



Response to COVID-19

Lahaul and Spiti



How a Himalayan District stopped the virus from scaling the mountains

As COVID-19 is said to affect those residing in colder climates more severely, there has been considerable worry on the part of Indians living in the country's mountainous regions. Chief among these elevated areas is the Lahaul and Spiti district in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, with a stunning landscape. This remote region has an average altitude of 4,270 meters, and can be divided into two valleys: Lahaul valley that remains snowbound for six months during the winter and Spiti valley that remains accessible year-round through Kinnaur District. With an area of 13,833 square kilometres and a population of 31,564, the district of Lahaul and Spiti has one of the lowest population densities in India.

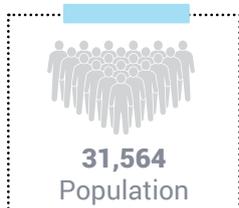
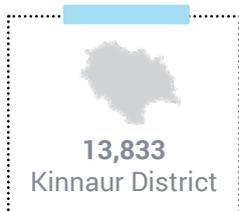
This district has been COVID-19-free since the virus entered the country at the beginning of this year—and continues to remain COVID-19-free till today. In fact, it has been declared a Green Zone by the Government of India. This is despite the fact that the district has received people coming into the state from other parts of the country as well as abroad; the influx still continues.

It is the proactive role of government machinery and the cooperation and support of citizens in defending their district from the virus. Even before the announcement of the first lockdown, people of this district became very



cautious, worried about the virus entering the valley. They devised their own plan to prevent an outbreak. They were particularly vigilant in the Spiti subdivision, with wide agreement between all villages: entry to the valley was prohibited to outsiders and a committee dedicated to combatting COVID-19 was formed. People under home quarantine were kept in check by the village representatives in their respective locations. Moreover, Kaza, the headquarters of Spiti (at 320 km from the state capital Shimla), was the first in the state to sanitize the entire area.

Lahaul and Spiti : Overview



Establishment of emergency communication



The flow of emergency communication and information associated with COVID-19 between District Emergency Operations Centre and response were established ensuring regular monitoring of COVID-19 cases in the district. A helpline/contact number for an Emergency Operation Center (EOC) for COVID-19 for the Lahaul and Spiti was provided on the district website. The Deputy Commissioner's Facebook Page remained very active in spreading awareness about the crisis, as well as for current updates on orders, activities and policy implementations during the COVID-19 lockdown. It enabled the general public to avail of easy, minute-to-minute access to information and news updates in relation to COVID-19.

Maintaining flow of essential goods and services



The district ensured that all shops selling food grains, groceries, vegetables, dairy products and medicines were open and that there were no shortages in the supply of such items. Ration card holders could procure their essential commodities from the fair price shops. All the health centers in the district had a sufficient stock of medicines with them. Additionally, one authorized medicine vendor has been home delivering medicines in the district. An adequate supply of COVID-19 equipment such as PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), N-95 masks, hand sanitizer, surgical gloves, was made available



Management of hygiene and sanitation and capacity building



A proper check on cleanliness and sanitization was maintained, and a sanitization drive was conducted to disinfect important public spaces in Kaza and the Lahaul division. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were involved in the sanitization campaign and capacity building. Importantly, all medical officers, paramedical staff and volunteers were imparted with training in dealing with COVID-19.

Case monitoring and tele-medicine



Residents of Lahaul and Spiti needed to address their spread-out population and remoteness. District authorities identified active cases through an active survey of all villages. Medical and health staff also visited the homes of quarantined people to test if they were symptomatic or not. Amidst the inflow of residents as well as outsiders into the valley, entry points were identified as screening points. Medical officers and health staffs were appointed to perform duties at these points.

Telemedicine consultancy initiated by the state government in collaboration with Apollo Hospital played an important role in this period of lockdown. This facility in health centres provided expert evaluation and consultancy

services to people in remote places. As most patients in the district were not able to visit hospitals outside the district, this service acted as a safeguard for them.



Appropriate handling of the stranded



People stranded in Himachal Pradesh due to the lockdown in other states were provided with the COVID-19 helpline number and COVID-19 toll free number. Online application facilities were created on the district website portal; for people of Lahaul and Spiti stranded in the Kullu district, who wished to return for agricultural purposes.

Initially, preference was given to farmers of the Lahaul division. The helicopter liaison officer was appointed to prepare a list of passengers while allotting seats as per the norms of social distancing within the vehicle. Transportation facilities were provided by the Lahaul administration and all these people were sent toward their respective destinations. Their medical check-up was conducted at the entry point on the Manali side and at Koksar on the Lahaul side. Stranded locals with private vehicles were allowed to travel on the condition that they follow the norms of social distancing.



Battling extreme weather conditions and inaccessible terrain to reach remote areas



Frontline Corona Warriors including doctors, nurses, paramedics, police and local NGOs had to go out in freezing temperatures and through continuous snowfall, to provide services associated with COVID-19 in the most remote areas of Lahaul and Spiti. For instance, these warriors visited Hikkam, the world's highest post office in Spiti, at an elevation of over 15,000 feet, to educate its people on hand sanitization and the need to stay at home to stay safe. In these areas, the frontline healthcare workers traversed distances ranging from 10 to 25 kilometres on foot, from the road-head for reaching the rugged and inhospitable remote villages of the district, to collect information on COVID-19.



Way forward

The district of Lahaul and Spiti has been able to keep COVID-19 at bay through meticulous planning, proactive administration and the collaborative efforts of the authorities and its people. Its population is not large or dense, compared to other parts of India. However, the danger is not past yet. Both the authorities and its people will have to remain vigilant and continue the good work to keep this beautiful part of India free from COVID-19.



