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Unlike other neighbouring countries, Bhutan is in a better position to handle the Wuhan Virus also called Covid-19. Firstly it is a small country with an estimated population of hardly 727,00 people. More importantly, the people are more disciplined and ready to obey instructions unlike what we noticed in India like the Markaz incident.

Bhutan had an advantage in that its Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tsheirng was a popular practicing Surgeon before he entered Politics. He is aware of the problems. But his Health Minister Dechen Wangmo declared even on 14th March that Bhutan is 99 percent free of Covid-19! Too hasty?

So far, Bhutan appears to have done fairly well in controlling and managing the Spread of Virus. It is said to be in the “Orange Zone” where there are one or two positive cases and whose immediate (primary) contacts are all identified.

The UN, WHO and other neighbouring countries have come to the help of Bhutan. India has assured and has seen to it that essential supplies to Bhutan are continued. Bangladesh provided 12000 hand sanitizers and 150,00 Face Masks. The WHO has provided 12.5 million Nu and the ADB has also promised to help. The UN has also provided 1.14 USD.

Bhutan's response can be discussed in two parts- first before March 5 and the second after this date. It was on March 5th 2020, that a 76 year old American Tourist was found to be detected positively with Covid-19 at the Referral hospital. Soon the Government swung into action and within twenty four hours some twenty seven people, including Drivers and Guides and others who came into contact with the tourist were identified and tested with PCR kits. Fortunately, with two tests each (one more for reconfirmation)-all proved negative. The tourist it is learnt was flown back from Bhutan on the 14th March.

At the time when the lone incident was discovered on 5th March, there were 209 tourists still stranded in various parts of the country including five Italians who hailed from Lombardy- the place which had the maximum incidence of Virus in Italy. All of them showed negative results.

Prior to June 6th, one saw a sense of optimism in the official circles.

Till that time, there were only partial restriction on the movement of people and goods, The Prime Minister had said- I quote "If we restrict incoming tourists to all border posts, we have to completely shut down businesses as well and it will lead to economic paralysis". According to PM , 50,000 Bhutanese would have been jobless if total restrictions were imposed.

He said that the economy is easier to manage in Bhutan as the main contributor to the GDP was the Government. With 35 percent contribution of the Government, it would be easier to manage and control he said.

He also said that the Government can absorb tthe shock as the contribution of the private sector to the economy was minimal. He had asked the Banks to lend more for projects that employ machinery or create jobs.

But all these changed on 5th March when the first Covid case was detected.

The following steps were taken.

- 1.No new permits were issued to both tourists and Foreign workers.
2. All Foreigners holding valid visas and other important permits for travelling to Bhutan from any of the affected countries or transited through such countries were suspended.
3. Entry from Pheuntsolin,g the land border with India through the main Highway was closed.

4. All flights in Tashi Air were suspended.
5. Restrictions were placed on movement of vehicles from one point to another in Bhutan through Assam and West Bengal.
6. Informal border routes from India were all sealed. The point of entries (POE) were all disinfected.
7. The medical Shops soon ran out of masks and sanitizers, Bangladesh readily helped in sending the items.
8. All MPs, Ministers and the Prime Minister have donated one month's salary to the Government thus saving 5.4 million Nu.
9. A Multi Sectoral task force to develop an economic response plan to protect the economy from taking a major hit has been set up.

Despite the initial optimism, the economy stood to take an unprecedented hit. Though Bhutan is not in the category of Nepal in being too dependent on tourism sector, it is bound to take a serious hit. About 37,000 people are employed in Hotels and Restaurants. There are 1000 Hotels, 4000 Tour Agents and 5000 Tour Guides who stand to lose. The Financial Institutions that had lent funds to the Hospitality Industry (Tourism, Hotel etc) also stand to lose.

On 22nd March, the King addressed the Nations. He was very objective and was not over optimistic either. He said,

1. He would ensure help to all those stranded outside the Country to return Home.
2. He conceded that Covid-19 will cause great disruption to Global Economy and Bhutan will be no exception.
3. The Government will take the responsibility of alleviating any suffering to the people due to the Virus.
4. As a small country with a small population, Bhutan can overcome any challenge faced by it if the People and the Government work together.

The King's Speech was encouraging. In all, as said earlier, Bhutan's response after March 5th has been quite positive and effective.

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