



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECTIVENESS OF DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION IN HANDLING COVID 19 CRISIS- A CASE STUDY OF BHILWARA DISTRICT (RAJASTHAN-INDIA)

Dr. Archana Sawshilya

Associate Professor, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi.

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

(This writeup is based on my personal observation, discussion and dialogues with the head of the Administration- The District Magistrate in webinar session on "Bhilwara Model: Setting Example of a Ruthless War against COVID19". Apr 18, 2020 07:00 PM India (Speaker: Rajendra Bhatt, IAS, Collector & District Magistrate, Bhilwara (Rajasthan) and other resources-newschannels and newsarticles.

The novel coronavirus has challenged public healthcare systems' capacities to the hilt and the World Health Organization also declared it as a pandemic. (1) The spread of COVID-19, has sparked a rare, unprecedented, scare at a global scale resulting in 317,210 deaths worldwide and 3029 in India. India has been facing a challenge to save its citizens since March 2020, when Lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi. The Government has followed step by step Model for screening at the Airports, putting restrictions on travels, social events and gatherings so as to control further infections. India started evacuating its stranded citizens from high risk affected countries like China, Italy, Iran and Japan. The Prime Minister through his strong leadership and awareness campaign started mobilizing and persuading Governments of the SAARC Countries and also of G-20 to share reliable data of infection, deaths and best practices to contain the spread of the epidemic

In Indian constitutional setup healthcare is the responsibility of the state governments but in extraordinary circumstances like the outbreak of coronavirus, the constitution provides for the Union government to take the lead in coordinating between and supporting the states, where central government has to monitor and support the state governments in controlling spread of epidemic. The Epidemic Diseases Act empowers both the central and state governments to regulate the spread of epidemic diseases. The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, is the nodal legislation with respect to containment of 'Dangerous Epidemic Diseases'. This Act empowers the Union and state governments to take any measure to prevent the outbreak of a dangerous disease once declared as an epidemic. Section 2A of the Act allows the Central Government to take any measures and prescribe regulations for the inspection of any ship or vessel leaving or arriving at any port. Violations of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, invite penalty under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code. But there is no provision to speedily setup any system for coordinated and concerted response. That is why this Act is criticized for not coping up contemporary health challenges. This led to the invocation of Disaster Management Act 2005 because it provides for an exhaustive administrative setup for disaster preparedness and the Union Home Secretary; chairperson of National Executive Committee delegated his powers to the Secretary, Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Corresponding Author:- Dr. Archana Sawshilya

Address:- Associate Professor, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi.

It also empowers the state governments to take preventive and regulatory measures to curb the spread of epidemic diseases within their own jurisdiction, to impose bans on public gatherings, close educational institutions, and instruct companies to devise work from home strategies within their territories. Many Districts across India were put under complete Lockdown to maintain social distancing on the appeal of the Prime Minister. But much before that one district Bhilwara from Rajasthan got into action and sealed the border of the district, thus drawing attention of the nation towards its promptness and the administrative capabilities and responsibilities performed by Mr Rajendra Bhatt, the D.M of Bhilwara district whom media highlighted as COVID Champion for combating spread of COVID 19 infection and reporting least number of cases at that point of time. Unfortunately till date 131 death cases has been reported from Rajasthan and mostly from its capital Jaipur

My interaction with the D.M and other officials through Webinar provided an interesting insight into the way the district administration functioned during the crisis. This method of handling the crisis was named as Ruthless Containment Model. Initially, the situation appeared challenging after reporting of the first positive case of a doctor from the Brijesh Banger Memorial Hospital. It was found that entire hospital was the epicenter of the infection. To preempt any further spreading of the virus, the district was completely sealed. Aggressive screening in city and rural areas, rigorous village monitoring, creation of quarantine and isolation wards and delivery of food items at peoples' doorsteps were started.

The district Administration had to take commanding decisions to make the people realize the gravity of the situation. District collector is the chief administrative and revenue officer of a district in Indian states. He is also referred as magistrate and in some district he is also called as Deputy Commissioner. A District Magistrate is responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the district. The D.M had to convince his people, the administrative staff and the community that -if they didn't follow the directions of the administration at that point of time, Bhilwara District would become a history for the people of India. The D.M even persuaded people that India will never forgive them if this virus and deadly disease was not controlled in Bhilwara itself and they will be blamed for spreading this disease in India (2)

Strategy followed in Bhilwara:

Bhilwara had become one of the pioneer districts to contain and combat spread of the disease by strictly following mass screening and locking down the district on 19th March. It is the 7th largest district in Rajasthan which has a total 36 districts. The population of Bhilwara District is 24 lakhs and approx 4200 tests were done in the district. Bhilwara was the first district where complete lockdown was imposed before the state government of Rajasthan or central government could contemplate lockdown. Entire district machinery - administrative, police, labour, and Panchayati raj joined hands to fight against the Covid crisis and within a week spread of the virus was brought under control. Till 19th April there was no reporting of any fresh case of Covid.

Containing the Pandemic was however not an easy task by any means. It was Do or Die situation but administration continued doing its work, like reporting of patients and identification of Suspected ones-

The first case was reported from a doctor of the Hospital. So the administration was asked to seal the hospital first and collect data of all the patients who had visited the hospital in OPD as well as in ICU. Approx 6000-7000 patients were identified and sent into quarantine. However it was difficult to locate the patients who had consulted the Doctor at home. With the proactive cooperation of the doctor this critical task of identifying the patients was done. This matter was immediately reported to the State Chief Minister-Mr. Ashok Gahlot apprehending its deadly spread to the other adjoining districts seeking his permission for locking down of the district and sealing its boundary. Promptly responding to the request, the Chief Minister gave the permission for the necessary action and on 19th March the entire district was locked down. The state Government actively supported the D.Ms decision and started monitoring the situation.

Screening process in detecting Covid patients:

The screening of 25000 people in the district was done and that was the highest ever done in any district or even in the state. Total of 4200 tests were done in Bhilwara District while it was even lesser in Jaipur which has a population of 40 lakhs. Administrative staff moved door to door filling up structured proforma. It was conducted by several teams and each team having 2-3 members. For urban and rural areas different teams were made (Total 3200-teams for both urban and rural areas). The electoral rolls were used to locate people and their total number of

members in the family. The experience of officials who had worked in swine flu teams was of immense help to the administration

The structured form had few specific questions relating to:

1. Foreign visit history or interaction,
2. Any symptoms of cold and flu
3. Any symptoms of corona virus.

These filled up questions helped the team to identify and categorize the patients into general patients, suspected cases to put them in quarantine and positive cases to be in Covid dedicated hospitals. It also helped them to segregate the areas into Hotspot and containment zones. These team members were called Corona fighters or Corona champions, who had to persuade, counsel people about all pros and cons of the disease and at times they had to be harsh with the people in case of non-cooperation and had to show the official order of lockdown.

Implementation strategy:

Along with the district administration, the police dept, panchayati Raj officials also joined this war against Corona. Experienced staff of Swine Flu were the master trainers in forming 300 teams and giving them training. With the imposition of lockdown, the entire district was sealed on 19th March so as to stop entry and exit of people in the city. When National lockdown was declared on 25th March by the Central Government and people started moving out for essential services without maintaining Social Distancing, the authorities again imposed complete lockdown in the district on 2nd April 2020 and started delivering essential items at their door steps.

Simultaneously to generate awareness and alertness among adjoining areas, messages were passed on to the other districts that since two doctors were found infected with corona positive, there was no data available as to how many people would have been infected by them, so for their security they should also close down movement of their people to Bhilwara district. This fear factor really helped the administration to put the district in complete isolation.

Media played very important role in sensitizing and creating awareness among people. Media did not allow fake news to be circulated among masses to create panic and fear. They rather educated people for isolation, breaking the chain of infection by social distancing and respecting the decision of District Magistrate.

The entire administrative machinery –Police, Labour and Panchayati Raj came forward to form teams which were given proper training. It took 7 days for preparedness. Tina Dabi, the S.D.M of Bhilwara led a proactive team to convince people to stay inside ensuring that they should not suffer from dearth of essential needs and services. This ruthless containment policy such as keeping district in isolation, transferring to quarantine, aggressive screening of people and complete lockdown had become an example for the entire country to implement it. These team members named as Corona Fighters were sent to villages and towns for survey and screening. They put the people in quarantine and kept a vigil on quarantine people so that they did not move out from their houses. In big villages more teams were deputed and in town 2nd and 3rd surveys were done after the interval of 14 days. These trained team members used to counsel people to fill up performa and by evening prepared the feedback to report to the government. It facilitated the government to segregate the people on the basis of information received into different categories. Several Hotels were changed into Quarantine centres and many Private hospitals and District hospitals were declared as Covid Hospitals for the infected cases.

Mobile App was generated to keep check on the mobility of quarantined people and team members were asked to keep vigilance on quarantined families and post pictures of closed houses along with their selfies. This also helped to identify the lawbreakers and take action against them. The mobile app informed people about distribution of food items, milk and medicines areas wise specifying days and time to collect them. The residents were given numbers of all the control rooms to contact in case of any emergency. Surprisingly people of Bhilwara had memorized these emergency numbers and this gesture was well appreciated by all.

After announcement of lockdown, cooked food packets along with extra ration for 15 days were distributed among the poor people. For the industrial workers approx 2000 cooked food packets and raw materials for more than 6000 workers were distributed. Nagar Parishads (Urban Administration) were given responsibility of town areas for such call and distribution. Even many NGO came to the help of these workers and the DM proudly admitted that in Bhilwara district no one ever complained of shortage of supply of food and this deserve appreciation.

Positive aspects in implementation:

People in Bhilwara presented the case of one religion, one party, one state and one Nation during COVID crisis. They stood for the cause of saving human lives, they chose to fight and not become a history like Wuhan. They came forward to extend their support to administration, offering their services to work as volunteers. The gratitude shown by the DM towards the people of Bhilwara is itself an example of how they supported the administration, treating the DM as their savior of life. The District Magistrate even admitted that prompt and immediate action taken by him wouldn't have been a success without the support and cooperation of the people irrespective of their caste, class and gender. People only accepted the directives of ICMR and state government, that facilitated the district officials to carry out the programmes successfully without facing any partisan politics and difficulties, which Delhi, the capital of India had to face later. The positive response and concern of the Chief Minister for his people, motivated the administration to work ruthlessly but with compassion for the poor not letting them to sleep hungry. The authoritative bureaucratic administration with humanistic approach moved the entire Nation.

Media also played a vital role in spreading government message without any fake news of fear and false cases of COVID positive. The district showed a true social cohesive state of nature despite of all odds.

Reasons behind the promptness for taking such step without any delay can be best summarized in the words of the DM itself "The Covid crisis appeared as a shark in the sea and in the process of swimming, the swimmer had just one option either to swim as fast as possible to save himself or let the shark finish him". The story would have been finished if they had not taken spontaneous measures. However it goes without saying that effective implementation of the administrative practices can not be possible without the support of the public cooperation. Bhilwara model can be followed by other states/districts where the head of the administration can customize it according to their population structure but for and foremost they have to be spontaneous in reacting to the situation without any delay else they have to face the repercussions as it happened in Spain, Italy and U.S.A.

End Notes:

1. Coronavirus: WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic, India fights back with Epidemic Act (Coronavirus outbreak in India: Decisions related to health lie with the states, but by invoking Section 2 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, advisories and directions of Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare can be enforced across the country), BusinessToday, New Delhi, March 12, 2020
2. District Magistrate of Bhilwara District, (Shree Rajendra Bhatt-Replying in Webinar) Bhilwara Model: Setting Example of a Ruthless War against COVID19, April 18th, 2020

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1. Deep Mukherjee, Explained: The 'Bhilwara model' of 'ruthless containment' to stop coronavirus, Indian Express edited by Explained Desk, Jaipur April 11, 2020.