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LOCKDOWN MEASURES IN INDIA AND ITS ECONOMIC IMPACT ON LOW INCOME GROUPS

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Abstract:

The complete lockdown measures implemented in India to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the economic conditions of the working class of the country. The initial jolt pushed the unemployment figures to 23.52% in April 2020, and to date, the recovery has been far from satisfactory. The quarterly GDP growth data have indicated a negative real GDP growth for India for the fiscal year 2020-21. As data on employment, income, consumption, saving, borrowing, and access to different public utilities are available after a time-lag; there was no other option but to depend on micro-level studies to get an idea of the real picture on the ground. In this paper, we have attempted to assess the impact of the lockdown on the workers of unorganized sectors especially the self-employed and the daily wage earners of different service sectors from urban and semi-urban areas located in and around South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The present study has found that the income of workers from the informal sectors has recorded a sharp decline during the lockdown period. As these workers primarily belong to the low-income group, their consumption expenditures have also declined concomitantly, reflecting their low economic endowments. Most of them didn't have much savings to support the sudden decline in their income, thereby resulting in a decline in consumption expenditure. This decline is most severe for daily wage workers. This paper has argued in favour of direct cash transfer from the government to low-income people as the only way out to overcome the present crisis.

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1.0 Introduction:

The world economy is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020 and India is no exception to it. The Government of India (GOI) announced a complete lockdown all over the country to prevent the spread of COVID-19 effective from the mid-night of March 23, 2020 (The Hindu 2020). This complete lockdown that was initially implemented for three weeks was extended up to May 31, 2020 in four phases (The Economic Times 2020). The process of unlocking has started since then, but India is yet to reach normalcy. Movements of passengers by rail and air were restricted to a large extent in many parts of the country till November 2020. The impact of the lockdown measures was huge on the working class of the country, mostly

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engaged in the informal sector having no social security. Millions of migrant workers have returned home within the lockdown period on foot, crossing 500 to 1000 kilometers suffering unimaginable distress (Priyam and Bordoloi 2020). The sudden and sharp fall in employment, income, and output as a fallout of this complete lockdown was unprecedented in the contemporary economic history of India. According to the employment report of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE, 2020), the unemployment rate in the country increased from 7.78 percent in February to 23.52 percent in April 2020. As the complete lockdown continued till the end of May 2020, the unemployment rate remained as high as 21.73 percent in May 2020 (CMIE, 2020). In this context, it must be noted that the Indian economy was already sliding down from its earlier growth trajectory and had gradually entered into a recessionary phase by 2018-19, much before the inception of the present COVID-19 crisis. According to the data released by the Labour Ministry, GOI, the unemployment rate from July 2017 to June 2018 was around 6.1 percent. This was the highest level of the unemployment rate that India had experienced in the last 45 years (Business Standard 2020). This data was released on May 31, 2019; one week after the declaration of results of the Parliamentary elections on May 23, 2019 in India.

The GDP growth was decelerating in consecutive quarters since 2018, and it became obvious from the first half of 2019-20 that the Indian economy had entered into a recessionary phase (Patnaik 2020a). As the unorganized sector is the biggest source of employment in India, the income of the working class had started to fall with the onset of economic decline in the economy. Simultaneously, the agrarian distress and indebtedness of the peasantry were aggravating for a decade and more, mainly reflecting low productivity, high input costs, and non-remunerative prices for the agricultural products (Sainath 2018). Low income and indebtedness of the farm sector resulted in a decline in wages and employment of the non-farm sector in India. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis besieged the Indian economy when it was going through its worst phase in the last two decades.

2.0 Macroeconomic Impact of Lockdown through Secondary Data:

According to the National Account Statistics (NAS) data released by the GOI, gross value addition (GVA) at constant prices (2011-12 prices) recorded a negative growth by around 23 percent during the first quarter (April –June) of 2020-21 as compared to the corresponding period of the previous year (Table 1). As mentioned in Table 1, apart from the agricultural and allied activities, all other sectors have registered negative growth to different extents. Manufacturing activities that contribute around 18.0 percent of GVA have shrunk by 39.3 percent during April-June 2020-21 as compared to the same period in the previous year. Trade, hotels, transport, communication and services related to broadcasting that have a share of around 20 percent in India’s GVA registered a negative growth of 47.0 percent in the first quarter of the current financial year in comparison to the same period of the previous year. Similarly, construction activities recorded negative growth of 50.3 percent during the first quarter of 2020-21. In this context, it may be noted that apart from the data of the organised manufacturing sector, data for the rest of the manufacturing sector are projections based on the performances of the previous years. Therefore the actual data for the manufacturing sector may be revised downward when the annual data will be published later. Given the closure of large number of manufacturing farms under the micro, small and medium industries (MSME), the possibility of downward revision of data is distinct.

This crisis has vindicated the importance of the agricultural sector in the economy in terms of production and supply of adequate food grains and vegetables during the time of lockdown to meet the country's demand for food at reasonable prices. It has remained the largest source of employment of the labour force in the rural economy. The migrant workers who returned to their villages during the lockdown also received support from the farm sector. These jobless workers in the unorganised sector, construction-related activities in metropolitan cities were partly absorbed by the agricultural sector (Patnaik 2020b). The enhanced expenditure under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) through the Atmanirbhar Bharat Stimulus Packages (GOI 2020a and GOI 2020b) also supported rural employment. However, these efforts were not enough to mitigate the sudden decline in employment and income of the working class who returned jobless to their rural homes in India. Moreover, for a major part of the complete lockdown period, work under MGNREGA was totally stopped (The Hindu 2020). It resumed gradually from May 2020 onwards.

In the absence of transportation, it was difficult for farmers to transport vegetables from villages to cities during the lockdown period. This situation continued till the time local trains resumed operation in the respective states. Therefore, in the absence of markets, vegetables were sold at much cheaper rates in villages (Shukla 2020). It reduced income of the farmers. But it helped the rural people to survive in the lockdown period even with lower earnings. In contrast, workers situated in the urban areas and metropolitan cities faced serious economic stress once laid off from their workplaces. They didn't get any alternative work easily. On many occasions, they were deprived of free distribution of food grains through Ration Shops under the Public Distribution System (PDS) by the governments. As on most occasions, workers staying in cities have their roots in villages; they have their ration cards registered in villages. So, they could not avail the facilities of PDS also. Though the central government made attempts to provide food grains through PDS by issuing temporary ration cards, it was ultimately dependent on the state governments to provide these facilities to migrant workers. On most occasions, state governments failed to issue temporary ration cards to needy families (Sinha 2020).

The second-quarter national account statistics data of 2020-21, published by the GOI on September 27, 2020 has indicated a recovery in economic activities resisting the negative real GVA growth to 7.0 percent for the second quarter of this fiscal year (Table 1). This recovery of the Indian economy indicated that India was gradually coming back to normalcy. Disbursements under fiscal stimulus packages were expected to play an important role in generating further demand in the economy. Many economists were of the opinion that the Indian economy is more resilient than many other economies and would be able to bounce back soon (RBI 2020). However, their belief was based on the reliance exhibited by the Indian economy during the International Financial Crisis and East Asian Crisis. But both these crises affected the Indian economy through external sectors and their rippling effects on the overall economy. In the case of the International Financial Crisis, the Indian banking sector was mostly insulated from this crisis as only a part of India's private banking sector had limited exposure to mortgage security markets in the United States of America. The impact of these crises on our external sectors was also transient in nature (RBI 2010). Thus, in the past two crises, India's domestic market remained almost unaffected. But the lockdown measures have affected the internal market demand in India adversely. There is hardly any sector that is not affected due to these lockdown measures. The Indian economy at present is a demand deficient economy, and its recovery will be delayed if it does not get enough boosts from the government in the form of large fiscal expenditure. However, the latest data published by CMIE on the employment rate has indicated a quick recovery from as high as 23.5 percent in April 2020 to around 6.98 percent in the month of October 2020. Therefore, India may remain optimistic of returning to its normal growth trajectory by the end of this current financial year 2020-21.

Table 1: Quarterly estimates of GVA at basic prices for 2020-21

Industry	(April-June) (% change over previous year)		(July –September) (% change over previous year)	
	2019-20	2020-21	2019-20	2020-21
1. Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	3.0	3.4	3.5	3.4
2. Mining & Quarrying	4.7	-23.3	-1.1	-9.1
3. Manufacturing	3.0	-39.3	-0.6	0.6
4. Electricity, Gas, Water Supply & other Utility Services	8.8	-7.0	3.9	4.4
5. Construction	5.2	-50.3	2.6	-8.6
6. Trade, Hotels, Transport, communication and Services related to Broadcasting	3.5	-47.0	4.1	-15.6
7. Financial, Real Estate & Professional Services	6.0	-5.3	6.0	-8.1
8. Public Administration, Defence and other Services	7.7	-10.3	10.9	-12.2
GVA at Basic Prices	4.8	-22.8	4.3	-7.0

((Source: Press Note on Estimates of Gross Domestic Product for the First Quarter (April-June) and Second Quarter (April-September) 2020-2021 by National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.)

As data on employment, income, consumption, savings, borrowings, and access to different public utilities are available with a time-lag; we have no other options but to depend on micro-level studies. This paper attempts to assess the impact of the lockdown on income and consumption of the workers of unorganized sectors and self-employed, daily wage earners of different service sectors from urban and semi-urban areas. The survey for our study was therefore conducted in the urban and semi-urban localities of the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

The survey was conducted through in-person interviews of people based on a prepared questionnaire. We used the purposive sampling method to conduct this survey. This was done in order to exclude those who were employed in the organised sector or remained unemployed before the lockdown measures were implemented. This survey was conducted with respondents of the low-income groups randomly during the month of October 2020. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) has been used for the analysis of the primary data collected through our survey. Multinomial Logit Regression Model (Green 2002) has been used for regression analysis as required for the statistical analysis in this paper.

3.0 Description of Data:

There are a total of 75 respondents in our survey. All of them are employed in different categories of the informal sector. This includes maidservants, taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers, construction workers, employees of service sectors like restaurants, security agencies and petty shop owners etc. This sample consists of 50 male and 25 female respondents. 29 of them belong to semi-urban areas, and 46 of them belong to urban areas. The details of their specifications are mentioned below in Table 2. The income and consumption classification, based on data pertaining to the period before the lockdown, is mentioned in Table 3. As reported in the data, 63 percent of respondents covered under this random sample survey have income up to Rs 10,000 per month. Similarly, in the consumption expenditure data, we find that around 80 percent of the respondents have recorded their family income below Rs. 6000 per month. Therefore, the survey represents low-income groups.

Table 2: Specification of the data

Table 2A: Age Specification	
Below 30 years	10
31-40 years	28
41-50 years	27
51 years and above	10
Total	75

Table 2B: Employment Type	
Regular Worker	20
Daily Wage Worker	50
Petty Business	05
Total	75

Table 2C: Sector-wise Employment	
Service	10
Self-employed	18
Petty Business	4
Domestic Worker	43

Note: According to ILO definition Domestic workers are those who perform a range of activities in household – cooking, cleaning, washing laundry, and caring for children, the elderly or persons with disability – or may work as gardeners, guards or drivers etc.

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

Table 3: Income and consumption

3A: Income-wise Classifications		
Income per month	Frequency	Percent
Below Rs. 5000	7	9.3
Rs. 5001- Rs.10000	42	56.0
Rs. 10000 – Rs. 20000	20	26.7
Rs. 20001 and above	06	8.0
Total	75	100

3B: Consumption Expenditure-wise Classifications		
Income per month	Frequency	Percent
Below Rs. 2000	5	6.7
Rs. 2001- Rs.4000	29	38.7
Rs. 4001 – Rs. 6000	25	33.3
Rs. 60001 and above	16	21.3
Total	75	100

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

4.0 Findings and Analysis:

The survey data has revealed that almost 80 percent of the people have reported a decline in their income during the lockdown (Table 4). This decline in income was witnessed amongst all income groups in our sample. But the highest decline was recorded for the respondents whose income ranged between Rs. 10001-Rs.20000 before the lockdown (Table 5). Above 80 percent of the male workers belonging to the age groups of 'below 30 years' and '41-50 years' reported a decline in their family income. Similarly, 90 percent of the female workers belonging to the age groups of 'below 30 years' and '31 years to 40 years' registered a decline in income. This indicates that female workers 'below the age of 40 years' were the worst sufferers of this lockdown. The work participation of women is already low in India (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2013), and this lockdown may have accentuated this problem further.

Table 4: Decline in Income during Lockdown

Has Your Income Declined During Lockdown?	Frequency	Percent
No	15	20.0
Yes	60	80.0
Total	75	100

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

Table 5: Decline in income according to different income groups

	Income Group	Has your Income declined due to lockdown (percent)	
Average monthly income before lockdown		No	Yes
	Below 5000	28.6	71.4
	5001-10000	26.2	73.8
	10001-20000	0.0	100
	20001 and above	33.3	66.7
	Overall	20.0	80.0

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

This survey has revealed that about 39 percent of the respondents were forced to change their professions to maintain their livelihood. The survey interviews have found that many 'car drivers' were forced to work as labourers in local construction activities to maintain their families. People from other professions also engaged themselves in selling vegetables to earn bread for their families. 80 percent of those respondents who had to change their profession during the lockdown believed that they would be able to continue with their original profession once normalcy is restored. But the remaining 20 percent had indicated that they might have to change their profession altogether. Almost one-third of the total respondents reported that the number of earning members in their families was reduced during the lockdown period, and results of cross-tabulations have confirmed that on most occasions, female members of their families lost their jobs.

The survey has found that nearly one-third of the respondents had no savings at all when the lockdown was announced. 62 percent of those who had some sort of savings had to draw down their savings partly or fully to meet their expenditures. Almost 57 percent of those who are covered in this survey had to resort to loans to continue their living. Friends and relatives were the major sources (65%) of these loans for some respondents, while others had to borrow from local money lenders (18%) and local banks (22%). 80% of those who were staying in rented houses faced difficulties in paying rent to their landlords.

Table 6: Decline in consumption during lockdown

Did your purchase decline during lockdown?	Frequency	Percent
Yes	60	80
No	15	20
Total	75	100

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

Table 7: Decline in consumption acccording to different income groups

	Income Group	Did your purchase decline during lockdown? (percent)	
Average monthly income before lockdown		No	Yes
	Below 5000	14.3	85.7
	5001-10000	16.7	83.3
	10001-20000	15.0	85.0
	20001 and above	66.7	33.3
	Overall	20.0	80.0

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

Data on consumption expenditure in this survey has found that 80 percent of the respondents reported a decline in their consumption expenditure during the lockdown (Table 6). In each income group, around 85 percent of respondents confirmed a decline in the consumption expenditure of their families. The only exception is the highest income group covered in this survey (Rs. 20001 and above). In this income group also, around one-third of the respondents recorded a decline in their consumption expenditure during the lockdown (Table 7). As the bulk of the expenditures of these low-income groups are on food items, the decline in their family consumption expenditure has reduced their food consumption during the lockdown period. This is evident across income groups in this survey. Cross tabulation results have indicated that decline in consumption is the highest amongst daily wage workers (82%) followed closely by regular workers (80%). The decline in consumption expenditure is lowest amongst the respondents belonging to petty business categories (60%). Cross tabulation results have further endorsed that decline in consumption is more severe amongst women workers. Almost 88 percent of the women earners have recorded a decline in consumption expenditure in their families as compared to 77 percent for male earners. Within the age groups, respondents belonging to the age group '31-40 years' registered the highest decline (89%) in consumption expenditure, followed by the age group of 'below 30 years' (80%). The survey has indicated that consumption expenditure had actually declined over 20 percent for all those respondents who mentioned a decline in their family consumption expenditure during the lockdown.

Table 8: Recovery in income after lockdown

Is there a recovery of Income after the end of complete lockdown?	Frequency	Percent
Yes	48	64
No	27	36
Total	75	100

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

Table 9: Recovery in income according to different income groups

	Income Group	There is a recovery of Income after the end of complete lockdown (percent)	
Average monthly income before lockdown		No	Yes
	Below 5000	28.6	71.4
	5001-10000	38.1	61.9
	10001-20000	25.0	75.0
	20001 and above	66.7	33.0
	Overall	36.0	64.0

(Source: Prepared by the authors)

After the end of the complete lockdown in May 2020, the process of unlocking the economy started in a phased manner in India. Accordingly, economic activities have also resumed gradually. The employment scenario also started to improve. But till the end of October 2020, movement of passengers through local trains was restricted in many states, and economic activities were yet to reach normalcy. Many sectors like hotels, restaurants, entertainment, and tourism are yet to attract customers as people have normally restricted themselves between offices and homes to avoid COVID-19 infections. Results of our survey also indicate that 64 percent of respondents have had a recovery of their income from the lockdown phase. But 36 percent of the respondents are yet to recover from their income levels of the lockdown period (Table 8). Results of the cross-tabulations have indicated that recovery is lowest in the highest income group of our sample (Table 9). There is no such difference between male and female workers with respect to income recovery after lockdown. Cross tabulation results have further revealed that recovery is highest amongst the regular employment categories and lowest amongst the daily wage workers. Almost 80 percent of the respondents who had regular employment informed that their income was partially or fully recovered in the unlocking phase. In the case of daily wage workers, only 58 percent mentioned some sort of income recovery. Therefore, this survey has found that daily wage workers were the worst sufferers in the lockdown process both in terms of loss of jobs, the decline in consumption, and recovery of income in the unlocking period.

In order to understand the impact of the income decline during the lockdown period on consumption expenditure, a Multinomial Logit Model is used. As we are dealing with qualitative data, the Multinomial Logit Model is found most suitable for the purpose of regression analysis required in this paper. The result of the model is mentioned in Table 10. This result has indicated that a decline in average income has resulted in a decline in consumption of respondents, and it is statistically significant at 3 percent level of significance.

Table 10: Regression result of impact of decline of income on decline of consumption (parameter estimates)

Did your purchase of food items decline during lockdown?[a]		Coeff	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
								Lower Bound	Upper Bound
yes	Intercept	1.284	.539	5.682	1	.017			
	[Avgincomedecline=0]	-1.478	.668	4.899	1	.027	.228	.062	.844
	[Avgincomedecline=1]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Rationfacilities=1]	.696	.668	1.085	1	.298	2.005	.542	7.421
	[Rationfacilities=2]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.

a. The reference category is: no.
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.
Note: Avgincomedecline: [Average Income Decline. 0 for No and 1 for yes.] [Rationfacilities: Availing Ration Facilities, 1 for yes and 2 for No]

5.0 Some Policy Issues:

The negative GDP growth highlights the decline in economic activities in the economy. But the distress and sufferings of people during the lockdown period as indicated by the macroeconomic data are quite astounding. There is no doubt that hunger and indebtedness have increased during and after the lockdown and it is prevailing for quite some time now. The miseries of the people belonging to the low-income groups will further increase if this situation continues for a longer period of time. The GOI has announced stimulus packages to the tune of rupees 21 lakh crores (around 10 percent of India's GDP) under the Atmanirbhar Bharat stimulus packages to boost the economy. But in reality, this package increases the fiscal expenditure of the government only by rupees 3 lakh crores (1.5 percent of India's GDP) (author's own estimation) in this current fiscal year 2020-21. If the government has to pay all loan guarantees provided to the MSME sectors (rupees 3 lakh crore, 1.5 percent of India's GDP) as announced under the Atmanirbhar Bharat stimulus packages, then the fiscal burden of the GOI may increase by another 3-lakh crore in the coming fiscal years. The budgeted fiscal deficit for the fiscal year 2020-21 was 3.5 percent of India's GDP. The poor Goods and Service Tax (GST) collection reported so far has indicated that India is going to overshoot this 3.5 percent fiscal deficit figure even with the budgeted expenditure. If we add all the possible expenditures under the Atmanirbhar Bharat stimulus packages that will have a bearing on the government exchequer, then the fiscal deficit will go beyond 5 percent of India's GDP for the fiscal year 2020-21. There is no doubt that it could be a big concern for the fiscal management of any country in a normal year. But this is an extraordinary situation, and the fiscal policy needs to be modulated according to the needs of the domestic economy. This present level of fiscal stimulus is not enough to mitigate the prevailing economic crisis in India, where over 25 percent of the population still lives below the poverty line. The investment expenditure multiplier is much higher than the revenue expenditure multiplier in India (Jain and Kumar 2013). Therefore, it would have been better if the government could enhance investment expenditure to generate more employment and demand in the economy. However, investment expenditure requires detailed planning and approval of projects that come with a time lag. The present level of the crisis demands an immediate increase in income of the people. So, to address the present level of economic miseries of large sections of our population, as indicated in our survey also, direct cash transfer from the government to low-income groups is the only way out to overcome the present crisis.

6.0 Conclusion:

The lockdown measures implemented by the Government of India to combat the COVID-19 crisis had an unprecedented economic impact on the Indian economy. The loss of employment, income, and output recorded so far is unparallel in contemporary economic history. The macroeconomic data available so far has already indicated the economic crisis that India is facing today. The present study has found that income of workers of informal sectors recorded a sharp decline during the lockdown period. As these workers mostly belong to low-income groups, their consumption expenditures also declined concomitantly, reflecting their low economic endowments. Most of them didn't have much savings to support their fall in income resulting in a decline in consumption expenditure. This decline is most severe for daily wage workers. This paper has favoured direct income transfer to people belonging to low-income groups to support them in this economic crisis. The concern over the high fiscal deficit is a genuine one, but it should not be over-emphasized or prioritized above the hunger and misery of the citizens of India.

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