**FICCI calls for balance to normalise economic activity, control COVID-19 spread**

The exit strategy of countrywide lockdown amid coronavirus pandemic should aim towards bringing about a fine balance that on one hand normalises economic and social activity and yet contains the disease from spreading and getting out of control, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) said on Friday.

"One of the big gaps that we are currently facing is the lack of mass testing capability which is limiting our understanding on the true scale of spread of the disease," it said in a note to the government.

"It is extremely important at this stage to augment mass testing and ensure a disciplined and a cautious approach adopted by the grassroot functionaries and community duly monitored by local authorities," it added.

Finally, said FICCI, the disease is such and its course so unpredictable that the policy to deal with it will always be evolutionary. Day-to-day monitoring with constant alacrity in changing strategies will be the order of the plan.

As the government and all its agencies are aggressively working towards flattening the novel coronavirus infection curve, national leaders and officials are also debating exit strategies and trying to work out a comprehensive framework towards it.

Though India in the global context so far has not seen larger number of cases who would need hospitalisation, however, the increase of infected people in the past few days may lead to a situation where more and more patients may require respiratory assistance and intensive care.

"At the same time, for a country like India, we also cannot afford to have a prolonged lockdown that lasts for months," said FICCI.

The government should lift lockdown selectively across the country so that production, distribution, consumption, transportation and other economic activities resume beginning with districts having no COVID 19 cases.

The exit from the nation-wide lockdown could be done by permitting healthy persons in the age group 22 to 39 to resume work. "This will be a low-risk group from a perspective of putting strain on medical and ICU facilities. This group of over 150 million people could put the wheels of economic activity into motion."

FICCI said harvesting season is on and labour is not available. District collectors should be advised to ensure full harvesting and MNREGA workers should be used for harvesting. The inputs like seeds and fertilisers are not available to the farmers and this is hampering the plantation of summer crops. Movement to mandis for selling crops is another issue.

"The entire agri-value chain should be opened and facilitated. Otherwise, it could lead to a very difficult situation for farmers and agriculture labour," said the industry body adding that movement of all goods traffic without any distinction of essential or non-essential should be allowed immediately.

The government should allow stores for walk-in and allow kiranas to be open for customers with strict enforcement commitment by all to maintain social distancing and health and safety standards. This will help the communities source the essential items and considerably reduce panic.

Domestic travel by air should be opened, especially between destinations not affected much by COVID-19. The aircraft may be run at say one-third of seating capacity to maintain distance. Limited movement of trains should also be allowed so that people can travel for urgent matters.

FICCI, however, said authorities should continue to identify hotspots and ensure that such areas remain under restrictions of movement.

All the public gathering places should be under lockdown till April 30 and then open in a phased manner. Weddings, conferences, sports events and other such gatherings should be banned till May 2. Malls, cinema halls, restaurants should continue to be closed.

Restaurants should be allowed to continue with their home delivery services, said FICCI. (ANI)

**Source**

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