

Maharashtra's Fight against COVID-19

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Summary

In India, Maharashtra has, to-date, recorded the highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19. Several measures taken by the government to stop the spread of the pandemic will impact the state's economy and affect the vulnerable sections of the population.

Introduction

At the time of writing (24 March 2020), the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in India was 519, including nine deaths. Most of these cases are imported. In an effort to curtail the import of the virus, the Indian government has decided to ban the landing of all scheduled international commercial passenger aircrafts for one week with effect from 22 March 2020. Also, India was locked down from 22 to 31 March 2020. This has now been extended till 14 April 2020.

Maharashtra, with 101 confirmed COVID-19 cases thus far, is the state with the largest number of infections in India. This paper looks at the impact of the outbreak in Maharashtra and the measures taken by the state to combat its spread. It concludes by looking at the prevailing myths and superstitions surrounding the avoidance of infection and elimination of the virus.

Impact and Costs

Since 11 March 2020, more than 20,000 buses of the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation have not been in operation. Till now, this has caused an estimated loss of about ₹5 crore (\$958,510) for the state. Similarly, the local train service in Mumbai has also been suspended for the general public since 22 March 2020. Only personnel engaged in maintaining essential services and those who have a medical emergency can commute on local trains. According to estimates, the daily loss to the Indian railways, due to the shutdown of the Mumbai local trains, will be around ₹5.2 crore (\$1 million).

According to the [Mumbai Mirror](#), about 16,000 of 32,000 black-yellow taxis are currently off the road, and 90,000 of the 220,000 auto rickshaws are not plying in the city. This has temporarily unemployed many drivers and has affected their earnings.

Malls, shops, manufacturing units and many markets in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra will remain closed from March 11 to 14 April 2020. During this period, hawkers and roadside food sellers, among others, even more so than big business owners, will be badly affected.

Due to the closure of the state, many contractual workers, daily wage labourers and helpers in big shops and hotels are unlikely to receive their wages. Salaried workers are also likely to face pay cuts. While the Maharashtra government has appealed to employers not to cut the wages and salaries of their employees and contractual and daily wage workers, the final decision is ultimately that of the employers. And if they are hit, they will need their workers to share the burden.

As panic gripped the state, many people began to flee from cities such as Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur back to their hometown in different parts of India. According to an estimate, in a single day on 13 March 2020, more than [10,000 unreserved train tickets](#) were purchased in Mumbai alone.

Measures Taken

Foreigners and Indians who came to Maharashtra before 22 March 2020 were properly screened by the health officials at the airport. Those suspected of being infected by the virus were quarantined while others were asked to self-isolate for 14 days.

The Maharashtra government has also invoked the Epidemic Disease Act, 1897. Through this Act, the government has imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure in parts of the state. This basically gives power to the police to coerce people to remain indoors and, if need be, use force to ensure compliance.

As the situation worsened, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his second address to the nation on 24 March 2020, extended the lockdown period for another three weeks. However, essential services will remain in operation.

Myths and Superstitions

Amidst the public health emergency and advisories from the government and health agencies, several myths and superstitions began to surface.

On 14 March 2020, the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha (All India Hindu Organisation) organised a [gaumutra \(cow's urine\) party](#) at its New Delhi office which was attended by about 200 people. During the gathering, as some media reported, *gaumutra* was served to the attendees. The Chief of Mahasabha, Swami Chakrapani Maharaj, had argued that the use of cow urine and cow dung could help to eliminate the coronavirus.

In some parts of India, people are consuming the homeopathic syrup – Arsenicum ALB.30 – to remain disinfected, as prescribed by some local doctors. On 21 March 2020, a Maharashtra-based organisation called the [Giants Welfare Foundation](#) organised a programme at Khandelwal where around 2,000 people drank the syrup. The organisation claimed that the syrup protects the people from coronavirus infection. However, the claim is unsubstantiated.

Third, in a now unavailable tweet, Shaina N C, the spokesperson from Maharashtra for the Bharatiya Janata Party, the ruling party at the Centre, stated that according to Hindu religious texts, the sound of bells and conches can kill bacteria and viruses. Therefore, the bell is rung and the conch is blown during prayers. Following criticisms for her view, Shaina removed her tweet. However, there are still people in India who believe that the sound of bells and conches will eliminate COVID-19.

Conclusion

In an effort to contain COVID-19, all of India is now locked down. Several other measures have been put in place to combat the virus. Based on the trend at the present time, it is likely that India and cosmopolitan states like Maharashtra will see further increases in COVID-19 infections in the coming days. The government and the people of Maharashtra need to remain vigilant and disciplined if they are to overcome COVID-19 and bring the state back to normalcy.

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