

A Virus without Border, COVID-19: A Case Study of Delhi

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Introduction

In the cold war era, the national security debate was dominated by the ideas of classical realist thinkers like Han Morgenthau and Stephen Waltz. Classical realism is based on three pillars – to ensure the survival, security, and self-interest of the state. The realist (classical) school of thought has maintained its commitment towards state-centric ideas and always accorded great importance to the survival of the state above everything else (Lee and Chan 2007). But in the post-Cold War era, the security debate has changed to a considerable extent, shifting its security dimension in favor of non-traditional security challenges like the environment, terrorism, infectious diseases, illegal migration, trans-national crimes, and information security to name a few. No state can overcome these challenges alone (Jones 2013). This framework reflects the importance of an interdependent world regulated by the forces of globalization. The idea of interdependence may have reduced the chances of full-scale armed war but has increased the chances of the spread of contagions like wildfire throughout the world. In recent times, the whole world is facing one such non-traditional security challenge posed by a virus named SARS-CoV, which we commonly refer to as the coronavirus.

The virus has brought the whole world to its knees and the spread of the contagion has presented a case against global interdependence. Major challenges have

been faced by governments and people across the world. Governments must ensure the safety of their citizens which can be ensured by limiting the mobility of people. It would have been relatively easier for a government to order its people to follow home quarantine rules but the real problem is to manage the expatriate population and the tourists who may end up becoming illegal citizens if their visa expires before the aviation industry resumes its flights. Countries adopted two ways to deal with the problem: many asked their citizens to return home and kept their borders open while others like the United Kingdom decided to extend visas for foreign nationals to facilitate the process of their legal stay inside their borders (Relph 2020). On 11th March 2020, the Government of India suspended all foreign visas except for diplomatic, official, United Nations/international organizations, employment, and project visas (Relph 2020). On 18th March 2020, the government of India closed its borders for its citizens leaving thousands stranded abroad including students and tourists. The Indian government had suspended all its domestic and international flights along with rail and road public transportation services leaving not just the expatriate population but also millions of interstate migrants stranded in its own country.

It can be observed that governments are using every possible means to stop this contagion but are failing to provide protection, both physical and mental, to its citizens against this invisible enemy. Countries like China are coming back to normalcy and are also easing their guidelines on social distancing. India on the other hand is still grappling with its spread in states like Maharashtra and its capital city New Delhi. The national capital New Delhi has become one of the major hotspots of the outbreak of the contagion which is impacting the lives of not just the local people but also of the migrant population that resides in its territory. On the night of 23rd March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation and declared a nationwide lockdown beginning the following morning. This decision spread a wave of panic throughout the migrant community, especially daily wage workers. They had nothing to hold on to - neither food nor shelter. They were left unattended and amidst this psychological panic, many of them took the difficult decision to cover the long journeys to their homes as pedestrians. Schools, colleges, and cinema halls were shut much before the center's guidelines and by 24th April, markets were also shut down resulting in economic distress for the business community.

At the national level, the pandemic has exposed the Delhi government to challenges of various kinds. The government has to look at all the people under its jurisdiction, even non-residents because they can still act as carriers of the virus. From children to the elderly, the government is responsible for keeping everyone safe and sound. In this context, the paper will explore the present condition of New Delhi and the policies undertaken by the Delhi state government headed by Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. The Kejriwal government came to power in early 2020 and has done acclaimed work in the education and healthcare sectors. They have presented a novel case of developmental politics that is devoid of the typical caste, class, and religious dimensions. The spread of the outbreak presented some unique challenges for the government and it is high time to look at whether they are going in the right direction on this issue or not.

Delhi

By 10th May 2020, Delhi had recorded 6923 confirmed cases out of a total of 41,877 in the country (The Hindu 2020). This means that Delhi alone constituted more than 16% of positive COVID-19 cases in the country. The recovery rate in Delhi is around 10% as compared to the national recovery rate which is 29.97%. Looking at death figures, Delhi recorded 73 deaths out of 2114 in the country, which is 3.45% of the overall death numbers in India (The Hindu, 2020). The death rate of Delhi is somewhat similar to the national death rate. Given this data, it would be safe to say that Delhi may have seen a surge of cases in the past but is doing fairly well at present. However, one of the reputed national dailies, The Hindu, reported that the Delhi government is underreporting deaths related to the coronavirus. The numbers are so low that their total death record is lower than deaths reported by just two hospitals combined (Babu 2020). It's a recent controversy and nothing conclusive can be said in this matter as the spokesperson of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party has "strongly denied" these allegations (Babu 2020). It would not be the first time that numbers would have been meddled with to save the party image, but it is also true that such reports are a product of political contention between the state and the central governments. Amidst these crises, political and public health-related, let us quickly look at the policies formulated by the

Kejriwal government to deal with this unwelcome guest.

The Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, in a recent press conference, discussed his plan of action to deal with the outbreak. The government has chalked out a 'Five T Plan' which involves testing, tracing, treatment, teamwork, and tackling and monitoring to deal with the crisis (Live Mint 2020). Taking inspiration from South Korea, the Delhi government is also planning to launch a random mass testing phase to segregate the infected population from the non-infected population (Khanna 2020). On 23rd April 2020, the number of coronavirus containment zones was increased from 89 to 92 within 24 hours (Kumar 2020). To prevent community spread, it was planned to trace the movement of confirmed patients. For infected patients, beds are reserved and they are kept in special isolated wards. The private sector has also been invited to contribute as hotels and banquet halls have been used to serve as isolation centers for infected patients (Live Mint 2020). The government has assured that they are prepared to deal with up to 30,000 cases in one go. The government has reiterated the importance of teamwork in this time of crisis where everyone has a role to play. Kejriwal has said that he will personally monitor the situation to ensure that everything falls in line (Live Mint 2020). This is the broad strategy of the government to ensure the safety of its people and also to keep in check the spread of the virus.

On 12th March 2020, the Government of India used its power conferred by the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 to issue guidelines for schools, colleges, cinema halls, and swimming pools and call for the suspension of services till 31st March 2020. The central government put the entire nation under lockdown from 24th March 2020 without paying much attention to the situation of the migrant population of the country. 40% of Delhi's population comprises migrant population, out of which 48% and 18% belong to UP and Bihar respectively and a majority of them are daily wage workers (Jeelani, Anand, and Kumar 2020). The Delhi government sensed this fear among people and decided to transfer Rs. 5000 to the accounts of construction workers (India Today 2020). The Delhi government's transport department launched a 'One Time Relief Scheme' of Rs 5000 for PSV badge holders of paratransit vehicles under which the department received 34,000 applications from school cab, taxi, and e-rickshaw drivers till 13th April 2020 (Outlook 2020). Along with this, the government has made arrangements for food and shelter

for the needy and set up hunger relief and temporary shelter relief centers at the ward level. The Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board has prepared a database of permanent and temporary shelter homes in Delhi and maintains a record of their occupancy which it updates every day (DUSIB 2020).

To eradicate the problem of ration hoarding by people, the Delhi government introduced an e-ration coupon for the masses, the procedure to obtain which is detailed both in Hindi and English. The government has also made arrangements to get an e-pass for emergency purposes. The pass is issued for obtaining ration, pension, food, and emergency travel during the curfew. The procedure is simple and detailed in both Hindi and English. The government is also regularly updating Delhi's public on the spread of the pandemic. It can be observed that the government has made arrangements for dealing with the crisis wherein sector-wise needs have also been catered to. The government has adopted the online mode to deliver the benefits of the schemes it has launched. However, as mentioned earlier, 40% of Delhi's population comprises migrants, a large chunk of which are daily wage workers. These are the people who most need the benefits of these schemes, but the question is whether they have enough awareness regarding these schemes and the know-how to avail them online, or indeed have access to technology at all. These are some critical issues that need to be addressed by the Delhi government.

The Kejriwal government has given due attention to the problems of the expatriate population who are stuck in foreign lands away from their families (Delhi Government 2020). The Delhi Disaster Management Authority has launched a portal to prepare a dataset of people who are stuck abroad amidst the crisis to initiate the due process for their return, starting with informing the central government. The government also needs to make arrangements for quarantining the people coming from abroad into Delhi. If the government fails to handle the expatriate population, that can lead to a community spread in the national capital. The government is also compiling the data of students stranded abroad for their safe evacuation.

Conclusion

The Delhi Government has tried to cater to the needs of its people, but it seems that its policies are catering more to the needs of a select class of techno-savvy literates. The question that remains is how the government can ensure an alternative manual or analog plan amidst the crisis. The government could have used the help of ward members to ensure an adequate supply of ration and other essential commodities. Interestingly, the large exodus of the migrant population to their native villages has added fuel to the fire. Now the Food and Civil Supplies Department is finding it difficult to deliver rations to distribution centers due to the non-availability of workers or laborers (Sultan 2020). The government did not properly handle the migrant crisis which broke out in Delhi for the first time. The government failed not only in keeping the migrants inside its territory but also failed badly in providing transportation to them. Poor migrants were forced to walk thousands of miles to reach their home and in the process, many died. Who will take responsibility for their deaths? Should we blame the system or the politicians for not charting out a proper plan to keep people safe and sound? There is no denying that the Delhi government could have handled the situation in a better way by taking the central government into confidence. But the Kejriwal government, like most, could not coordinate with the center and vice versa, leading to severe inabilities to cope and loss of lives. The Delhi government also tried to save its face by paying train fare for migrants traveling to Bihar. The Bihar government accused him of using “cheap populist politics” (Tewary 2020). It wouldn't be entirely wrong to say that the Kejriwal government did not make adequate arrangements of food supply and shelter either for the local people or for the migrants, as people are complaining about lack of availability of food in the distribution centers. The amount of food given out to one person is often not enough to satiate hunger, leaving millions of poor people hungry (Yadav 2020).

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