

## **INDIA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has posed a massive challenge to countries across the globe. Since India has the second largest population in the world, where the problem assumes much greater proportions.

India executed a comprehensive action plan to contain the spread of the virus. In January, 2020 the Government of India organized a meeting of the Health Crisis Management Group, and constituted a Group of Ministers to plan, monitor and review the situation regularly. States were provided with guidelines for surveillance and contact tracing, laboratory sample collection, packaging and transport, clinical management protocol, prevention and control in healthcare facilities.

The first travel advisory was issued on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2020, even before the first case was detected in India. The screening of passengers from flights arriving from China and Hong Kong at major airports, was started. <sup>1</sup>Screening and graded travel restrictions were increased gradually from mid-January till 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic.

On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, a 21-day nation-wide lockdown was announced to contain the spread of the virus. During this period, pharmacies, shops and outlets providing essential commodities, such as groceries and vegetables remained operational. The Government also designated Quarantine Centers at the District level to isolate persons who had got infected.

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<sup>1</sup>Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

The decision to phase out the lockdown was delegated to the States on the basis of the conditions prevailing therein.

The Government of India issued various Notifications and Advisories under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 stating that the pandemic should be considered to be a natural calamity, and *Force Majeure* clauses may be invoked, wherever considered appropriate.

The Government announced an Economic Package of INR 20 Lakh Crores to be infused into the economy, through loans and schemes to boost the manufacturing and service sector.

The outbreak of COVID – 19 brought about a major transformation in the functioning of courts in India. A shift from physical hearings to virtual hearings took place in the Supreme Court, High Courts and District Courts to ensure accessibility to justice. An elaborate Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was framed for e-filing, mentioning and hearing of urgent matters through video conferencing. Hearings are being conducted through video-conferencing on specially developed e-platforms. By this process, the Courts have been able to dispose of a large number of cases in the last couple of months.

To ensure the safety and smooth functioning of Courts, various steps have been adopted, such as thermal screening of all employees before entering the Court premises, compulsory wearing of face masks and face shields, rotation of the Court employees on alternate days so as to avoid over-crowding, mass Rapid antigen tests of all Court staff, supply of hand sanitizer dispensers.

In order to ensure the safety of judges, the Supreme Court provided oximeters, regular supply of clean face masks, face shields, gloves and

shoe covers. Provision has been made for thermal screening at the residence of the Judges. Foot operated sanitizer dispensers have been placed at the entrance of the official residence.

The Supreme Court took *suo moto* cognizance of the difficulties faced by litigants in filing petitions within the period of limitation prescribed under the general law of limitation. In order to obviate the difficulties for litigants, and to ensure that lawyers/ litigants do not have to come physically to file such proceedings, the Court directed<sup>2</sup> that the period of limitation for filing petitions would automatically stand extended till further orders. By a further Order<sup>3</sup>, the Supreme Court specifically extended the period of limitation applicable to the Arbitration & Conciliation Act, 1996 and to proceedings under Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881.

The Supreme Court directed that physical presence of all undertrial prisoners must be stopped forthwith, and recourse to video conferencing must be taken. The transfer of prisoners from one prison to another for routine reasons was also prohibited, except for the purpose of de-congestion. Directions have been issued to contain the spread of the virus in Children Protection Homes. The Juvenile Justice Boards and Children Courts would take measures for online video sessions. The Court also directed free testing of COVID-19 for persons belonging to economically weaker sections of the society.

With respect to the treatment of COVID-19 patients, the Court directed the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, to constitute an Expert Committee in every State, which would inspect, supervise and

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<sup>2</sup>Suo Motu Writ Petition (Civil) No(S). 3/2020, Order dated 23.03.2020.

<sup>3</sup> Order dated 06.05.2020.

issue necessary directions to all hospitals taking care of COVID patients.

On the plight of migrant labourers, who were returning to their home-towns, the Supreme Court directed the Government to take immediate steps to ensure safe transport of these workers. The Government made provision for Special trains, so that the migrant labour could return safely back to their home states.

I hope our initiative will help the other member countries in spreading awareness, and meet the challenge thrown up by this pandemic.