Disaster Management in India: Covid 19, Adhocism and Need for a Holistic Approach

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ABSTRACT: Disaster management is a test of efficiency or preparedness and the response system to a disaster briefly explains disaster management. The impact value of disaster management revolves around

disaster planning, management and recovery. The invisibility of the state, during crisis situation, raises questions over the existence of disaster management. Lack of policy drive, clarity, precaution and innovation becomes evident. Covid 19 is not the first of crises/calamity/disaster to strike India nor will it be the last in varying proportions. Covid 19 is an unprecedented and to this point, governments can be discounted for not being aware of the disaster. The idea of lockdown was the only option but how to go about it was completely missing tantamount to clear strategic disaster. Lack of uniform order and objectives between the Union and the state governments was witnessed on the roads. Handling of the migrant labour is the single most issue that earned flak and damaged the image of the government for a long time to come. The governments failed the corona warriors, who are discharging duty under trying and threatening circumstances. Disaster management needs to be turned proactive than merely reactive. Disaster management drill must be an integral part of disaster management. The wisdom and intelligence of local bodies was completely ignored and but still entrusted with the responsibility of managing and controlling the spread of virus. Micro interventions at the local Panchayats ward or village level would help better manage the disaster. The local wisdom and practices should be incorporated as part of disaster management. Adhocism and piece meal approach and war time training needs to be avoided

Key words: disaster, management, covid-19, migrant labour, panchayat, adhocism

I. INTRODUCTION

Disaster and management offers diametrically opposite opportunities. A disaster is a bolt from the blue and management is a test of efficiency, preparedness to meet the unseen circumstances. The response system to a calamity or disaster briefly explains disaster management. It involves both the risk and the consequences of an event. Disasters test the capacity of the government or the lack of it showcasing administrative machinery at work and challenge the wits of the political leadership and the bureaucracy for timely initiative and action. More than the mere relief, as it is understood to be, disaster management is holding the fort in a crisis reducing the negative impact and/or consequences of adverse events. The results of ill managed disasters reflect colossal loss of life, property and belongings. Disasters demand preventive steps and long-term initiatives without resorting to popular short cuts. The handling of Covid-19 in India, the mother of all disasters, could be marginally discounted for being a completely an unforeseen disaster but down the time line, disaster management is a non-priority driven by adhochism. The absence of a concrete, cohesive, disaster management framework and apparatus is conspicuous.

Objectives: To analyse the working of disaster management in India with Covid-19 pandemic disaster management as the back drop; identify the existing legal provisions for disaster management and its enforcement or lack of it by the governments at the Centre and the states; and deal with the shortcomings of the government in handling the Covid-19 crisis and suggestions for course correction in particular to Covid-like situations and overall approach to effective disaster management in India.

Understanding Disaster Management

Anticipation, preparedness, management of resources, response, responsibilities and recovery constitutes a comprehensive set of disaster management. Disaster management, primarily dealing with humanitarian aspects of emergencies, must not ignore the plight of animals as well. The impact value of disaster management revolves around the triangular strategy of disaster planning, disaster management and disaster recovery.

Earthquakes, floods, famine, hurricanes, tornados, or fires fit into the category of disasters. In a disaster situation, loss of life, home, belongings, leaves a community under emotional stress. The response of the system to meet the crisis with minimum loss or damage is reflected in 'disaster management'. The worst affected in a disaster being the poor and the destitute, disasters do not touch the main corridors for serious attention, largely contributing to heavy casualties.

The scenes of people going through extreme hardship, helplessness and fending for themselves has strengthened the impression that in a time of crisis or disaster the state has not come to the rescue of the people. The invisibility of the state/governments during crisis situation raises questions over the existence of disaster management. The common people on the street need to be aware of the existence and efficacy of the disaster management institutions.

Disaster management and Covid 19 in India

Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides are regular phenomena in India. Out of the total geographical area of 33 lakh sq. km, about 60% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of various intensities; over 40 million hectares is prone to floods; about 8% of the total area is prone to cyclones and about 68% of the area is susceptible to drought. Of the 35 States/Union Territories in the country, 22 are disaster prone.[1] Floods affect 11.2 percent of the land and drought account for 28 percent of the land, cyclones along 7516 km vulnerable coastline and earthquakes covering 57 percent of the land.[2]

From 2002 to 2013, India was among the five countries most frequently hit by natural disasters. These included the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, resulting in 11,000 deaths and affecting 2.8 million people; 2013 floods in Uttarakhand caused 5,748 deaths and affected over 4,200 villages. In the 1990s, Cyclone Paradip in 1999 took a toll of around 10,000 deaths.[3] The World Risk Index 2014, places India is in the top half of all countries at risk from natural hazards. But, prominently, for many years, India did not make attempts at capacity building to cope with and adapt to the hazards.[4] The thrust of the argument is to highlight lack of policy drive, clarity, precaution and innovation accumulating disastrous management of disaster management. The buck stops here. Covid 19 is not the first of crises/calamity/disaster to strike India nor will it be the last in varying proportions.

Covid 19 disaster management or rather the failure has popped up as a major issue of grave concern, a serious disaster with multifold ramifications. Covid 19 pandemic involves an unseen enemy not limited by geographic extent against which there is no strategy or ammunition at this juncture. So, disaster management in this context is limited to control the spread of virus with serious precautions till the time a vaccine is found. The plight of the powerful industrial-financial-health capitals in facing with the disaster stands testimony.[5] However, it should not absolve Indian managers for not establishing a workable disaster management system which the people, real time stake holders in a crisis, are not aware of. The run of the infected and the affected from pillar to post, office to office, umpteen times, post- disaster is largely attributed to lack of responsible and responsive disaster management administration. The key components of disaster management-collaboration, coordination, transparency and accountability are conspicuously absent.

Covid 19 is an unprecedented, unanticipated blow. To this point, all governments can be discounted for not being aware of the disaster. But, pertinent questions need to be raised on the way the Covid situation is being handled by the governments of the day. Policy convulsions, conflicting claims, confusion, lack of consultation, coordination and foresight, poor or lack of judgment, populism, dithering, waiting for things to happen, lockdown, slow down, shut down, breakdown, seal down and the situation jetting deep down.

Having witnessed the magnitude of the crisis, the government did not look up to the nations who managed to rein in the crisis in a reasonable span of time. Yes, reasonable span of time because, it is an unprecedented disaster in recent times. Germany, for instance, went for complete lockdown and managed to rein in the crisis. India was forced to opt for a lockdown in 5 phases spread over 100 days.[6] The government attributed the lockdowns to break the chain, as was the global strategy. The idea of lockdown was the only option but how to go about it was completely

missing tantamount to clear strategic disaster. Instead of opting for proactive measures, government was seen reacting to the panic gripping the community without a way forward.

As witnessed in many parts, lockdown was a mockery of the objective. Lack of uniform order and objectives between the Union and the state governments was witnessed on the roads. Leave alone the fear of law, the fear of life could not keep many indoors. Government lost the critical time of long lockouts to strengthen the operational part of the disaster management. Placing 1.3 billion people under lockdown, as pandemic response, without reinforcements like developing testing capacity, medical infrastructure, providing food and basic essentials proved catastrophic.[7] Half hearted, piecemeal, and adhoc measures followed.

The gravity of the crisis, on a national scale, was unfolding each passing day to offer enough warning for the government to tighten the belt. The Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy (CDDEP) issued a report in late March, in collaboration with researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Princeton University, predicting that in the best case scenario, one million hospitalizations may be needed in early June.[8] India entered the million mark in July. As on 19th of July, India recorded 1 million, precisely 10, 78, 757 cases, with 26,838 deaths and 6, 77,856 recoveries.[9] The initial global appreciation of India's handling of Covid cases, created a false sense of bravado in the government's thinking to the extent that the worst is over in league with Japan (985 deaths) and South Korea (295 deaths) as on 19th of July.[10] But, India appeared to have won the battle but looks fast losing the war with alarming rise in corona positive cases and the skyward death rate.

The disaster managements efforts, barring a few, was piecemeal and adhoc. Air dropping food packets, unfulfilling promises and handing out compensation is largely seen as a disaster management strategy in India. The disasters were confined to certain provinces of a state or a few districts. In covid scenario, the state governments and the Union government found wanting to take up the task. Lack of serious home work on disaster management situations, exposed the governments in equal measure. Significantly, the state of Kerala attracted global attention with, now famous, Kerala model. Except for Kerala, with a well coordinated health system, none of the states were in a position to stick their neck out and come up with alternatives. Handling Nipah virus

successfully was behind Kerala's confidence.[11] True to the army adage, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed during war" needs to be incorporated into disaster management planning and execution. Disaster management drill must be an integral part of disaster management.

Disaster Management Act, 2005

The DM Act is a comprehensive legislation identifying and mandating the role of the Union government, state governments and the Panchayat Raj Institutions in a crisis situation.[12] The heart of the problem lies in neglecting the content and intent of the Act. The handling of Covid 19 crisis at the Centre gives an impression that there was hardly any consultation leave alone coordination but only confusion. The Centre and the states trading charges and some states expressed unwillingness to go with the Centre underscores the lack of preparation during the lock downs. The Act vested the Union government with exclusive powers to issue any directions to any authority anywhere in India to facilitate or assist in the disaster management under Sections 35, 62 and 72. The present national lockdown was imposed under DM Act.[13]

The 2019 National Disaster Management Plan also deals extensively with Biological Disaster and Health Emergency. This is the broad legal framework within which activities to contain COVID-19 are being carried out by the Union and State governments.[14] The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the Apex Body for Disaster Management under the umbrella of Disaster Management Act, 2005 was to coordinate institutional mechanisms at the State and District levels by way of laying down the policies, plans, and guidelines to be followed by the State Authorities in drawing up the State Plan.[15]

The State governments, in addition to the provisions in the Disaster Management Act have enacted state specific Public Health Acts. Following up the 'Containment Plan for Large Outbreaks (COVID 19)' issued by the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare which is the Nodal Ministry for biological disaster, several states have issued COVID specific Regulations. The law also allows state disaster management authority to exercise similar powers within the state jurisdictions.

The institutional arrangement was in place but the experience, coordination and communication was not reflected in the way covid started getting out of hands as some states looking up to the gods for strength forgetting the covid warriors on duty. This betrays a team effort.

Britain imposed a 100-pound fine for not wearing the mask.[16] Back in India, the government was hesitant to put the foot down during the lockdown. Some governments lacked confidence to implement the legal provisions. The police, the covid warriors, after logging day in and out, got the brick for being rude and cruel to the violators! The governments failed the corona warriors, who are discharging duty under trying and threatening circumstances. The DMA does not accord blanket powers for law enforcement authorities, but the limited powers that would have kept the violators at bay was not seriously used and enforced from the day one by the government.

Lockdown rule violations prompted the Ministry of Home Affairs to direct states and Union Territories to book and punish the lockdown violators under Indian Penal Code and under provisions of Section 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act. Section 51 is clear on punishment for obstructing any officer or those who refuse to comply with any direction given by or on behalf of the Central Government or the State Government with punishment up to 2 years.[17] Reckless roaming without safeguards not only diluted the objective of lockdown but also increased the risk of community spread. Area wise, state wise discrepancies and leniency is dealing with offenders diluted the spirit and intent of the DM Act. The government failed to give teeth to the police fearing the offenders, offering an incentive to violations. The tree of negligence is now bearing the fruit.

The union government, on its part, failed to take the states into confidence in evolving strategies to counter the pandemic. Outwardly states were putting up the federal argument to raise a token protest against the Centre for taking unilateral decisions but inwardly content to follow the guidelines because of the uncertainty surrounding the methods to be adopted. It looked like the Centre being wholly responsible for actions on the disaster where as the effective implementation part was with the states. Except for Kerala, no other state showed any spine to put forward a strategy of its own.[18] The Union government was seriously handicapped by the absence of a constitutional provision to declare a national emergency for medical and pandemic reasons.[19]

DM Act was the logical foundation for all governments to work in a disaster situation. The successful working of the network delivery system would decide the extent of disaster management. The 'Report of the Task Force to review DM Act'2013 suggested that the present structure of various authorities under the DM Act are not conducive for carrying out the tasks it has been mandated to perform and also recommended redesigning the NDMA structure to ensure greater objectivity and transparency in selecting members besides pointing at the lack of functional integration between NDMA and the home ministry.[20] But, no lessons learnt resulting in entering the Chinese dragon without the knowhow of combating it.

Wasted lockdown space

Lockdown was not intended to end corona but break the chain and control the spread of virus. Strategically, it offered a precious lung space for strategic planning and preparedness, overcome deficiencies and go full throttle to take on the virus in the days ahead with no vaccine in sight. Five lockdown periods of over 100 precious days was not utilized for gaining control over the spread of the pandemic.

It is said that the god and a doctor is remembered only in an emergency. True to this, doctors, nurse, police and pourkarmikas turned the saviors in the form of covid warriors. With 0.9 doctors/1000; 0.7 hospitals/1000; 1.7 nurses /1000; 0.6 community level workers/1000 population and 138 police personnel/100000 population, they are to work for 130 plus crore people.[21] To get into the battle field, they need the basic protective gear. It would be a nightmare to think of the covid warriors showing their back given the way they were treated during visits and on duty.

From the beginning, there were cases and instances of the covid warriors operating without Standard Operating Procedures. Shortage of masks, sanitizer, Health Care Equipment and PPT kits was reported all across the nation in the initial stage of lockdown. During the lockdown, the governments failed to prepare the government machinery, mobilizing and training of health personnel, procuring testing kits, ventilators and personal protective equipment.[22]

Taiwan, Vietnam and Hong Kong used the lock down period for much needed preparations and managed to contain the infection levels swiftly. In fact, Taiwan, just across the mainland China, was quick to move in the month of March for case identification, containment, and resource allocation to protect the public health. Creation of big data for analytics; QR code scanning and online reporting of travel history and health symptoms; tracking the quarantined through their mobile phone, all put together established control.[23] Back in India, Union government was basking in the glory of global appreciation and state governments were happy to

leave it to the centre to take action and responsibility. Real time planning and action was missing.

As the days progressed with mounting number of cases and deaths, the shortage of hospitals treating Covid patients and later beds became a serious concern. This was not completely unknown because many studies and agencies including WHO warned India of mounting numbers by June. Michael Ryan, WHO's Health Emergencies Programme Executive Director, warned that the disease has not "exploded" in India, but the risk of that happening remains as the country moves towards unlocking its lockdown.[24] The attempt to enlist hospitals and procure beds was painfully slow and not decisive. Some hospitals in Karnataka did not cooperate till the time the wand of law was shown at them. A study by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) projected a better case scenario total corona virus cases at 37.4 lakh at the end of March 2021 and as high as 6.18 crore at the end of March 2021 in worst-case scenario,[25] Thankfully, it did not get that worse but the threat remained.

Co-opting local bodies

The common refrain from politicians to babus reminds us time and again that India lives in villages. Not a bit changed since decades. But, in dealing with the covid crisis, the Panchayat Raj institutions are being used as dispensers. The wisdom and intelligence of local bodies was completely ignored and but still entrusted with the responsibility of managing and controlling the spread of virus. The local administrations, in most of the places, were discharging responsibility without power.

Community participation and communication are the most effective elements in achieving the desired goals in a crisis. But, the Union government did not deem it fit to have an opinion of the local administration at any level. The state governments came to the conference table once the cases started spiraling and the onus of controlling the spread of virus shifted to the states. The local administration comprising of district administration and local self-government institutions were not in picture. Section 30 and Section 41 of the Disaster Management Act, mandates that the local bodies are administratively, politically and financially empowered to take decisions. The top down approach reduced the local administration to merely follow the orders.

Interestingly, the publicity for using mask, sanitization and social distance was doing rounds in cities and urban pockets but reported alarming number of covid cases. The self enlightened cities Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Bangalore needed no awareness! The rural parts of the country showed better resilience to the virus and displayed awareness and concern. Many villages opted for self quarantine and isolation! Seven tribal villagers of West Bengal's remote Purulia district who returned from Chennai quarantined themselves on one Banyan and two Mango trees because they had single room houses.[26] What more awareness do we need? Micro interventions at the local Panchayat ward or village level would help better manage the disaster situations. Distribution of immediate relief in the form of money, food grains, medical care, cloths, tents, vessels drinking water and other necessities, activities of restoration, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts of can be implemented better with the involvement of local bodies.[27] A great opportunity was lost in the centralized approach to tackling covid.

The Corona newsrooms

Corona has come as a boon for the electronic media. The most benefitted being the 24x7 news desks. Apprehension, speculation and fear mongering became a daily routine. Initially, the number of cases reported and dead was insignificant and the people were eager to see what's happening to someone somewhere. As the cases and death toll started touching the neighborhood, the fear slowly began to grip the people and the media houses fully exploited the nervousness.[28] The specter of fear, uncertainty and confusion was planted by the media at the opportune time and it started growing each day along with the number of positive cases and the death rate.

The glorification of fear and death was evident in the excitement and enthusiasm shown by the channels in breaking the news of number of possible cases of covid or the expected number of deaths! Why speculate the numbers when the government is entrusted with the task of releasing the Health bulletin on a daily basis? Without regard to the health bulletin, the speculative figures are available to be correlated with the Health bulletin later. The indifference of the government also put paid to these unethical standards.

The government was at fault for being too timid in responding to media speculation. Media regulatory authority should have been alerted for a reasonable direction. It was all about who reports a case or death first. Journalistic values witnessed a serious fall in covid coverage. Most of the channels turned Omni present and Omni potent to become a victim, lawyer, judge, doctor, health expert and an

administrator all rolled into one. The information anarchy created in the media houses made a common viewer, compelled by lockdown to watch, feeling a sense of virus in the mind at the drop of a hat. Many times, the breaking news was a policeman lathi charging a violator! The TRP populism was disgusting to say the least. The press freedom and independence is indispensable but can't be reckless and irresponsible. The corona - related news language reminded of dreadful horror movies.

The cut throat media competition spilled into board rooms and bed rooms as the cases intensified. Media sensationalism turned communal branding some sections to be the chief carriers of corona.[29] The moment it became a non issue, the media latched on to vaccine route. It's pertinent to highlight an instance of advertising over vital health information. A doctor who first spoke of inventing an ayurvedic medicine for Corona was literally forced to shut for sake of an advertisement. This was the motive behind corona drumming.

During the time of disasters and calamities, there should be serious responsibilities imposed on news channels to stop showing the same dead body 100 times in a day. It will psychologically influence the minds of aged and old people. The trial by media was meticulous because it did not skip an advertisement.

The migrant exodus

To add fuel to the fire, unplanned migration and mindless reverse migration points to the disaster of disaster management. Handling of the migrant labour is the single most issue that earned flak and damaged the image of the government for a long time to come. The lockdown plunged millions of migrant labour into hunger, insecurity, pain, frustration, anger, helplessness and of course, primarily loss of self-respect. The unprecedented astronomical migration numbers exposed the government's bankruptcy of real time data on migrant labour. It is an accumulated blunder of adhocism of the governments over time treating the migrants as mere wage workers, the locomotive of the Indian economy.

With lockdown, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of work and income, lack of food and uncertainty looming large. The tales of thousands walking back home was an unprecedented disaster. Over 300 deaths out of starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care.[30]

The financial package given by the Union government was a fair relief for most of the affected. But, the initial days of lockdown rendered most of the migrants destitute and helpless. The emotional trauma of being uncared and unwanted has left a lasting impression. Food, shelter, medical help, transport that followed was too late as the damage was devastating and the psyche deeply damaged.[31] To rub salt into the wounds, many were seen with suspicion and castigated as being a corona carrier back home.

Lack of foresight and preparedness to deal with an expected massive migration could well be an error on part of the government and a result of exigency but the bitterness and anguish that it left in the lives of the migrants is for a life time. The folly was conceded by Amitabh Kant, the CEO of NITI Aayog diplomatically stating that migrant workers could have been better taken care of and stated that it was the responsibility of the state governments.[32]

Economist Jean Drèze stated that the lockdown had been "almost a death sentence" for the underprivileged of the country.[33] The lofty idea of Atmanirbar Bharat is summed up by a weeping migrant worker who could not see his dying son in Bihar thus, "The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant labourers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives."

Making hay, when the sun shines

In the fight against corona, the political practitioners lost no time in managing the disaster for political ends. The kind of fear, insecurity and uncertainty created in the media is well utilized by the governments to ward off real time issue facing the nation or the states. Once the covid started taking centre stage, at the centre, the issue of economic slowdown corresponding unemployment, falling markets, closure of small business was on the back burner. The states did not lag behind in postponing local elections in MP and West Bengal.[34]

The covid narrative was well used by the governments and the media played into the hands of the government for their own reasons as well. It was the TRP at stake for them and covid was the key content available for free. A single instance would make for the day. Inadvertently, the media played the government's game. In the covid game, government is the only savior seen and operating, beds, hospital or health bulletin.

The opposition is the government in the making. But, in the covid scene, it failed to make an impact on the people with innovative suggestions and alternatives to tackle the issue. The virtual meeting by a host of opposition parties on

India's fight against Covid-19 was held after almost two months since the outbreak of the pandemic. During this entire period when India has been fighting its battle against corona virus, the opposition remained largely conspicuous by its silence and inactivity.[35] Even more concerning, the opposition did not try to get closer to the people with an option-based approach. Mere trading of charges against the government or trying to find fault lines doesn't make for a policy alternative. The road shows, jatha or a protest could end up becoming a media feast and side kick for entertainment. Sadly, the opposition suffered from paucity of ideas and eagerness to make a fresh beginning after massive electoral drubbing. As very much a national party, Congress lost out on a national platform in presenting an approach to tackle the crisis. The voice of the opposition was hardly heard except for sound bites. Blaming the ruling dispensation will not make an opposition party. A shadow government on covid would have been an excellent idea for the opposition to pool together the best brains at the same time rework political equations. A great opening lost.

A new breed of political disaster management evolved out of the covid crisis. Whole lot of politicians – aspiring, budding, ruling, and potential came up with charitable gestures with a clear intention of touching the political chord with the masses. The striking aspect was, helping with food grains. In traditional Indian system serving food is considered the greatest of services. The motive behind the political calculation is understandable because, traditionally people are believed to never forget those who offer food. This is not to ignore the service minded people. Interestingly, the electronic media, for instance in Karnataka, was partisan in naming the donors and calling them to the studios as if they own the donors. A quid pro quo was visible and looked like a sponsored slot, negating the very service the aspirants rendered. One upmanship prevailed all along. The motives emerge once the covid haze becomes clear and elections round the corner. Nevertheless, the help irrespective of the motives helped many poor get food, particularly the migrant labour.

Concluding Observations
- Keeping in mind the number of disasters that strike regularly, community disaster fund could be developed all over the country. It is not necessary that each and every contributor be a beneficiary. The objective should be to inculcate the spirit of belonging in an hour of crisis. A step in this direction, introduces

people to practice nation building. In the midst of Corona, we are witnessing floods in Assam and a cyclone just passed by.
- Disaster management needs to be turned proactive than merely reactive. The record of disaster management response is a testimony to the fact and covid is no exception. Advancement and up gradation of early warning systems be made operational and functioning all the time.
- More of preventive disaster management plans and strategies like flood-proofing areas prone to annual flooding; drought proofing with green strategies including afforestation, social forestry and water management; creating infrastructure for community disaster awareness and response plans needs to be focused upon.
- Local administration, the PR Institutions, should be recognised and developed as the fulcrum of disaster management response mechanism. The local wisdom and practices should be incorporated as part of disaster management.
- Large scale migration involving millions need a well planned out strategy to ward off unwarranted hardships. Disaster with in a disaster situation could be avoided. The covid 19 migration model could be an eye opener for future reference in terms of experiment, experience and results. Food, shelter, livelihood need special attention
- The pitfalls in Disaster Management Act could be overcome with suitable legislative inputs with Covid 19 as reference point. The police need to be given more power to counter violations of lockdown situations. Law enforcement, wherever necessary, should be strengthened. The DM Act does not provide for grievance redressal mechanism that needs to be addressed.
- Public health, disaster management and Indian constitution should be compulsorily introduced in all universities and the same students could be enrolled as volunteers in times of need. The volunteers be given a Certificate of Recognition, to be considered for employment.

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