

AVOID LOCKDOWNS, FOCUS ON SAFETY PROTOCOLS

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AS Covid-19 cases are beginning to spike for a second time and surpass the peaks of the first wave in India, several states are seeing lockdown trends re-emerge in the form of night curfews, weekend lockdowns and restrictions in operations of sectors like hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, theatres, gyms and salons. With the rising pace and casualties of the pandemic, the fear of even more stringent constraints on economic activities by states is not ruled out. This would deal a severe and avoidable blow to an economy already struggling to emerge from the Covid-enforced lockdowns of last year.

Last year, a nationwide lockdown had to be imposed due to absence of knowledge and experience in those days to treat the novel coronavirus. And vaccination was also not available. With the passage of time, we have made massive progress on both these fronts. Having dealt with the pandemic for a year, the medical fraternity now is equipped with much greater understand-

ing and expertise to treat Covid patients. Further, with the pharmaceutical industry innovating and producing specific drugs, the casualty rate has come down significantly. Even more importantly, now the vaccination drive in India is in full swing with about 4 million people being inoculated on a daily basis. It is set to pick up momentum in the coming months with augmentation in vaccine output. Citizens have also become aware of the health and safety protocol measures to be followed to control the spread of the disease.

We are now obviously well prepared to manage and control the disease even without enforcing lockdowns. Stressing on the need to avoid lockdowns, the PM has recently stated that "... we had to impose lockdowns because at that time, we did not have the infrastructure to control the infection: no PPE suits, not enough sanitisers, masks... we are no longer facing those shortages. So micro-containment zones should be the strategy".

The CII agrees with the view of our PM and believes that the full-fledged lockdowns are now needless, and the objective of containing the spread and casualties of the pandemic can be achieved through other measures that do not adversely impact the economy by hindering the ease of doing business. When night curfew becomes absolutely essential, it should be ensured that supply chains and overall industrial activities remain unaffected in the area even during curfew hours.

Weekend and day curfews must be avoided completely. While ensuring that health safety protocols are followed strictly, in no circumstances should interstate as well as intrastate movement of trucks/vehicles be allowed to be affected. Further, no distinction should be made



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between essential and non-essential goods when it comes to their movement from one place to another. Manpower should be allowed to move freely to factories and offices, subject to adherence to health safety protocols. Similarly, congestion at ports should not be allowed to build up. What is also important is to ensure that the Covid-related relief measures provided by the government should continue, if not augmented, till we are able to get rid of the pandemic fully.

Instead of lockdowns, which would unnecessarily derail the economic recovery besides causing livelihood and migration issues of labour, greater attention needs to be accorded to enhancing the citizens' participation in the vaccination drive as well as ensuring adherence to four other important norms: testing, using masks, sanitising regularly and maintaining social distancing.

While we have been able to ramp up our pace of inoculation considerably, it has to move to a level of 8-10 million people on a daily basis in the next few months. For this, the vaccine output has to increase exponentially from the current monthly level of 65-70 million doses, which would require several measures such as fast-tracked approval for new production capacities, facili-

tating local manufacturers to produce other brands of vaccines (like Johnson & Johnson and Novavax) in large quantity, ensuring hurdle-free availability of inputs to manufacturers and improving the cold storage facilities for vaccines in the country.

Until we have sufficient stock of vaccines, we should look at targeted inoculation in a manner that minimises the need for lockdown. For instance, immunisation of the labour segment, migrant workers and logistics providers, among others, may be prioritised while also helping them with affordable and easy testing and treatment facilities.

While implementing stricter health and safety protocols, state governments should also ensure that citizens have affordable access to masks, sanitisers, face shields, gloves, gowns, PPEs, ventilators, etc., to tackle the second wave of the pandemic effectively. Focusing on economical masking, testing, vaccinating and care facilities along with adherence to stricter health safety norms would be much better than going back to the outdated lockdown strategy, which has adverse implications on economic activities and livelihood of a large section of population including the labour force.

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