

Can closing India's red light areas reduce COVID-19 cases by 72%?

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By Puja Gupta

New Delhi, May 17 (IANSlife): Continuing the closure of red-light areas in India even after the lifting of the lockdown on May 17 can reduce the number of COVID-19 cases by 72 per cent in a period of 45-days; and delay the peak of cases by 17 days, says a finding by academicians from Yale School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School.



The study called 'Modelling the Effect of Continued Closure of Red-Light Areas on COVID-19 Transmission in India' finds that Indians are at a much lower risk of getting COVID-19 if red light areas are kept closed after the lockdown, until an effective treatment or vaccine for COVID-19 is developed. This intervention can help the Indian government significantly reduce the risk of citizens getting COVID-19.



The delay in the peak will provide the government more time and opportunities to plan and execute measures to protect public health and economy, as India moves in Lockdown 4.0. The study also states that there could be a 63 per cent reduction in the number of deaths in the first 60 days after the lockdown ends, if red-light areas are kept closed.

In India, there are close to 6,37,500 sex workers as per the National Aids Control Organization (NACO) and over 5 lakh customers visit the red-light areas on a daily basis. The study shows that if the red-light areas start operating, the disease will spread extremely quickly and infect a very high percentage of sex workers and customers. The high transmission rate is because social distancing is not possible during the act of sex. The infected customers could spread the disease to lakhs of other citizens.

Therefore, these red light areas have a combination of factors that can create a major hotspot. This hotspot can create a large percentage of the disease spread after lockdown ends. To protect citizens against this, the study recommends keeping red light areas closed indefinitely, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report highlights the impact of red-light areas across India and in five Indian cities which are currently in the red-zone and account for some of the largest red-light areas in the country with large numbers of sex workers.

As per the study, if red-light areas are kept closed following the lifting of lockdown, there can be a delay in the peak of COVID-19 cases by:

Up to 12 days in Mumbai

Up to 17 days in New Delhi,

Up to 29 days in Pune,

Up to 30 days in Nagpur,

Up to 36 days in Kolkata

Further, it can reduce COVID-19 cases in a 45-day period by:

11 per cent in Mumbai,

17 per cent in Pune,

11 per cent in New Delhi,

16 per cent in Nagpur,

6 per cent in Kolkata

The report shows that closure of red-light areas can significantly reduce deaths by 63 per cent in India, 58 per cent in Mumbai, 38 per cent in New Delhi, 43 per cent in Pune, 61 per cent in Nagpur and 66 per cent in Kolkata in the first 60 days. These numbers are based on the prevalent reproduction number of 1.0. The numbers could vary depending on the Reproduction number, which is constantly changing with time in different locations.

Commenting on the report, co-author, Dr. Jefferey Townsend, Professor of Biostatistics, Yale School of Medicine said: "At the release of lockdown, there is a very high potential for the increase in the cases, and hence, a modulated approach is warranted. The actual scenario will depend on behaviour of individuals and our model does not predict how individuals will behave. The purpose of our modelling exercises is not to predict what will happen in the future, but to understand the effect of the intervention in the future. Our study findings show that there is a strong effect of the red-light area closures, especially immediately following the lockdown."

Other countries have also implemented similar interventions. In Australia, brothels and strip clubs are the only businesses that are delineated as indefinitely closed in the country's reopening plan. Germany and the Netherlands have also closed their brothels to protect citizens from COVID-19. Japan did not close down red light areas in-time and saw an "explosion" in cases because of a red light area that left local hospitals "overwhelmed".

Speaking about the COVID-19 situation in India, co-author of the report, Dr. Sudhakar Nuti, Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School said: "The Indian government's early measures to prevent the high growth in COVID-19 cases have flattened the curve in the country. The continued closure of red-light areas would build on the successes achieved by the government in lockdown. India gained around 40 days of delay in the peak through lockdown and can gain another 17 days of delay by keeping these places closed. Any effort in delaying the peak reduces the amount of stress on the medical system and potentially translates into lives saved. Preventing the potential surge in cases by red light areas reopening will protect gains made by the lockdown."

The report has been co-authored by Prof. Jeffery Townsend, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Yale University, Prof. Alison Galvani, Director, Center for Infectious Disease Modelling & Analysis, Yale University, and Dr. Sudhakar Nuti, Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School.