

Policy Failure during Covid-19 Lockdown: Critical Discussion on Some Government Policies of India and West Bengal

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Abstract

Government of India declared lockdown on 24 March 2020 amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. In order to make lockdown effective and to restrict the outbreak of the virus both central as well as state government come with many recommendations, enacted laws and ordinances. Many existing government policies have been either useless or become redundant during this lockdown situation. In this article five such government policies across different sectors have been selected both from state and central level. Their critical analysis suggests that government have failed to deal with the pandemic situation in terms of policy measures. Management aspects of COVID-19 required holding strong policy from government's end. But present study shows that in maximum policies under discussion have either failed or become redundant during lockdown period. Most of the policies required either change or partial modification targeting the lockdown situation. Lack of such effort created many problems and totally devastated the civic life throughout the country.

Keywords: Lockdown, COVID-19, Pandemic, Government Policies

Introduction

Covid 19 is affecting all civic amenities and even has shut the door to fulfill the basic needs. Central and state government devising many policies to keep civic life normal. But managing this situation require existing policy modification and if needed implementation of new policies. This pandemic period also has seen sudden implementation of many laws and policies. But many of these have either partly fulfilled their objectives or have become completely redundant in pandemic situation. In this context an attempt has been made to discuss some of such policies concerned with financial, industrial and educational sectors. Five of such policies have been discussed within this scope. Their critical analysis has been presented with recommendations to attract correctional measures from appropriate authority.

Government Policy no: I

Passenger Bus Transport Policy of the Govt. of West Bengal

Statement of the Problem: West Bengal passenger bus transport service is guided by the state government. West Bengal Transport Department has five State Transport Undertakings (STU's) and private bus transport services run by private operators. As a parental body transport department impose general surveillance and control by the enforcement of Motor Vehicle Act and rules. State government fixes fare by negotiating Bus Owner's Association. General consensus is the basis for running

passenger bus services. Last fare hike was in June, 2018. Private bus owners demanded another hike in bus fare to be compatible with new transport rule provisionally deployed for tackling pandemic outbreak. The transport rule stated that bus can play in route by carrying only 20 passengers. Lots of restrictions and code of conduct have been imposed for staff and passenger safety. Further increase in cost caused private players to stop running their bus. Govt. remained fixed at the point not to increase fare. People's mobility reduced due to meager access to mass transport. Fear of getting infection also restricted people to avail mass transport. People prefer personal as well as rented private vehicle for their mobility management. The situation is still continuing even in mid-July, 2020. Situation will become more worsening for bus transport as from 31st, July state government have declared to go for area specific lockdown. Therefore, existing Bus Transport Policy has become redundant in the state of West Bengal.

Data and Method: Considering the pandemic situation data collection remained confined within the telephonic conversation to the related persons like bus owner, bus staff, employees of Transport Corporation, internet achieves data and obviously some passenger's opinion.

Discussion and Analysis: Current pandemic situation completely damaged the normal transport system. After lock down during May, 2020, transport department ordered private bus owners to start playing bus in respective routes. Firstly, with only 20 passengers, later the number rose by full seat capacity. But bus owner's association demanded a huge hike in fare. Despite several efforts the government didn't want any fare hike amidst pandemic situation considering people's affordability.

No buses were deployed on behalf of the private owners. State government ordered their undertaken corporation to deploy more buses to keep the transport active. Even route cancellation warning for private operators was given. Few local routes started but majority remained inactive till June, 2020. During this time government declared Rs.15000/bus/ month subsidy. But still it couldn't have attracted private bus to play in their routes. State buses played by Transport Corporation have to suffer a revenue loss transporting only few passengers. One of the private bus owners opined that "we have to pay huge tax for renewing route license and also has to afford huge maintenance cost. Diesel price is high. Carrying only few passengers it is impossible to survive".

During July, 2020, the transport department approved fare hike. It is decided that minimum fare for first 4 kilometer will be Rs. 20. For distant journey people having personal vehicle preferred two-wheeler or rented car to move with. Looking at the fare hike even local minibus services were unable to found threshold passengers to continue the bus services. Continuous inflow of migrants made the pandemic situation more worsening. Community spread started taking place in all suburbs including in Kolkata megalopolis.

West Bengal private buses hold almost 80%, while remaining 20% share is of government. Therefore, government's existing bus transport policy of over dependence to private bus services has become redundant during pandemic situation.

Recommendations: Nobody knows the temporal length of this pandemic period. Therefore, some recommendations towards strengthening of mass transport are as follows:

In order to maintain a balance between profit and service government has to device new policy.

Government has to enact special safety protocol considering the health of the masses.

People's confidence gaining measures must be taken into account so that people can take the advantage of mass transport.

Transport staff's confidence building from government's end is essential. Both financial and actual information support will be of immense help.

Government should strengthen the Corporation's by procuring new buses and recruiting more staffs to ensure the transport during crisis time.

Government Policy no: II

West Bengal Excise Department Liquor Supply Policy

West Bengal Government entered in wholesale distribution of India Made Foreign liquor (IMFLs) in early 2017. West Bengal State Beverage Corporation Ltd. undertook all private distribution companies vide Finance Department Notification No. 04-EX dated 05.01.2017. During COVID pandemic situation government supply of liquor was very poor. The entire supply chain was disrupted due to lockdown. Raw material supply of Extra Neutral Alcohol (ENA) further reduced the production. Therefore, the production, supply and marketing trio entirely entered into crisis phase. Hence it is clearly the policy failure which negatively impacted government revenue.

Data Source and Method: Government websites and news sources are used to find the facts. While for establishing and finding supply trends West Bengal Directorate of Excise data and data from wine shop vendor has been used.

Discussion and Analysis: The motives behind the undertaking were to implement strong e-governance and to raise the revenue gain from this sector. Strong governance started showing positive result from 2017-18 financial year (Chart No: 1). Revenue earnings of government rise from 4015.12 Crore Rupees in 2015-16 to 10590.72 Crore in 2018-19 financial year (Chart No: 1).

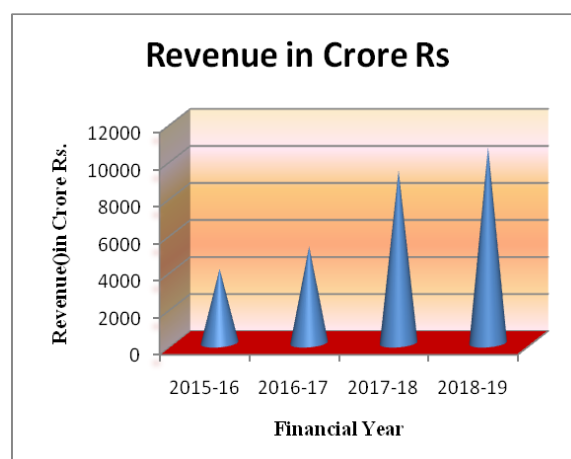
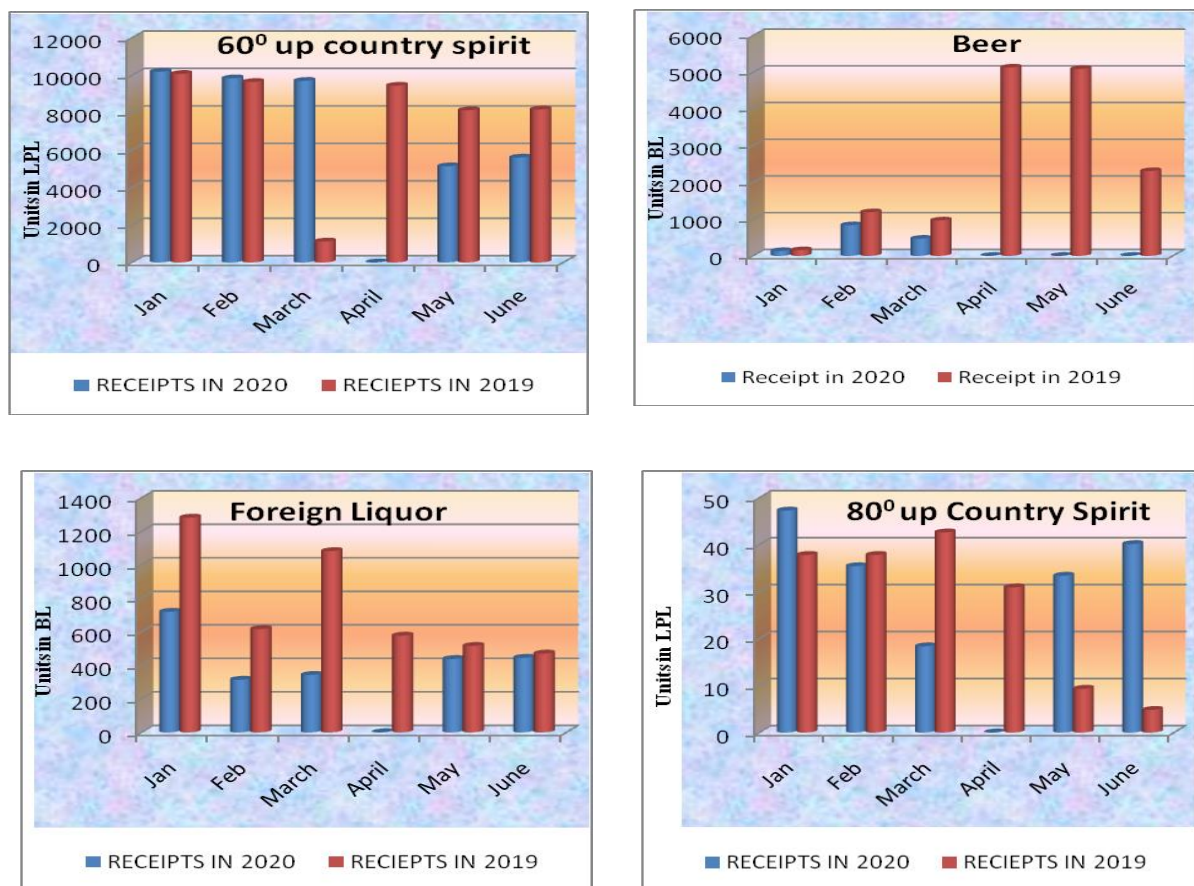


Chart 1: Increased excise revenue earnings of West Bengal Government

Source: Finance Dept. Govt. of West Bengal

During January, 2020 the supply was stable from govt. source and continued till February. Data from the first ranking vendor of Bankura district is showing the failure of West Bengal State Beverage Corporation Ltd. to supply (Chart-2). Very little or even zero supply of liquor laid profound impact on both seller and on consumer. Black marketing was followed by price hike and scarcity. Unauthorized and unhygienic local liquor even priced higher than safer packaged liquor. In May, 2020 the government imposed 30% additional sale tax on liquor. In some areas home delivery system was deployed to upkeep the sell and to have a grip upon the black marketing. People didn't have affordability in COVID lockdown period.

Chart- 2: Supply of Different Types of Liquor during Pandemic period



Source: Vendor, Mejia C.S. Shop, Bankura, West Bengal.

Therefore, the marketing policy has become redundant.

Recommendations: Decentralized distribution system is the key to the success if the same pandemic recurs. Government should increase the supply points. Storage capacity for ENA should be enhanced in order to maintain sustainable production and supply. Departmental raid should be increased in

pandemic like crisis situation for preventing black marketing and unauthorized liquor production and sale. Sale tax reduction will also benefit consumption. This will in turn benefit revenue earning by maximizing sale of liquor in normal situation.

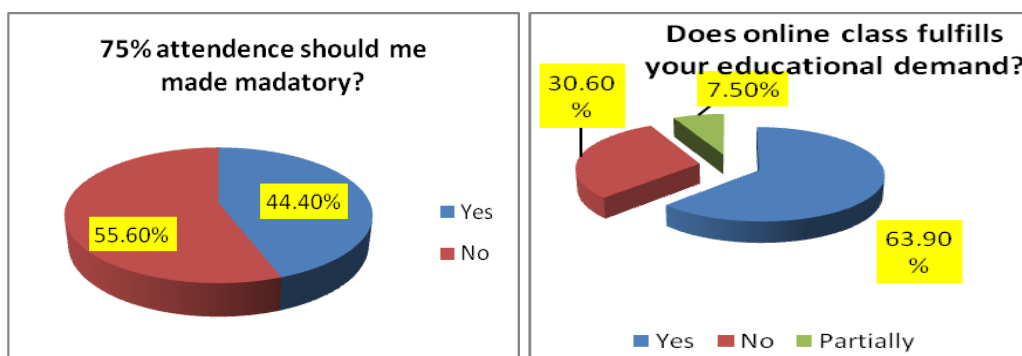
Government Policy no: III

Mandatory 75% physical attendance in Higher Educational Institutions for Students

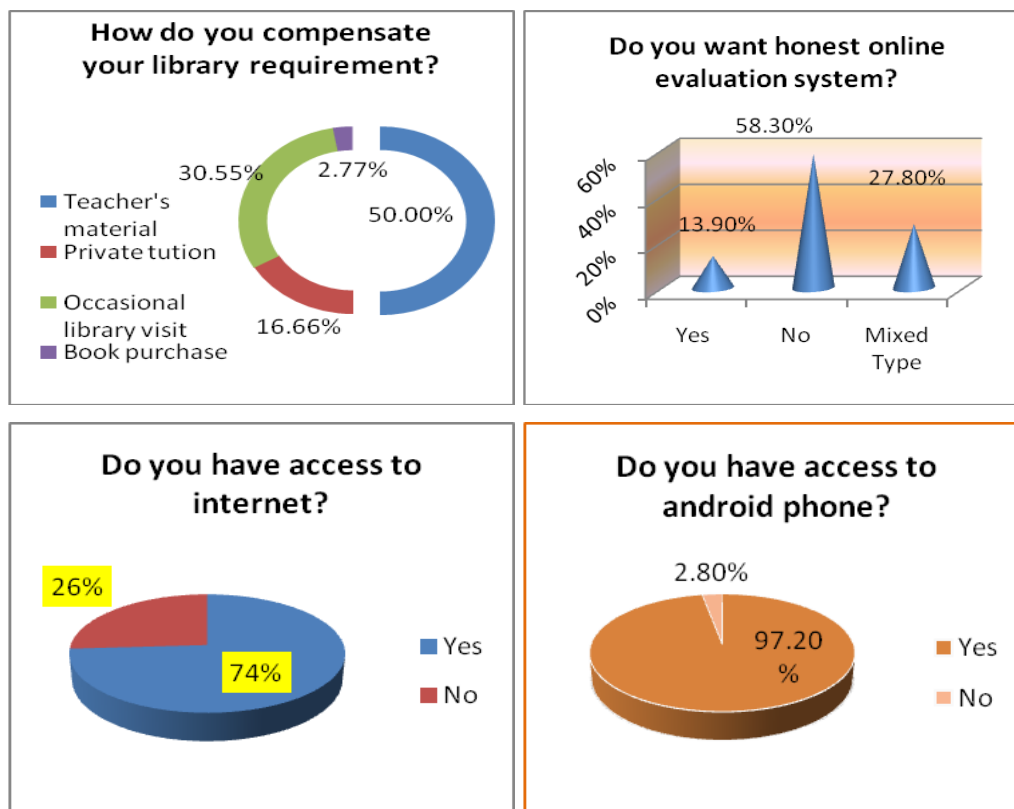
Statement of the Problem: Almost all Indian universities have standing rule of 75% physical attendance mandatory for their students. It was an indispensable criterion for appearing final exam both in UG and PG courses. But present educational space has become virtual one, owing to the spread of pandemic. Therefore, this government policy of mandatory attendance is being violated. Students are day by day being forced to get into the virtual world. Therefore, it is a matter of interrogation whether students are really wanting to be abide by existing policy or it is due to pandemic that they are virtually connected to their institution. The opinion of the students is of foremost important to draw conclusion.

Data and Methods: Data were collected from different websites to find the fact. For past few years the issue of student attendance remained major concern for all university examination in India and particularly for the state of West Bengal. Therefore, few news websites also used as data source. A student survey was carried out using Google Form to take into consideration the student's opinion.

Discussion and analysis: The policy in consideration is not new rather it was long been considered as most effective way of learning. During pandemic situation perhaps all university and colleges shifted their teaching learning processes to online mode. Now the existing policy of 75% mandatory student attendance comes into question. If it was mandatory to attend physically certain percentage of classes then how and on what basis they are allowing their students to go for evaluation. Here lies the scope for advocacy of online teaching learning mode. If certain percentage of syllabus can be covered by online mode of teaching, the burden of attending classes physically can be at least reducible to certain percentage. Availability of current data forced to go for online survey. By posting a Google Form questionnaire, student's opinion has been gathered. The survey results have been presented in the charts below.



Carrying online classes have good support from students end. Student appreciated having the library and infrastructural facility along with online mode of class. Student's access to infrastructure like Android phone and internet connectivity has been assessed. Almost 99% of the student poses both the facility.



Carrying online classes have good support from students end. Students demanded for the library and physical access to laboratory facility along with online mode of class. Student's access to infrastructure like Android phone and internet connectivity has been assessed. Almost 99% of the student poses both the facility. While they asked for honest online evaluation, majority of students agreed to carry it on offline mode. This is perhaps due to the student's advantage during center evaluation. Hall collection and other malpractices bring them few advantages to score more in center evaluation. In online mode absence of these facilities discouraged them to go for online mode of evaluation. Therefore, it can be said that instead of sole reliance on either online or physical classes it is suggested that in normal situations part of the syllabus can be covered by online mode of teaching. It will entitle not only teachers but also the students with free time and to carry on academic teaching learning as per their convenience.

Recommendations: India and west Bengal both have witnessed much turmoil on this issue of students' attendance. Avoiding such situation some policy intervention is required. Taking lesson from the prevailing pandemic, education policy needs to be oriented to have some part of mandatory online mode of teaching, learning and evaluation. If infrastructures suppose to pose any threat government

should provide free aid to the target students. University and college authority may also provide such equipment to the student. In normal situation students need to teach about online teaching learning and evaluation method. Use of ICT tools in classes remained UGC's agenda in higher education. University may force departments to organize workshop to develop their skill. It will become neo normal in upcoming days to have online mode of teaching; though not solely but at least partially.

Government Policy no: IV

Policy Failure in ICDS

Statement of the Problem: Integrated Child Development Scheme is run by central and state government jointly. It is targeted to provide children, pregnant women and latching mothers with health, nutrition, and education for infants. In current pandemic situation some aspects of ICDS policy have failed to provide the existing services. Due to pandemic outbreak ICDS centre have been closed since March, 2020. Instead of providing hot meals, informal teaching learning services for children, it has been restricted within just providing monthly ration. Therefore, existing policy has become redundant in current situation.

Data and Method: West Bengal ICDS website and internet sources are the main data source. Some ICDS worker has been interviewed over telephone to know the current status of services in the current pandemic scenario.

Discussion and analysis: Many of the benefits of all beneficiaries from the scheme have been curtailed due to lock down. ICDS, the one of the oldest government schemes has become inefficient to cater the needs of the beneficiaries.

Table 1: ICDS Service Availability during Covid-19

Beneficiaries	Services in Pre- Pandemic period	Status of Services in Pandemic period
1.Expectant Mother and Nursing Mothers	1.1. Health check up	✓
	1.2. Immunization of expectant mothers and Referral Services	✓ x
	1.3. Supplementary Nutrition	x
	1.4.Nutrition and Health Education	x
2. Other Women aged 15-45 years	2.1. Nutrition and Health Education	x
3. Children <3 years age	3.1. Supplementary Nutrition	x
	3.2. Immunization	✓
	3.3. Health check up	✓
	3.4. Referral Services	x
4.Children between 3-6 years age	3.5. Supplementary Nutrition	x
	4.1. Immunization	✓
	4.2. Health check up	✓
	4.3. Referral Services	x

	4.4. Non-formal pre-school education	x
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Source: Compiled by author from telephonic interview of ICDS worker and website data of ICDS, West Bengal.

The scheme couldn't maintain its status quo during the pandemic due to government policy. To ensure the minimum support of beneficiaries only rationing of staple food grain and potato has been supplied throughout the period. Hot meal preparation and informal teaching learning activities for 3 to 6 years child remain suspended for entire period. Medical support services continued with ups and downs with supply of essentials. Therefore, it can be ascertained that the existing government policy completely failed and government has to deploy some policy measures to provide the minimum essential service support under the scheme.

Recommendations: Looking into the nature of indispensable nature of services provided by this scheme following recommendations are proposed as follow up to avert future recurrence of failure:

Government should include disaster crisis management policy with the existing policy.

Local people should be involved to provide the safe hot food and local youth can be engaged to continue non formal teaching learning activities.

Locality based SHG's can perform the task more easily in this situation. Therefore, local self government should undertake the responsibility of continuing the services.

Government Policy no: V

National Policy of Industrial Operation

Statement of the Problem: The policy here referred to is based on The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. This law explicitly declares the employer's right to discontinue an employee and wage payment at the rate of 50% for up to 45 days in any disastrous situation. After this period no wage need to be paid. But during first lockdown in India, ministry of Labour and Employment consciously issued an advisory of mandatory payment of wages. The motive was noble from employees view point. But the Ministry should have been issued a formal order instead of advisory. On the other hand, being a democratic country in India several labour laws also are in operation. The prevailing dispute continuously started weakening the sector with the lengthening of lock down. It indicates the breaching of law in operation. Hence concerned government policy becomes redundant.

Data and Method: Data were collected from different websites to find the fact. Different online articles and achieve data are explicitly used for holding the discussion.

Discussion and analysis: In 25th March, 2020 government enforced the Disaster Management act (DM Act), 2005 to take a grip on the spread of Corona Virus. On 29th March, 2020 the advisory in dispute in present context was issued. The advisory issued for all state government and union territories directed to take necessary measures to ensure employees salary in all sectors during lock down period. This raised the question of illegal exercise of central government's power to issue directive by purportedly exercising the DM Act. Disaster management can't be done by such a un-

authoritative approach and forcing private entrepreneurs of all kind to pay for workless employee the full wage. This was apparently got masses support at first, looking the novelty of the advisory favoring migrant laborer and private sector worker. Private industries started exploiting employees in the name of reducing working shifts by issuing order of 12-hour duty per day. Very little amount is being paid for overtime to the workers. For all sectors including industrial establishments, it was very hard to continue with the full wage in workless long run. If the situation continues industries will become bankrupt. In Indian constitution both the employer and employee have same right to carry on any occupation under Article 19(1)(g). Harm for one side must handicap the other side. The situation demand is a monetary subsidy for industrial sector. Foreign countries like Australia, America have done in the line to sustain the industries. Existing policy failure loses both the side.

Recommendations: Government should priorities both of the stakeholder's interest to maintain sustainability of industrial sector. Instead of issuing advisory government should come up with subsidy packages for private industrial workers to sustain their livelihood with minimum basic pay. Maintenance of transparency of payment must have to be ensured by including administration for surveillance. Some addendum is necessary in exiting industrial operation policy to avert future recurrence of similar situations.

Conclusion

Policies here discussed be it central or state government's need to be corrected. Partial modification in order to make them more contemporary will benefit the country as a whole. Preparedness to disaster is a management process which is governed by act and policies. Therefore strong policy and timely implementation involving locality should be the motto of the government in upcoming days.

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