



GOVERNANCE PRACTICES IN PANDEMIC: GLOBAL AND INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

It is important to recognise the importance of leadership roles Public Administrators have played in the Covid-19 pandemic. As an Institution, the Civil Services particularly the All India Services have always commanded considerable respect from the people of India. Such respect emanates from a perception that decision-making would be neutral and unbiased and would enable the nation to achieve the objectives outlined in the Preamble of the Constitution. The 21st century has witnessed a significant expansion of the Civil Services processes and responsibilities. Recruitment has become highly competitive, training norms more stringent, performance appraisal timely and constant evaluations have been introduced on the capacity of the civil servant to meet current challenges. There is greater emphasis on performance management practices. Effective management of public resources has necessitated open, transparent and accountable systems of delivery. The regulatory oversight by the Central Vigilance Commission, the Comptroller & Auditor General and the Central Bureau of Investigation, has increased. Clearly accountability levels today are far higher than they ever were in the past.

It must be said that the monitoring levels in government have increased significantly. There are Central *Prabhari* Officers for most of the major Centrally-sponsored schemes to ensure quality implementation, high quality/ multiple indicator monitoring dashboards like e-Samiksha, Aspirational Districts Programme, constant reviews at highest levels through *Pragati* meetings and monitoring through Sectoral Groups of Secretaries and Empowered Groups. The Central Secretariat work culture has changed visibly.

In a broader sense, the challenges that civil servants face in the 21st century are no different from those of the 20th century - Commitment to the larger public good against all odds. Further the New Age competency remains anchored in integrity, building credibility and trust in the institution of civil service. Even in a New Age India, these values are foundational and non-negotiable. You can hire skills, but leadership and faith in fairness and impartiality cannot be outsourced.

A New Age India 2022, envisages civil servants as agents of change, displaying personal characteristics of high morality, courage, independent decision-making, an intrinsic motivation and an inner desire to excel to contribute to policy making. Civil servants are expected to be striving for radical reforms and transformational governance. Relentless pursuit of excellence can only be achieved with enormous amount of dedication and seriousness of purpose. There are simply no shortcuts to success. Institutions rise and fall with individuals.

The Global Policy Framework to the Corona Virus Pandemic

The global response to the Corona Virus pandemic has been disorderly. Most countries have turned inward, travel bans pervade, there exist export restrictions and the marginalisation of global institutions like the World Health Organisation with the United States suspending its financial commitments. The weakening of the multilateral institutions of global governance has been a striking feature of the response to the Corona Virus pandemic.

Important forums like the G7, G20, and the UNSC have not been very visible in this period. The G7 and G20 met in March 2020 nearly three months into the outbreak. China, which holds the presidency of the Security Council has blocked any resolution about the pandemic. The most promising multilateral initiative has been the US\$ 2 billion fund announced by the UN Secretary General to mitigate the effects of the Corona Virus on fragile and war-torn states. India has called for a restructuring of the WHO to ensure that its capabilities meet its mandate. The International Health Regulations post the SARS pandemic in 2015-16 had given the WHO the core legal prescriptions governing state conduct with respect to infectious disease. The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, the World Bank's Pandemic Emergency Financing Facility, and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention formed part of the 2020 global health infrastructure. With China being slow to report the magnitude of the pandemic, the horrific costs that it has entailed can be seen on the global community. There exist even more horrific costs if multilateral organisations don't rise up to this challenge. In



2008-10 the United States led the multilateral efforts to coordinate the massive stimulus packages to fight the Global Economic Recession. At this stage multilateral cooperation seems abstract and is a felt need to prevent another global economic meltdown.

India has played a very constructive role in multilateralism during this pandemic. India allowed export of HCQ (Hydroxychloroquine) to USA and Brazil, paracetamol / HCQ and other items were provided to over 100 countries. India led the SAARC cooperation to strategise the region's fight against Covid 19. India also participated in the G20 and NAM contact group meetings.

The G20, the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) and the Development Banks have resolved to support the poorest and most vulnerable countries which do not have substantial market access. The Debt to GDP in Low Income Countries is expected to go up to 50 per cent of GDP, 65 per cent in Emerging Market Economies and 125 per cent in Advanced Economies.

The 42nd IMFC in its communique said that the crisis threatens to leave long lasting scars on the global economy, such as weaker productivity growth, heavier debt burdens, heightened financial vulnerabilities and higher poverty and inequality. To support the recovery the international community will sustain the extraordinary and agile policy response, tailored to the different stages of the crisis and country specific circumstances. The IMFC has emphasized the need for international cooperation to accelerate research, development, manufacturing and distribution of Covid-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines with the aim of supporting equitable and affordable access to all.

The IMFC approved the following major measures:

- a. Extension of debt service relief under the Catastrophe Containment Relief Trust (CCRT)
- b. Expansion of the loan resources under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust (PRGT)
- c. Extension of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) into 2021. However, private creditors have not participated in the DSSI.

The G20 in its virtual meeting dated April 15, 2020 has supported a time-bound suspension of debt service payments for countries that request forbearance. The G20 agreed on a coordinated approach with a common term sheet providing key features for the debt service suspension initiative. The G20 welcomed the Rapid Credit Facility and the Short Term Liquidity Line. The G20 called on the Financial Stability Board to continue monitoring the financial sector vulnerabilities. Further the G20 supported the IMF's USD one trillion lending capacity and the emergency response packages adopted by the World Bank and the Regional Development Banks amounting to USD 200 billion.

The G20 agreed on the principle of a 'common framework for debt treatment beyond DSSI' which has also been agreed to by the Paris Club. A comprehensive debt resolution by coordination of officials and private creditors needs enhanced policy coordination across all international organisations at multilateral, regional and country levels.

The chair of G20, the Saudi Minister of Finance Mohammed Al Jadaan has said that 46 countries have benefitted from the DSSI of the 73 eligible countries. An extraordinary meeting of the G20 has been convened in November 2020 to update the G20 action plan, and committed to avail all possible policy options and inclusive growth.

The G24 appreciated the efforts of the IMF to provide lending to more than 80 countries and the efforts to boost the resources of the Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust (PRGT) and the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT). The G24 also complemented the World Bank for a lending programme of USD 160 billion over a 15-month period along with USD 12 billion initiative to procure vaccines to treat one billion people. The G24 said that debt restructuring is essential to ensure debt sustainability and there is a need for timely sovereign debt resolution. Effective debt standstills need to be worked out.

India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said that the looming debt crisis is a potential threat in the post Covid-19 recovery for low income countries. Debt sustainability should be an important agenda going



forward. An area of growing concern is the lack of transparency and debt structures assuming multiple faces. Debt restructuring becomes meaningful only if we know the contours of the debt – who owes what, to whom and on what terms. Hence great effort is needed in ensuring transparency in all forms of debts. The role of international organisations is critical to steer this issue in order to have a more meaningful and pragmatic assessment of a country's distress and to suggest preventive measures for the incipient stages.

The Covid-19 Pandemic — Redefining National Governance

The Corona Virus pandemic has redefined India's governance models. Getting to live with the pandemic has meant less contact governance, officials having to work in masks and gloves and adoption of work from home policies for nearly 66-75 per cent workforce. Institutions have become very important in the regulatory governance model with emphasis on cooperative federalism. The contributions of Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), National Institution for Transforming India (NITI), Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Railways, Posts, Air India, AIIMS have become highly visible. There has also been an increased focus on centrally- sponsored schemes with enhanced health sector spending under the National Health Mission and job creation under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme MGNREGS.

There has been a lot of emphasis on digital decision-making in the Central Secretariat. Virtual offices were possible in those Departments where e-office was implemented. Web-room meetings and new protocols were put in place, as the Central Secretariat shifted to a digital mode, the attached, autonomous and subordinate offices adopted digital practices. Virtual private networks and home working policies have become more streamlined.

The implementation experience has been successful. 75 Ministries adopted e-office, with 57 Ministries achieving more than 80 per cent of work on e-office. Nearly 17 lakh e-files have been created in the Central Secretariat. The Central Secretariat Manual of Office Procedure, 2019 enabled the digital Central Secretariat with virtual private network facility being delegated to Deputy Secretary level. Quite clearly many of India's digital infrastructure initiatives have borne fruit in this period as the nation's administrative systems braced to fight the pandemic. The significant impact of *Bharat Net*, *Megh Raj*, *e-Sign* and *Digi locker* were seen in this period.

Another feature of the redefined governance has been the emphasis on integrated service portals. The DARPG created a portal for Covid-19 public grievances through which grievance redressal was provided to 1.5 lakh citizens. As digital infrastructure became the core utility of every citizen, the focus was on ensuring high speed internet, providing unique digital identity and access to common service centres. E-Services had to be ensured on real time basis and government tried to provide integrated services across departments. The digital empowerment of citizens was most felt in online classrooms, literacy platforms and in participative governance. The benefits of several successful e-governance projects like e-Hospital, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), Aarogya Setu app, e-NAM, SWAYAM was seen.

There was a lot of emphasis on augmenting health care with production of hand sanitizers, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and *swadeshi* swab sticks to fight against Covid-19. Government created over 800 Covid-19 hospitals and increased Covid testing laboratories. The PM Cares Fund was established as a public charitable trust and money was used for augmenting supply of ventilators and vaccine development. *Shramik Express* trains were operationalised to move migrant workers and other stranded persons during the lockdown. Government also successfully conducted the NEET and JEE examinations and completed the CSE interviews to ensure that the academic year is not lost for millions of students. A Press Information Bureau (PIB) Fact Check was launched to curb the spread of fake news. The *Vande Bharat* Mission helped evacuation of 1.5 lakh Indian citizens stranded in foreign countries to return home safely. Armed forces were pressed into duty and their role was witnessed in Operation *Samudra Setu* and Lifeline *Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik* (UDAN) missions. The *Atma Nirbhar Bharat* campaign formed the bulwark of the policy response for the economic stimulus focusing on land, labour, liquidity and laws.



The Corona Virus Pandemic – Changing the Face of State Governments

State governments stood at the forefront of the battle against the Corona Virus pandemic. War rooms were created in State Secretariats for massive coordination with field formations. Health, Information Technology and Home Departments played the leadership role with Industries and Food departments handling issues of migrant labour. Several advanced e-office systems were operationalised in State Secretariats – Odisha Secretariat Workflow Automation System (OSWAS) in Odisha, *RajKaaj* in Rajasthan to name a few. The wifi facilities at village level and video conferencing facilities at Gram Panchayat level were extremely useful for coordination.

Following are the details of two case studies:

The Karnataka government acted quickly and aggressively to stop the chain of virus transmission, and engaged with people with clear and simple communication. The State focused on honesty and transparency in reporting early signs of virus outbreak, which represented the key to limiting the spread of the virus. Implementable biological disaster and contingency plans were devised. Decisive decision-making remained an integral component as Government took decisions on stopping international flights from virus-affected countries and legally enforced the lockdown. An effective communication strategy was adopted with concise do's and don'ts to reassure the public. The responsiveness and resilience of health system in the State was tested in this period.

Karnataka moved to address shortages in ventilators, ICU's PPE kits, labs, drug shortages by scaling up of health infrastructure and human resource and health technology. Further a lot of emphasis on capacity building was necessary to upgrade the skills of students and NGO's, first responders, paramedics and doctors for swab collection, etc. The State Government leveraged technology effectively – pharma and druggists app to monitor Over the Counter (OTC) drugs related to fever, the Karnataka Private Medical Establishments (KPME) app to crowd source suspect cases, monitoring tool for Covid-19 hospitals, readiness indicator – an advisory tool for self-assessment of workplace readiness, Covid unified portal as a single source of Covid-19 related information, was used in this period.

Tamil Nadu has India's best health system with good public health and private health infrastructure and a long-standing procurement agency for drugs, surgical equipment and services. There was no shortage of qualified human resources like doctors, nurses and paramedics. However the challenges emerged in the shortages of RT-PCR testing facilities and lack of infrastructure specific to Covid especially oxygen beds and lack of appreciation of people to strictly adopt preventive methods like masks and social distancing. Tamil Nadu witnessed two super spreader events – Tablighi meeting and the Koyambedu market, yet the strict implementation of protocols and involvement of local bodies enabled the State to fight back strongly. There was unwavering focus on testing, with RT PCR test being the gold standard and ramping up health infrastructure. The best practices introduced by Tamil Nadu included deployment of rapid response teams in districts, registration of stranded persons and e-pass system with web portals being launched to restrict people's mobility.

District Administration – Resilience, Courage and Conviction

The District Collectors have stood at the frontend in the battle against Corona Virus pandemic. There are numerous success stories of resilience, courage, sacrifice and conviction that have emerged from the districts. In many ways, the young officers who have stood in the frontlines have shown maturity and commitment well beyond their seniority, implementing the strict lockdown, promoting social distancing, ensuring mobilisation of village level Covid-19 taskforces and above all ensuring that the rural societies adapt to the new normal.

Let me present 4 success stories.

In Pattanamthitta, Kerala, the containment strategy included trace, isolate, test and treatment. A regular surveillance was operated which consisted of contact tracing – in-depth interview with patients; involvement of field teams for contact tracing, spatio-temporal mapping, cell tower data. Call centres were also functional to monitor the outbreak of Covid-19 by addressing medical and non-medical needs, psychological support



and counselling and symptom surveillance. Media surveillance was used for channeling ideas for policy decisions and addressing public needs. Community mobilisation was undertaken through involvement of local self-governments to handle the pandemic, volunteer involvement and management of quarantine facilities. Additional human resources were recruited from private medical colleges and inter-sectoral convergence was achieved. Community halls and auditoriums were operationalised as Covid first line treatment centres with 5000 additional beds.

In Siricilla, Telangana, district officials were instructed to geo-tag the details of the people who were in home quarantines. The District administration appointed two special officers for every mandal to monitor the Corona Virus situation. The District Collector conducted review meetings with the officials of various departments to discuss the Covid-19 situations in the district. Special officers were instructed to record the details of home quarantine persons in a prescribed form along with their present photographs through village secretaries. It was the responsibility of special officers to see that the price escalation did not happen. Also the need to maintain social distancing at vegetable markets and shops were a must for all. Further measures were undertaken to ensure physical patrolling, information flow, logistics, telemedicine and managing expectations. In respect of migrant labour, 5000 families were surveyed to ensure they were provided work and ensure availability of food to them. Regular counselling was given to migrant labour families. Local measures have also been taken as precaution to this pandemic as use of umbrellas; community radio; election infrastructure; *kala jataras*; public appeals; local manufacturing; sanitation; and preventive measures which included diet and exercise.

In Ranchi, Jharkhand, a taskforce for perimeter surveillance was established along with decentralised health screening. Dedicated Covid hospitals were created and in-house production of masks and sanitizers was ramped up. Food security was taken care of with mega community kitchens through SHGs and collaboration with religious institutions. Mobile ATMs and initiatives like ration kits distribution, milk/vegetables on wheels prevented any kind of scarcity. Robust contact tracing and dedicated emergency response mechanism along with a helpdesk for logistics eased Covid governance. Post lockdown efforts are aimed at public awareness of new normal, reorienting unemployment, addressing food security, access to digital education, increasing focus on co-morbidity management and sharing best practices.

In Cachar, Assam the Covid strategy employed by the district was highly successful in controlling the pandemic. The strategy involved screening, swab collection, quarantine centres, contact tracing, community targeted surveillance and creation of urban and block level Primary Health Care (PHC) in hub and spoke model coordinated through a district control room. The dedicated Covid hospitals, transparent networking and procuring of equipment along with local manufacturing of masks made a huge difference. Immense work was done by "*Pratirodhibondhu and aapdamitras*" facilitated by the multipurpose worker training along with dissemination of schemes like "*Project Aastha*" for psychosocial support which led people cope with the exigencies better. To rope in the good work of the civil society, a whatsapp group by the name GO NGO was created to coordinate the working of all NGOs. Awareness campaigns were organised with important stakeholders and price management of essential commodities were also undertaken.

Districts have utilised e-governance in a big way - the author had interactions with 117 District Collectors of Aspirational Districts on Good Governance Practices in a pandemic on September 4, 2020, the overwhelming message was that districts have leveraged technology and synergised developmental programmes. Most districts adopted multiple surveillance practices - sero-surveillance, digital-surveillance, thermal screening were widely used. New technology practices included use of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems, e-Sanjeevani app, Aarogya Setu app and e-Pass. Raichur district in Karnataka had developed 10 new apps. MGNREGS payments were made through online portals. Several districts not only coped with the pandemic but also with challenges like landslides as in the case of Wayanad.

District Collectors showed resilience in ensuring proper cremations in Covid-19 death cases. Young Keerthi Jalli said she attended the cremations to ensure streamlining of procedures at cremation grounds. Several District Collectors ensured that online education even in remote areas - the *vidya-varathi* app being an outstanding example, distributing library books and mid-day meals through village volunteers. District Collectors ensured students reached home safely, as in the case of Kota, Rajasthan. To help farmers, District Collectors mobilised National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)'s self-help groups to identify progressive farmers and provide effective

market linkages under e-NAM. Many District Collectors also worked with SHG's to ensure door step delivery of services, some also worked with big businesses like Swiggy and Zomato to supply vegetables.

Conclusion

The citizen is the centrality of a civil servant's odyssey, and commitment to the larger public good against all odds is his defining goal.

To quote, George Bernard Shaw's vision:

"I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I love. I rejoice life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me, it is sort of a splendid torch which I have got hold of, for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

That's what a civil servant can be – an inspiration to one and all.

Jai Hind.

(The article is an excerpt from the Talk delivered by the author in the Indian Institute of Public Administration on October 19, 2020.) ■

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