

## Democracy and Decentralization: Way Forward for Successful Corona Combat

The Coronavirus infection worldwide as pandemic, made all the countries and states commit enormous energy and resources in devising methods and strategies in combating the Covid 19. Few of the early successful countries in controlling the infection are China, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and Singapore. Some others still in the struggle and meeting with moderate successes are Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, the UK and the EU countries. The USA and India were in limbo and still could not overcome the saga. The USA gradually reduced the infection and death rate but India is in deep crisis with the second wave of infections with new variants which is gradually showing declining trend since August 2021. Though in the second wave, India is a worst sufferer but some states of India like Delhi region. Tamil Nadu, west Bengal and state of Kerala set examples of efficient response system. This is an attempt to observe the approaches and methods various countries specially in Asia adopted in the process of Corona combat for mutual learning.

The South Korean model is widely recognized as democratic response and community based approach build on greater degree of social trust between government and the people.<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese model is characterized as low cost- model with prompt government alertness and pro-activeness together with active mobilization through monolithic party structure. The model evolved from Japan is known as cluster based model. The Chinese model is chartered as regimented lockdown model combined with test, track and treat. The Chinese model was followed in many other countries such as Italy, Spain. France and UK in their own way with partial successes.<sup>2</sup> Among Europeans, the Netherlands and Sweden pursued different paths. India followed a mixed method which differed from state to state. Among the states, Delhi and Kerala considered successful in their efforts which may be termed as decentralized participatory approach. In all the success cases, side by side with the firm policy direction and huge resource allocations from the central government, the local authorities played key role in mobilizing people's awareness and making the tracing, testing and tracking efforts successful with appropriate care and treatment arrangements. Except China, in almost all other cases there were an environment of free flow of information. To keep people indoors, the relief operation among the poor and needy were entirely managed by the local authorities.

It is found that democracy and decentralization is not a device suddenly adopted by many of the societies those harnessed immense benefit from the approach; it was deeply ingrained in their socio-political-administrative system and cultural practices in a distinct way. Among the various cultural practices two elements played a significant role are: transparency and free flow of information and mutual trust between government and the people. The widely known nation prevalent all over the world is that West Europe and North America are the "models of democracy, corona to some extent showed that democratic practices may be different and varied but it is not fixed in any given region or any predefined model. It is more of a phenomenon deeply rooted in the culture of a particular society rather devices that is depicted in almost in many of the non- western countries.

The studies specifically focused on South Korea, Japan, Vietnam<sup>3</sup> Hong Kong. Singapore and India<sup>4</sup>-the six of our Asian countries on the basis of their responses up to June 2020 may be considered as phase one, showed the very high level of commitment with efficient management under a well- resourced health sector. The second phase may be considered from July to December 2020. The beginning of 2021 may be labelled as third phase and popularly discussed as second wave. In the meantime, the vaccine is selectively available and that gave confidence to governments and the people in general and widely considered as the rays of hope in the other side of the tunnel. The new administration in USA took the corona combats one of the priority programs of the government in the initial days of the new Presidency under Joe Biden. The WHO weekly update shows that a show bit steady declining trend in North America, Europe, Scandinavia, East Asia and Mediterranean is visible but in some Asian countries and Latin America it is still in the rise.

India experienced a resurgence during the beginning of 2021, Bangladesh also felt the Intensity of increased infection. Bangladesh did not adopt any new approach and strategy by reviewing its past experiences. This is a matter of regret that community mobilization and community action seem in the process of wane and becoming a forgotten chapter, in phase one (up to June 2020) and two (July-December 2020), Bangladesh adopted an approach which is out and out 'bureaucratic' in letter and spirit. Initially Deputy Commissioners

(DCs) were at the helm of all affairs. Later, when it did not produce expected results, it reinforced the same bureaucratic approach by engaging secretaries of central administration for supervision and monitoring of district level corona combat activities.<sup>5</sup> The so called second wave is silently killing and still in the process of expansion and aggression. Compared to the first phase, the intensity and dimension were also alarming. The local level administration and community seems inactive and unmoved. There prevails an environment as business as usual everywhere. Only the education institutions remain shut since March 2020 but all other activities are casually being run with benign indifference. The communities and local level people's bodies such as Local Government Institutions (LGIs) are neither spontaneously coming forward nor being asked to come forward. Government issues orders from very top offices, there are very poor compliances at the field. Lack of trust is everywhere. Trust deficit is swallowing the nation as a new social pandemic. The successes of five Asian countries as initially mentioned achieved a miraculous success because of massive confidence building culture amongst the people, government, and local communities 'along with local level functionaries which shared major burden of management of most of the Covid protocols.

The pandemic trend so far observed is clearly showing that it is not going to be finished so soon has come to stay for a while if not more, we may not be free from the pandemic in another one or two years (end of 2022). We may have to live with it during these years. We have to prepare ourselves considering its different long-term effects and consequences. So, a sustainable management approach needs to be devised to sustain the lives, livelihood, nation and society. Side by side with central or national government, our local government institutions and local level government functionaries need a rigorous reorientation with proper moral, legal and resource support. Our representative bodies such as Union Parishad, Upajila Parishad, Jila Parishad, Municipalities and city corporations be made more responsive and responsible. Local GOB functionaries should work shoulder to shoulder with them.

Vaccine seems to be a common panacea everywhere. It is scientifically true too. A WHO spokesperson recently told that the world is not safe until vaccine coverage worldwide reaches to at least 70 percent. So far Europe covered 17% in two doses and 32% in single dose (June, 2021). We could vaccinate about 5 million so far in Bangladesh which is a moderate success. Our vaccine program suddenly came to a halt as the Indian Serum Institute failed to honor the contract. We may have to reach to about 85 million population within next one year. We hope, it is achievable with firm commitment by pulling required resources and utilizing utmost management capacity. It needs a clear vision and pragmatic plan keeping next two years in our perspective.

We may need a policy which can be termed as 'Vaccine plus' policy which may not be an entirely alternative to the existing 'bureaucratic approach' but a coordinated approach that brings communities and official combatants together under one single umbrella. People's trust on professionals will be built and people and professionals will join hands and bureaucracy will play the role of facilitators. The authority, function and role need to be redefined and a new engagement rule has to be in place with all the transparency and accountability.

1 Eun A. Jo, *A Democratic Response to Corona virus: Lessons from South Korea*, *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2021.

2 Haiqian Chen, Liiyu Shi, Yuyao Zhang, Xiaohan Wang and Gang Sun, *A Cross country Core Strategy Comparison in China, Japan Singapore and South Korea During the Early Covid-19 Pandemic*, *Globalization and Health* 7 no- 22, 2021/Kazuta Suzuki *Covid-19 Strategy: Japan Model*, *The Diplomat* April 24, 2021.

3 Sanja Ivic, *Vietnam's Response to the Covid-19 Outbreak*, *Asian Bioeth*, September 2020, 12 (13) 341-347. Maya Nguyen, *Vietnam's War Against Covid-19*. *The Diplomat* October 2020.

4 Rishita Chandra and Smita Sinha *India Fighting Covid-19: Experiences and Lessons Learned from Successful Kerala and Bhilwara Model*, published online by Cambridge University Press, April 19, 2021 (the models are also summarized as "Triple-lock containment" and "All Down Curfew")