

Innovative Ways of Countering COVID-19 in India (CMS Business School, 4/27)

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Abstract

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What is the message? India is combatting COVID-19 by combining a broad-based lockdown to ensure that the number of patients does not reach a geometric progression with a strong mix of innovative tactics for combatting the virus. The tactics include converting railway coaches, stadiums, and hotel rooms as quarantine and treatment facilities, using depictions of deities to promote the lockdown, employing mobile testing buses, and expanding the use of plasma therapy and private testing labs.

What is the evidence? The authors draw on their experience in observing and engaging with India's coronavirus measures.

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India is Using a Complete Lockdown to Combat COVID-19

COVID-19 has now affected more than 27 lakh (2.7 million) people worldwide, with over 200,000 deaths being reported. Countries such as Italy, Spain, the U.S., Ecuador, and others have struggled to find ICU beds to accommodate serious patients. The epidemic is now threatening many other countries around the world.

Different countries are using different methods for controlling the epidemic. At this point, almost half of the world is under at least partial lockdown, affecting the livelihood of millions. At the same time, other countries such as Germany and China are beginning to open up their economies.

India, with a population close to 1.3 billion, provides a striking example of strategies for dealing with the crisis. On March 24, the country initiated a complete lockdown, initially for three weeks and recently extended to a total of 40 days. The lockdown has helped the country check the number of cases, which as of April 26 had not reached about 27,000 identified cases and less than 1,000 attributed deaths.

Most places in India are still in tight control due to lockdown, although some opening is beginning. India has divided locations into red, orange, and green zones based on the number of cases, with green being minimum. The government has started to provide some relaxations in green zones, while requiring social distancing to help economic activity recover. As the days go by, the hope is that more zones will become corona free and they will go back to normalcy.

Healthcare Innovations during the Lockdown

During the lockdown, rather than counting on full containment, India is finding innovative ways to build healthcare infrastructure. Here are examples of ways that India is dealing with the disease.

1. **Converting railway coaches into isolation wards.** Railways are converting 20,000 coaches into isolation wards to accommodate 320,000 people. The converted coaches include key ICU facilities such as ventilators, as well as bathrooms and other basic facilities. There is space for temporary accommodation for doctors and nurses, along with space for them to carry out clinical work. These arrangements will help the country

accommodate more patients if treatment is required. [1] , [2]

The railway coach conversion strategy faces challenges.[3] Converting toilets into bathrooms, attaching oxygen cylinders, and modifying the coaches to carry medical equipment is complicated. The conversions involve older coaches, leaving newer air-conditioned coaches available when passenger traffic resumes. Maintaining hygiene is not easy. Nonetheless, the conversions are an important step to ensure that patients can be treated if the pandemic spreads in the country.

2. **Converting stadiums into quarantine and hospital facilities.** Plans are under way to convert Jawaharlal Stadium in New Delhi and Gachibowli Stadium in Hyderabad into quarantine facilities and, if needed, treatment centres. Similarly, there is a plan to convert Sarusajai Stadium in Assam into a quarantine centre.
3. **Converting hotels into quarantine centres.** Several hotel rooms in the country are being converted into quarantine centres. The owners are paid for this and basic amenities are given to the people who are being quarantined.
4. **Deities.** In rural villages and smaller towns, police officers and other officials are dressing up as Yamaraja, the Hindu god of death, to promote the lockdown. They are then talking with people to highlight awareness of the dangers. Their goal is to make sure that people do not roam around in the streets during the lockdown.
5. **Mobile testing buses.** Mysuru, which is a district of Karnataka State, is using Road Transport Corporation buses as mobile sites for testing COVID-19 cases in different parts of the region.
6. **Plasma therapy.** The Indian government has allowed plasma therapy to be used for critical hospitalised patients on a trial basis, hoping that it will support speedy recovery.
7. **Private labs.** Private labs in India are now allowed to test for COVID-19, which is helping find more cases before they spread to others.

Implementation Challenges

The steps in place should ensure that enough isolation wards and quarantine centers are available for tackling a possible spurt in COVID-19 cases. Nonetheless, multiple challenges remain.

1. **Medical staff availability.** As well as facilities, it is necessary to ensure that enough medical care professionals are available to care for hospitalized cases.
2. **Protecting medical staff.** It is critical that health care staff do not themselves contract the virus. Indeed, there are signs that medical teams in some parts of the country are already infected with the disease.
3. **Climate.** It remains to be seen how effectively train coaches that lack air conditioning can be used in the hot climate.
4. **Testing.** Despite the expansion in use of private labs, India needs increased ability for coronavirus testing to prevent widespread contraction of disease.
5. **Vaccination:** Once effective vaccines emerge from global development efforts, which might occur by the end of the year or might take multiple years, India will need to ensure that vaccinations are widely available in the country.

Looking Forward

These strategies are very recent and only time will tell whether they are successful. Future actions after lockdown will determine how successful we will be against the disease. It will not be easy for a country with such a huge population to combat such a dangerous pandemic.

Clearly, it will take a huge effort from all parties to make sure that this pandemic is erased from the society and economic activity and normal life are restored. But if we can ensure social distancing along with effective testing, tight control over the movement of people, efficient clinical management, innovative ways of creating awareness, and ensuring maximum preparedness of the health infrastructure, then it is likely that India will come out of this phase with limited damage.

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