

Is Social Distancing a Good Strategy to contain COVID-19 for slums in India?

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Abstract: Around 6.5 crore people in India live in slums where social distancing is practically difficult to comply with and implementing it is even harder. Social Distancing along with lockdown does not go right with the poor people living in slums, as they do not have access to comfort living by watching TV or using smart phones or working from home options etc. Crowding is inevitable in slum areas because the only leisure activity affordable to the slum people is to sit and talk in groups in narrow streets of slum locality. As per Census 2011 data, more than one-third of slum households had no indoor toilets. About 18 per cent of the households opt for open defecation, and 15 per cent of the households uses public latrine. About 43.27 per cent households do not have a water source within their household premises. Not having water and toilet facility inside the house implies that social distancing is difficult. Based on cross-country examples, what support is needed from the government in the slum localities and some useful strategies of social distancing for the poor has been suggested in the article which could be adopted.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID – 19, Social Distancing, Slums, Migrant.

Introduction

With the outbreak of the COVID – 19, one term that got most popular is ‘Social Distancing’. Since the world has no specific medicine to treat COVID 19, all the countries have adopted Social Distancing as a potential weapon to fight the current pandemic. India also adopted the strategy of Social Distancing from mid-March in general and 24th march in particular with the announcement of the Nationwide Lockdown. According to Ministry of Health and family Welfare (MoHFW), guided by the medical proscriptions given by World Health Organization (WHO) and Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Social Distancing is considered to be helpful in stopping or slowing down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community. This further could lead to a decrease in spread and reduction in morbidity and mortality cases due to the disease.

The Social Distancing strategy of the Government of India has failed miserably as now we are witnessing COVID 19 cases in large numbers from urban and rural areas. Slum localities are specially in focus because spreading of the infection is easy in these areas. The Social Distancing policy failed in slums, which comprises of around 4.8 percent of the total population of India. A study reveals, “Containment zones are heavily concentrated in areas which have a higher concentration of slums in Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata” (Besra, 2020). Large number of positive cases in slums indicates that slum dwellers did not practice proper social distancing. The reasons for not complying with social distancing norms could be – slum’s physical arrangements, economic and social aspects of a slum locality. Given the large slum population in India, Social Distancing did not go right with the type of settlements that

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exists in India. The upper class and the middle class live in houses and in the areas where practicing social distancing is not a big task. While the majority of the India's population, i.e. the poor people live either in small houses of urbanized villages or in slums of urban centers.

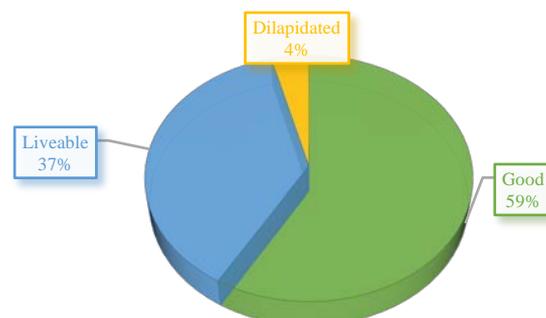
In Covid-19 times, the poor in slums because of lack of resources have to depend on the mercy of government for the food. Whenever dry ration / cooked food comes from the government the slum dwellers go in crowd to get the ration, as there is a fear of missing ration. This happens due to large demand for food in slums and limited supply of ration. The Coronavirus transmission chances increases whenever the slum people gather in crowds. The slum people are well connected culturally and socially and spend most of their leisure time in chatting with fellow slum dwellers sitting in narrow slum streets. Even in Covid-19 times, the slum people have continued this tradition of sitting in narrow streets and chatting, as many do not have TV and ACs in their small one-room houses. Given these difficulties, it is absolutely impossible to think that the norm of keep 1 to 2 meters distance between two individuals can work well in slum areas. The government of India has given the order to practice social distancing to the people of India as if social distancing is the privilege accorded to all. Therefore, India indeed required a lot more thought process to be put into the implementation of ways of combating the pandemic situation, than just an announcement to practice Social Distancing.

Findings

India is home to 1.3 billion people. According to the Census 2011, 2,613 slums reported from cities and towns accounts for 12.92 million slum households across the country. In total, 65.49 million people occupied these slum households. "A slum is a compact settlement with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions" (NSSO, 2014). Census of India categorizes slum households into 3 categories Good, Livable and Dilapidated in terms availability of basic amenities like safe drinking water, electricity and toilet facilities etc (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation Report, 2013).

Census of India in its decadal census operation collects valuable information on number of households, quality of houses in terms of good, livable and dilapidated in the country along with some of the important information on availability of basic amenities like safe drinking water, electricity and toilet facilities etc.

Figure 1: Condition of Slum Households in India

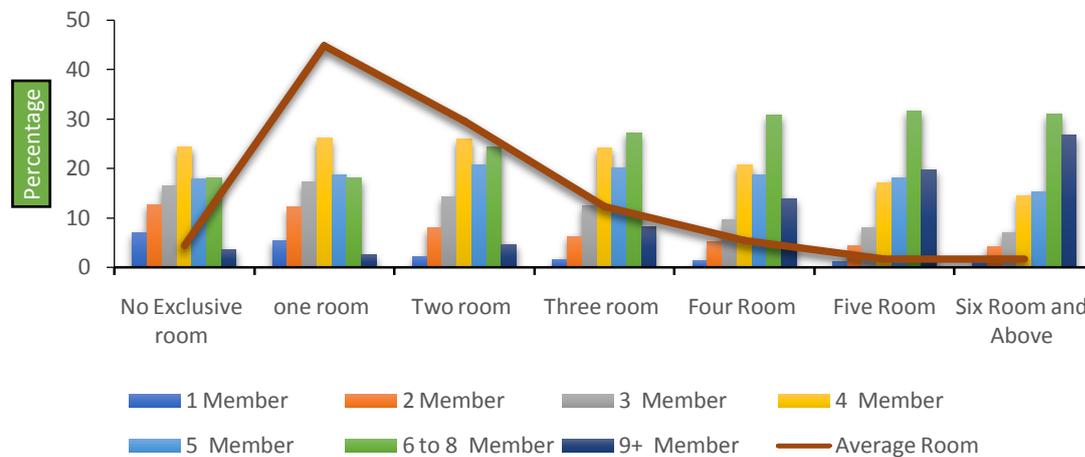


Source: Census of India 2011 – HH-1: Slum households by the condition of Census Houses occupied by them

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The biggest worry for the government is how to keep away the slums from the effects of COVID-19. There are fears among the central and the state governments that slums could become the hotspots of the COVID-19. If this fear turns into reality, then our healthcare system will be under tremendous pressure.

Figure 2: Room Type of Slum Households in India



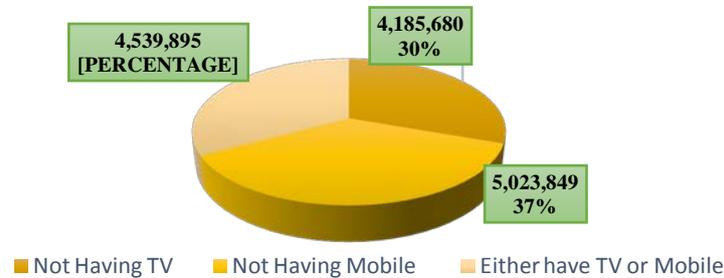
Source: Census of India 2011 – HH-4: Slum Households by ownership status of the census houses, size of the household and number of dwelling rooms

The above graph shows the average sizes of the houses in terms of the number of rooms in a single slum household of the slums of India. About 44.84 percent (6,165,484 households) households in slums in India have only one room. In 25 per cent of one-room households, four family members live. In around 20 per cent of one-room households, five family members live and in more than 15 per cent of one-room household, there are about 6 to 8 family members living. If we further analyze the above graph, we will understand how high the density is, in Indian slums. The slums have extremely small houses. In the evening, houses in a slum are mostly congested as all the family members in a slum household join each other after finishing their duty at the workplace in the evening. The small one-room house is all full in the evening. Now when there is no work for them due to the lockdown, these slum dwellers have to spend all their time be it at daytime or in the night in the small rooms of their houses.

In slums, people live in small houses, which are in close proximity to each other. The slum houses are so small that people prefer to spend most of their daytime in the narrow streets in front of their houses. In a single house, which generally has one dwelling room, an average of 4-5 people reside in such households. Like rich people, they do not have access to leisure activities like watching movies on big screen televisions, teaching students, watching videos on YouTube, etc. According to the census 2011, 70 per cent of the slum households have access to TV and 64 per cent have access to mobile phones. During lockdown, the rest 30 per cent who would like to watch TV and 36 per cent who would like to watch videos on mobile phones may try to sit together in groups or in crowds, which will automatically lead to the violation of social distancing norms. They do not have work from home as well as they are generally unskilled workers engaging in works like sanitation, care works, construction sector, etc. which requires their physical presence in their workplace. Therefore, in the times of lockdown when they do not have any work in their houses, they spend most of the time in slum streets, which leads to crowding. But where else they can go? In the daytime, when the day is very warm and hot, they cannot sit inside the poorly ventilated small rooms, which are

hotter than the slum streets. The streets in slums are interconnected, and in order to get the groceries and vegetables from the retail shops, all the slum dwellers use narrow streets, which again do not go right with the social distancing norms.

Figure 3: Number of Households that do not have TV and Mobile



Source: Census of India 2011 – HH-12: Slum number of households availing banking services and number of households having each of the specified assets

One of the leisure activity for the slums' young and elderly ones is to tease policeman and to run away. They think this is a good way to remove their boredom. However, this leads to injuries to the people as some fall while running in crowds, while some get injured by the police personnel.

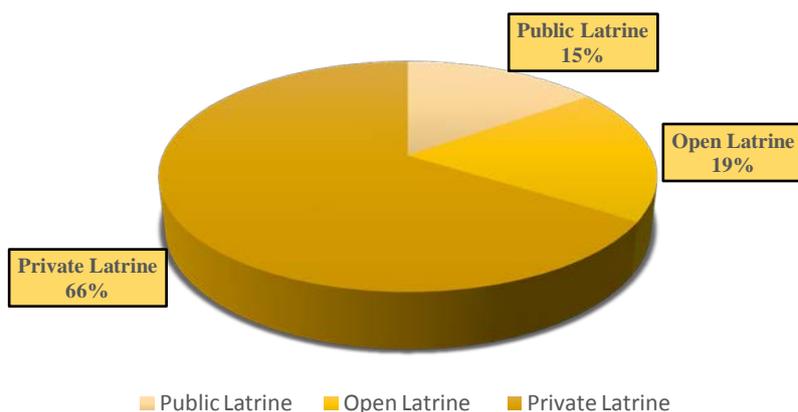
Crowding inevitable in slums during lockdown

As per the data across the country, more and more COVID-19 positive cases are being reported from the slums of India. Slums of Mumbai, Delhi and Noida are among the few examples. Overcrowding is a major cause behind the increased COVID-19 cases in slums of India. The population density in slums is much higher than in other areas of the cities. Poor nutrition and a high prevalence of respiratory and other medical conditions among the slum population make them more susceptible to the COVID-19 infection. As per the survey done by International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) “89.6 per cent of people in slums die of respiratory diseases followed by digestive problems (41.6 per cent) and aches and pains (37.8 per cent)” (Basu, 2015). Most workers in slums are part of the informal sector; therefore, they have low wages, and have unprotected jobs. During our interaction with the slum dwellers of one of the slums of Noida many have reported that they have not received their salaries since April onwards. Therefore, now they are on the mercy of the government's cash transfers and free ration distribution under the Public Distribution System (PDS). Many people in slums of Noida have also reported that their ration cards have got invalid due to non-usage. Now very few people have a ration card and eligible to get ration. So many who have nothing to eat and are in dire need of ration are not getting any ration. Whenever cooked food and dry ration comes, slum people go in crowds to receive the ration, as there is a severe competition among the slum dwellers to get the ration as the ration distributed is very less than the number of people who requires ration. In slums, some groups dominate others. These people have shops on the edges of the slum and have nexus with the government services of ration distribution often lead to diversion of food grains. People who live inside the slum locality do not receive ration. Slum people who already face hunger will give least attention to social distancing policy. Their priority will be to arrange food for themselves and their family members.

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On a national level, more than one-third of slum homes had no indoor toilets (Census 2011 - HH-8: Slum Households by Availability of type of latrine facility). As per Census 2011 data, about 18 per cent (2,599,106 households) of the households go for open defecation, and 15 per cent (2,074,469 households) of the households use public latrine. In the slum of Noida (sector 8) women who do not have a toilet in their house, and in the sealing period, they were unable to access the public toilet facility. At that time, the neighborhood people helped her by letting her and her family members to use their toilets. This kind of situations again reminds us that social distancing is not possible in slums.

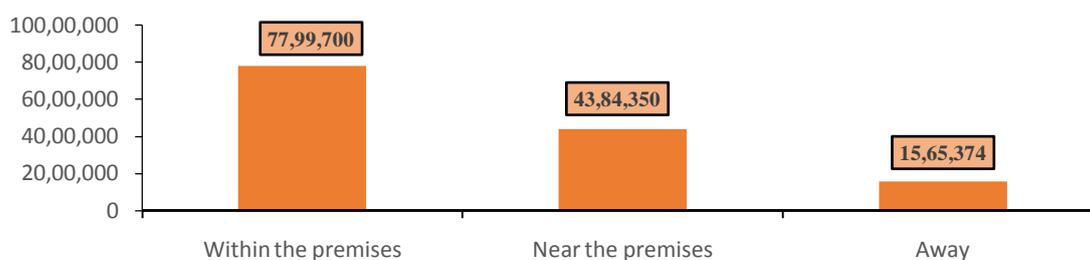
Figure 4: Availability of Latrine in slum households in India



Source: Census of India 2011 - HH-8: Slum households by availability of type of latrine facility

According to Census 2011 data, about 43.27 per cent (5,949,724 households) households do not have a water source within their household premises. 31.89 per cent of households have a water source near their household's premises while 11.39 per cent of households have to travel to far away locations to fetch water. It is very hard to imagine how these people are arranging water when everything was locked down few weeks ago. Some slum localities in India are now facing extreme problems as some slums have been sealed, as they have become the new hot spots of COVID – 19. As water is essential for life, the slum people will not stop themselves from going out for fetching water. In this situation, when slum households are facing not one crisis of COVID 19 but several others like water crisis, food crisis, etc., it would be difficult for them to comply with social distancing.

Figure 5: Location of Sources of Water in Slum Households in India



Source: Census of India 2011 – HH-6: Slum households by main source of drinking water and location

Most slum dwellers were forced to take the pain of living in small rooms, as the months of March, April and May were “warmer than normal” over Northwest, West, Central and parts of South India (Ghosh, 2020). Even the month of June was extremely hot. We have seen above how crowded the households are in the slums of India. In the evening, it is little easy to adjust as some family members could sleep on the roof of the house while some could sleep inside the house. But it is the daytime when they face more difficulty when the houses in slums get too hot during the hot summer period. To save themselves from warm houses most slum dwellers sit in the narrow streets of the slum in front of their houses.

Why policy of social distancing failed in slums?

Central Government and State Governments should have been informed about the possibilities of the social distancing in India. Large slum population is one of the unfortunate realities of India. Some of the characteristics of the slums are that they are overcrowded, houses are unplanned and extremely small, population density is very high, etc. Given these features of a slum locality, our government should have done some kind of preparations in order to ensure social distancing in slum areas. The government should have shifted half the slum households to government schools or colleges until the lockdown period. The government should have distributed sanitizers and arranged hand wash facility at various corners of slum so that the exposure to the virus could be minimized.

Migration crisis and failure of social distancing

Migrants suffer from the double burden of being poor and migrants (Bhagat *et. al.*, 2020). Both the entities ‘poor’ as well as ‘migrant’ are vulnerable in the urban space. Most migrant population live in slums of various cities across states in the country. On 24 March 2020, Government took the decision of the nationwide lockdown in the country, which created panic among the vulnerable migrant population. Soon after the lockdown announced, workers now without access to employment, were rendered without food or shelter. We know that most government programmes meant for the poor do not reach to them due to issues in identification of poor. As a result, many poor people do not have ration cards. A large proportion of the migrant population is daily wage earners, so they feared that in the lockdown how they would arrange food for themselves and their families. This panic among migrants shows the least trust in the government, which led to the large-scale movement of migrants towards their native villages. This movement of migrant workers also led to several deaths on the way back to their villages.

To avoid this situation government should have been conscious about the migrant population and their nature of occupation and livelihood. The better strategy could have been arranging daily food or dry ration for them for the full period of the lockdown. The government has enough food as per the FCI data. It just needs to ensure proper distribution of food to the needy. Certainly, government is unable to provide food to all the needy migrants that is why there is increasing demand of travel to their native villages. Again, non-adherence to social distancing was seen when migrants in thousands gathered on bus stands and railway stations.

Conclusion

Strategic interventions are required from the government’s side to ensure full compliance with social distancing in the country. Right now, we do not have a better alternative than a social distancing to contain the COVID-19. Without understanding the specific needs of the slum dwellers and without considering them while making policies,

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measures like social distancing are impracticable and impossible. The government should work in close partnership with community organizations - such NGOs that works in slums, volunteers from the respective slum locality only. We can take the example of slums of Brazil, the groups within the slum locality have built hand-washing stalls at the main entrances of the respective slum localities (Lee, 2020). The same thing is possible in India also, for that government of India need to rope in the slum people in strategy making to contain the spread of COVID-19.

If widespread social distancing is to be ensured at a national level, then the government should put more efforts into availing food, fuel, and putting cash into the hands of the people who have the least access to the basic resources in this time of lockdown. This would be challenging in a country like India, where workers have no social safety nets. The government, in collaboration with the banks and technology companies, should devise innovative ways to transfer cash to the poor.

Every government policy has certain economic implications on certain societies. Before adopting those policies, government should assess such policies against the possible harms it may do to the particular society. The government should ensure that the policy of social distancing should not do more harm to the poor than saving them. If poor will die more of hunger and mental trauma, then the government should ponder more on their strategy of social distancing in the slums of India. The government should think of a better strategy of social distancing for the poor while at the same time ensuring enough food for them.

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