Buddhist Monks as Community Organizers: An Indigenous Response to COVID-19 in the Spiti Valley of Northern India

Tejinder Pal Singh, MDS, MPH, Peter A. de Schweinitz, MD, MSPH, Ishita Khanna, MA, Norbu Vaidya

Introduction
COVID-19 has highlighted the need for protection of vulnerable populations globally. Indigenous populations are a core group within this growing concern. Governments are challenged to develop plans that are politically acceptable and equitable. Another critical consideration is community and political organization to make the measures of COVID-19 control to be effective.
COVID-19 in India continues to surge spreading across all states including tribal areas. The pandemic has not spared the Spiti Valley, in the western Himalayas, a part of the district of Lahaul-Spiti, in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India. This area is one the five Integrated Tribal Development Projects of the state. Centuries old religious institutions (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) play an important part in the socioeconomic and religious activities of the region. When residents lost trust in their ability to actualize a plan of COVID-19 prevention through official channels, the monasteries stepped in to provide leadership. This paradigm of self governance was the focus of our exploration.

Methods
- Semi-structured interview
- Grey literature
  - How and when
  - What
  - Who
  - Outcome

Results
- Committee for Preventive Measures and Sustainable Development (CPMSD) was established
- Action steps
  - complete lockdown
  - mandatory quarantine of people with known history of recent travel
  - coordination of quarantine locations in homes and locations in consultation with village leadership (Gram Sabha and Panchayat)
  - uninterrupted supply of essential goods
  - food security through cultivation of indigenous grains instead of cash crops
- As of September 15, 2020, India reports a total of 5,017,801 cases with 82,458 deaths, the state of Himachal has close to 10335 cases with 89 deaths.
- Spiti region <2

Discussion and Conclusion
Secular forms of governance developed in the 20th century may have assisted in modeling structures of collaborative governance, it appears that the long standing socio-cultural and religious structures of the region came to the fore, and even further developed their authority through the pandemic. Can this translate into a durable shift toward greater collaboration by the monasteries? Similar types of response have been found in semi-autonomous zones and indigenous zones around the world. Self-governance, innovation and individual accountability are the primary drivers as communities plan and strategize their response to fight the spread of COVID-19. In choosing how best to form alliances with and invest resources in indigenous communities, global public health practitioners and community activists would do well to investigate how specific communities have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as a signal of citizen trust and effective authority.