ХОРОШЕЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ

ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКАЯ СТАТЬЯ

Система государственного управления и качество государственных услуг в Индии в неспокойные времена: вызовы и решения

ПРАБХАТ КУМАР ДАТТА[a]
АЛЕКСАНДР ПЕТРОВИЧ КОЧЕГУРА[b]
a Калькуттский университет
b Российская академия народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте Российской Федерации

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Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются особенности современной системы государственного управления в Индии, роль и функции государственных служащих, их взаимодействие и отношения с политиками. Выделены существующие основные проблемные области и предложены определенные «корректирующие» действия для преодоления существующих трудностей и повышения эффективности национальной бюрократии, в частности, ее способности предоставлять своевременные и более качественные государственные услуги. Результаты и выводы выполненного исследования в значительной степени основаны на анализе деятельности индийских государственных служащих в нынешних административных и политических условиях, в частности, на региональном и местном уровнях. Колониальное наследие государственной службы все еще дает о себе знать в эту быстро меняющуюся эпоху глобализации. Именно в этом контексте реформа государственной службы представляет собой наиболее существенный элемент процесса развития системы надлежащего управления (good governance).

Исследование в значительной степени сфокусировано на получивший международное признание опыт региональной администрации штата Керала по успешной мобилизации граждан, бизнеса и чиновников низового уровня, чтобы противостоять воздействию пандемии. Относительный успех штата Керала в решении ключевых вопросов выживания десятков тысяч граждан в условиях пандемии во многом объясняется способностью региональных и местных органов власти поощрять и координировать главные заинтересованные стороны в их совместных усилиях по борьбе с коронавирусом, а также поддерживать инновационные инициативы снизу.

Ключевые слова: Индия, COVID-19, государственное управление, бюрократия, гражданское общество
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India's system of public administration and delivery of public services in turbulent times: challenges and solutions

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRABHAT KUMAR DATTA[a]
ALEXANDER P. KOTCHEGURA[b]
a University of Calcutta
b Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration

Abstract: The paper explores the peculiarities of the current system of public administration in India, the role and functions of civil servants and their interface and relations with politicians. It delienates existing main problem areas and outlines certain "remedy" actions to overcome current difficulties and raise performance of the national bureaucracy, in particular – its ability to deliver timely and better quality public services. The findings and inferences of the accomplished research are largely based on the analysis of the performance of Indian civil servants in the current administrative and political setting, specifically at the regional and local levels. The colonial legacy of civil service still persists in this fast-changing era of globalization. It is in this context that civil service reform constitutes a quintessential element of the system of good governance.

The study focuses on the internationally recognized experience of the regional administration in Kerala State, focused on the successful mobilization of citizens, businesses and street level bureaucrats to withstand the impact of the pandemic. The relative success of Kerala in addressing key issues of survival for tens of thousands of citizens is largely explained by the ability of the regional and local governments to encourage and coordinate stakeholders in their joint anti-coronavirus efforts and support innovative grassroots intiatives.

Keywords: India, COVID-19, public administration, bureaucracy, civil society
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Introduction

India started its republican journey on January 26, 1950, as a group of states having two tiers of government at the Union (national) and State (regional) levels on a road paved by the new constitution. In terms of powers, functions and resources the Union has dominance over the State level. The country is currently divided into 28 states.

There are two constitutionally ordained recruiting agencies for the civil servants at two levels. Indian Administrative Service officers recruited by the Union Public Service Commission are posted at two levels and hold a pre-eminent position in the administrative system of the country [Vaishnav, Khosla, 2016. P. 16].

But there is also a third tier in the governance structure of the country at the local level, which was introduced by the British colonial rulers, although the basics of this tier emerged long before the colonial rule began. It continued to exist in post-colonial India but did not have constitutional approval until 1992 and its functioning was largely dependent on the will of the state governments as constitution makers left this subject to the states. Thus, currently there are three constitutionally mandated tiers of governance in India, although the third tier is not equally vibrant in all the states because of the differential views on local governance of the state governments led by different political parties.

The specifics of public administration landscape in India

Urban India is largely ruled by democratically elected urban local bodies where the administrative officers of either the Union or State governments do not play a leading role, because India has adopted political executive model in local governance. There is a considerable control of the state government over them. But in rural India the role of civil servants is more visible. The lowest administrative unit where there is significant presence of the state civil service officers is called a 'block'. A state is administratively divided into districts and districts are further subdivided into sub-divisions and blocks. Thus, there are two parallel structures, bureaucratic and democratic, except at the sub-divisional level. But while the bureaucratic structure of governance ends at the block level, the democratic structure extends further to a cluster of villages where bureaucratic presence is very limited [Mishra, 2001. P. 216].

At the state and local levels there are two sets of officers drawn from the Union (national) and State (regional) Services. Although there is a significant presence of the State Service officers in state administration, the Indian Administrative Service officers hold a preeminent position. In most of the states they are the heads of district administration and hold the highest position in the state administrative headquarters located at the capital city of the related state.

Evidently, the union or the national government can keep an eye on the state administration and may exercise some amount of control through its own officers. There had been occasions when the union government and the state governments had opposing views when the former wanted to establish contact with its officers posted at the field by passing the state governments. It emerged as a major problem causing strains in intergovernmental relationships when the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi decided to meet with the All-Indian Service Officers posted in the local districts to promote what was called responsive administration, bypassing the elected government in the states. This meeting was convened at a time a number of state governments was run by parties other than the party to which the Prime Minister belonged. There were cases when the state government directed its officers not to attend meetings held at the Union Government. It had caused "bad blood" between the Union and the State governments run by different political parties.

Bureaucratic autonomy in the routine administrative work from political masters is a desirable objective of any liberal democratic government. A close study of the rules of business tend to show that bureaucratic autonomy at the lower rung of the ladder is doubly restricted by top-down administrative monitoring and political interference. This has dangerous implications in times of crisis as it happened following the outbreak of COVID-19. It led to bureaucratic indecision. In times of crisis the study has shown that the bureaucratic response to crisis or disaster situations where neither the timelines nor outcomes are clear, is often inadequate [Singh, 2020. P. 23]. The bureaucracy tends to follow the rules srtictly and prefers to avoid taking risks. It has other harmful consequences because there remain the chances of deterioration in the delivery of public services.

It is neither possible nor desirable to insulate bureaucracy exclusively from political control in a democratic system of government. In liberal democracies safeguards are provided in the Constitution itself to ensure bureaucratic autonomy in the administrative work. But it assumes alarming proportion when political executives step out of the limit set by the Constitution and try to give directions to the administrators by writing them down in files. In the developing countries like India, it sometimes becomes endemic. But political interference cannot be solely attributed to the lack of adequate legal protection and safeguards for the bureaucracy. It may partly be attributed to the lack of required administrative and political culture and tradition. A strong desire on the part of some civil servants for a suitable and lucrative posting and the lurking fear of being transferred to insignificant posts and far-flung districts drives them to develop personal intimacy and cultivate personal relationships with politicians who make use of them for promoting personal and political agendas [Mishra, 2001. P. 214]. Thus, there has developed *quid pro quo* and a sort of an unholy nexus between politics and administration. It becomes prominent when the question of selecting the beneficiaries for the delivery of public services takes place. This is more widespread at the local level where the civil servants have to work much closer with the political executives and party leaders. It appears there has emerged a breeding ground for potential administrative and political corruption. A recent study has demonstrated that organizational and social proximity to political decision makers translates into higher political pressures or influences [Sneha et al., 2021. P. 63]. It cuts at the roots of bureaucratic neutrality and stands in the way of good governance. It reduces the chances for improvement when the party or a coalition of parties continue to rule for a longer period of time.

Transfers of officers controlled by the political masters hang over the heads of the members of the bureaucracy as Damocle's swords. Disruptive transfers have negative impact

on performance. One study has shown that arbitrary transfers lead to short tenures at each post, and it reduces, in turn, effectiveness [Krishnan and Somanathan, 2017. P. 351]. There is also evidence that transfers are used as political instrument [Iyer and Mani, 2008. P. 8]. Having analyzed data from 1980 to 2012 they have concluded that average probability of transfer of an officer every year is 53 %. In terms of the percentage of transfers after elections, India does worse than all parliamentary systems except Italy. The matter drew the attention of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission which recommended repeal of the penal transfers as they have demoralizing effect and cause a drain on the exchequer. The threat of transfers and investigations make bureaucrats avoid decisions or take decisions in a risk averse manner [Rasul et al., 2017. P. 11]. It becomes a matter of serious concern in times of turbulence and calls for quick actions.

One of the ways to break this nexus between politicians and civil servants is to set up a body which is in charge of issues like postings and transfers, and where there will be no place for politicians (as has been the case with Electricity Regulatory Commission). But recent study has indicated that the politicians have devised ways of influencing the administrative officers through backdoors with the support of some pliable civil servants. If they are at the top of affairs, they extend favors to them in lieu of some other favors like good postings, employment of "near and dear ones" [Datta and Majumder, 2019. P. 429].

At the state level there are generally problems between the all-India service officers and the state service officers, more particularly in states where the pay difference is conspicuous and where the all-India officers try to rule them over by virtue of their position in the hierarchy. This information results from personal interaction with state level officers. Some of the state governments are trying to tame the disgruntled officers by giving them special advantages in terms of promotion and change of ranks. But the crux of the matter remains and this might make timely delivery of quality public services difficult in times of crisis. It is an internal administrative problem which should be addressed by the Administrative Reforms Commission.

The Shift of Policy in the 1990s

Post-colonial India initiated a developmental model in which the state was at the centre stage and bureaucracy was perceived as the instrument of building the nation. Keeping that in mind, the training modules for the bureaucrats were designed and administrative procedures and processes were framed accordingly. This policy underwent a fundamental shift in the1990s when India adopted a neo-liberal policy. The latter appears to be incongruous with both mindset and functional style of civil servants and with the administrative procedures and processes as manifested in rules, regulative processes etc. This mismatch has not been duly corrected yet. This might pose a big challenge for implementing neoliberal policy in which the bureaucrats are expected to work in line with the approaches and principles typical of business activities and in close unison with market and civil society organizations. The COVID-19 challenge has demonstrated that there is an urgent need of roping them in for arranging and delivering public services in no time and on an emergency basis.

The neo-liberal ideologues argue that in line with the New Public Management concept there should be frequent exchanges between the state officers and the market players in order to enable the former to learn from the latter about how public administration can be made more efficient and cost-effective [Kim, Kotchegura, 2017. P. 14]. The Indian state has accepted lateral entry from the successful players of the market and civil society, but there seems to be a very strong resistance from the bureaucracy to accept them as partners because they are outsiders. This conclusion is derived from personal experiences of one of the authors being an Advisor to the government in an Indian state. There seems to be a fundamental problem here. The lateral entry route does not seem to be an effective modus operandi for increasing efficiency of the public servants because in India the market is still to develop commitment for the developing the society at large. Besides, earning profits is more important for business than providing public services to the people.

Moreover, as one of the "godfathers" of the New Public Management concept, Professor Christopher Hood from the Oxford University evidenced in his landmark publication "What We Have to Show for 30 years of New Public Management: Higher Costs, More Complaints", the benefits of the practical implementation of the NPM concept are often obscure whereas the negative implications are tangible [Hood, Dixon, 2015. P. 266].

At the third sub-national level called the local level, there are two sets of civil servants: one set of officers is on deputation from the state civil services and another set of officers is recruited exclusively for the local government institutions. In some states there are separate service commissions for recruiting the officers and staff who hold offices in local bodies. The officers under the local bodies work under two kinds of control: control from the state government as they are on deputation and the overall control and guidance of the local bodies. Thus, they are also torn by two loyalties as in the case of the Indian Administrative Service officers working at the state levels. In all the local bodies, and more particularly in rural areas, there are some officers who play important roles. This has an inherent disadvantage in a multiparty democracy when the state government is under the control of one party and local government is controlled by another political party. There are instances when in such a situation the state governments try to exercise control for purely narrow partisan reasons. This creates tensions between the local bodies and the state government causing inconvenience to the local citizens who are the at the receiving ends of the public services. And in the times of crisis, it may have far-reaching adverse consequences.

After the amendment of the Constitution in 1992, the local government has assumed more importance because of its new constitutional status. An attempt has been made to empower local government financially by providing for separate Finance Commission at the state level. In some states separate budgetary allotment is made to local government to enable them to function with some amount of autonomy. But it has not been done in most of the states, and it negatively affects the delivery of appropriate public services and creation of infrastructures in keeping up with local needs and demands. Added to it is the problem of legislation as a large number of states continue to follow the old legislations with some changes here and there

to make them conform to the requirements of the constitutional mandate. The earlier legislations were framed with a view to ensure effective state control over the local governments, which were conceived earlier as agencies of the state governments. As a result, the old ghost haunts despite the fact that the constitutional amendment mandates to create local bodies as institutions of self-government and instruments of planning for economic development and social justice [Datta, Majumdar, 2018. P. 430].

As a result of amending the Constitution, the local government is now a sort of cabinet government, but the local level politicians tend to forget it because of their long practice in which the political executives used to have the upper hand. This leads to situations of disorientation and conflict delaying the delivery of public services. In one case, state government had appointed a Municipal Service Commission to get all the issues emerging out of the amendment of the Constitution examined and respective solutions elaborated. But the report which comprised useful recommendations has been gathering dust for more than a decade and the political executive seemed to have failed to accept the changed reality. The report has not even been made public.

Addressing the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic

Given the structure of the Indian administrative system along with its concomitant complexities and the existence of multiparty democracy, it is often difficult to ensure good coordination and interface of all the officers under normal conditions. However, this has become possible during the pandemic as is evident from the empirical account of what happened in the states of Kerala and Odisha during the first phase of the pandemic. In the delivery of public services there was commendable convergence of activities which contributed to the relative success of these states in handling the COVID-19 outbreak.

The primary responsibility of the state to deliver public services gets greatly multiplied in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. In the battle against the virus, two coastal Indian states, Odisha (in the eastern coast) and Kerala (on the southern coast), have drawn the attention of the national and international media, in particular the Economist and Washington Post, as well as multilateral agencies like the World Bank. The *Economist* named Kerala's handling of the pandemic as "bargain abatement" with "stellar results", an allusion to successful containment involving very little expenditure. These two states have had experience of tackling natural disasters off and on and utilizing the decentralized structures and civil society organizations. Kerala had successfully met the NIPA-2 virus challenge. These lessons helped the administrative officials at three different tiers of governance to draw up a realistic COVID-19 protocol [Nileema, 2020. P. 9].

Kerala is a narrow strip of land between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, located in the southwest corner of India, it is home to 36 million habitants. Starting from the 1970s, Kerala has strongly pursued a social development strategy based on health and education, often called the 'Kerala Model of Development'. While lagging on indicators of industrial development, Kerala ranks highest in India on the Human Development Index. It has some unique advantages such as high rate of literacy, good health infrastructure created and maintained by the vibrant local government and active civil society-based organizations [Kutty, 2000. P. 105].

Allocating a specific percentage of the regional budget to the local administrative bodies has helped to concentrate on COVID-19 containment programs. A number of public health initiatives such as the "Ashraya program" provided Kerala with an upper hand in addressing COVID-19 related threats.

The state government of Kerala launched an application called GoK-Kerala. It sends COVID-19 updates and travel information via phone notifications, and via SMS to ordinary phones as nearly half of the population in India does not have smart phones. These messages are delivered both in English and in Malayalam, the local language. And the entire work was successfully handled by the elected officials and professional bureaucrats who joined forces. The Kerala development model based on horizontal coordination and regular interaction could make it possible easily [Radha et al., 2020. P. 5028].

Kerala installed low-cost portable sample collection booths at the instance of the district administration. The district officers were inspired by the similar experiences in South Korea. Little more than a phone booth, these *Walk-in Sample Kiosks* or WISKs have a glass front, with fixed extended gloves attached, through which a healthcare worker from inside the cubicle collects samples. The fully contactless collection process takes about 5 minutes, maintaining all social distancing norms.

The higher-level government officials with active support of the elected officials at the state and local level could motivate local bodies to work together with the local officials, NGOs and public institutions like schools. The local bodies set up local co-ordination committees. Most of them had created WhatsApp groups which were very helpful in disseminating information and holding discussions about the on-going work on a daily basis. Some of the local bodies had developed on-line websites which played an important role in procuring e-pass to facilitate delivery processes. A pre-existing broadcasting system involving the mobile phones/telephones of all the households was also used to disseminate information and awareness by some urban local bodies. Mobile apps were also used by local bodies to track the movements of quarantined persons beyond a set limit to prevent violation of quarantine guidelines and further spread of the infection [Tandon, 2020. P. 3].

The local government at the appropriate level had taken special care of the ailing patients who were offered free and regular transportation for their treatment. The local bodies arranged telemedicine for the senior citizens. Quarantine facilities were arranged at educational institutions' buildings such as engineering colleges or at premises provided by welfare organizations. The COVID-19 management committee constituted by the local government used to oversee the work of these COVID-19 Care Centers [Radha et al., 2020. P. 5031].

The local body had trained a large number of volunteers who were very useful in reaching out to the home quarantined people in needed services at their doorstep. A recent study [Choolayil, Putran, 2020. P. 7] had mentioned their role in a district where large number of people quarantined themselves at home. Some local bodies conducted classes to dispel from their minds the stigma and myth related to COVID-19.

The local government institutions where there are elected and unelected officials, organized meetings with farmers to

motivate them to extend their support in running community kitchens which proved to be very effective. These community kitchens were maintained by the local women's groups which work under the larger umbrella called Kudumbashree, the membership of which is open to all adult women. It consists of a three-tier structure with Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) as primary level units, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the local government level.

During the month of March 2020, the state experienced a significant shortage of life saving resources. Kudumbashree groups rose to the occasion and helped to launch local production of masks and extended support to the frontline institutions like medical service corporation, district medical officers, private and government hospitals. Pharmacy shops also became the stakeholders of Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree formed fairly large numbers of WhatsApp groups to educate their members about anti-Covid requirements and measures. The information was sent to NHG groups via this platform. This platform was also used for sending posters and other positive communications to all through social media.

Kudumbashree through its *balasabha* (the forum formed for the children of NHG members) designed and implemented various activities in on-line mode. They organised different competitions for children like drawing, photography, Tick-Tok video making, dubmash, craft from waste, online magazine making, book review etc. and the *balasabha* resource persons occasionally called the children and enquired about them. The gender desk Snehalata opened by the Kudumbashree groups provided counseling services to the children and another outfit Snehahit extended support to women and children who fell victims of domestic violence and other atrocities.

In another case, a local district administration developed a program called "Do something during CORONA". The central point of the program was a stay-at-home talent competition. At 10 o'clock each morning, the district's Public Relations Department had released a post about the daily activities on various social media platforms and competition entries for that day were accepted until 6 pm. On several days, more than 1,000 families participated in the competition – singing, dancing, creating art, displaying their body strength or decorating their homes. It may sound small, but it brings local communities together during isolating times and ensures mutual support at local level.

In their search to win the support of the entire society, the local authorities and the local government officials could collaborate with local colleges and schoolteachers who expressed interest in helping to contain COVID-19. They guided the production of sanitizers with their technical knowledge. The local authorities were successful in mobilizing the local shops and merchants to help them provide home delivery of foods and medicines [Biju, 2020. P. 121].

Inspired by the government policy to involve the entire society, the two sets officials decided to motivate the younger citizens, and this led to the appearance of Sannadha Sena. Sena was a sort of community volunteer. It was thought that their services would be primarily utilized for providing food and other essentials to the target groups during lockdown. And significantly the members came from across different political parties and the officials quickly arranged their training, thanks to the cooperation they received from the local bodies.

The experts are of the opinion that an orchestrated decentralized response system comprising the state government, local government, Kudumbashree, health system and citizens demonstrated solidarity and social capital at its best and helped a great deal in controlling the pandemic during the first two waves of COVID-19 infections in the state [Chathukulam, Tharamangalam, 2021]. The state government set up integrated control and facilitation centers under the control of the officers and doctors to keep watch on home isolated and COVID-19 care center patients via phone calls, based on which swift follow up actions were taken. These centers actively provided and arranged teleconsultations using various telemedicine platforms. These command centers acted as a bridge between the field teams and district administrations and coordinated management of various apps and help lines.

Conclusion

Throughout recent decades India's advance on the road to removing traces of the colonial past in its public administration system and developing a modern system of governance has been marked by modest progress, setbacks and noteworthy solutions generated in times of crisis (e.g., the pandemic).

The reform efforts geared to build a modern administrative system in India have encountered serious difficulties caused particularly by deeply entrenced traditions of favoritism, patronage, dogmatism and political interference widely spread at all levels of national, regional and local bureaucracies. One of the "wicked" problem areas is an informal relationship between politicians and civil servants, which is sustained by the outdated legislation and administrative practices stemming in the colonial past.

Nonetheless the perfomance of the administrative structures differs greately across the Indian states, which is particlarly evident during turbulent times and which can be explained by the extent of "maturity" of a particular regional or local bureaucracy and the scale of its cooperation with the central government and local civil society organisations.

The presented empirical account highlights the experience of one of the best performing states in India during the pandemic, which attracted national and international attention. The accomplished analysis allows to conclude that top-down centralized intervention is required to prepare a crisis resolution roadmap for the whole nation. The Indian state had played that role by falling back on a colonial Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and National Disaster Amendment Act, 2005, which empowered the state to declare national lockdown. In a turbulent situation of this sort the National government has to come forward to steward the country with its financial and non-financial resources. In a multiparty democracy like India, torn by different divisive social and political forces and various political parties at the state levels, it would have been difficult to arrive at consensus quickly. Conflict-free interaction of political parties is still not fully developed and neither the civil society organizations nor the citizens themselves are so organized or enlightened as to put pressure on the local governments to arrive at consensus. Under such circumstances the national government has to

play the role of a whistleblower and an effective coordinator. But the local state government is nearer to the people, which have to fight this battle.

The study demonstrates that the key to success of Kerala in containing the first wave of the COVID-19 effectively lies in its being able to mobilize the entire society and create a good nexus between the state and citizens. The relative success of those actors able to mobilize state and local resources jointly suggests that due consideration should be given to decentralized governance and response at the regional (state) level [Shringere, Seema, 2020]. It was the trust of citizens in the government that contributed significantly to the popular and spontaneous acceptance of the measures initiated by the central and regional governments. The vibrant decentralized government institutions and horizontal partnership between the elected representatives and professional civil service coupled with proactive role of the civil society groups contributed to this success. This is a practical lesson confirming that the state is still very important for the people of developing countries. Thus, the Kerala's experience challenges the foundations of the concept of neoliberal state in the context of developing countries and reaffirms that political decentralization with active civil society are the necessary tools to promote effective public service delivery in these countries.

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Информация об авторе:

ПРАБХАТ КУМАР ДАТТА, доктор наук, профессор
Калькуттский университет (Индия, 700073, Западная Бенгалия, Калькутта, ул. Колледж, 87/1).
E-mail: dattaprabhat@gmail.com

АЛЕКСАНДР ПЕТРОВИЧ КОЧЕГУРА, доктор философских наук, вице-президент Азиатской ассоциации государственного управления (AAPA), профессор кафедры государственного и муниципального управления Института государственной службы и управления
Российская академия народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте Российской Федерации (Российская Федерация, 119571, Москва, проспект Вернадского, 82). E-mail: alex.koch2016@mail.ru

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Information about the author:

PRABHAT KUMAR DATTA, Doctor of Sci., professor
University of Calcutta (87/1, College Str., Kolkata, West Bengal 700073, India). E-mail: dattaprabhat@gmail.com

ALEXANDER P. KOTCHEGURA, Doctor of Sci. (Philosophy), Vice President of the Asian Association for Public Administration (AAPA), Professor of the Department of State and Municipal Services, Institute of Public Administration and Civil Service
Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (82, Vernadsky Prospekt, Moscow, 119571, Russian Federation). E-mail: alex.koch2016@mail.ru

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