

Economy - Synopsis of the main developments reported in leading newspapers April 18, 2020 – April 24, 2020

Key Developments

West Bengal to start pool testing of samples in low-risk zones

Bengal government on Saturday decided to start pool testing samples in low-risk zones which have reported 2% or lesser Covid-19 positive cases according to the preliminary samples tested. This method will involve pooling in samples of five possible suspects, even though they are asymptomatic, and testing them together. A negative result will prove that all five samples in the pool are negative and a positive result will prompt further tests of all five samples individually. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) director-general Balam Bhargav had in a letter to all states, including Bengal, on April 14 proposed pool testing to ramp up surveillance. A feasibility study at the Virus Research and Diagnostic Laboratory (VRDL) at King George's Medical University, Lucknow, had clearly demonstrated that performing real time PCR tests (polymerase chain reaction tests which detects Covid-19 antigens in the body) by pooling five samples show desired results in places where the rate of incidences is low.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/bengal-to-start-pool-testing-of-samples-in-low-risk-zones/articleshow/75227413.cms>

Coronavirus: All you need to know about new relaxation rules in your state

India has over 17,000 confirmed corona virus cases, with Maharashtra alone recording nearly 4000 cases followed by Delhi, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. The death toll due to Covid-19 infection has jumped to 556 so far. The government had earlier announced a partial relaxation of lockdown from April 20 onwards. Let's take a look at states' position on lockdown relaxation rules. **West Bengal** - Lockdown relaxation in Bengal: CM Mamata Banerjee declared extension of the lockdown till April 30, after a video-conference with PM Modi. The govt will review the scenario by April end. All schools and colleges in West Bengal will remain closed till June 10. Meanwhile, the parliament secretariat will start functioning from Monday while adhering to the guidelines on social distancing issued in the wake of the novel Coronavirus pandemic. The officers of the rank of joint secretary and above will have to attend office, while other officers will join the duty on rotational basis. The ministry has directed that if any symptom for the novel coronavirus is seen in any person, he/she should leave the workplace immediately, and leaves should be sanctioned for home quarantine.

https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/lockdown-2-0-which-states-are-relaxing-norms-from-april-20-which-aren-t-120042000118_1.html

State plea to UGC on exams

The state government has requested the University Grants Commission (UGC) to consult it before finalising how universities and colleges can hold the deferred undergraduate and postgraduate exams after the lockdown. Universities and colleges will have to regularise the postponed exams following a new set of guidelines, which will be issued by the UGC, the commission has recently said. The state government feels the Centre is attempting to curb its powers in framing its higher education policies by taking such a step, a higher education department official said. "...As education is on the Concurrent List of the Constitution of India, I would suggest that the report of the expert committee (constituted by the UGC to deliberate on the issues related to examinations and academic calendar) may be sent to all state governments, for suitable feedback within stipulated time period before any decision is

taken on the report,” Manish Jain, the education department principal secretary, wrote to the UGC.

https://www.telegraphindia.com/calcutta/coronavirus-lockdown-state-plea-to-ugc-on-exams/cid/1766694?ref=more-from-west-bengal_west-bengal-page

Antibody tests soon in Bengal

Rapid antibody blood tests for Covid-19 will soon be introduced in Bengal as a “surveillance tool”, the health department said on Sunday. The rapid tests are likely to begin in the city on Monday or Tuesday, an official of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) said. Blood samples would be collected instead of throat and nasal swab as is the practice in the existing tests for the coronavirus. Public health professionals warned that rapid tests are not confirmatory, but would help gauge how many in the community have been infected with the novel coronavirus. Rapid tests are done to identify if an antibody has developed in a person as a response mechanism against the novel coronavirus, public health experts said. The antibody would develop only when the person has been infected by SARS-CoV-2 and a positive result would thus confirm that s/he has been infected.

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/calcutta/coronavirus-pandemic-antibody-tests-soon-in-bengal/cid/1766395>

States get Rs 46,038 crore

The finance ministry on Monday said it has disbursed Rs 46,038 crore to states as their share of central taxes and duties for April. In a tweet the ministry said to assist states effectively address the situation arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a special dispensation, the calculation of net proceeds of shareable taxes has been kept unchanged according to Budget 2020-21. The budget this year had projected the share of the states in taxes at Rs 7.84 lakh crore for 2020-21. The 15th Finance Commission had recommended the share of states at 41 per cent of the divisible pool and 1 per cent for the newly-created union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. The 14th Finance Commission had recommended the states be given 42 per cent share in taxes. “The ministry of finance has issued sanctions for April instalment of Devolution of States’ Share in Central Taxes and Duties amounting to Rs 46,038.10 crore today (Monday). “The inter-se share is according to the recommendations of the XV Finance Commission,” the ministry tweeted. Uttar Pradesh has got the maximum sum with a net transfer of Rs 8,255.19 crore, followed by Bihar at Rs 4,631.96 crore. The Centre has allocated Rs 3,461.65 crore to Bengal and Rs 3,630.60 crore to Madhya Pradesh. The share of Maharashtra has been lower at Rs 2,824.47 crore. Goa and Sikkim have got the least from the central pool of taxes at Rs 177.72 crore and Rs 178.64 crore, respectively. Earlier, the RBI had raised the ways and means advance (WMA) limits to state governments by 60 per cent of their existing limits for 2019-20 to help them borrow more from the market. The time the states can be in overdraft has been raised, allowing them to mop up to Rs 3.2 lakh crore in the April-September period. The Centre has also advanced the release of Rs 11,092 crore of the central share from the state disaster risk management fund for 2020-21. The states, however, have sought relaxation in the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) Act. They want the permissible limit of fiscal deficit be raised to 5 per cent of their GDP from 3 per cent now. Bengal finance minister Amit Mitra wants corporate donations to the Chief Minister’s Relief Fund to be part of CSR.

https://www.telegraphindia.com/business/coronavirus-pandemic-states-get-rs-46-038-crore/cid/1766636?ref=business_business-page

West Bengal: Toll plazas to start operations today with increased rates

Toll plazas will resume operations early on Monday across national highways. National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) has revised the toll by 4% to 5% across 15 toll plazas in the state. Truck operators said that reintroduction of toll during the lockdown will adversely impact the supply of essential commodities in Kolkata, rest of Bengal and elsewhere in India. Distribution of essentials like fish, fruits, egg, pulses, oil, food grains, medicines and fertilizer will be badly hit if our interest is not taken care of, said a trucker. A lot of trucks have already gone off the road because cost of transportation has gone up many-fold with uncertainty prevailing at loading and unloading points, police harassment and due to lack of food and shelters for the drivers. At many points, drivers have abandoned fully-laden trucks. Under these circumstances, the reintroduction of toll, that too at a higher tariff, would further disrupt the services, said a truckers' body. NHAI, however, said that the revision of tariff is a routine affair. It is done annually. The new tariff was supposed to have been implemented from April 1. But, because of the nation-wide lockdown, the toll plazas were shut to allow hassle-free movement of essential commodities. "Since the toll plazas are going to be operational from midnight, the new tariff would be effective from April 20," said NHAI chief general manager, Kolkata region, R P Singh.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/toll-plazas-to-start-operations-today-with-increased-rates-truckers-fear-supply-woes/articleshow/75240342.cms>

Restaurants step up safety measures in Kolkata as orders drop after Delhi incident

Restaurants offering home-delivery have beefed up their safety measures. The move comes after a sharp drop in orders in Kolkata, following the Delhi incident where a pizza delivery person was diagnosed with Covid-19. Orders in Kolkata dropped by 30%-40% over the last week after a good Poila Baishakh. National Restaurants Association of India (NRAI) had earlier requested its members to ensure proper hygiene. To reassure customers, Speciality Restaurants, which owns brands like Mainland China and Oh! Calcutta, has introduced a 'temperature log' tag in the food packets. Chairman of Speciality Restaurants Anjan Chatterjee said the company has introduced its own home-delivery system in cities like Mumbai and Kolkata for orders worth Rs 2,000 and above. "We believe in best hygiene practices. In our kitchens, there are thermal guns. Our chefs and delivery-persons are checked twice a day," he added. The director of leading biryani chain, Aminia, Kabir Azhar, said, "We shall install thermal guns at all our kitchens. Our cooks and support workers have been living in our premises for the last one month and we check their temperatures regularly. We shall start checking Swiggy and Zomato delivery persons' temperature too," he added.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/restaurants-step-up-safety-measures-in-kolkata-as-orders-drop-after-delhi-incident/articleshow/75262803.cms>

Credai seeks West Bengal's help to bring construction labourers back

A real estate developers' association in West Bengal has sought permission from the state government to bring labourers back at the project sites after the Centre allowed to resume construction works with some restrictions during the ongoing lockdown, an official said on Saturday. The industry body urged the state government to allow movement of workers from their home towns and native villages after the Centre had given its nod to restart construction activities from April 20 on those projects where labourers are already available at the sites. "We have written to the state government seeking permission to start works at the construction sites and reopening offices in a partial and phased manner," Credai West Bengal president Sushil Mohta told. But the challenge with most of the projects has been availability of workers as many labourers hailed from districts and they left for their homes immediately after Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had announced the lockdown, he said. "We have also

urged the state to allow us to bring labourers back from their home districts such as Medinipur, Murshidabad, Bankura and other areas," Mohta, also chairman of the Merlin Group, said.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/productline/building-materials/credai-seeks-west-bengals-help-to-bring-construction-labourers-back/articleshow/75252400.cms>

Govt services take first step towards resuming normalcy

The state government resolved normalcy in administration on Tuesday with skeletal staff in all departments, directorates and other establishments. Thermal checking of each staff was carried out when they entered Nabanna and other establishments of the state government. An official has been posted at each entry point of the state secretariat with a thermal gun. Another person has also been deputed to ensure that no one enters the premises without sanitising their hands and it has also been ensured that all officials put on masks. All departments have ensured that minimum number of staff is engaged to start functioning of the state administration. The state government has allowed each department to prepare their respective rosters by engaging 25 percent of the existing strength of Group C staff and below. Officers of deputy secretary rank and above are to come on alternate days. A senior officer posted at Nabanna said that for the time being, they have not directed any staff of Group C level and below to attend office. "But it is not that they are not willing to come to office. Many of them have contacted us expressing their willingness to join. But it is our endeavour to carry on the work with minimum workforce required," the officer said.

<http://www.millenniumpost.in/kolkata/govt-services-take-first-step-towards-resuming-normalcy-407610>

200 app cabs for medical emergency

A few app cabs are now available for medical emergencies . Calls can be made to 9804886028 or text messages sent to 9432324341, stating the pick-up location and time two to three hours before the pick-up. A total of 200 cabs from the West Bengal Online Cab Operators' Guild are available within the city for medical emergencies. "We are providing this service only for hospital pick-up or drop. Someone who needs to go to a hospital for, say, chemotherapy or dialysis, can book a cab. We need at least two hours to allocate a cab. Our coordinator (whose numbers are given) will verify the location of the customer, destination and the duration of the trip before allocating a cab from our database," said Indranil Banerjee of the cab operators' guild. The fare is Rs 20 per km with a waiting charge of Rs 100 an hour. One can also book a cab for several hours, for which the fare will be Rs 200 an hour. On calling the number, the customer will get the registration number of the vehicle and the name and contact number of the driver. The customer will have to send a digital copy of the prescription to the driver over WhatsApp. "The driver may need to show the copy to police on the way to pick up the customer. The customer must board the cab with the prescription," said Banerjee.

https://www.telegraphindia.com/calcutta/200-app-cabs-for-medical-emergency/cid/1767236?ref=more-from-west-bengal_west-bengal-page

Not to compromise on hunger, from now on the ration shop will open twice a day!

The state government has already moved away from the decision to pack the ration products and hand them over to the customers. In this case, rice, wheat, etc. will be measured and distributed in the ration shop in front of the customer in the same way as the ration products were given to the customers earlier. This time, the food department has set a deadline for opening and closing ration shops so that more people can collect rations while maintaining social distance. According to the guidelines issued by the food department, ration shops will

be open twice a day from April 24 to May 31. The ration shop will be open from 8 am to 12 noon and again from 2 pm to 8 pm. Not only that, the ration shop will be closed on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr on May 25.

<https://eisamay.indiatimes.com/west-bengal-news/kolkata-news/food-and-supplies-department-of-west-bengal-order-on-ration-shop-open-and-close-time/articleshow/75321790.cms>

'Citizens' want compassion, this time step-by-step lockdown

Mamata Banerjee asked for the phased withdrawal of lockdown after May 3 to prevent corona infection. In this case, she said, 100 per cent lockdown should be lifted after two more weeks of May 4. However, not as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, but as an ordinary citizen and as the President of the Trinamool Congress, Mamata has made it clear that she wants this. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to hold a meeting with the chief ministers of each state next Monday to decide on the next course of action in the situation. The meeting will be via video conference. "As an ordinary citizen and grassroots leader, I want the lockdown to continue,". She further added, "25 per cent lockdown should be withdrawn in the week starting May 4. In the second week after May 4, 50 percent should be reopened. The entire lockdown should be lifted after two weeks of May 4.

<https://eisamay.indiatimes.com/west-bengal-news/kolkata-news/covid-19-outbreak-tmc-chief-mamata-banerjee-recommended-the-phased-withdrawal-of-the-lockdown/articleshow/75328716.cms>

Amit Mitra formula for revival

Bengal finance minister Amit Mitra has prescribed a three-legged formula to shore up money to fight the economic catastrophe unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic and support livelihood. He reiterated the stance of chief minister Mamata Banerjee voiced before Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India should spend at least 6 per cent of GDP to reinforce the economy, ravaged by the ongoing lockdown. In an interview with Karan Thapar, Mitra said there was enough headroom to raise resources because of three favourable factors. India's debt-to-GDP ratio stands at 69 per cent compared with 106 per cent in the US and 240 per cent in Japan, providing headroom for the country to raise more debt. The record low prices of international crude oil also augur well for the country as it imports nearly 85 per cent of the requirement, he added. A lower oil import bill will translate into savings for the government. Moreover, the country is sitting on huge foreign currency reserves, the highest in recent memory, he added. "This is not the time to quibble over fiscal deficit," Mitra said in the interview. Mitra, who was the secretary-general of industry body Ficci before throwing his hat into politics and becoming the finance minister of Bengal, also prescribed how the money should be spent. Rustling out numbers to claim that around 25 crore people in the informal sector have been rendered jobless in the lockdown which will complete one month on Friday, he prescribed parachute dropping of resources. He advocated direct payment of survival money to the people, allocating 40 per cent of the 6 per cent of GDP, or about Rs 10 lakh crore earmarked for them. The Centre should also provide liquidity to the formal sector and medium and small enterprises (MSME) as there is no liquidity in the system. The MSME sector is often described as the backbone of the economy, contributing 30 per cent to GDP and 50 per cent to exports. "Give them a x ur-year tenure loan with one year of moratorium on payment," he suggested, without going into the details of whether there would be any impact on the banking sector.

https://www.telegraphindia.com/business/coronavirus-pandemic-amit-mitra-formula-for-revival/cid/1767596?ref=business_business-page