

Covid-19 Pandemic and Contextualizing South Korea's Success

Sandip Kumar Mishra

Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

sandipmishra10@hotmail.com

The main story so far about the Covid-19 pandemic has not been whether a country has got less or more infected by the virus. Rather it is how a particular country has been coping with the spread of the virus. The debate now is whether a country has resorted to lockdown, opted for herd immunity, had enough tests, flattened the curve, had less mortality rate or created a good balance between the costs of lives and livelihood (BBC 2020). Most of the countries have taken unprecedented measures to deal with this unprecedented crisis from the social distancing to the lockdown but their attempts generally appear to be insufficient. Even though in many countries the curve has started flattening, it has happened after a huge cost to human lives and economy. Furthermore, the curve may have flattened in a few cases, but in most of them the new cases have still been coming in big numbers.

Overall, it seems that South Korea is in full control of the crisis and until now, more than 9500 people have recovered and active cases in the country are less than 1000.

Amidst a sense of despair, there are examples of few countries apart from China, who have dealt with the pandemic quite effectively. South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam could be cited as few of these success stories (Jo 2020). Among these countries, South Korean case is of particular interest as at one point of time South Korea had the second highest number of the Covid-19 cases after China (Associate Press 2020). At the peak of spread in South Korea, the country was reporting more than 1000 daily cases around 29 February 2020. However, the country has been able to restrict the total number of cases around 11000 so far and new cases per day are quite low. Overall, it seems that South Korea is in full control of the crisis and until now, more than 9500 people have recovered and active cases in the country are less than 1000. The fatality rate has also been 2.37 percent and almost one fourth of the fatalities have been of the people who were more than eighty year old (KCDC 2020). It is also important to underline that South Korea achieved this success without any lockdown. It's indeed a remarkable feat and its contexts and course must be understood systematically to appreciate the South Korean success and learn from it.

Test, Trace and Treat Strategy

It has been extensively reported in the international media that South Korea dealt with the situation by a proactive and systematic test,

trace and treat strategy (Haidar 2020). South Korean strategy of early proactive testing yielded good results. Even though, South Korea's total tests so far has been around 740000 which do not appear quite impressive in absolute term or if we compare it with the US which has done almost one crore tests and even India which has done almost 19 lakhs tests. However, South Korean tests were game-changers not because of numbers but because unlike most of the other countries, South Korea did them aggressively at the very initial phase of the spread. In the first and second weeks of March 2020, South Korea had the highest number of tests after China. Furthermore, South Korea made innovative, convenient, quick and free tests available to not only its citizens but also to the foreigners residing in South Korea. Mobile testing vans were deployed to reach out to every nook and corner of the country and hospital telephone booths were converted into testing centers. At various places, arrangements were made where one could drive through a car and get tested without even coming out of the vehicle. The alacrity of test protocols and procedures of South Korea were indeed unprecedented and made huge difference in its fight against Covid-19.

It's important to underline that when the WHO was not prescribing face masks for healthy persons, South Korea not only recommended it for everybody but also ensured that sufficient supply of such masks could be maintained.

South Korea also laid huge emphasis on contact tracing. The moment a person was tested positive for Covid-19, her/his last two weeks' activities were immediately made public. It was quite a detailed minute by minute report of the person's activities. It was considered necessary for both common people so that they could avoid visiting those places and the health authorities so that they could sanitize the infected areas as soon as possible. The details of the Covid-19 patient were extracted from their mobile phones, debit/credit cards and transport cards (Cellan-Jones 2020). The technological and digital

advancement of South Korea was aggressively used to assist tracing process (Law and Chang 2020). This was possible also because South Korea has the fastest internet services in the world along with a record of 95.1 percent people using internet. As per the UN Government Survey, South Korea is ranked highest in its e-governance and e-participation index. These digital advancements of South Korea were quite useful while tracing the patients. There were people who raised questions relating to violation of privacy rights of individuals, but for majority of South Koreans, successful fight against the pandemic was a more pressing need than their right to privacy.

South Korea also provided high class medical assistance to patients of the Covid-19. South Korea followed up every positive case with alacrity and the government tried to keep a sustained supply of every health facilities required. Even those people who were suspected to be potential positive cases were reported and the health authorities kept them engaged and informed almost on an hourly basis. Even though there is no treatment of the virus, South Korea tried to prescribe medicines which were recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the larger global medical fraternity with careful supervision from South Korean epidemiologists.

Apart from the test, trace and treat strategy, South Korea also recommended everybody to maintain social distancing and personal hygiene along with the use of face masks and hand gloves (Kyodo News 2020). It's important to underline that when the WHO was not prescribing face masks for healthy persons, South Korea not only recommended it for everybody but also ensured that sufficient supply of such masks could be maintained. Fortunately, the level of awareness in the people of South Korea is quite high and people normally complied with the government advisory. Though some observers attribute South Koreans' compliance with face masks and social distancing to their Confucian values, rather than cultural reasons it was the people's awareness and state's effective communication which made it possible (Park 2020).

Infrastructural Contexts

Apart from the immediate response strategy of South Korea, the success of South Korea in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis could also be attributed to several important fundamentals of their country. One of the most important factor has been resource availability of the country. South Korea is one of the members of Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries since 1996 and because of its spectacular economic growth in very short span of time, at present the country has about US\$40000 per capita income. South Korea is the only country in the world which was an aid-receiving country few decades back and now is an aid-donor country.

Along with economic growth, South Korea also has a unique distinction of involving maximum possible people of the country in the process of economic growth. For the same reason, South Korea's Gini index of the average household's total income is 0.353, which is one of the lowest among the OECD countries. The less Gini index means less economic gap between rich and poor in the country. Even though the gap has increased in the last decade, still around 60 percent of South Korean population fall under middle class category (The Korea Times 2019). In South Korea, middle class means that a family of four people must have annual income between US\$1762 to US\$5286. Furthermore, South Korea from the very beginning of its economic growth worked systematically on its rural development through its New Village Movement and in respect to infrastructure, the country does not have huge gap between rural and urban areas.

The second important reason for the success could be attributed to its investment in the public health. In a gradual and responsible manner, the country used its economic success to improve its health facilities. For the same reason, South Korea has state-of-the-art health facilities across the country. With a determined goal of universal access, these facilities have also been made accessible to each and every citizen of the country. South Korea was ranked first among the OCED countries in respect to access to health facilities in 2015 (Kim Tae Hyun 2020). South Korea ventured to provide compulsory and universal health insurance to

all of its citizens in 1977 and perfected it by 2004. It has been possible only by spending almost 8.1 percent of the country's GDP on health. South Korea spends almost US\$2600 per person on health and it is two and half times higher than the global average. South Korea ranks second in the world in availability of bed per person and it is three times higher than the US (Newkirk II 2018). The health facilities are so effective in South Korea that the survival rate of colon cancer patients in South Korea is 73 percent while it is 55 percent in Denmark. Thus, effective, accessible and state-of-the-art health facilities of South Korea played a critical role in fighting the Covid-19 crisis.

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The third variable which helped South Korea in dealing well with the crisis could be its experience during the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) crisis. South Korea encountered the MERS crisis in 2015, in which 186 South Korean got infected by the disease and 3 people lost their lives. South Korea did fumble in the beginning but it traced more than 17000 people and tested them to stop the spread of the virus within two months. South Korea learnt a valuable lesson by the MERS crisis that a proactive, aggressive, careful approach must be adopted from the very beginning to deal with any such crisis in the future (Kim Hyung Jung 2020).

South Korea also learnt that the role of technology in tracing and testing patients from the early stage makes a huge difference. For the same reason, it created detailed protocols for tracing, testing, and treating for the patients. It also established an early warning system. It has been a fortunate coincidence that during both the crisis situations – the MERS crisis and the Covid-19 crisis, Jung Eun-gyung, the present Director of the Korea Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) played the key roles. It provided an important

continuity in the South Korean response to the Covid-19 crisis (Business Standard 2020).

National Assembly Elections

South Korean success in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis is also reflected through the fact that the country did not go for a complete lockdown, though large congregations were prohibited. Furthermore, South Korea was so confident about its health system that it did not even defer the then upcoming National Assembly election which was scheduled on 15 April 2020. South Korea not only had the elections as per schedule but also surprisingly had an 8.2 percent higher voter turnout than the previous National Assembly elections in 2016. This time 66.2 percent voters exercised their voting rights which was the highest after 1992 elections (Kim Victor 2020).

South Korea arranged for special voting centres for 73000 people who were quarantined either at their homes or at the government quarantine centres.

The reason why South Korea did not postpone its National Assembly elections is because they realized that the country would be able to tame the crisis before elections. For example, South Korea had its first reported case on 18 February 2020 and the number of daily cases kept growing until 29 February, when the country recorded the highest one day number of 1062. However, soon South Korea was able to significantly restrict the spread of the virus and the daily cases came back to 100 from 11 March 2020 onwards. The reporting on new cases kept decreasing and on the election day of 15 April 2020, South Korea reported only 22 new cases. Similarly, the total active cases in South Korea was highest at 7470 on 11 March 2020 but it has been coming down continuously since then.

South Korea also realized that around 65.4 cases were being reported from Daegu and additional 12.7 percent cases from Kyungbuk areas. It meant that almost 78 percent cases were coming from two areas and rest of the country did not have many cases. South Korea contemplated that if extra precautions are taken

in these two regions, the National Assembly elections could be held without any delay.

Since 2009, South Korea has a provision that if voters want to cast their vote before the election day, they may do so on a Saturday or a Sunday. This provision was quite helpful as almost 26 percent eligible voters (including postal ballots) casted their votes on 10 and 11 April 2020, which is why it was not very crowded on the actual election day. Additionally, on the day of the election, extra care was taken. Every voter had to go through temperature tests and if their temperature was more than 99.5 Fahrenheit, they were taken to another special booth to cast their votes. Every voter had to wear face masks and maintain one meter distance. Authorities provided hand sanitizers and disposable gloves to every voter before they entered the polling booths (Gallo 2020). South Korea arranged special voting centers for 73000 people who were quarantined either at their home or at the government quarantine centers.

The results of the National Assembly elections reflected the success of the ruling party in dealing with the crisis. The ruling Democratic Party bagged 180 seats out of a total of 300 National Assembly seats (McCurry 2020). It was the best performance of a ruling party after 1960 elections in South Korea. The main opposition party- United Future Party was able to bag only 122 seats.

Throughout the Covid-19 crisis and National Assembly elections, the South Korean President Moon Jae-in's popularity kept growing. Actually, Moon Jae-in approval rating was less than 35 percent in the late-2019 but it has increased to more than 70 percent in the last few months (Choi 2020). It is indeed a testimony to the fact that South Korea has dealt with the crisis quite remarkably. Moon Jae-in's success in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis and National Assembly elections would definitely strengthen his political clout and give him more space to execute his policies in the future.

Conclusion

South Korea's success story in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis does not mean that it has been able to fully eliminate the virus. A few sudden and sporadic spreads might happen in the future. However, it appears to have its strategy

and infrastructure in place to successfully deal with any such occurrences. More significantly South Korean case also shows that a democratic country is quite effective to deal with any such pandemic provided they have consistently worked on providing all-round welfare to its people (Zsiros 2020). Rather than hard-handed lockdown, effective health management is more important in any such crisis. The maximalist argument that South Korea violated the right to privacy might be moderated by taking a pragmatic cost-benefit approach and it's quite obvious that in an unprecedented global pandemic, a more pragmatic approach is suitable to save human lives and economic livelihoods. Overall, South Korea provides a good case study of balanced, proactive, and effective approach to deal with the Covid-19 crisis and several lessons from it could be learnt by others. The election results in South Korea also show that people don't want a 'hard' or 'soft' state, rather they want an effective welfare state.

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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
Delhi 110054, INDIA

T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202

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