Assam Model of Combating COVID-19:

Corona Virus, which is now known as COVID-19, was declared as “pandemic” by World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March, 2020. Each country is struggling very hard to face the COVID onslaught effectively. To ensure smooth functioning of life of people, each State Government with the active support of Union Government and different Development Partners has been taking different initiatives to support to needy in this hour of crisis.

The Health Department Assam has also taken many initiatives to combat COVID-19 under the active leadership role of Hon’ble Health Minister, Assam, who has been leading the team from front to energize the entire Health and allied Department staff to fight the onslaught of COVID-19. The Development Partners, who are supporting Health Department are also extending technical assistance in many ways to fight against COVID-19. The COVID War Room, which is made functional at the office of the National Health Mission (NHM), Assam is the place, where from all plan, strategies are finalized involving all key health and other allied department officials. The Hon’ble Health Minister Assam keeps visiting the COVID War Room very frequently and takes all updates, guides officials, addresses media so that latest updates including guidelines, issued by Government reach to target audiences. This is helping people at large, to have the correct latest information and thus in beating the menace of “infodemic” and to share the correct information to people. While doing all these, enough stress is given on “Social Distancing” and in maintaining “Personal Hygiene” (mainly in the form of “Hand wash for minimum 20 seconds”, using of mask by everyone, which are known as effective vaccines to keep COVID at bay.

The state adopted the following effective strategies to fight COVID-19. The multipronged strategies, being adopted by Assam has so far proved highly meaningful. Assam had only 106 cases till 18.05.2020 but number of positive cases started increasing after the lockdown got lifted and people from outside started coming back to Assam since 18th May, 2020. Since, this rise in number is in the expected line, so state had taken adequate preparation to face the challenge.

1. Sufficient availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): As prioritized by Hon’ble Health Minister, Assam ensured sufficient availability PPEs (triple layer mask, N-95 and PPE) to ensure that the COVID warriors feel confident of working at different settings (as per situation) related to COVID management. The state had only few counted full PPE (less than hundred) in mid-March but now state has sufficient number of all these in store. Regular and timely supply of all these logistic give much needed energy and confidence to the COVID warriors, who are fighting the battle in the front line.
2. **Gap filling of identified health facilities**: The gap of the health facilities, mainly of Medical Colleges and District Hospitals were assessed on a war footing scale, the gaps were bridged, and facilities were made ready to entertain COVID patients. In making the Guwahati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), the biggest state hospital functional, officials from WHO and UNICEF gave handholding support and ensured the facility is made functional in record time of 96 hours. Now, state has functional COVID Hospitals in all districts, even at sub district level.

3. **Participation of Private Health Facilities**: State took support from private health facilities in Guwahati, Dibrugarh and Cachar districts (which has got Medical College) to send all non-COVID, OPD and IPD cases to those private hospitals and making the medical colleges as fully dedicated COVID hospital. An agreement was signed between Health Department, Assam and Owner of Private Hospitals for initially 3 (three) months and private hospitals are being paid as per the rate of PMJAY/AA. This helped in decongesting Medical Colleges and in managing COVID cases. Along with Medical Colleges, the District Hospitals are also made ready for treating COVID patients. All districts are attached to a particular Medical College, which does mentoring of staff of the respective district.

4. **Training of staff, who are associated in clinical management of COVID**: Proper training is the critical component to achieve success as proper training equips manpower to follow proper protocol of clinical management, which results high survival rate and the positive message gets circulated among masses. Assam formed different training teams with the support of WHO, UNICEF, Jhpiego members finalized the training contents for different level of cadres (Doctors, Para-Medical staff, Nursing, cleaning staff etc.) and imparted training. Due to lockdown, state used either zoom session or video conferencing to train the district level trainers from different Medical Colleges, who in turn trained hospital staff and managerial staff of each district. To have strong back up of trained HR, Assam trained 700 final year MBBS students and 2000 final year nursing students and they are kept ready as back up human resources.

5. **Safety and security of COVID warriors**: In COVID-19 management, the safety and security of COVID-19 warriors are very important. As a step towards this, Health Department, Assam decided that each team of health providers of all cadres work for 7 days and after 7 days work, the team is quarantined for 7 days in identified quarantine centres (mostly in hotels), where department takes care of the team members. After mandatory 7 days quarantine period, each team again joins back to their duties. During their duty at COVID wards, all necessary precautions as per protocols are taken.
6. **Active support from frontline workers in generating awareness on COVID:** Active support of all frontline workers (ASHA, ANM, MPW) has been found very useful in reaching to the last household of the community with the COVID-19 messages, mainly **DOs and DON’Ts of COVID-19.** The 1st suspected case from Jorhat, who got tested negative in 2nd test, was identified by ASHA, which proves that ASHAs are highly instrumental in field. Hon’ble Health Minister, Assam on record appreciated the role being played by these frontline workers.

With an aim to ramp up testing, Health Department, Assam has started “Assam Community Surveillance Program (ACSP)” from 07.05.2020 in around 28000 villages/wards of Assam to look for SARI (Severe Acute Respiratory Infections) and ILI (Influenza like Illness) and fever and to do testing of all such cases to take necessary steps, as per the findings of the testing (be in COVID, JE, Dengue, malaria) and to take follow up actions (including isolating person followed by treatment and contact tracing) and doing all necessary follow up actions. This initiative has helped in identifying many potential cases and to take necessary steps. Based on the positive feedback, state is carrying out 2nd round of ACSP in Assam.

7. **Psychological management of patients through yoga session facilitation:** The major challenge, which is posed to a COVID-19 patient, is “Hopelessness”. Patient tends to think, s/he is not left with any “Hope for Survival” and thus patient enters to a mental trauma. So, it is important to keep the patient engaged, keeping him/her joyful by allowing him/her to speak to family members and informing that s/he is improving. Arrangement is made for **online yoga training** to patients at hospital and giving psychological support through psychologist. Patients are connected to their family using WhatsApp video call, if s/he wishes to speak.

Government has started another initiative called “MONON”, whereby 220 psychiatric specialists, social workers have come forward (many of them are faculties of Medical Colleges), who gives psychological counselling to home quarantined people and for this one need to dial toll free no 104.

8. **Arrangement of bringing stranded people from other states:** Assam Government made arrangement of bringing stranded people from other states, students from Kota, especially, cancer patients, those who got stuck up in Mumbai and in other places and could not return due to lockdown, were brought back by sleeper coach busses to Guwahati. Medical supports were provided during journey and after reaching Guwahati, they were quarantined and tested for COVID-19. Based on the test report, either s/he was sent for strict home quarantine or admitted at hospital for medical care.
9. **Massive IEC campaign for mass awareness of Public on COVID-19:** The target group driven and need based Information, Education & Communication (IEC) initiatives plays a very significant role in minimizing the spread of this deadly virus by creating mass awareness. For awareness generation in field, ASHAs were mobilized for door to door awareness campaign informing community on DO’s and DON’Ts of COVID-19. IEC Materials were distributed on signs & symptoms, preventive measures (hand washing and social distancing) using different media. Street plays and miking were done to create awareness amongst the common masses. Advertisements in local languages were telecasted through radio and television with focus on signs & symptoms of Coronavirus. Appeals by Hon’ble Health Minister, Assam was recorded and being aired through electronic media. Apart from all these, various informative videos were produced and telecasted on topics like handmade mask, respecting health workers, norms of Quarantine, Social distancing, rules of lockdown, myths and facts etc. At prominent places, hoardings were installed. Regular Press briefing is given by Hon’ble Health Minister.

10. **State’s policy of Ruthless quarantine with human heart:** Assam took a conscious decision that anyone enters Assam by any means (air/railway/road) will be quarantined at identified quarantine centres and tested before s/he is allowed to go to home. Based on the test report, either s/he is admitted at hospital (if positive) directly from quarantine centre or s/he is allowed to go for strict home quarantine for the residual number of days out of total quarantine period of 14 days. It is heartening to inform that more than 95% of the cases, came only from different quarantine centres. This decision of Government to introduce “Ruthless quarantine with human heart” has saved state from facing severe crisis.

   Once a person is tested positive from a quarantine centre then triaging is also done, and all critical patients are sent to Medical College and patients with NCD and other co-morbidity conditions are sent to District Hospital and asymptomatic positive cases are kept at Model Hospital. Training is being given to the staff on treatment protocol of these centres. To have maximum quarantine centres, State made 5 Regional Quarantine Centres functional at Kokrajhar, Guwahati, Jorhat, Silchar, Tezpur and these centres are made responsible for number of districts, attached to each one of them (zone wise). Over and above, each district made its own quarantine centres functional to accommodate positive cases at the district level. State decided to further decentralize the quarantining process by creation of quarantine centres at block level, legislative constituency wise so that person, who is at the quarantine centre feels s/he is at home (as the quarantine centre is close to his/her home).
Deputy Commissioners are given SoP on how to maintain quarantine centre, mainly on cleanliness, hygiene, food quality, security services etc. Majority of the hotels, lodges, hostels of educational institutes, guest houses of other departments have been requisitioned by the Deputy Commissioners and these are made as quarantine centres. Demand for beds has increased with the traveler started coming from other states. Rs. 500 per person is spent for each quarantined person and during home quarantine, Government pays Rs. 2000 (cash or kind) to the family.

11. Different safety nets initiatives by Health Department: Government of Assam has taken few timely initiatives to support the needy, who got stuck up at different places due to sudden nationwide lockdown.

- **The 1st initiative**, is to help patients, who went outside for getting treatment for Cancer, Heart Surgery and Kidney, but could not come back to state. Such patients are given financial assistance of Rs. 25000 each. Around 889 patients got benefitted for April, 2020 and 448 in May, 2020 as few returned after getting lockdown relaxed.

- **The 2nd initiative** is for persons, who went abroad temporarily but could not come back to state due to lockdown. Such person is being given financial aid of 2000 USD (in 2 installments) so that s/he can stay abroad without much hassle and can come back to state once lockdown is lifted. 79 such persons got benefitted from this scheme.

- **The 3rd initiative** is an effort to help Assam people (belong to either BPL or middle-income group), who have been staying at different states of India. On registering the necessary details to a dedicated link, which used to be sent on giving a missed call to a dedicated number and after verification of given credentials, Rs. 2000 per month is credited at his/her account. Till 21.05.2020, Government credited Rs. 2000 to 3,61,170 beneficiaries and Government has spent more than 153 crores so far in last 2 (two) months. This payment, Government will continue to pay till COVID continues and the person continues to stay at his/her place of stay.

- **The 4th initiative** is known as “Dhanwantari” scheme, which has been proved highly beneficial for the needy, who were in desperate need of urgent medicines during lockdown. On registering the medicine requirement details with address of the caller by dialing 104 toll free number, health department officials collect medicines from Block / District Store / State and delivers medicines at doorstep. Till 15.06.2020, more than 7710 beneficiaries got benefitted out of around 13000 valid phone calls. Many beneficiaries expressed their happiness and satisfaction on getting medicines in the hour of crisis and thanked Government for this noble initiative.
12. **Increasing testing capacity:** There are 10 ICMR accredited laboratories for RT-PCR COVID-19 testing in the state now. The state took steps to ramp up testing, which can be understood from the fact that state could do more than 70000 tests in May and in 1st fortnight of June, 2020, state could add another more than 100000 tests. State has also roped in famous private labs, which are functioning in Delhi, Hyderabad. These labs also supporting state in doing the testing and giving report at the earliest. As on June 15, 2020 total number of *samples tested is 2,12,519* and the graph of per day testing is fast showing increasing trend. The improvement in testing number is shown in the graph below.

![Graph of Daily Tests](image)

13. **Impact of lockdown and re-opening of travel:** Assam was doing well, as far as the number of positive COVID-19 cases are concerned, before the imposition of lockdown on March 24, 2020. The planning, preparations and interventions worked as per plan and Assam didn’t have any positive case till March 30, 2020. During the lockdown 1.0, there were only 34 laboratory confirmed cases and subsequently during lockdown 2.0, the cases rose to 42 only. Then the Union Government as well as State Government announced lockdown 3.0 with a number of relaxations, which included controlled inter-state travel through buses and towards end the rail services. During the lockdown 3.0, substantial movement of people from other states came to Assam, resultant of which, number of cases rose to 100. The lockdown 4.0 brought more relaxations on interstate travel including railway services. The influx of passengers increased considerably and all of them were screened, tested and many of them were tested positive for COVID-19. As on **14.06.2020**, total cases stand at **4118**.
The role of Development Partners in facilitating state’s initiatives in combating COVID:

The Development Partner like World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, Jhpiego, Piramal Swasthya, SAATHI have been working very closely with the state/district officials on day to day basis and has been extending technical assistance as per the need of the state.

The areas on which, Development Partners have been supporting state include – member in different committees, technical assistance in formulation of different guidelines (by referring different sources of ICMR, MoHFW, NCDC, IDSP, WHO etc), Standard Operating Procedure (SoP), imparting training, re-training of district level staff, supportive supervision at field level, sharing Global and Indian update, contact tracing, community surveillance etc.

The keys to success in combating COVID-19 in Assam so far:

In fine, it can undoubtedly be said that the keys to success include **firm leadership of Hon’ble Health Minister, Assam** with active support of Health Department and Allied Department Officials coupled with different safety net initiatives of Government and **active support** from Development Partners. **Participation of Private Health Providers** in treating non-COVID treatment, **rigorous Community Awareness** drive by Front Line Workers, **Testing** of suspected cases, robust **Contact Tracing** of positive cases and in **Isolating Suspected Cases** and **Treating** patients following all set protocols. Hope, with this kind of preparation undertaken by Health Department, Assam will certainly be able to successfully come across onslaught of COVID-19.
Action Photos:

Figure 1: Community Health Workers are crossing all odds to reach to last mile

Field level actions under Assam Community Surveillance Program (ACSP):

Compiled by: National Health Mission, Assam