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Role of effective crisis communication by the government in managing the first wave Covid-19 pandemic – A study of Kerala government's success

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Effective crisis communication is critical for successful crisis management. The current study is an attempt to unravel the public communication efforts of the Kerala government in its successful Covid-19 crisis management efforts during the first wave of the pandemic. The findings of the study indicate that the government has successfully used pre-crisis communication to inoculate the stakeholders, 'steal thunder', and bolster their crisis management capabilities. Effective crisis communication, by the government, has ensured proper information management, media management, right supportive action, and direct communication with stakeholders. Effective communication has also helped the government in garnering favourable constituent attribution, positive framing, positive affect in stakeholder, and enlist active stakeholder participation in crisis management; resulting in, effective crisis management and enhanced reputation for the government. The study unravels the best practices of the Kerala government, in public crisis communication, during the pre-crisis and crisis stages of the first wave of the pandemic and proposes a Kerala model of crisis communication. The model can be used as a reference for future government communication efforts during a crisis across geographies.

KEYWORDS
crisis communication, direct communication, information management, media management, public communication

1 | INTRODUCTION

Kerala, a south Indian state, is trending high on the news worldwide for its successful 'Kerala Model of Covid Management'. A Google search of the word string 'Kerala Model of Covid Management' returns about 47.6 million results in about 0.58 s. A brief scan of the initial pages prima facie indicates the search results to be praising the 'Kerala Model of Covid Management.' However, the word 'Kerala model' or 'Kerala phenomenon' was coined to explain another phenomenon – the state's economic model. As measured by state gross domestic product (SGDP), the state's economy is driven by inward remittances from two sources. The primary source is the Malayali Diaspora spread worldwide but majorly concentrated in the Gulf region and tourists' remittances. It is estimated that 17% of the state's

population lives outside the state (Government of Kerala, 2019), and this includes migrants to foreign countries, other states in India, and student population outside the state; both in India and abroad (includes many in Chinese universities like Wuhan university). The state received an inward remittance of about 28 billion USD, of the total 70 billion USD received by the nation in 2019, contributing to 36% of the SGDP. Another major contributor to the SGDP is the tourism sector contributing about 10% to the SGDP (IBEF, 2020) (Dutta, 2018).

The large diaspora and tourists have created a constant movement of international travelers' from and to the state. The tiny state has four airports, all international, and handles more than 20 million passengers a year; international travelers dominate the numbers (53% of all passengers). The state had 16.7 million tourist arrivals in 2018, of which

foreign tourists numbered about 1.09 million and the rest from the domestic circuit, earning total revenue of about 45,000 crore rupees (DoT, Kerala, 2019). However, this immense movement of international travelers, including tourists and diaspora, has its issues, especially on the health front. The state was the epicenter of the Nipah virus outbreak in 2018 and now Covid-19 (WHO, 2018) (Shaji, 2020), and involved international travelers. India's first Covid-19 case was reported from Kerala on January 30, 2020, in a person from the state with a history of travel to China, which was followed by a wave of cases brought in by expatriates and international tourists, making the state the initial epicenter of the current Covid-19 outbreak in the country (Wikipedia, 2020) (Nidheesh, 2020). However, high levels of education, a responsive healthcare system, pragmatic and intensive disease control strategy, successful communication strategy, and increased executive involvement have helped the state combat these potentially dangerous disease outbreaks. The state's Covid-19 control efforts have been appreciated the world over and assessed to be a notch above even the developed world's response to the Covid-19 crisis (Biswas, 2020) (Chowdhury & Sundaram, 2020) (THEWEEK, 2020) (World Economic Forum, 2020). The 5P model of Kerala's Covid-19 control, which includes prevention, preparedness, public health, political leadership & people, has been recommended for adoption across the world by WHO Director-General (Talha, 2020).

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Crisis

A crisis is a major catastrophe that may occur either naturally or due to human error or intervention or malicious intent (Argenti, 2013). A crisis can result in tangible (as in men and material) or intangible losses (credibility and reputation). According to Coombs, a crisis is any sudden and unexpected event that curtail the organization's ability to be involved in everyday operations and can cause tangible and intangible losses (Coombs, 2007a). Both definitions indicate that a crisis has potential adverse outcomes. Fink defines crisis as a turning point for better or worse, suggesting that all crisis outcomes need not be harmful and effective crisis management probably may bring results that are 'better' than worse (Fink, 1986). The 'Tylenol' crisis, faced by J&J, was a classic example of effective crisis management and the realization of 'better' results. Coombs also defines crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an Organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2007a, p. 19). Coombs definition indicates three characteristics of a crisis. Firstly, a crisis is perceptual in nature (and perceptions can be managed); it violates the stakeholder's expectancies (about the organization's ability to serve him) and brings adverse outcomes. Four distinct elements characterize crises, according to Argenti. Firstly, a crisis has an element of surprise; it appears unexpected and catches the victim unawares. Secondly, crises offer limited or insufficient information making informed decisions impossible. Thirdly all crises offer a quick pace of events where the victims do not get preparation time to tackle the crisis. Fourthly, crisis brings about intense scrutiny from the constituents, be it employees, customers, business partners, or others. The scrutiny attributes responsibilities for the crisis and often looks for negative news about the organization at the center of the crisis.

A professional organization should have an effective crisis management policy and institution. Crisis management involves a set of strategies designed to combat a crisis and lessen its impact on the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007b). Crisis communication is a part of the crisis management function and is imperative for any organization facing a threat to its reputation due to a crisis (Bundy et al., 2017). Over time, various crisis management models have been proposed since the 5 stage model of Fink (Fink, 1986), followed by Smith's 3 stage model and Mitroff's 5 stage model. Coombs proposed a simple 3 stage model that included the earlier models' various stages (Coombs, 2007b). Coomb's model has three distinct stages of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages, needing different crisis management strategies. The pre-crisis stage involved detecting crisis signals, preventing the crisis, and preparing for the crisis (when prevention is impossible). The crisis stage involved recognition of the trigger event and response to the crisis. The post-crisis stage involved following up crisis activities, investigations, and learning and knowledge management from the crisis.

2.2 | Crisis communication

Critical success in crisis management involves effective crisis communication. A crisis creates a need for information, and effective communication collects and processes information and shares relevant information with concerned stakeholders (Coombs, 2010). The objectives of crisis communication depends on the crisis stage. As the crisis stage changes, the stakeholders' information requirement changes, and the crisis managers should be able to cater to the same. The pre-crisis stage involves information collection about the impending crisis, risk assessment, and the crisis team's and spokesperson's training. The crisis stage collects and processes information, disseminates knowledge to the decision-makers and the relevant stakeholders. The post-crisis stage's role is to review the crisis management efforts, provide follow-up messages, and document learning. The crisis communication efforts aim to achieve three strategic objectives (Sturges, 1994). The primary aim is to provide 'instructing' information that will help the affected public physically cope with the crisis. The secondary objective is to provide 'adjusting' information to help psychological coping. The last objective is to 'repair' the reputation and provide information to lessen the reputational loss due to the crisis. Crisis communication has also been divided into crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management (Coombs, 2009). Crisis knowledge management involves behind the scene activities involved in creating public responses to a crisis. On the other hand, stakeholder reaction management involves communicative efforts to influence how the stakeholders perceive the crisis, the organization in trouble, and its crisis response.

Every crisis leads to attribution (assigning causes to events), which causes emotional reactions among the stakeholders. When an organization is judged responsible for the crisis, anger is evoked, and when responsibility is not assigned to the organization, it evokes sympathy (Weiner, 2006). This emotional reaction, resulting from the attribution, decides the stakeholder's transaction with the organization involved in the crises. Effective crisis management needs evidence-based crisis communication efforts to convey truthful information to the stakeholders enabling them to make the right attribution. Crisis managers should effectively frame their side of the story, or else the stakeholder can be hijacked by the media's or other third party frames. The communication function will involve training the managers for dealing with media for crisis management, improved communication lines with local communities, and improved communication with the intervening stakeholders (Healthcare officials and police in case of the current Covid-19 emergency) (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). A well-thought-out crisis communication will update the stakeholders with regular, timely, useful, and reliable information. Such communication will enable the stakeholders to make the right attributions to the crisis and develop the right emotions to act as motivators in exhibiting appropriate behavior. Effective crisis communication will also ensure stakeholder involvement in managing and overcoming the crisis.

Many models have been proposed to explain the importance of crisis communication and its impact on saving the organization's reputation. Image repair theory (IRT) posits that the corporate image has to be protected during a crisis (Benoit, 2014). Another commonly applied crisis communications model is the situational crisis communications theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995). SCCT is based on attribution theory and proposes that stakeholders attribute responsibility to an organization during a crisis. SCCT focuses on stakeholder's perception of the crisis and effectively managing it. Social mediated crisis communication (SMCC) was proposed to understand crisis communications in an increasingly digital world (Liu, 2011). The Integrated Crisis Mapping model (ICM) focuses on stakeholder emotional change during the crisis stage (two sets of emotions are studied, which include anger/anxiety and sadness/freight) (Jin et al., 2012). Other commonly looked at crisis communication models include the co-variation-based approach to crisis communications, the discourse of renewal, and Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT). All the above crises communication models deal with the stakeholder emotions during the crisis and how they can manage the same through appropriate responses, especially communication, to save organizational reputation.

Due to the contextual differences and non-repetitive nature of the crisis, every organization's crisis communication process has differed. Though a critical part of effective crisis management, crisis communication theory does not further elaborate the 'processes' in crisis communication models. As crisis induces chaos, leading to events' non-linear progression, communication becomes more reactionary than a planned event. However, successful practitioners and researchers have identified some common threads and have recommended a set of do's and don'ts while communicating during a crisis to ensure effectiveness. Exhibit 1 summarizes the key takeaways from academics and practitioners while communicating in a crisis.

Exhibit 1: Do's & Don'ts in Crisis Communication

- Anticipate Crisis: The pre-crisis stage of anticipating a crisis helps in developing a crisis plan, including setting up of a crisis team, policy, and pre-drafted crisis messages
- Respond quickly: Any delay in responses will create stakeholder skepticism and affect reputation. A good crisis plan, developed in the pre-crisis stage, helps in responding quickly.
- Avoid 'no comment': any lack of perspective or comment from the organization will allow negative framing and attribution from the stakeholders.
- Be accurate: The organization has to provide only accurate data to the stakeholders. When accurate data is not available, inform them when it is likely to be known and communicate immediately once the same becomes available.
- Be consistent: The crisis message has to be consistent in that it should speak the same voice. Providing contradictory information will lead to negative attribution and framing.
- Identify stakeholders: The crisis management team should identify the key stakeholders in the crisis and include all primary and secondary stakeholders.
- Define information requirements: A crisis may not offer an opportunity for clear communication but may generate a lot of information. So defining the information requirements of the stakeholders will help in the dissemination of only the relevant information.
- Centralize the communication function: A crisis may create a need for constant information, and multiple sources of information will create conflict and confusion, which a centralized communication process can prevent during a crisis
- Enlist key personnel/ experts: the head of crisis management may not have all the information or expertise to handle specific information. Thus enlisting the key personnel who are experts in the area helps in disseminating relevant information effectively.
- Show concern: the communication should display adequate concern for the stakeholders, and commercial and organizational interest should take a backseat.
- Communicate effectively: Effective communication involves dissemination of timely, frequent, reliable & relevant information, to the identified key stakeholders, during the crisis.
- Use & integrate multiple channels: As stakeholders may access information through different channels, in a digital world, there is a need to communicate using various channels and ensure integration of messages across the channels.
- Manage fake information: It is critical that fake news, often spread by adversaries, is tackled effectively during crisis times.
- Be first to provide 'bad news': When the news is bad, the organization should be the first to provide it to the stakeholders, creating an effect of 'stealing thunder.'
- Leverage your supporters: Leveraging support from all sources help spread the message and generate synergy for the communication

- Maintain media relation: A good media relation is crucial as it helps in conveying your message. Poor media relations may lead to negative framing, which may influence critical stakeholders.
- Be transparent: A crisis requires more transparency than a normal situation. Hiding or concealing negative news may generate substantial negative publicity.
- Train your team: Different members of your crisis team must be trained adequately in various aspects of communication, especially in handling media. It may not be a regular affair for them.
- Post-crisis analysis: It is essential to do a thorough post-crisis analysis to document for future crises management needs and use it effectively.

(Institute for PR, 2007) (Bernstein, 2015) (Argenti, 2002) (Strawser, 2016) (Landry, 2018) (Snyder, 2019) (Arpan & Pompper, 2003)

Crisis communication for Publics: Governments, the world over, have been facing heightened crises of various nature be it an economiccrisis, political crisis, terror and secession related crisis, and majorly crisisfrom natural disasters (Horsley, 2010); and adding to the list is once a century health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. A lack of adequate communication efforts to tackle a crisis can severely affect the reputation, economic, and health fronts of governance (Siddiquei & Khan, 2020). Governments should have a crisis plan that encompass crises of varying nature, from natural to human-made. However, preparation for crisis management becomes lax when the organizations involved are the governments themselves. Governments are often burdened by bureaucratic setup, trained to handle structured matters with linear progression, making them slow and unresponsive and typically incapable of handling an emergent situation needing unstructured thinking and decision making. A government's capacity to communicate is critical for good governance, more so in times of crisis. Public communication generally serves to inform the stakeholders, persuade/ advocate them, and engage citizens in government activities. During an emergency, public communication becomes more critical as government activities may be short-term and frequently changed, needing a more responsive communication setup that is quicker and more professional in their approach. However, the government capacity to communicate is affected by the budgetary allocations (often none exist), communication capacity (poor professionalization of the function), ethical considerations (on what and how much needs to be told), and the lack of realization of the incentives involved in public communication (GSDRC, 2009). The governments also need to develop a suitable disclosure culture, where every public servant feels the need to disclose relevant public information. They should set up an appropriate institutional mechanism to make the information available to the concerned (which today is lacking due to siloed nature of government departmental functioning); if they wish to succeed in public communication.

The state of Kerala had witnessed at least one significant crisis annually since 2017. It was Nipah in 2017 followed by the great floods in 2018. 2019 saw the Covid outbreak, a once-in-a-century health disaster that spawned the crisis. The frequent crisis has helped the governments (both state and central) learn about crisis management and loss reduction; develop and enact suitable crisis management policies, and set up appropriate institutional frameworks to tackle the crisis. Institutions like the national or state disaster management agencies serve this purpose. However, communication is generally not a part of the disaster management agency and is performedby separate entities like the information and public relations department, which works separately from the disaster management agencies. Kerala government has successfully communicated during the crisis resulting in heightened stakeholder involvement in crisis management efforts (Balakrishnan, 2020; Jayarajan, 2020; Dass, 2020), unheard of for governments in crisis. However, crisis communication has become very complex due to the multiplicity of the media and the speed at which news travels, especially in the digital medium. Successful crisis communication should ensure that the organization (government here) is the sole source of information to the stakeholders. There should be tight integration between the various media; conscious efforts to prevent the spread of false and incomplete information; maintain good relationships with the media, and good internal communication & coordination between the various departments at the forefront of crisis management and communications.

3 | RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The study of crisis communication has been showing an increasing trend in the academic literature, though still small and facing challenges (Muñoza et al., 2019). However, most of the studies are related to commercial organizations. The limited research available on crisis communication by government agencies has focused on leadership efforts on image repair (for example, President Bush's image repair speech after hurricane Katrina) (Benoit & Henson, 2009) or public organization's efforts in image rebuilding (Olsson, 2014). Yet other studies have investigated how government agencies like 'state emergency management agency' (SEMA or its counterparts in other countries like national disaster management agency (NDMA) in India) attempts public communication during a disaster (Horsley, 2010, pp. 550–569). However, studies investigating how elected governments (as opposed to leaders and institutions) communicate in crisis are scant, especially so in medical emergencies (in fact, the Chinese government's unwillingness to share and disseminate relevant information has been cited as a reason for the current pandemic). Kerala's state government has successfully managed medical crises, Nipah in 2018, and Covid-19 (the first wave), and communication has played a critical role in tackling these crises. This study's primary objective is to investigate the crisis communication strategy adopted by Kerala's government during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the state (six months from January 30, 2020 to June 30, 2020); lauded the world over. The study involves applying crisis management and crisis communication principles to investigate how the state has succeeded in its communication efforts during this first

wave. Detailed research and documentation of the state government's crisis communication would help other governments develop suitable communication strategies to handle various crises. The study approaches crisis management from the 3 stage model of pre-crisis, crisis & post-crisis stages. Though a brief reference is made to the pre-crisis stage the study concentrates on the Kerala government's public communication efforts during the crisis. The post-crisis stage is beyond the study's purview as the crisis is currently ongoing. There seem to no feasible solutions in sight (like vaccination or treatment) to control the crisis and is not expected to end any soon.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The study is a narrative account of the Kerala government's communication activity during the pre-crisis and the current crisis stage (of the first wave) from January 30 to June 30, 2020 and adopts a case research method. The study aims to review the various publications about the Kerala government's communication activities to find the state's successful practices in effectively communicating during the current Covid-19 crisis. The literature will include academic sources, regular media publications, and gray literature. The analysis of published content would be used to trace the best communication practices, viewed through the lens of crisis communication theories, followed by the government and its impact on crisis management. The authors aim to propose, based on their analysis, a model of communication adopted by the Kerala government which can be replicated in other crises needing specialized communication efforts. The study essentially is interpretive in its philosophy and deductive in its approach to theory/model development. Though mostly qualitative, the study cites published quantitative data to triangulate crisis management success. For maintaining ecological validity, the study has kept close to the practitioner's perspective and actions while examining the subject.
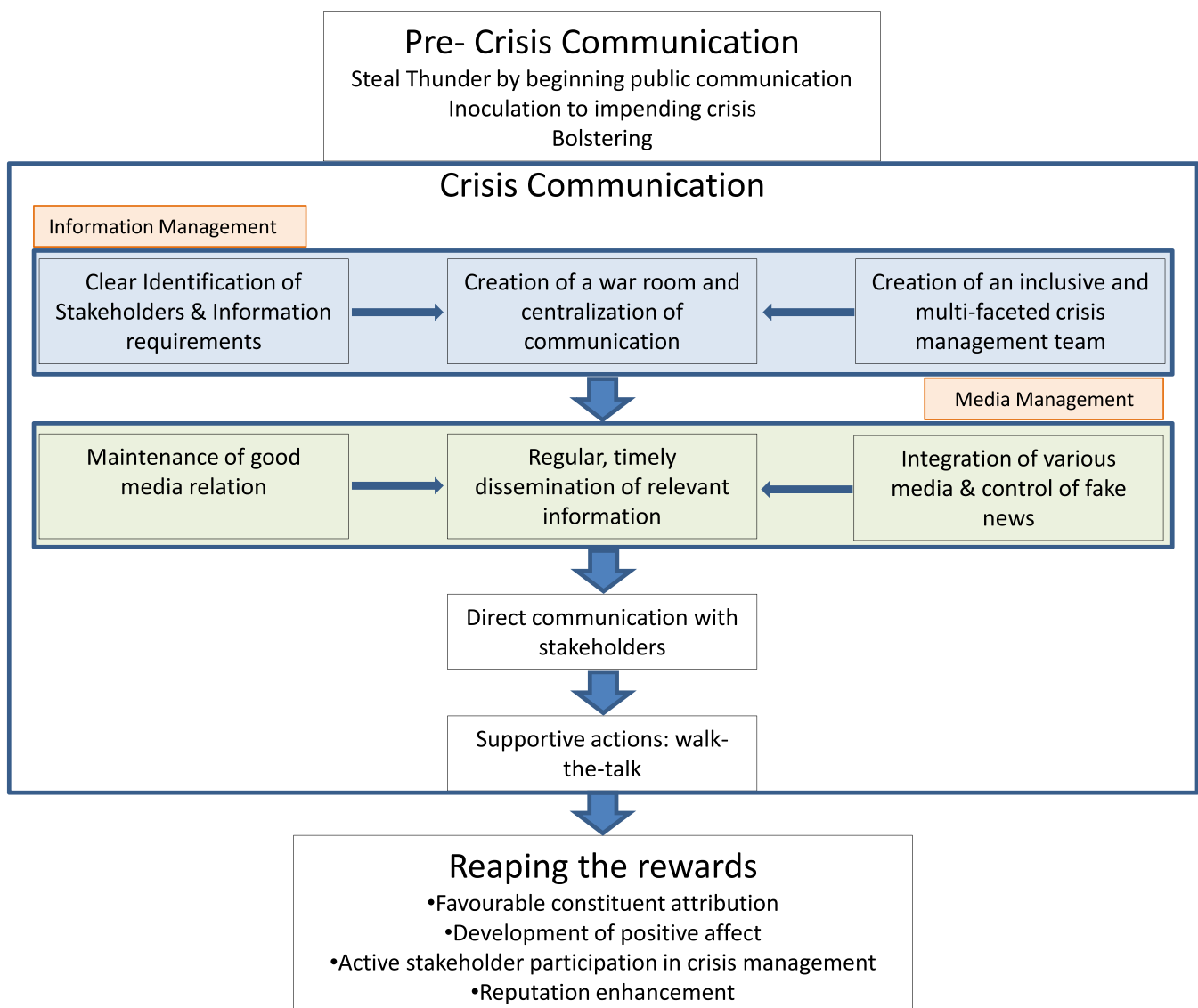

FIGURE 1 Communication model of Kerala government during Covid crisis

5 | CRISIS COMMUNICATION BY KERALA GOVERNMENT

In a functional democracy, the government provides timely and reliable information to its citizens to keep them updated with the government's latest policies and activities. Effective public communication ensures improved acceptance of the governance initiatives, active stakeholder participation, and government policies and actions. However, due to the organizational setup complexity, governments have not been considered great communicators, especially in crises (OECD, 1996). However, the Kerala government has used public communication as an integral part of the overall crisis management strategy. They are communicating in a crisis has not deterred the state government, which has kept up with a systematic plan for crisis communication. Another unique factor that distinguishes the Kerala government's communication effort is that it has been spearheaded by the Chief Minister (CM) himself, the head of executive and legislature in the state, immensely improving its reception. The CM has already been hailed as the gold standard in Covid-19 crisis communication in India. His efforts have been a primary reason for the state controlling the crisis successfully during the first wave that otherwise wreaked havoc in India's other states (Balakrishnan, 2020a). An examination of the government's crisis communication strategy reveals the following elements (also highlighted in Figure. 1).

5.1 | Pre-crisis planning, & communication

The use of pre-crisis communication reduces risk by inoculating the stakeholders to the impending crisis (Wan & Pfau, 2004). They help stakeholders build resistance to adverse reactions and media coverage during the crisis. The anticipatory crisis management model (Olaniran & Williams, 2008) posits that prevention is the most critical priority in the pre-crisis stage. However, not all organizations are lucky to have a pre-crisis plan, especially in an emergent healthcare situation like the Covid-19. Kerala's government was fortunate due to the experience gained from the Nipah outbreak of 2018, where the state was the epicenter in India. Such an experience helped the state government communicate clearly about the crisis risk and the threat perceived from the crisis in the pre-crisis stage itself, helping control the problem if not prevent it altogether. It also allowed the government to create the 'steal thunder' effect by being the first to break the bad news (Lee & Lee, 2020). The government maintained a constant vigil, anticipated the crisis, and prepared itself to handle the crisis. The Nipah outbreak helped create a medical protocol to handle highly infectious disease emergencies (the Nipah outbreak saw 18 infections and 16 deaths) (Thomas et al., 2019). Public healthcare already had experience in isolation, containment, surveillance, and quarantining of highly infectious diseases. As soon as the initial cases of Covid-19 were reported from Wuhan – China, the government was ready with a clear plan. In an interview with the BBC, the state's health minister highlighted that the state had many students enrolled in Wuhan University. Anyone could return with the deadly virus; the anticipation was not misplaced. This anticipation prompted the state government to open a control room to contain the disease. The government developed a clear screening and treatment protocol and guideline was developed and communicated among the health workers and other stakeholders like the police force. The hospitals and their staff were also well equipped with the necessary resources in handling the cases (BBC, 2020). The government was early to begin public communication, kept alive since then with minor modifications. On the mid-night of January 30, 2020 (date of first case reporting), the health minister gave her first press briefing to inform the state about the impending crisis and government preparation to handle the same. The Nipah outbreak had taught the government the importance of communication in managing health crises. The government understood that providing instructing and adjusting information ensured stakeholder participation and involvement in crisis efforts. The state's preparation was not limited to healthcare interventions but also included economic measures to tide overcome the business and livelihood disruptions caused by the crisis (Business Standard, 2020). The pre-crisis information about the health risk and control process, posed by the impeding Covid-19 crisis, helped improve self-efficacy and danger control behavior, as proposed by the extended parallel processing model (EPPM) (Witte et al., 2001). The state had successfully handled the earlier medical emergency (Nipah outbreak of 2018) motivated the stakeholders to act, as instructed by the government, to reduce the threat. The government used the Nipah success as a 'bolstering' strategy (Coombs, 2010, pp. 40–41) in the pre-crisis stage itself (generally, secondary crisis response strategy like bolstering is used only with other primary crisis response strategies). Such prior success helped stakeholders develop response-efficacy and self-efficacy, which resulted in favorable crisis stage behavior. The pre-crisis communication helped the public to be vigilant and prepare for the crisis.

5.2 | Crisis communication

Crisis communication, by the state government, clearly involved four elements. The government was careful in its information management, media management, direct communications, and actions to ensure clear and consistent public messages. Each of the activity is elucidated below.

5.2.1 | Information management

Centralization of communication function: The centralization of crisis communication function is crucial and helps provide a single-window for information dissemination, avoiding confusion and conflict. Centralization helps collate and compile information from various sources, ensuring that conflicting and incomplete information about the crisis does not circulate, creating confusion among the stakeholders.

Centralization of communication also ensures continuity and the integrity of the information. It improves source credibility (ensuring information seekers return to the same source), thus providing faster information diffusion and acceptance. The public communication of the Kerala government about the Covid-19 crisis was highly centralized. The first government press meet was addressed by the health minister (Ms. K. K. Shailaja) at midnight of January 30, 2020, when the first case was reported. Then onwards, the health minister held a daily evening press brief for the next 40 days, after which it was taken over by the CM (from March 16, 2020) (Ramachandran, 2020). The CM held a daily press conference at 6.00 pm to brief the public about the crisis. The CM briefed the media and public improved the seriousness and credibility of the message among the stakeholders. The CM was ably assisted by a group of task heads, which included the health minister, Chief Secretary (head of bureaucracy in the state), other ministers (on an ad hoc basis), and a team of task heads from the war room; who could provide the CM with the latest information. As the press conference was a daily affair, it was attended and often aired live by all media houses from the state, which ensured print, audio-visual and digital coverage. Such high coverage provided high levels of information penetration and high levels of message acceptance among all stakeholders. A daily press release was also posted on the CM's official website for reference, improving information dissemination about the crises (CM of Kerala, 2020). The centralization helped the government 'speak through one voice' (the CM or the health minister) and 'speak in one voice,' ensuring the messages' consistency. Another great success of the government in public communication was creating a central theme to remind everybody about the simple ways of controlling the disease. 'Break the Chain', coined by the government, has gone on to become the central or core representation and unifying theme depicting the fight against the disease (Prasad & Dennis, 2020).

By creating an empowered crisis management team, the centralization ensured that all Covid-19 emergency related activities were handled separately, giving the rest of the government machinery time to carry on the routine activity. Such centralization ensured that other crises were not created due to the breakdown of regular government services. The empowered team reported directly to the CM and was provided autonomy and resource adequacy, a critical success factor for crisis management and communication (Horsley, 2010, p. 553). The centralized crisis management team worked similarly to a joint information center, ensuring successful crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management. It also ensured that the regular public communication machinery, like the Information and Public Relations Department of the state (I&PRD), was let alone to do their routine work.

5.2.2 | Clear identification of stakeholders, & communication requirements

The government of Kerala successfully identified the key stakeholders and their communication requirements, bolstering their communication efforts. A look at the daily press conference and press release primarily identify three stakeholders. The primary constituents consisted of the general public, beneficiaries of the governance efforts. The secondary constituents addressed were the expatriates (both international and national) and migrants from other states, primarily the north and northeast. The tertiary constituents included small businesses and select commercial organizations, like self-help groups (SHGs). The primary information provided is of the instructing type and had the number of new infections, recoveries, location of new infections, classification of disease containment zones, sources of infection, morbidity and mortality statistics, etcetera; which helped the stakeholders adjust with the disease. The secondary information provided included schemes and schedules for migrants and expatriates' movement, policy decisions that included new restrictions and relaxations, any joint decision with the central government, new initiatives to ensure sustenance and livelihood for the marginalized, etcetera; which helped reassure the stakeholders psychologically. The tertiary information was reputational and included all government activities in combating the disease; their impact and worldwide acceptance; the good works of the critical staff like healthcare workers and police force; further plans to contain the disease; favorable comparison with other states (curiously unfavorable comparisons were omitted), and helped improve the reputation of the government. Clear identification of the stakeholders and their information requirement ensured high levels of information dissemination, information acceptance, and improved information credibility, resulting in quick behavioral adaptation necessary for crisis management. The state government's communication has been very inclusive, transparent, and fact-filled that the CM has earned the sobriquet of being the 'Andre Cuomo' of India (after the New York governor known for his fact-filled briefings) (Balakrishnan, 2020). The government also ensured that the messages were transmitted in multiple languages, like Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Hindi, etcetera, to ensure that the significant migrant population could comprehend the same (Mufsin & Malakar, 2020). Any failure to involve stakeholders would have resulted in severe healthcare and economic losses, as seen from other parts of the country and world (Ali et al., 2020).

Creation of Crisis team: The state government had constituted a central control team to handle the crisis management efforts on January 24, 2020, a full week before the first case was reported, which is a testimony to the pre-crisis preparation by the state government (OutlookIndia, 2020). The control team consists of more than 100 professionals divided into 18 groups handling various crisis management facets. The control team is responsible for data and information, disease containment, resource allocation, and planning. The control team has a 24 × 7 operation, and each of the committees headed by a nodal officer. The group is supported by their district offices and draws specialists from various functional areas, including healthcare, information technology, logistics, and administration. The control team operates from the directorate of health services and reports directly to the CM's office. They act as a one-stop-shop for all Covid-19 crisis management activities and have been the primary

source of reliable and timely information for the state government's crisis communication (Heller, 2020). The control room ensured automated real-time data capture from districts to ensure effective crisis management and communication (Pinarayi, 2020). Apart from the control room, the state government had created a 'war room' in the first week of April. The war room was to coordinate the state's logistic efforts (both men and material), ensuring smooth movement and recording inter-state and inter-national movements and regularly reported details to the district authorities for on-the-ground follow-up necessary (Saikiran, 2020).

5.3 | Media management

5.3.1 | Regular and timely dissemination of relevant information

The state government disseminated the most pertinent public information daily through the CMs 6 pm press meet. The press meet has gone on to become a staple media diet for Keralites across the globe. The press meet is aired live by all channels and has become the highest TRP event since it began on March 24, 2020 (till then, the health minister conducted the press meet) (Jayarajan, 2020). The video is also posted on the official Facebook page and Twitter-live and is also broadcast through YouTube broadcasts and receives about half a million views on Facebook. The press meet's content is cross-posted as a press release on the CM's official and other relevant state government websites. The use of multiple media in information dissemination ensured faster and broader diffusion of the message across all demographics.

5.3.2 | Maintenance of good media relations

The CM, the face of the state government's public communication, has a checkered history of media relations. He has been accused of gagging media on various occasions (Nair, 2017) and has shown animosity towards the media, even giving them marching orders from his meetings (Asianet, 2018). However, he has put his best foot forward to maintain a good relationship with the media during the current crisis. He has been receptive to their questions and suggestions during the daily press meets and has had a cordial relationship with the press. This shift has also been seen in the relationship between the media and the government machinery. The improved press relations of the CM and the government machinery have ensured prime time coverage for the government's crisis communication efforts, thereby ensuring faster dissemination of the messages. The media also has responded positively by being a responsible communication partner. They have desisted from alternate framing efforts, stayed consistent, and transmitted reliable information to the public, thus synergizing the government's crisis communication efforts (Mochish, 2020).

5.3.3 | Integration of media and control of fake news

Fake news, especially the negative variant, finds high affinity and travels fast, and can influence attributions and framing in crisis times. The current crisis had its share of fake news which was strictly handled and effectively controlled by the Kerala government. Kerala state was the first to appoint an 'anti-fake news division' headed by a senior bureaucrat. The division was responsible for detecting and eliminating fake news relating to the crisis and worked under I&PRD (Dass, 2020). The state government also invoked actions under the IT act and arrested several persons on charges of spreading fake and unverified news about the crisis (Raghunath, 2020) (Mathrubhumi, 2020) (Shan, 2020). As the media habits change and stakeholders move on to newer mediums, the communicators should also adapt to such changes to ensure effective media integration into the communication tactics (Taylor & Kent, 2007). Kerala's government was prudent in understanding the shift in media habits and adapted by using multiple mediums apart from traditional print and television. The state government uses dedicated pages and accounts in social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube – Live stream (I&PRD Kerala Govt, 2018). The government also uses owned media (various government websites) by cross-posting public communications. The use of multiple mediums has ensured that the crisis's communication efforts have reached anxious Keralites from across the world. The use of multiple media also has expanded the target in terms of age group; the traditional media are catching the higher age groups and the modern media the young. The use of multiple media has also helped in higher message penetration and reinforcement as the targets have a larger chance of multiple exposures. The state government's use of 'transmedia' has been recognized as one of the major successes for its successful public communication during the crisis (Mufsin & Malakar, 2020). The use of multiple media sources and their integration has also acted as a source of information subsidy, thus enabling the government to tell its side of the story and preventing alternate framing.

5.4 | Direct communication with the stakeholders

Though most of the crisis communication was indirect, the government ensured direct communication with stakeholders when warranted. There was a centralized helpline through 'Covid-19 Jagratha', which was a one-stop solution for most services (Covid-19 Jagratha, 2020). There were also district corona control rooms that traced and communicated with high-risk individuals by directly calling and talking to them. The control rooms also had multi-lingual support to cater to the migrant laborers, a critical mass in the state (Directorate of Health Services, 2020). The local primary health workers also kept in direct touch with high-risk individuals, individuals with other chronic medical conditions, and their families through direct visits. The local governments (village/panchayats), police, local political representatives & government officials were responsible for

direct communication with migrants and other marginalized sections to ensure their welfare and wellbeing (Swamy, 2020). The CM also interacted directly with constituents through his official Twitter handle, clarified their doubts, and provided a speedy resolution (TNN, 2020a). The direct communication efforts provided adequate adjusting information, ensuring that the highly vulnerable stakeholders could cope with the crisis. For example, the state has not seen any large-scale migrant returns, unlike other parts of the country (Shanas, 2020) (TNN, 2020b).

5.5 | Supportive actions

Communications go beyond words and need to be followed up by appropriate actions. The Kerala government proved sincere in 'walking its talk' during the crisis. The state government used all its machinery and goodwill to ensure that all activities envisaged in managing the crisis are fully implemented on the ground. The government widely used departments like the police and fire force (which could reach every nook and corner of the state) to deliver medicines to the old and critically ill who were shut out of the healthcare system due to lockdown (TNN, 2020c). The government had set up specialized 'Prashanthi' helpline numbers, which were accessed from across the globe (where children settled abroad called up seeking help for their elderly parents back home). The government even went ahead supporting the expatriate community in seeking appropriate medical help through agencies like Norka (non-resident Keralite's affairs) (Sebastian, 2020). The state government also coordinated with the central government in bringing back their expatriates stranded across the world on emergency; and even passed assembly resolutions for the same (ENS, 2020a). The government also had augmented healthcare facilities by creating temporary quarantine centers for asymptomatic returnees by enlisting hotels and railway coaches as suggested by policymakers (Singh & Neog, 2020). The state governments also worked on the ground to ensure that every poor person was well fed, be it migrants or the natives, through the running of community kitchens (PTI, 2020) (Gopika, 2020). The Healthcare system's response to the crisis has been world-class, ensuring proper screening, containment, & treatment of the disease (Ramakrishnan, 2020) (Nileena, 2020). The excellent media relation also ensured that the media brought to the government's attention any significant issues before developing their frames and stories. Such media support provided the government a chance to resolve the problems and gain favorable public relations.

6 | REAPING THE REWARDS

Effective communication by the state government has helped the crisis management efforts in many ways. Most importantly, it has brought in favorable attribution from the stakeholders. Though a 'victim' type crisis, where the government was not at fault, the stakeholders have credited the government for being proactive, effective, and efficient in managing the crisis. They have attributed the crisis's successful management to the current ruling dispensation, especially the CM and the health minister, who have lead from the front, and the rest of the state machinery (Sharma, 2020) (Shaji, 2020b). The state government has also been a positive affect recipient due to its effective crisis communication; among Indians and foreigners. A Facebook post, by the Bulgarian football coach Dimitar Patev, read: "I was and am still dumbstruck to hear about the destruction Coronavirus has wreaked in Europe, and I feel truly blessed that Kerala is the place that I was at in the times of the virus" (Bechu, 2020) (as reported in New Indian Express). The praise for the government's efforts has come from even the opposition politicians (ENS, 2020b). Another benefit of the successful communication efforts has been the stakeholder participation in the crisis control efforts. The government has been able to mobilize the participation of the common public, migrants in the state, state machinery – especially the police and healthcare forces, and local self-governments (even the opposition-controlled local bodies), among others (Heller, 2020). Enhanced stakeholder participation has ensured effective control of the infection. The state has had one of the lowest incidences of the disease, very low mortality, and no community spread so far (Sinha & Suresh, 2020). The state had one of the lowest fatality rates, high recovery rate, low test to positive ratio, reproduction number (of 0.8, 95.8, 1.4, & 1.05, respectively), the best among all Indian states (Singh & Singh, 2020) (PRS Legislative Research, 2021). All this has resulted in an enhanced reputation of the state both in India and abroad. Many an accolade has come the way of the state and its minister (especially the CM and the health minister) both from India and abroad. The Kerala model has been lauded, among others, by Washington Post (Masih, 2020), BBC (BBC, 2020), & WHO (Talha, 2020).

The Kerala government's crisis communication efforts and their effects can be summarized using the model in Figure 1. The model represents the government efforts in crisis communication to date and the resultant benefits accrued. The model will have to be expanded to include the later stages of the pandemic and government's communication efforts during those stages. The post-crisis stage and the government efforts in knowledge management efforts will form the critical last part in documenting the crisis communication of Kerala government during Covid-19 crisis.

7 | DISCUSSIONS

The government of Kerala was successful in both crisis communications management and stakeholder reaction management. Centralized crisis control and communication helped in identifying, collecting, and analyzing relevant information. The knowledge thus generated was used for effective decision-making, and timely shared with the stakeholders (crisis knowledge management). The government's communication efforts (both the talk and the walk) positively influenced the stakeholder perception management and the crisis control efforts. Through effective public communication, Kerala's government achieved three strategic objectives espoused by communication

specialists (Sturges, 1994). Firstly they were able to deliver the right 'instructing information' to cope physically with the crisis. The instructing information was responsible for one of the quickest behavioral changes, seen in recent times, of social distancing and improved personal hygiene, which helped control the virus spread (Sinha & Suresh, 2020). Secondly, effective delivery of 'adjusting information' helped the stakeholders cope with the crisis, be it frontline health workers putting their life at risk to serve the patients, a policeman ensuring lockdown, or the general public subjecting themselves to social isolation. Lastly, by highlighting the government's concern regarding the crisis and measures taken to alleviate the same, the government could enhance its reputation.

The government's public communication's key success was getting through their side of the story, which prevented alternate framing by third parties, ensuring better message acceptance. The current Covid-19 crisis was of the victim type (Where the government was the victim of a crisis of not their creation) and the state government was in no way attributed the responsibility for the same. The government used a secondary response strategy of bolstering (bypassing primary response strategies); it highlighted the government healthcare system's positive work for effectively controlling the earlier Nipah outbreak of 2018. The bolstering ensured the legitimacy of government communication and actions and improved message diffusion and acceptance. The fact that the state has high literacy rates, good public healthcare, higher economic affluence, and overall human development also favored the government. At this stage of the crisis, we can reasonably argue that good crisis communication and crisis management have created more of an opportunity than a threat for Kerala's government and helped them create an image of being a strong and decisive government. Effective crisis management and communication efforts have achieved three objectives for the state. First, it has resulted in the stakeholders' quick mobilization and imparting behavior change (Sinha & Suresh, 2020). Secondly, such stakeholder involvement has resulted in one of the lowest fatality rates, high recovery rate, low test to positive ratio, reproduction number (of 0.8, 95.8, 1.4, & 1.05, respectively), the best among all Indian states (Singh & Singh, 2020) (PRS Legislative Research, 2021). Third, the success has resulted in the enhancement of the state's reputation internationally (Masih, 2020), (BBC, 2020), (Talha, 2020) (Wikipedia, 2020a).

8 | LIMITATIONS

Like any research, the current study is also not without its limitations. The principal limit is that the study looks at the Kerala government's crisis communication efforts during the first wave of the crisis between January and June 2020. Such a limit has been deliberately applied to restrict the study's temporal scope because the pandemic shows no signs of abatement the world over with no possible solution in sight to tackle the same. Authorities world-over, be it government or healthcare, have issued warnings about the second wave. Parts of Europe and the United States face a surge in daily cases beyond the

first wave's peak daily numbers. The central ministry of health has already issued a national warning on the impending second wave and has advised the state governments to improve preparedness. In India, the second wave has already started in states like Kerala and Delhi, with new cases well above the first wave daily numbers. The rest of the country is moving into the next waves quickly, with cases spiking across major states (Express Web Desk, 2021, https://indianexpress.com).

Another limitation of the current study is that it incorporates a third party perspective and investigates the subject through published materials reporting and reflecting the impact of the Kerala government's crisis management efforts, including crisis communication. Considering the original research time, the first wave between January and June 2020, it was impossible to include a direct investigation of stakeholders in the research due to social and physical restrictions. However, this might be a blessing in disguise as the range of published material available on the subject is so vast that any direct investigation technique would have found it almost impossible to match the width.

9 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The second wave covid-19 numbers are higher than the first wave for the state, a trend seen across most geographies where the second wave has begun. The Kerala government's communication efforts and strategy have not been changed. The centralized communication efforts under the CM's leadership are still underway. The message comprehension and penetration still high but effectiveness low. Newer confounding factors have emerged contributing to the second wave (Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2021)). One of the critical factors was the return of the state's migrants. 10.61 lakh people have returned to the state between May and October 2020 (Radhakrishnan & Sen, 2021). Such largescale inward migration has put undue pressure on the public health system, which had to relax the original medical protocols of isolation, containment, surveillance, and quarantining; to accommodate the large inflow of migrants from high-risk states. Also in play was the 'lockdown' exhaustion and subsequent festivities coinciding with the various 'unlock' dates. The relaxations in lockdowns were overused, resulting in increased infections. Another factor contributing to the second wave was low threat appraisal (Witte et al., 2001). A low threat appraisal develops when the targets perceive a low chance of susceptibility or severity of the disease. Under such circumstances, message efficacy reduces even when comprehension and penetration are high. Kerala had a low case fatality rate of 0.34%, which has been far less than the national and global average of 1.51%–2.94%, respectively (Wikipedia, 2020b) (Singh & Singh, 2020) (PRS Legislative Research, 2021). The low fatality statistics induced low threat perception, leading to the message rejection in the second stage.

Effective crisis management is fast becoming a critical component of governance due to the increase in various types of crises faced by governments across the world. Effective crisis management will

involve developing appropriate crisis management institutions, proper strategies and protocols, successful knowledge management initiatives, and crisis communication capabilities. Given that the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic across the world is continuing, it will be beneficial to extend all Covid-19 related studies, including the current one, to include the later stages and expand our understanding of the crisis management efforts and their impacts. The present study adds to the existing body of crisis communication knowledge by synthesizing successful government communication efforts. The current Kerala government's crisis communication (Figure 1) can be used as a proxy by other governments and their institutions while developing proper crisis management and communication strategy in the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have no conflict of interest of any kind.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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