FAILURE OF POLIO ERADICATION IN PAKISTAN

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The 20th century ranked polio amongst the most feared diseases throughout the globe. According to reports of WHO, polio is now endemic in only three countries of world which includes Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. Wild polio virus strains are found in the some parts of Pakistan that includes some areas of Karachi, FATA, KPK and Baluchistan. The three areas mentioned above are different from each other on the grounds of demographics, geography, climate, geo-political situation and to some extent in culture and rituals too. So, these three areas should be considered separately, to help us understand the situation of polio in the country.

Karachi is one of the most densely populated cities of the world. The city comprises a metropolitan population in which a large chunk is literate and is fully exposed to the vibrancy of electronic and print media. The literacy rate of the city is 79% which include it in the list of top ranked literate areas in the country. Geographically, it is a plain area with a highly developed transport infrastructure. It tends to have a warm, tropical arid climate with a low precipitation level. It can be estimated that the major hurdle encountered in Karachi with regards to polio eradication can be a large crowd living in the city with different religious values and ethnicity. The warm climate of the city can also cause the disruption of cold chains required for the effectiveness of vaccine. Also the bad law and order situation in different parts of the city can affect the polio campaign in a negative way. Geography and transport infrastructure are highly favorable for the polio campaign in Karachi whereas lack of knowledge and awareness amongst polio workers can be the reason for the failure of the polio campaign so far.

Baluchistan, being most under privileged and under developed province of country has been facing failure in polio eradication program due to many reasons. The most important can be the cross border migration between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As, both the countries are polio endemic and considering the fact that the transmission of virus becomes highly efficient in crowded and poor sanitation areas, this becomes a huge problem increasing the overall burden of the disease in the both the countries. According to unofficial statistics, approximately 4 million refugees occupy the loosely governed western border (more so in Baluchistan), and they move between the two countries quite comfortably and frequently. The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) has stated that the migration has increased so much that now the number of afghan refugees is much greater than the local population in the province which has perplexed the political situation of Baluchistan even more. The regions now dominated by the tribal leaders...
rather than political institutions. The relevance of this discussion is that the tribal leaders favor a conservative approach towards religion and social values and don’t allow women to take part in polio campaigns. Furthermore, drone attacks leading to anti-west approach and low literacy levels make the tribal leaders believe that infertility causing drugs are mixed in the polio vaccine. The bad law and order situation in the province and military operations also add up to the problem and greatly reduces the accessibility to many areas. In 2012, the anti-polio campaign in the province was halted by the government due to security reasons. The growing talibanization in the province also create serious hurdles in completion our motive against polio. Geographically the area is predominated by mountains and hills and poor infrastructure increases the hurdles in the accessibility. Baluchistan experiences hot summers which can also affect the cold chain for vaccines. The province has a low literacy rate of 41% and also has limited access towards print and electronic media which directly harms their awareness for the disease. The areas which are still under threat of polio endemic include some parts of Quetta, Pishin and Killla Abdullah.

The areas of KPK and FATA where still cases with polio virus are found are Bajur agency, Khyber agency, Swat and Mahmund agency. These areas are continuously under terrorist attacks and military operation which renders them a difficult region to make progress in the campaign. The killing of polio workers in these areas also caused a lot of damage to the cause and halted the campaign. The difficult geography, harsh weather, low literacy rates, deprivation of population from electronic and print media, cross border migration between Pakistan and Afghanistan, poor infrastructure conditions, growing talibanization, and conservative political and religious approach in masses of the area is like adding insult to the injury. In addition, the concept that health campaigns similar to polio campaign are being used to locate the terrorists and their training centers has created an aversion among masses towards such campaigns and has produced lot of reaction against it as well. The dominance of tribal leaders and lack of proper religious guidance promotes the thinking that it is non-Islamic to have polio vaccination also greatly contributes to the failure. The KPK is the most effected province in Pakistan at present particularly due to the killing of polio workers. As a result many children have missed their routine vaccination in recent times which is contrast to other provinces in the country where at least this has not been the situation so far.

Analyzing and reviewing the whole scenario prevailing in the country, we can summarize some common problems. The foremost problem is the poor sanitization conditions in the country, which provides an excellent medium for growth and transmission of the virus. The overwhelming growth of the population with worst fiscal scenario and dearth of resources for the existing and ever increasing population has somehow also
been responsible. The allocation of 0.6 to 1.19% of GDP and 5.1 to 11.6% of total expenditure for health is definitely not enough to meet the growing health issues including polio. The lack of communication between different religious sects and ethnicity has also increased the issues. The conservative and extremist approach towards women in tribal areas, wrong approach and false interpretations of the religious sayings has somehow lead to or resulted into killing of polio workers in KPK. Growing hatred for the western nations proves to be catastrophic for the motto as this campaign is mainly dominated by west. Worst law and order situation in the country also tends to discourage the campaign. Lower literacy rates and lack of awareness creates a non-serious attitude in public which also causes harm. Pakistan has been spending more on security than health, agriculture or for that matter any other sector. Areas occupied by terrorist and extremist also causes shameful incidence for the country.

Presence of polio is a shame and alarming situation for us as a nation. It reflects our non-serious attitude towards basic human needs and problem. It raises a lot of questions on our health system and the seriousness of our govt. towards the real issues of masses. It is a high time for all of us to join hands and fight against this disease. Serious and thoughtful efforts are needed to accomplish this task. Firstly, the govt. and the officials of WHO in the country should try to vanish the feeling of a ‘western campaign’ from the polio eradication plan. It should be realized amongst the masses that polio is no longer an issue in any of the western countries, and it is us who will be suffering from the disease as a result of failure of the campaign. Moreover, local leaders, respected and important people of society, and religious scholars should be encouraged, informed and engaged in the campaign and they should be awarded some honorary or temporary post or slot in the campaign which will surely help people to own the problem and the campaign too. Different religious and ethnic groups should be gathered to sort out their problems towards the campaign. The experience of China and especially of India can be used as it shares a lot of common grounds with us. In addition, there is a must need of improvement in literacy rate, sanitizing condition and awareness amongst the polio workers to avoid more harm. A fool proof security should be provided to polio workers by the government in the threatened areas to avoid any more accidents.

To save our next generations from polio, it is highly important for us to start fighting against this disease and play our roles in declaring Pakistan polio free country.

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