

# Success of coronavirus lockdown hinges on clarity and credibility; State could do better on the former

Vatsalya Srivastava and Apurva Harsh Apr 03, 2020 12:03 PM IST

India's high-stakes gamble of enforcing a severe, nationwide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a week old now. In times like these, when the State imposes exceptional curbs on individual and social liberties, the role of the State as a planner, implementer and enforcer stands magnified. The Indian State, often maligned for its inefficiency, will have on its hands the herculean task of keeping the country functioning and reassured through this emergency.

As we wade deeper into the crisis, the immediate urgency of fighting the virus will give way to the urgency of getting on with our lives; fatigue will set in, tempers will fray, and the number of infractions will mount. The success of the government's bold lockdown gambit will rest on two key pillars — clarity and credibility.

These are unprecedented times and nobody can draw on past experiences to form expectations of the coming days. This creates a problem of lack of clarity that can destabilise any system of governance; the people expected to comply are not on the same page as the people expected to enforce. The purpose of the stick of enforcement available to any government is to get people to comply with rules and regulations. But if people do not know what it is that they have to comply with, the stick cannot accomplish much.

In fact, it can lead to a situation where any act of enforcement might seem to be arbitrary and therefore, erode the trust between people and the government that it is critical in times like these. The spread in this perception of arbitrariness is expedited if the enforcers themselves are unaware of what it is that they are meant to enforce.



The credibility of a State and the public's belief in the State's ability to handle challenges and crises evolves and develops over a long period of time. It is a function of many things — clear goals, infrastructure, training of the State's representatives, finances, planning and technical skills. Most of these factors can't be addressed overnight in the face of a sudden crisis like the current pandemic. But, the Indian government can still take an important step by prioritising clarity of purpose and communication, wherein all actors — government enforcers and citizens — know what is expected of them in the days to come. This will improve both enforcement and compliance, lending more credibility to the government's directives and policy interventions.

Any government is comprised of many individuals constituted in departments, organisations, and committees. One of the key tasks of administration, particularly in a crisis is to ensure that its constituent elements of the governance move in sync. Since India was not in the initial firing line of COVID-19, one might have expected the government to create well-considered response protocols. However, the following examples prove otherwise.

The Central government has asked public sector banks and undertakings to work with 50 percent of their staff, while still providing all essential services. The trouble is that not all of these firms need 50 percent of their staff to provide basic services; some need more, some need less. So, they are either understaffed or are putting more people in harm's way than is absolutely necessary. Whatever the reasons behind this directive, it ended up reducing clarity by having two requirements that were not necessarily compatible with each other. Similarly, the decision to allow food delivery services took its own time to reach local law enforcement authorities. In the meantime, delivery boys were harassed and, in some extreme cases, even beaten up.

A common refrain has been that essential goods and services will be available. There was an original list of services that every state government released, but each of those lists has been amended many, many times since. Kerala recently allowed the sale of alcohol to those with a doctor's prescription; Haryana, on the other hand, closed down liquor shops two days into the lockdown. These revisions and re-revisions of government guidelines circulate as WhatsApp forwards with varying degrees of accuracy, adding to the confusion, fomenting fear and panic.

The migrant labour crisis was possibly the most visible manifestation of a lack of clarity. It became clear soon after the lockdown announcement that a large-scale migrant labour exodus was brewing. Its aftermath has been no better, with no clarity on the ways in which civil society is meant to help, if at all. With so many going hungry, would taking food and ration to the nearby slum be a punishable violation of the lockdown? Wouldn't the action increase the danger of the virus spreading? If so, What should the police do? Send the person home? Take the food and distribute it themselves?

The basis of an ideal governance structure is the clarity that emanates from classifying actions into good and bad. The people being governed should know of this classification. More than a week into the lockdown, these classifications are still not clear.

This is an evolving situation and the swiftness with which we went from the prime minister 'asking' for a few weeks of our time to a full national lockdown suggests that there were very few remaining options. Even the most astute observers could not have been able to foresee all the measures, counter-measures and their outcomes. In these times of great uncertainty, the government needs to be honest with its people in terms of the state of our country, our preparedness and its planned next steps.

Only clear and honest communication from the government to the people can form the basis of the mutual trust that will be needed to put out the many fires that are bound to flare up in the weeks and months to come. Platitudes and hollow promises will only serve to create a trust deficit.

At the same time, it is imperative to ensure that different arms of the government are on the same page. No arm of the State should be operating blindly — the expectations from each of them must be clearly specified, even if the specifications have to change frequently. In this regard, Centre-state cooperation is going to be of paramount importance. If the Centre and the states do not move in lockstep due to lack of clear communication, even the best laid plans will come a cropper. Chief ministers have already complained that the states were not consulted about the lockdown when, in fact, most of the implementation has fallen to the state machinery. This information gap must be addressed at the earliest with every attempt to prevent it from opening up again.

Many of us will be forced to make very difficult decisions in the times to come. Whether these decisions will back the government's efforts or obstruct them, will in large part, be determined by the information we have about the government's plans. There will still be those for whom the threat of punishment must be maintained, but for most being informed of what we should and should not do, along with the assurance that our near and dear will be taken care of, will suffice. The Indian republic has survived for seven decades, allegations of weak governance and opportunistic citizens notwithstanding. It is time that the government of India reposes faith in its citizens and tells us exactly what it plans to do, and how we can help.

*Vatsalya Srivastava is an assistant professor of economics at Jindal School of Government and Public Policy. His research is in the area of microeconomics of governance. Apurva Harsh is a social media and communications expert who has lived and worked across emerging Asian markets including India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Views expressed here are their own.*