is double down on information because I think rather intrepid health journalists started asking rather pesky questions, which was piercing through the kind of image the government was building by its statistics, by its claims. And in that the government proceeded further into not telling the truth about the level of crisis. And in that throwing the responsibility on the civil society, instead of admitting to its own delays. And I think there's a huge cost first for society to pay for the delays of the government for which I guess I can only imagine why the government would do something of this kind.

Contrary to ICMR findings, to claim the nation-wide lockdown would control the pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on April 14 <insert quote about 550 cases>

Three days earlier, on April 11 the health ministry released a graph to claim success of the lockdown which claimed that the lockdown and containment measures had limited the covid-19 cases to 7,477 by April 10. Without the lockdown and containment measures India would have had 2.08 lakh cases. Do we know, who So who made the graph that was released by the health ministry? Was it prepared by ICMR? What was the basis of the data that was provided there? This is what Kumar Sambhav had to say:

Kumar Sambhav:

So Padma, basically this I mean, the health ministry presented the graph but they never put in public domain on what basis this data was calculated on what basis their estimates were made, plus the number that they are showing at that point of time. The claim that they're making that they have brought down the numbers which otherwise would have been so high, is other illogical also because one you don't have, you will not testing enough in a country of this scale, as compared to other countries, our testing levels have been much much below. And when obviously you are not testing enough, you would find less cases. And you already see that during the lockdown periods, the number of contaminated zones for the hotspots have been increasing. So unless you know that what is your testing base, you can't really compare the two numbers that hypothetically would have been and that are now today with the lockdown in place. So, yeah, I mean, that doesn't really make any sense. And then, even if, the ICMR study that we have seen internally discussed, it does show that during the lockdown, the impact would be that eventually your peaks will be lower. But that doesn't really mean that the overall number of cases that eventually we'll be infected in the country will come down or the lockdown would have any effect on that. So that clearly the ICMR has stated in the internal study that we have seen.

Nitin Sethi says that the aim of the investigation to weigh in favour of one scientific argument or the other. It was to understand on what basis the government is taking action. .

Nitin: Our point of this investigation was to say, look, here is the government's premier scientific agency to deal with this pandemic. It's given advice now, on what if the government does not accept this advice? On what basis has that not accepted this advice and with whom have they gone? Who have they asked for what kind of scientific understanding to then take the decision they have? I think the government owes it to the citizens to at least justify its decisions, rather than use rhetoric and the sole purpose of identity is not to say that this science is good or that science is bad. I don't think journalists should be the judge of that absolutely. But here is evidence that there was scientific advice given which was suppressed. When the government took a decision that their top scientists said you should not take. To our mind, that's clear. Second part is Sambhav said, not testing and having results when you tested one out of million two, comparing when you had 100, or a million tested is almost like, I mean, if I could draw an analogy, you have a period in history where say, robbery is not a crime. And you compare that period with the number of crimes registered of robbery in 21st century. Clearly if you do not have equal metrics by which you're measuring it just does not make sense. We've gone ahead and done this too many times saying when you were testing one out of a million you were doing the same when you are not testing asymptomatic people today You had some numbers, you're comparing to point where you are doing symptomatic testing, you've done testing intensively in one or two pockets, unfortunately, even based on communal tangents, and you've not done across the country, you've done some testing and metropolitans. You've not even done that in non metropolitan areas. Now, therefore, that contaminates the data itself. And you cannot judge on the basis of data. What you can go back to is, how the pandemic generally spreads and what science believes how the pandemic will flow out over the next couple of months. And we're not talking days and weeks. We are talking months over here is what the ICMR study showed us.

Reporters Collective's examination of the presentation also revealed that researchers at ICMR gave the example of Delhi to elucidate how the lockdown would impact the spread of covid-19. It said that despite the 21-day lockdown the peak number of people showing symptoms of covid-19 would be as high as 1.3 million. The peak covid infection period would be delayed for some time they found. Without the lockdown the peak number of people being infected everyday would have been reached between 100-150 days from the time the first person was infected. The lockdown would simply shift this peak to between 150-200 days from the point of first infection in India. ICMR warned that "Absent any other control measure, lifting the lockdown would allow a resurgence of transmission," . I asked Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav what recommendations were made by ICMR in place of a lockdown.

Nitin: Mr. Paul was, I guess as one would need to be when speaking to the Prime Minister, rather polite in what he said. While what he was suggesting was dramatically opposite to what this government had already done. Dr. Paul said that he called it a package of continuum of care where instead of a locking down of people inside their homes, particularly for the poor, who are densely packed in urban clusters, he suggested that we need to make sure that the government reaches these people and looks for those who are having symptoms of COVID 19, brings them out, takes them to community quarantines centers. And for those who can afford, get these people showing symptoms to stay quarantined in their whole homes. For this he said it would take a door to door system of government going using incentives like providing grains and essential services to entice people to come out. Now imagine this is completely contrasted to the fact that here police is beating you for even coming out to buy a packet of milk for your child. So what he was advising was a completely different community oriented system, which was built on one increased testing, but also more than that increased surveillance at district level. he suggested that each district has its

own surveillance method, which ensures that you are looking at the trend at district levels right now we don't have any of that functioning.

Kumar Sambhav: The criteria for actually this even this strategy to succeed was that you should be the government should be able to identify and quarantine every one out of two symptomatic, sorry, every one out of the two suspected cases, which is showing symptoms within the two days of it showing the person showing symptoms. So to imagine at a scale of our country where you have to identify and quarantine every one out of two person within two days of them, showing symptoms, the kind of infrastructure you need cannot happen, especially in poor areas, like Nitin mentioned, through a top down lockdown, but actually, through community and a process of community led surveillance and monitoring, which eventually, Mr. Paul suggested in April and then they said that they needed time to put that infrastructure in place.

If this strategy was to be adopted and implemented, what would this have meant in terms of health infrastructure? I asked them if this was mentioned in the presentation accessed by them.

Nitin : Yes. So, Mr. Paul based on I think what the ICMR had recommended did project what would be the needs at that point, if you were to scale up surveillance, testing and quarantining to the level that was recommended by the studies. It's, I would say what the government had by then ready was nothing compared to what was being asked. Say I remember from the presentations that he said if the daily infection in an area was around 500, then, and you were looking at a median hospital stay of 15 days, you would end up seeing daily ICU admissions of 25. You would need around 150 ventilators for just that. And the number of ICU beds you'd require is 300. If all mild symptomatic people were put in centralized quarantine, then he suggested that for a daily infection rate of 500, you'll need 6000 beds by the end, on an average. And if only 20% of them were quarantined, you'd still need 1200 beds for quarantine. So I think he clearly laid it out that what was required to be done is massive. And to my mind that the fact that this was being discussed in April tells us that till April, the government had not even begun of thinking of this kind of infrastructure when just a few days later, the Prime Minister i remember in his speech talks about Oh yes, we are ready with 100,000 beds, when we have only say a 1000 cases something he refers. Truth is, I mean, if we went just by the recommendations within the government, we are falling far short. Particularly when you look at the strategy that is advising where he is saying you must have common quarantine facilities to bring out people ,you cannot stigmatize them, you cannot keep them locked up in their houses. Because as one would logically think if you lock up people with symptoms and with covert positive cases, in poorer densely populated areas, you are basically forcing them to spread it amongst their loved ones. Yeah. So, he, I mean, it could be this does not even need science in India in some, in some ways, average logic would allow you to understand that but so in some sense, he was asking for a complete change in government strategy, and he was saying, now that you have imposed a lockdown use it as an excuse to get started getting this in place. I think clearly even in his mind and in mind of the government, the first week of April, it was still too late to do it for the first phase, therefore, we ended up extending the lockdown further. we must remember that there are economic costs that are poor, particularly paying heavily for extension of the lockdown. To my mind, this is where the poor and the citizenry and the economy is taking a hit, just because the government did not begin to prepare a scientific response and the infrastructure required from January and onwards.

Questions sent to ICMR, Health Ministry and Dr Vinod K Paul by Reporters Collective have remained unanswered. We will update the story when an official response is issued.

Conclusion: In part 2 of the investigation Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav's investigation will throw more light on the central government's lack of preparedness in combating COVID 19 and how confusion and delays marred the COVID 19 response

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