

# Opinion | No, the lockdown is not a green moment

---

III [thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/opinion-no-the-lockdown-is-not-a-green-moment/article31645692.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/opinion-no-the-lockdown-is-not-a-green-moment/article31645692.ece)

A bird flies over the Yamuna near the Rajghat Thermal Power Station in New Delhi on April 7, 2020. | Photo Credit: [Sandeep Saxena](#)

On March 24, a nationwide lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister of India to contain the spread of COVID-19. A consequent halt to a significant proportion of economic activity, for close to 30 days now, has led to reduced pollution and an improvement in environmental indicators across the country. The Ganga, for example, [has better quality water now](#), than it has seen in decades. The Air Quality Index (AQI) across major cities has improved, particularly due to a [reduction in NOx and PM2.5 from vehicles](#). There have been [increased sightings of fauna](#) in and around cities. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions — mainly CO2 emissions from industrial activity — have reduced.

These environmental benefits are a result of stopping (or slowing down) of industrial and economic activity and not of proactive action for pollution control or climate change mitigation. However, in the Indian context, they have been used to make at least three claims on industrial activity and the environment. The first claim is that a drastic halt of industrial activity is exactly what is required to address climate change. The second is that economic growth and industrial activity cannot offer a way out of such a crisis. The third is that this is a moment to pause and opt for a path of degrowth. These arguments are not new and have been around much before COVID-19 hit Indian shores. The pandemic just seems to have lent more voice to them. However, these arguments miss the actual lessons we should learn from our experience of the pandemic.

Also read | [India has to come to terms with inequality: Thomas Piketty](#)

Let us deal with the flaw in the first argument — the contribution of the current lockdown to climate change mitigation. Global warming is determined by the cumulative stock of emissions and not by temporary valleys and crests in emission flows. The [total cumulative global GHG emissions between 1850 and 2017](#) (related to only productive activity and not land use change and forestry) are about 2,431 Gt (gigatonne) of CO2. The world currently emits approximately [36 Gt CO2 annually](#). Even if we assume that there is a significant drop in these emissions (let us say a 40% drop, which is an overestimate), there will be an addition of about 22 Gt CO2 to the cumulative total which will increase as the economy stabilises and picks up pace again. Even if we assume that the economy does not recover, we will still be adding emissions to the cumulative stock already in the atmosphere, even though at a slower rate. It would simply mean that instead of reaching global warming levels of 1.5 deg. C by about 2032, we will reach there by about 2038, just six more years even with 40% reduction in emissions. The most important aspect here is that even if these six extra years are gained, they would come at a terrible cost. Because

the one thing that the pandemic has taught us is that we are economically and politically extremely ill-equipped to deal with global emergencies and far from ready to deal with the looming crisis of climate change.

The second claim made is that industrial activity and economic growth can't address the crises of the environment or public health. This simplistic skepticism of industrialisation misses the fact that scientific and technological development goes hand in hand with productive economic and industrial activity. Such activities have in the past improved our capacities for enhancing environmental sustainability. This holds true for processes of waste recovery and recycling techniques right from the start of industrialisation to the substitution of fossil fuels for biomass and animal fat as fuel sources. Achievements in environmental protection have often been because of advances made in industrial activity and not in spite of them.

Further in these unprecedented times, we turn to science and technology — the development of a vaccine or a medicine, the rapid manufacture of ventilators, scaling up of our capacity to build health infrastructure in short order. To argue against industrialisation is to also forget our limited capacities in the past, where far more people died of infectious diseases than in the present.

Also read | [Silver lining to the lockdown cloud](#)

What we must learn from this pandemic is that an underdeveloped and/or unequal society is very likely to respond to a crisis by sacrificing its poorest populations. In India, the unfolding tragedy of the lockdown has not yet been fully uncovered. However, we already know that millions of workers continue to remain stranded, unable to get back home and unable to feed themselves in cities where work and wages have stopped. There are already 200 deaths reported due to the lockdown alone. Eradicating deprivation, reducing vulnerability, providing assured work and incomes has to be a priority in India even without the pandemic. Improved access to healthcare, modern technology and infrastructure, and increased incomes is the basis on which we can then protect all our people (and not just some of them) in times of crises.

The second lesson is that we require greater international cooperation to respond and deal with these crises better. Considering the increasingly globalised nature of production systems across the world, knee-jerk advocacy of some extreme version of self-reliance would be as utopian as an assumption of automatic benefits of global trade in an unequal world. The demand must be for greater cooperation between nations for the advancement of scientific and industrial development. Not recognising this has been a major drawback of environmental movements in the past as well.

Coronavirus lockdown | [No improvement in Ganga water quality](#)

COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown underscore the fact that equity has to be fundamental to improving the environment and is central to any vision of sustainable development. And this means equity between nations, within generations, and across

generations. It is our collective duty to find a way forward on the environmental question that does not put the burden of resolving it on the workers of the world.

***Aravindhana Nagarajan is with the Azim Premji University; Tejal Kanitkar is with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.***

---

Support Quality Journalism