

India's Lockdown Necessitates More Parkinson's Laws

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"WORK expands to fill the time available for its completion"

. This Satirical, maxim stands validated 1000% by India's extended lockdown, lauded globally for its stringency.

Known as Parkinson's Law (PL), this maxim now needs strong articulation in the light of amazing speed & efficiency with which bureaucracy spun rules & orders to keep itself & others busy.

Lockdown's diktats have had multiplier effect as they keep citizens busy during the shutdown & even under the phased unlocking. A law-abiding citizen is always on his toes as he/she has to keep abreast of dynamic regulations for remaining compliant.

If PL creator, C. Northcote Parkinson, were alive, he would have certainly polished Parkinson's laws. He might have added a few more.

Dr. Parkinson would certainly have been overwhelmed by unprecedented rise in workload for all during the total shutdown of India beginning midnight of 24th March. The diktats issued by bureaucracy covers all activities in all spheres of life.

Take the simple case of charity. Ideally, one should not disclose whether one has helped the needy. A Government department, however, decided to create a data bank on this.

The Defence Accounts Department (DAD), thus, decided to account voluntary help rendered to the poor during the lockdown. As put by DAD circular dated 17th April 2020,

"Competent Authority has desired to know the details of voluntary help (other than the contribution of one day salary) made by the officers and staff of Defence Accounts Department towards fight against COVID-19".

The Circular asked the staff to e-mail information about 1) Any donations made to PM CARES Fund/PMNRF/CM Relief Fund etc. 2) Any donations made to any NGO/Charitable Trust etc. 3) Any donations to general public. 4) Distribution of Food, groceries etc. to the needy people and 5) Any other help.

Imagine how it created work down the line. After reading this diktat, some staff members might have resorted to fresh alms-giving to downtrodden and photographed such activities. They might have submitted the photographs as proof of their generosity awakened by Prime Minister's first Covid address to the nation.

Consider now the case of umbrella. Is there a need to decide whether it is an essential item? What is the period during which product categorization should remain in force?

A clarification dated 15th May issued in

"the name of Governor of Maharashtra" is amazing. It says: "In view of the ensuing monsoon season, for the purposes of para 7(ii)(b), 7(ii)(d) and 7(ii)(e) umbrella, rain coats and plastic sheets/covers will be treated as essential goods till 30th September, 2020".

To know what the three paragraphs are, a citizen would have to refer to the original order dated 2nd May 2020 as revised consolidated guidelines for containing Covid under Disaster Management Act, 2005.

It thus makes sense to download & categorize all orders issued by Centre, States, district magistrates, Municipal Commissioners and all others empowered to give commands under the Lockdown. Problem here is that many collectors/district magistrates have external link to a website/server that hosts their orders.

And this link is not working for at least last three days. The stock message this columnist got on clicking any notification on each visited DM's website reads as: **"This site can't be reached. cdn.s3waas.gov.in's server IP address could not be found"**.

This speaks volumes about e-governance. The glitch of epidemic proportion ensures that citizens are kept busy searching the Net for locating the relevant notification at alternative portals.

Are computers and accessories essential items for sustaining work-from-home (WFH) idea advocated by Lockdown Empire. What about remains of office equipment used in WFH environment. If you have any doubt on this count, urge

District collector/magistrate to clarify.

Says Haryana Government order dated 22 nd March 2020:

"If there is any doubt as to whether a service is essential or not, the Collector and District Magistrate shall be the competent authority to decide. In case, any order issued earlier which is in contradiction to this order then these orders shall prevail".

One would come across dozens of such weird decisions after reading and comparing hundreds of orders, circulars and advisories issued by different tiers of bureaucracy.

Revert now to PL. Referring to release of Royal Commission on the Civil Service, Dr. Parkinson expounded PL in The Economist dated 19th November 1955. He identified two **"motive forces"** that enliven PL. These are 1) **"An official wants to multiply subordinates, not rivals"** ; and 2) **"Officials make work for each other"**.

Now see how these two factors played out when work-deprived migrant workers struggled to return to villages to restart dignified living. The Lockdown empire did not admit that sudden imposition of the Lockdown triggered India's worst migration after the Independence.

The Regime could have simply re-started public transport for hapless workers for say a week. After over a month of shocking tales of migrants trudging to villages, the bureaucracy spun a web in which several departments and thousands of officials were roped in.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) first issued slew of orders including clarifications & standard operating procedure (SOP) for migrants' return to their home States. Later, Ministry of Railways issued its own detailed guidelines & clarifications on operation of **Sharmik** / workers Trains. Each State issued its own orders and clarifications.

State Police issued its own guidelines for registration and screening of migrant workers intending to return home by non-stop special trains.

Railways' 6-page order thus says

"all States/UTs shall designate nodal authorities and develop standard protocols for receiving and sending such stranded persons. The nodal authorities shall also register the stranded persons within their States/UTs"

. It also forwarded list of nodal officials from the Railways side.

In fact, immediately after invocation of Epidemics Act & Disaster Management Act by State Governments, Dr. Parkinson's 1 st motive force started gaining pace (**"An official wants to multiply subordinates, not rivals"**).

The Centre's lockdown order issued on 24th March 2020 says:

"In order to implement these containment measures, the District Magistrate will deploy executive magistrates as incident commanders in their respective local jurisdictions. The incident commander will be responsible for the overall implementation of these measures in their respective jurisdictions. All other line department officials in the specified area will work under the directions of such incident commander".

To implement this order, district magistrates (DMs) created micro-level administrative structure to take on Covid. DM, Nuh district, Haryana, for instance, issued a 50-page table listing officers and their numbers for each village.

Raigad district Collector's list of Covid / Lockdown notifications run into 17 pages. Uttar Pradesh's Compendium on Covid-19 Prevention, Control & Treatment "**Version_14.04.2020**"

runs into 864 pages. The latest version would certainly be much bigger. Each State has its own compendium on Covid.

Despite such meticulous planning, Corona graph continues to rise and rise. And horror stories from different hospitals and graveyards continue to pour in. The viral infection has not yet Peaked. Everyone is worried over risk of 2 nd covid wave starting in the hinterland in the coming months. It remains to be seen whether first and second wave of infection would get merged and appear as one long-duration infection with a few peaks.

Dr. Parkinson, a British civil servant-turned professor, might have penned more wry laws on governance after reading tonnes of lockdown diktats to rein in Covid virus.

Take the example of street vendors. Silvassa Municipal Council (SMC) in Union Territory of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (DNH) first introduced odd and even (O&E) scheme for street vendors on 21st March. Three days later, it ordered all street vendors & shops to close operations at 5 PM till 31 st March.

SMC felt that these orders failed to ensure social distancing (SD). Thus, on 6th April, it ordered closure of vegetable market at Bahumali till further notice. It allowed working of Gayatri Mandir ground market. It also fixed working hours for street vendors with reduced period of 8AM to 1PM.

How shortening of public space & duration for essential services enhances SD? What happened at Silvassa was not an isolated case. Similar tales happened elsewhere too.

Even relaxation of LD or unlocking under lockdown.5 comes with tonnes of diktats. The businesses have no choice but to keep LD inspectors in good humour or keep the business shut till normalcy returns.

It is here apt to quote Telangana's LD order allowing shooting for all films and TV shoots that were stopped mid-day due to LD imposition. The 7-page Order dated 9th June has listed several conditions for resumption of shooting. One stipulation relating to casting says: "**Junior artists to be avoided / reduced**"

. This, in effect, means changing the script mid-way, leave aside the issue of demoralizing such artists & depriving them of their small income.

Do such stipulations help flatten the Corona graph?

Take another example of riders-loaded permission to re-start factories in States. Each unit has to first register its interest with district administration to re-start its operations. It then decides which unit should be allowed and which should not.

DNH administration, for instance, notified five lists of units permitted to re-start their operations. The notifications were issued over five days ending 26th April. Later came a fresh order stating that

"any industry granted permission to operate from the above-mentioned order(s) falls in the containment zone then the said permission shall be treated as suspended till 03.05.2020".

Imagine the waste of effort and money spent by units in preparing to restart operations in containment zones.

Complexity of doing business under Lockdown Raj can be appreciated by reading each and every condition attached to the permit to re-start operations. DNH permission to reopen factories comes with 31 riders - the chief being that no worker from outside DNH should be allowed.

Another caveat is mandatory medical insurance for the workers. The relevant Order does not specify whether worker or employer has to pay for medical insurance and for which diseases. Another rider reads as: "**Maintain minimalistic footfall in factory**". What is "**minimalistic**" is not defined. Can a factory break-even with such stipulation?

Factory management is required to submit daily reports to a portal developed by the administration. Any Industry found in contravention of 31 stipulations "**shall be subjected to penalties decided by this office vide its various orders**"

says an order dated 24 April issued by a sub-divisional magistrate

An Order dated 22nd April, to be read with previous nine orders, issued by DNH collector notifies names of 13 officials who would monitor covid prevention steps in establishments allowed to re-start operations.

Snap, national lockdown itself turned out to be Covid super spreader with migrant workers moving to villages for want of income support from the Government. No wonder we have hot spots in all areas where migrants with infections returned.

The work of writing regulations, orders, circulars and advisories on Covid & lockdown has expanded exponentially across the ministries at the Centre. The number of committees, expert group and their deliberations and presentations have also kept pace.

The State governments have aped the Centre well in this game. Similar situation exists in each district, which is controlled by collector or magistrate. Similar is the story with each local entity such as municipal corporation, hospital and resident welfare association.

The beauty of work expansion lies in the fact that many a diktat is followed by a new version or corrigendum or clarification. The expansion of work is also visible in field of mobile phone applications.

One nation; one Covid-tracking App is not adequate to track and control the spread of virus. Apart from Aarogya Setu promoted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, certain States have launched their own Apps to track Covid, which is matching the pace of work unleashed by lockdown.

Karnataka Government offers seven Covid Apps in addition to Aarogya Setu. These are: Corona Watch App, Containment Watch App, Quarantine Watch App, Contact Tracing App, Apathmitra App, KSP Clear Pass App and Health Watch App.

Punjab Government offers two Apps: 1) **"Ghar Ghar Nigrani"**

. It is a mobile-based App launched to keep house-to-house vigil on Coronavirus. 2) CovA-app for frequent inter-state travellers.

Analysis so brings us to a new enlightenment. Lockdown has unleashed third motive force in addition to 2 identified by Dr. Parkinson. The 3rd motive force is: **Officials create and multiply work for citizens and business entities.**

We are certain Dr. Parkinson won't mind this enrichment to PL from his grave.

Take the case of shop owners in Odisha. District Magistrates have put onus ensuring SD inside & outside their premises on shop owners. An Order dated 15th June issued by a District Magistrate says: **"The shop owners will be liable for criminal proceedings"** under section 188 of Indian Penal Code (IPC),

"if there will be any violation of social distancing norms inside and outside their shop premises".

Imagine how worried a shop-owner would be if five persons stop outside his business & start chatting in a group. Image how worried would be a President of Residents Welfare Association (RWA) of an apartment complex after reading that onus on enforcing SD lies on him/her.

A Haryana order dated 22nd March 2020 says

"The RWAs shall take necessary measures for social distancing and for maintaining essential services. If any violation found, same shall be informed to police control room by President/ Secretary of RWAs. In case, such information not given to the police the concerned President/ Secretary of RWAs will be responsible".

If one wants more instances to illustrate 3rd motive force, one can pick up latest version of SOP for any activity and compare it to the one issued under lockdown-I, II, III and IV. One can also compare SOP for same period for one state with SOP for another state on inter-state travel.

Law-abiding citizens have to regularly visit different government websites and social media platforms, apart from frequently tuning in TV news channels. Fear & uncertainty are biggest gifts of lockdown.

The lockdown initiatives included packages for different segments of society, notably, daily wage earners rendered jobless. The welfare mantra is buying food items for them, arranging shelter homes for millions who preferred to walk back to villages than survive on alms. Detaining migrants and housing them in temporary shelters became a war cry for government machinery. Courts at all levels are flooded with Public Interest Litigations largely against lockdown & Covid orders.

Dr. Parkinson might have requisitioned a platoon of assistants to collate, compare and spot the trends in diktats to codify them as new rules of bureaucracy. He would have found India's tsunami of rules, orders and advisories too daunting to interpret them into simple laws that would enthral the masses.

Parkinson's second law "***expenditure rises to meet income***"

is also playing out well under lockdown raj. This, however, requires a separate blog.