

Gist of EPW July Week 5, 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- [1. Onslaught of Escalating Fuel Prices](#)
- [2. A Regressive Syllabus Redesign](#)
- [3. Impact of COVID-19 on Labour](#)
- [4. Child Protection and Preparedness in COVID-19 Epoch](#)

Onslaught of Escalating Fuel Prices

Context

- In the last few months, there has been a sharp increase in the prices of petrol and diesel in the country by 17 % (or Rs 11.66 per litre) and 13% (or Rs 9.17 per litre) respectively.
 - In July 2020, unit prices of petrol and diesel in major metro cities were skyrocketing.
 - In Delhi, petrol and diesel prices stood at Rs 80.43 per litre and Rs 81.05 per litre respectively.
 - On the other hand, in Mumbai, petrol and diesel were available at Rs 87.19 and Rs 79.29 respectively.

This article analyses the various aspects of crude price hike and discusses its impact on the lives of commoners.

Global crude oil prices and consumers:

- Comparing the current situation with the last quarter of 2018, when the crude oil price globally was almost twofold of the existing prices, the prices of petrol and diesel have remained almost the same, fluctuating between Rs 80-85 per litre.
 - It means that the consumers are not able to avail the benefits of the low global oil prices.
- Hence, this puts to question the purpose of India's fuel price deregulations (of 2010 and 2014).

The linkage between global crude prices and retail prices

- In theory, there is a direct linkage between petrol and diesel prices in India and global crude prices.
 - It means that a fall in the price of crude oil in the international market will lead to a decline in retail prices also.
 - This downward trend has been seen since February 2020.
- But, in practice, oil price decontrol seems to be rigid/sticky downwards.
 - This rigidness can be seen in price decontrol because of the policy of the government.
 - Whenever there is a fall in the global crude oil prices, new taxes and levies are imposed by the government to increase the revenue.

In the end, there is no change in the condition of the consumers. They either pay the same which they were paying prior to the imposition or end up paying even more than that.

Price Decontrol

- Price decontrol is a practice followed by the retailers in which there is no intervention of the government in the process of pricing.
 - In the case of India, the government intervenes in such matters whenever it is required.

- Under price decontrol, retail prices are fixed by the Indian fuel retailers on the basis of their calculations of profits which are over and above the costs (or prices) at which they source their inputs from the upstream oil companies for whom the price benchmark is derived from global crude prices.

Fall in the Demand and Prices of Crude oil

- The spread of the Covid-19 disease across the world and almost worldwide lockdowns in response to this led to a sharp decline in the demand and prices of crude oil.

Fall in Demand

- Media reports state that the reduction in sales of diesel and petrol is greater in the first fortnight of July 2020 as compared to the first fortnight of July 2019.
- This is the primary reason as to why the Indian retailers have decided to collude, increase the retail prices of these products so that they can recover their losses.

Fall in Prices

- Crude oil prices have dropped significantly from the average of \$55 per barrel in February to \$20 per barrel by the end of March 2020.
- It is only now that the revival of prices has started, following the step by step relaxation of the lockdown rules.

Government's effort to build a fiscal position by increasing fuel price

- Government increasing the excise duty on petrol and diesel has its effects on consumer prices as well as further exacerbating their condition.
 - With this imposition, taxation covers nearly 69% of the retail prices of fuel in India—the highest rate of fuel taxation globally.
- The high rate of taxation is often used as a tool to revive the economy from the slowdown but it should be kept in mind that fuel prices are also used as an instrument to accumulate revenue for political desirability.
 - An example of this is high excise revenue earned by the government in 2016-17 by increasing the duty on petrol and diesel.
- **Politics of price hike:** In order to please the voters during the pre-poll period, some states like Karnataka decided to immobilize the daily revision of petrol pump prices in April-May, 2018.

Debating the rationality of fuel price hike

Two questions arise amidst this crisis:

- Will this hike in the prices of petrol and diesel help the oil markets of India recover from the depression? There are very less chances because of the following reasons:
 - **Restricted mobility:** With mobility still being limited/restricted, the demand for vehicular fuel is less likely to revive soon.
 - **Higher fuel price deters the use of personal vehicles:** Even if mobility is restored, people would prefer to use non-shared or private vehicles due to the fear of transmission of disease.
 - It means that there will be an increase in the expenditure on fuel costs at hiked prices.
 - These factors, in turn, are likely to act as demand depressing factors.
- How will it impact the common people?
 - **Fare hike of public transport** because of increasing oil prices.

- **Higher inflation:** There will be an increase in the logistic costs for the already damaged supply chains.

Conclusion:

- Most disconcertingly, the fuel price hike brings to the fore the contrasting nature of a so-called “commoner-friendly” state, where common people are going to be most affected by such action.

A Regressive Syllabus Redesign

Context:

- The announcement of significant cuts in the syllabus of all subjects has been made by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in response to the situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- This also highlighted the national level historical turf war between curriculum designers and exam organisers.

The article analyses the impact of this move on the quality of learning while highlighting other flaws in the education system.

Public response to cuts:

- The response of the public to these cuts was as per the expectations. Some were terming it as a political move, which the CBSE officials have denied.
- Reduction in the syllabus provided a sense of relief to the school principals and teachers from their new anxiety due to a switch from classroom teaching to online teaching.
 - CBSE students may also be pleased by this move.
- The plausible purpose of cutting the syllabus is to reduce the burden of curriculum on students.
 - The students can prepare for the board exams with a reduced number of topics in each subject.
 - The next exam season is about seven months away, that is, if they are held on time in February and March 2021.

Linkage between prescribed syllabus and the annual exams

- Links between annual exams and syllabus are crucial for the education system.
 - This linkage was officially forged in the latter half of the 19th century and since then six generations have gone through certified education, making the link familiar to the entire social spectrum.
 - This linkage has also served several systemic and social functions.

Shortcomings of the linkage:

- **Impacting curiosity:** The linkage froze the scope and process of examination, which overlooked educational aims such as awakening of the personal curiosity, and the desire to follow something out of interest.
- **Detached learning:** The examination process is such that the evaluation is detached from learning.

- The questions asked in the examination are judged correct if students write only those things which are mentioned in textbooks.
- Topics are segregated according to marks and those topics that are considered important carries more marks.
- Moreover, model answers are made available just before the exam and teachers ensure that students write the exact words in the following examination.
- Understanding a topic with reference to other topics and connecting the dots is neither expected nor welcome.
- **Suppressing creativity:** The punishment for applying personal imagination or reasoning is lower marking.
 - As a result, teachers encourage students to write answers similar to the approved ones.
- Instead of encouraging the interest of students in the subject, the focus of pedagogic efforts is on the success of examinations.
- **Maintaining social order:** Separation of learning from preparing for exams enables the system to serve as an instrument of social selection.
 - Board exam performance channelizes mobility into higher education and employment.
 - In the matter of course, public exams have become a tool to maintain social order as marks provide a legal basis for the distribution of educational and economic opportunities.

The above-mentioned characteristics clearly depict why the examining institution can mercilessly cut down the syllabus without thinking about the effects it will have on the quality of learning.

Impact of slashing curriculum: Exams have been prioritised over learning

- The official measure of this syllabus cut is expressed in terms of percentage. It indicates the mechanical way the board sees the framework of curriculum and its parts.
 - 30 % reduction in the syllabus is affirmed by the CBSE.
- **Impact on language subjects:** In language subjects, the slashing refers to literary pieces included in the prescribed textbook.
 - These pieces can be ignored by the students because they are not going to be asked in the examination. Hence, in this manner, the promise to reduce the burden is fulfilled.
- **Impact on other subjects:** In other subjects such as mathematics, science and social sciences, questions will be asked from the topics spared by the board's scissors.
 - This is not a matter of concern to the board if some topics become difficult to understand by the students because the topics preceding and supporting them have been removed.
 - **Example:** Federalism has been deleted from the political science syllabus. There is no need to study this topic for next year's (2021) exam. However, the Constitution as a topic is kept. Without knowing federalism it is difficult to make sense of the constitution.

Triumph of the organizers of exams over curriculum designers

- The goal of curriculum designers is to enable students to make sense of what they are learning. However, the Indian system provides a permanent edge to the organizers of exams over the curriculum designers.
- **Impact of pandemic and digital education:**
 - The turf war between them has been suppressed for now by the pandemic.
 - Without any consideration of alternative responses to the pandemic, online delivery of content has come up as the sole, favoured solution. Digital technology has finally achieved its long-delayed victory.
 - Norms for online delivery of content and intake have been laid down and announced.

Committee for reforming education

- **Yash Pal committee:** After an ardent appeal made by late RK Narayanan to reform education, the Ministry of Human Resource Development appointed the [Yash Pal Committee](#) to look into it.
- It was chaired by the space scientist and great educationist Yash Pal. The committee which presented its report in 1993, highlighted that incoherent syllabus was creating a burden on students.

Conclusion:

- Reforms in the design and content of the syllabus led by Pal himself are now under the CBSE's carving knife.
- This regressive move is likely to be followed by the state boards but, there may be certain exceptions.

Impact of COVID-19 on Labour

Context

- The pandemic has enforced changes in the labour market which have not only enhanced unemployment but has also led to the erosion of workers' rights.
- The article analyses the impact of the pandemic on various sectors, especially on manufacturing.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on labour market:

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown has impacted the labour market in a very harsh manner, such as the decline or complete loss of livelihoods, which have led to a severe impact on migrant workers and the working poor.
- **Workers providing essential services:** There has been a large increase in the workloads and working schedules of other workers such as health workers and those providing essential services.
- **Workers in the service sector:** Service sector experienced huge lay-offs and retrenchments due to the pandemic, but this has also been an agent for transforming the workplace.
 - Technically qualified employees have been able to continue their work from home through remote working arrangements.
 - This has led to a change in their work-life balance and resulted in indeterminate net effects on productivity.
 - Most of the employees have been involuntarily forced into working remotely, often under stressful conditions because of the pandemic, which could lead to diminished motivation and concentration as well.
 - However, these longer working hours have not been counterbalanced by the wages prevalent before the outbreak of the crisis.
- It can be clearly said that the pandemic has directly disrupted the lives of millions of workers in countries across the globe by resulting in a significant reduction in wages, reduction in working hours and layoffs.

ILO report on employment amid pandemic

- **Increase in job loss:** It is expected that 6.7% of working hours equivalent to 195 million full-time workers will get eroded in the second quarter of 2020.
- This will result in large scale unemployment worldwide and a higher proportion of it will be from the Arab nations, Europe, Asia and the Pacific regions.
- The sectors which will be badly affected are accommodation and food services, manufacturing, retail, and business and administrative activities.

Declining labour productivity

- A decade long significant reduction in the productivity of labour, since the global financial crisis of 2007-09, is being faced by the world economy.
- It is evident from various studies that the pandemic has caused severe effects on the productivity of labour.
- A study conducted by the [World Bank](#) on 35 advanced and 129 emerging markets and developing economies concluded that the four pandemics that occurred during the period 2008-18 led to severe impacts on the productivity of labour via a decline in investments resulting due to a growing sense of uncertainty.
- Furthermore, the increased sense of uncertainty about the ongoing pandemic and its duration could also lead to disruption in trade and foreign direct investment (FDI).
- Although the pandemic has resulted in changed behaviour, it was expected that this changed behaviour would escalate the take-up of new technologies, encourage greater efficiency and speed up scientific innovation among businesses.
- The analysis of Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) data clearly demonstrates that the productivity of labour in the organized manufacturing sector has declined in a significant manner over the past eight years.
 - The productivity of labour was also lower than the neighbouring country China.

Indian economy amid the pandemic

- Many emerging and developing economies were facing much weaker growth before the onset of the pandemic.
- Accompanied by the structural features of the slowdown, this would aggravate the long-term impacts of deep recessions associated with the COVID-19 crisis.
- A deep slowdown has been witnessed by the Indian economy prior to the occurrence of this pandemic.
 - There has been a decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for nine consecutive quarters.
- Given the risk aversion at the global level, the possibility of a revival in private and corporate investment is supposed to be fallen behind.

Changing nature of manufacturing amid the pandemic

- According to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, in order to alleviate the shortage of workers during the pandemic, the manufacturing sector could also seek the mass adoptions of latest technologies, such as robotics, [artificial intelligence](#), and big data.
 - This in turn would lead to a reduction in 10-20% existing jobs specifically in labour-intensive industries.
- In a labour surplus country like India, the replacement of labour with new technologies will cause severe effects on the generation of employment.
- Nevertheless, new jobs that would be created are supposed to provide room for 5-10% of jobs for highly skilled workers.

Erosion of workers' right amid the pandemic

- Although the labour laws of India are blamed for this reduction in productivity.
- Recently, some states such as Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat have declared a slew of labour laws suspension in order to avail the benefits from the disrupted global supply chains because of conflicts in trade, to invite foreign investments for international firms seeking to move production out of China and provide support to the businesses in recovering from the losses of the pandemic.

- These policy changes have led to undermining worker rights and dismantling of decades-old protective measures that were framed to abide by [ILO](#) conventions and constitutional obligations.

Conclusion:

- Adoption of labour-displacing technologies and dilution of labour rights in the wake of the pandemic and associated events have made the labourers pay a heavy price.
- Sadly, other alternatives to expand public investment in the economy have not been explored. Measures such as wealth tax can be introduced by the government to finance public investment.
- The government needs to focus on stimulating aggregate demand and increasing purchasing power to revive the economy.

Child Protection and Preparedness in COVID-19 Epoch

Context

- Children, especially those from the marginalised communities, have suffered immense hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown.
- They will also face increased risks and hardships in the post-lockdown period.

This article analyses the risks and proposes suitable measures to mitigate the same.

Status of Children in India

- According to the Census 2011, children constitute 37% of the total population of India.
- For a very long time, India has been struggling against various hardships that have had a direct impact on the lives of the children, especially on the lives of those belonging to the marginalized and vulnerable communities.
- Malnutrition, infant mortality, school dropouts, child labour, child marriage and child abuse are some major issues faced by the underprivileged children.
- It is evident from various studies that mortality and morbidity, illness, productivity and other developmental challenges are correlated with childhood trauma and increase the risk of exposure to violence as well.

Also read: [Child Labour Prohibition Act](#)

What is child protection?

- Child protection refers to the process of protecting and responding to any kind of violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and discrimination against the children.
 - Article 19 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for the protection of children in and out of the home.

Covid-19 Pandemic and Children

- Children's safety, well-being, survival, protection and overall development are endangered by any kind of conflict and situation of emergencies such as natural disasters and pandemics like Covid-19.
- There is no denying the fact that even before this global pandemic, no such sufficient measures were provided for the care and safety of the children.

- The continuum of vulnerability has increased now and, hence, the chances of children falling out of the safety net have multiplied many times.
- Previous humanitarian crises like frequent floods, earthquakes and epidemics have documented the threats to children and their devastating long-lasting effects.
- Safety of the children are dependent on the following factors:
 - Nature and scale of emergency,
 - Quality and functioning of the pre-existing child protection mechanisms,
 - The community's preparedness and most importantly,
 - The capacity of the state to respond.
- The risks involved in protection are separation from families, trafficking, abuse, trauma, commercial exploitation and death.
- These realities always existed and if we are not prepared to deal with the challenges faced by the children in the world post this pandemic, then it will take decades to provide a safer childhood to the children.

Physical, Psychological and Sexual abuse against Children during Covid-19

- The number of deaths is increasing across the world due to Covid-19 and it is clear from this fact that children are losing their loved ones, parents, caretakers and acquaintances.
- The trauma created due to the death of the loved ones is perennial and leads to stress and anxiety.
 - Therefore, in order to cope with stress, more psychological care should be provided to the children now than ever before.
- It is evident that different forms of violence such as physical, psychological and sexual abuse against children are emerging along with the excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies while enforcing lockdown decisions against the vulnerable children.
- The UN Secretary-General has emphasized that what began as a health crisis is evolving into a broader child-rights crisis.
- He then goes on to ask whether the steps taken for the well-being of children, frontline staff delivering essential services, children in conflict zones, children who lost their parents, children in childcare institutions and observation homes are sufficient?

What should be done?

The following measures should be taken to ensure child protection:

1. **Ensuring all the services are accessible:** All the services for protecting children must be declared as essential.
 - There must be access to children's health services during lockdown, quarantine and even after all the restrictions are ruled out.
 - Services related to gender-based violence and national child helplines must be made available to the survivors/witnesses of the violence, whenever required.
- **Provision of mental and psychological support:** The issue of lack of counsellors and psychologists to provide mental assistance to the children along with parents and caretakers is often raised by the committees of child protection, other child protection units of Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) and schools as well.
 - Basic counselling skills and capacity to deal with mental issues should be provided to the teachers, social workers, front-line government staff, child protection service providers by the government and the civil society.
 - It is going to be a tough challenge to overcome.

- **Identification of children at risk and providing required support:** Identification of children at risk and providing them with the required support to negate the risks is very essential during and after lockdown as well.
 - Children are already struggling due to the mass migration and lack of safe places during the nationwide lockdowns.
 - Children living on streets, children who have left their homes are at the high risk of trafficking, forced begging and child labour.
 - A stronger tracking system is required at local levels to keep a proper record of the families and children who are entering or exiting the villages/slums to take immediate follow-ups and reduce the risks.
- 4. **Providing financial assistance and opportunities:** Informal sector is suffering from the financial hardships due to the loss of livelihoods and resources, and hence, children will be forced to work.
 - Children are the cheapest source of labour and hence, they will be hired during a recession. They will also be working in agricultural fields and will be engaged in household work due to restricted movement.
 - Financial support to vulnerable families, relaxation of school fees, incentive schemes supporting children's education, especially girls, support to innovative learning opportunities, minimizing losses to income will be able to prevent children from entering the workforce.
- 5. **Strong Family and Community level support:** Reduction in income along with livelihood challenges increase the chances of child trafficking.
 - Strong family and community-level support for children, active community-based child protection mechanisms, long-term multi-sectoral response to address trafficking and mainstreaming of children are ways to mitigate this risk.

Order of the Government

- An order was passed by the government amidst the Covid-19 pandemic (in line with the [Supreme Court](#) order) to release children from all forms of observation and special childcare institutions and send them back to their families.
- Children are also at the risk of engaging or re-engaging into activities in conflict with the laws. The question that remains is, are we prepared enough to address these issues?

Budget and Planning for child care amid pandemic

Making the internet safe for children

- Time spent by children on the internet has increased as a result of an increase in online services including the internet. Parents and caregivers need to be empowered to protect children from online abuse and misconduct.
- Also, the government needs to come up with guidelines for strict monitoring of online risks and potential harms by educational institutions as well as restricting "screen time," especially for younger children.
- The private sector should also implement adequate technical measures such as parental control tools, age verification, safety-by-design and age-differentiated experiences.

Tackling Gender Discrimination

- A pandemic can amplify gender discrimination practices such as child marriage, adolescent girls being forced to drop out of school to take care of household chores, sibling care and other activities.
 - Other factors such as financial insecurities, breakdown of social networks, safety concerns and fear of sexual abuse impact girls' future further.
- A gender-sensitive approach is needed in order to make girls attend school post lockdown. Flexible learning opportunities, catch-up courses and accelerated learning opportunities may help girls to return to school.
- Also, there is a need for tracking of school registers to check on girls who have not returned to school.

Increasing budget allocation for childcare

- This whole thing requires investment. However, the budget for children shows a continuous decrease over the past five years.
- Also, the child budget as a proportion of GDP has declined from 0.6% in 2014–15 to 0.4% in 2016–17 and has remained stagnant since then.
- However, there has been a constant rise in financial allocation under child protection.
- To meet the challenges of the pandemic, it will require an increase in budget allocation specifically dedicated to the safety and well-being of children.

Other critical areas to be focused

1. **Focus on data management:** There is a need to boost the on-ground machinery and promote civil registration.
 - Birth and civil registration documents children's identity, supports access to services and verifies age to protect children from exploitation, among other benefits, thus mitigating child protection risks.
2. **Promoting inclusivity:** The COVID-19 child protection preparedness plan has to be inclusive in nature.
 - It needs to ensure gender sensitivity and include children with disabilities, children from minorities, tribal and Scheduled Caste children and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or asexual children.

Conclusion

Prevention is always better than cure and unplanned response. An early and timely intervention, effective planning and building existing capacities will strengthen preparedness and support the physical and emotional health, dignity and well-being of children, families and communities.

