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Local Governance and the Pandemic: A Critical Analysis of the Role of Village Panchayats in India

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Abstract

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in India, the government of India at every level promoted several measures to tackle the pandemic situation in the country. The prime minister realized the importance of local governance at the grassroots level and directed them to take measures as required at the local level. Throughout the pandemic, an enormous number of delegates functioned as a massive force at the lowest level of government. It is worth mentioning that thousands of village panchayats have committed to working carefully to prevent the spread of coronavirus inside their panchayats and to meet their villagers' food and medical needs. The panchayats played a significant role in tracing who had returned to the village and whom they had contacted, which was made possible by the help of panchayats. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments gathered data. They provided it to state agencies to formulate measures to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus in provincial areas of their districts. Panchayats also played a critical role in agricultural activities during the COVID-19 crisis, assuring labor supply and establishing a food supply chain in villages. During the pandemic, many panchayats launched WhatsApp groups and used other digital tools, such as Google spreadsheets, to raise awareness and provide essential services. COVID-19 has ushered in a renewed focus on health, sanitization, and abundant employment opportunities in rural India. Additionally, the union government has authorized panchayats to use the 14th Finance Commission Fund to implement COVID-19 emergency measures. This research article discusses the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of village panchayats in tackling the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, village panchayats, local governance

Introduction

The COVID pandemic's second wave was rapidly spreading into rural areas. Rural areas accounted for almost 40% of all cases, and infected persons living on the outskirts of towns went to large numbers of local hospitals. The local government's responsibility is growing significantly under the control of COVID-19. In the fight against COVID-19, India's rural local governments have to take the lead. India's Prime Minister spoke to thousands of elected delegates from Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) via video conferencing and addressed the importance of panchayats in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. India has 2,56,103 PRIs with around 31.00 lakh elected members, 14.39 lakh of which are women representatives, per data from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Many laborers from different cities returned to their villages during the pandemic's critical second wave, and panchayats' responsibilities have been further enhanced. Panchayats have health workers, such as ASHA and ANM, and local community members, such as teachers and self-help groups, who work closely with the community. Panchayats are critical for tracking and halting the virus's spread in rural

areas. The crisis has emphasized panchayats' critical role in managing complicated duties, generating resources, and shouldering obligations that no other government entity can.

Objective of the Study

This research article studies the importance of village panchayats in controlling the COVID-19 spread in the pandemic. This study will include suggestions for better cooperation between upper-level and local governments while working during the pandemic. Studying the governmental policy measures of the village panchayats and their implementation, as well as examining the performance of the responsibilities assigned by the upper-level governments to the village panchayats for managing COVID-19-related issues, are also part of the objective of the study.

Methodology

This study is a mixed study based on both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative work is based on secondary data from books, journal articles, newspapers, and internet sources. The qualitative data have been collected through

fieldwork based on the interview method, open-ended discussion with a focus group, and Observational Rural Appraisal.

Literature Review

Panchayats are India's ancient, autonomous democratic institutions. Description of panchayats is found in the ancient Indian text 'Rigveda' in the form of 'Sabhas' and 'Samities'. Panchayat means assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. The philosophy of Panchayati Raj is deeply steeped in the tradition and culture of rural India (Vani & Ravindranath, 2017) [22]. Panchayati Raj provided a system of self-governance at the village level. Panchayat Raj Institutions is the grass root unit of self-government. It has been declared as the vehicle of socio-economic transformation in rural India. These village panchayats' practical and meaningful functioning would depend on the active involvement, contribution, and participation of its male and female citizens (Jena, n. d.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clearly seen that citizens of almost each village panchayat had involved, contributed, and participated in controlling COVID-19 spread and managing the infected people. Different groups like youth clubs and self-help groups secured the supply and distribution of dry ration at the doorstep. The village community monitored the entry and exit points of the village through scrutiny of the inward and outward mobility of people. The people who went out for procurement of essential commodities were sanitized at the entry point back to their locations. Hand wash and soap were provided adequate water to the people returning to the village. A community quarantine center with appropriate provisions for food, shelter, personal hygiene, and protection at the Gram Panchayat level was provided. Separate toilets and accommodations were made for male and female inmates. Unorganized workers registered with Building and other construction workers' Boards were paid a Sum of Rs. 1500 each at their doorstep to augment their family income and protection from vulnerabilities during the lockdown/shutdown period. The situation became more sensitive and delicate because of the return of vast numbers of migrant workers to their native places. Many state governments made necessary arrangements in coordination with the national government for their safe passage to their locations of proximity.

In contrast, in coordination with the district administration and others, Gram Panchayats arranged their safe passage to the respective villages. Local Gram Panchayats were also vigilant and actively engaged local communities to serve cooked food to migrant workers. Door-to-door supplies of vegetables and groceries were also procured by the community groups in the village (Pattayat, 2020) [14].

COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that touches every aspect of every society, and collective responses are the need of the hour to embrace the broad range of needs and requirements on a global scale. Kerala, the narrow stretch of green land snuggled on the foothills of the Western Ghats, has developed an incomparable model for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. Kerala faced COVID-19 by raising its flagship programs like the *Break the Chain Campaign* and *Break the Chain 2.0 campaign* with the hashtag "*Don't spit, or you will fail*." The

commendable role of the Panchayati Raj institutions in the State is much applaud able. Psycho-social initiatives like "Orakatta Oppamundu" (Not alone, you have company) Community mobilization programs like kitchens make the Kerala Model more vindicating and dynamic. The strategies crafted and portrayed in the Kerala Model in tackling COVID-19 will continue and reverberate globally as they may be conceiving and reimagining the post-COVID era (Varughes & Luke, n. d.). In the health sector, Kerala is often applauded as an example of the successful use of Local Self Governments (LSGs) in the health care system across the State (Nabae, 2003) [8]. All the primary and secondary healthcare institutions (except medical colleges and regional hospitals) are under the control of LSGs in their function. The role of LSGs in Kerala in management and strategic responses to fight COVID-19 is remarkable in coordinating all sectors like health workers, police, public workers, Kudumbasree workers, and drivers, volunteers together; LSGs have taken stringent steps to quarantine people with any sign of fever cough or difficulty in breathing immediately and need to avoid close contact with others, avoid their eyes, nose, and mouth touching with clean or disinfect their house and surrounding in certain intervals (Vimal & Chandran, 2020) [24]. The innovative strategy for controlling COVID-19 spread makes Kerala Model highly admirable. Volunteers of Village Panchayats have played a vital role in assessing the need for relief measures delivered by panchayat-level committees. Panchayats in Kerala, Rajasthan, Odisha, and Jharkhand identified individuals and households outside of government welfare systems and in need of social support. In Kerala, the panchayat president explained here how financially distressed households approached elected panchayat leaders directly, who were able to discover governmental financing or social assistance systems to assist the home (Thirupathi, 2022) [21]. The success of a District Administration in controlling the spread of COVID-19 depends upon the performance of village panchayats in rural areas. A study of the Alirajpur district during the COVID-19 pandemic showed how village panchayats contributed to controlling the spread of COVID-19 and made their district perform at the top in the State. Alirajpur is counted among India's poorest districts and is located in the Malwa-Nimar region of Madhya Pradesh. Alirajpur lags in most social indicators, notably education, marking it as the district with India's lowest literacy rate at 37.22%, compared to the national average of 64.8%. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has given the district another surprising distinction, with six identified cases through the lockdown period. After that, Alirajpur emerged as the district with one of India's lowest cases per capita. The efficient coordination between arms of local government put in place by the 'Panchayati Raj' system has made Alirajpur a remarkable example of efficient governance in the face of turmoil despite poor economic and social indicators. Alirajpur provides keen insights into how decentralized governance and targeted action by local governments can provide a means to overcome limited resources and local challenges caused by national and global events (SAIGAL, 2020) [18]. The table below provides an overview of the activities and campaigns organized at the district and village levels in Alirajpur.

Table 1: Localized Village-level Campaigns in Alirajpur (March 2020- June 2020)

No. of door-to-door visits by health workers and volunteers	43355
No. of handbill distributions	20500
No. of hoardings put for awareness	300
No. of wall writings	735
No. of mike announcements	8640
No. of awareness camps organized	368
Total quantity of sanitizer (in liters) distributed	6122
No. of masks distributed	219605
No. of health camps organized	29
Village-level partial and complete lockdowns ("Gaobandi")	527
No. of volunteers employed	3100

Imposing a National lockdown nationwide takes work from a state government. India is a diversified nation, where each state has its own culture and specific lifestyles among its residents. At the start, many states needed help to implement it in their state at the rural level. A study presents how the State government of West Bengal has utilized the gram panchayats to implement the imposed lockdown. The government had assigned all gram panchayats within the state to implement lockdown and social distancing norms in cooperation with the police services so it could be easy. The state government had given specific tasks to panchayats, such as creating awareness of the COVID-19 disease and monitoring the home quarantine of those at risk of spreading the infection, preparing masks, and supplying the various government departments. Panchayats were monitoring the distribution of food grains to children through Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Gram panchayat members were involved in making and distributing personal protective equipment such as masks and hand sanitizers. Panchayat representatives are very well known about the condition of the villagers who are daily wage workers who migrated to cities in search of jobs, where women are pregnant and need immediate medical access, and where old couples live alone. So, whenever any crisis comes, gram panchayats can jump on it and help people who are in need. In West Bengal, the state government initiated mass sensitization and awareness generation events on vaccination through the gram panchayats at the rural level to ensure the maximum number of COVID vaccinations (Paul, 2022) [15].

Significant Roles Played by the Village Panchayats during the COVID-19 Pandemic-

Distribution of Face Mask and Sanitizer

In the second wave of COVID-19 virus, a large population from the cities reached the villages, so there was a need to control the COVID-19 virus. In such a situation, reaching every person with a face mask and sanitizer was challenging. It would not have been possible without the cooperation of the Panchayats. Therefore, various state governments provided face masks and sanitizers at their total cost to the panchayats so that these things reached every villager at the right time without any hassle. Similarly, the Rajasthan government has allocated Rs 50,000 to about 11,000 village panchayats, Rs 1 lakh to 295 panchayat samitis, and Rs 1.5 lakh to 33 zilla parishads for the distribution of masks, sanitizers, and gloves in rural regions. The overall cost of this work was expected to be Rs. 60 crore. Panchayati Raj institutions utilized this money effectively to provide hygienic items like hand sanitizer, masks, and gloves. The fund was given to

Panchayati Raj Institutions to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading to the communities. Personnel and public representatives assisting in the fight against the COVID-19 virus in rural regions have been directed to get sanitation items from Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Workers on the Frontline and their Responsibilities

Frontline health workers such as the Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (from now on, ANM), women's Self-Helping Groups (from now on, SHGs), accredited social health activists (from now on, ASHA), and local community members-for example, teachers-were advised to collaborate with the village panchayats. This whole was accomplished by forming a committee at the village or panchayat level. The ANM and ASHA workers were the frontline disease prevention and control functionaries (Tiwary, 2021) [12]. Village Panchayats select these workers, hired by the Indian government's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Their primary goal was establishing a detailed community healthcare plan in collaboration with the "Gram Panchayat's Village Health & Sanitation Committee. "These workers facilitate access to healthcare organizations by dispensing contraceptives, conducting immunization programs, and assisting with organizational births (Singh, 2020). They also promote basic sanitation and hygienic practices, learning about nutrition, available health services, and the importance of timely use of health and family welfare solutions. They serve as a bridge between marginalized communities and healthcare organizations in this way.

Initiatives in Response to Covid-19

Here are some examples of work done by local institutions

a) Related to Disease Control

- i). Raise public awareness through the use of loudspeakers, the distribution of posters and booklets, the organization of village gatherings, and the creation of WhatsApp groups.
- ii). To establish and manage quarantine centers on a local level.
- iii). To register migrant workers entering from metropolitan areas and to set up required quarantine.
- iv). To sterilize and disinfect the areas near quarantine centers and villages.
- v). To ensure that the community's physical (social) distance rules are followed.
- vi). To distribute masks and hand sanitizer.
- vii). To monitor systems both at home and at quarantine centers.
- viii). To monitor the overall health of villages.
- ix). To refer to the district administration who exhibits symptoms.

b) Social Security

- i). To support food through the Public Distribution System (from now on, PDS).
- ii). To provide income support under MGNREGA (India's Labor Guarantee Act).
- iii). To run a community kitchen and produce homemade masks by SHGs.
- iv). To assist in acquiring and selling farm products by establishing market links.
- v). To ensure the continuation of agriculture and allied services by distributing agricultural inputs, seeds, and fertilizer.

- vi). Organize volunteers to help with food preparation and delivery to quarantine centers.

Activities of Various Self-Help Groups in Society

In India, women's self-help groups have risen to the unusual challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They supplied masks, sanitizers, and protective equipment to rural areas, organized community kitchens, combating misinformation, and even offered banking and financial services. SHGs women were creating facemasks, running community kitchens, distributing crucial food supplies, sensitizing people about health and sanitation, and countering misinformation in over 90% of India's districts, far from the spotlight of the metropolis. 20,000 SHGs in 27 Indian states have produced over 19 million masks, over 100,000 liters of hand sanitizer, and nearly 50,000 liters of hand wash (Sahu, 2022). These commodities have reached scattered populations because of centralized production, eliminating the need for sophisticated logistics and shipping. SHGs have set up over 10,000 community kitchens across the country to feed stranded employees, the impoverished, and the vulnerable due to the lockdown, which has resulted in many informal workers losing their jobs and food supply lines being interrupted in some locations. Women were also in charge of staffing help desks and distributing vital food supplies to the elderly and those who had been quarantined (Ahmad, 2020) ^[1].

Implementing MGNREGA in Enhanced Mode

The COVID-19 pandemic in India and the ensuing shutdown wreaked havoc on jobs and income throughout the country. The Indian government attempted to lessen the pandemic's impact on unemployment by introducing panchayat-level remedial initiatives. The government's flagship cash-for-work initiative, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act, was used to channel these relief measures (MGNREGA). During the pandemic, it raised the daily wage rate for workers from USD 2.44 (INR 182) to USD 2.70 (INR 202). The Indian government used this scheme to assist many jobless individuals, including migrant workers, who had returned to their communities. The government has made every effort to include as many people as possible in the MGNREGA program. The endeavor was made more difficult by the extremely high demand for jobs, and between April 1 and May 20, 2020, 3.5 million workers applied for jobs through the program in just 50 days.

In comparison, 1.5 million people registered for MGNREGA jobs in the 2019-20 fiscal year. In response to the increased demand, the government increased the number of developmental projects in each village panchayat. One of the scheme's most notable achievements was creating employment for rural women. Even though the Indian government requires a minimum of one-third involvement by women in MGNREGA, women comprised 53 percent of those hired under the program in the fiscal year 2020-21 (Singh, 2020). MGNREGA is also implemented by local panchayats, which must have at least half of its members be women. The government endeavored to absorb more people through the MGNREGA program, and village panchayats were instrumental in discovering and hiring migrant workers. Since the Panchayats did a good job, more labor was available during the pandemic. Under the initiative, project completion was substantially faster.

Awareness about COVID Vaccination

Initially, only a handful of people were vaccinated due to

misconceptions and poor awareness. Most of them were hesitant. Not only this, there was a time when people used to run away after seeing the COVID-Vaccine team and their motor van enter the river or used to throw stones at them. However, the 'Corona Jagrukta Dal' (awareness teams) of panchayat teachers and others counseled the villagers and dispelled their fears and myths. Now, it is an excellent day for us to realize that practically every eligible adult in the country has been effectively vaccinated, and they are better protected against the virus. Local health workers and specially constituted 'Corona Jagrukta Dal,' ASHA (community health workers), and Angadwadi staff at the panchayat level played a vital role in clearing up the myths and preparing their mindset to be vaccinated. Today, more than 100 crores of India's population has been vaccinated. The role of local government in this herculean task cannot be denied.

Arrangements of Quarantine Centers at Village

Panchayats in several states have been receiving returning migrant laborers at bus or train stations and providing transportation to transfer them directly to quarantine centers. As migrants return to their villages, they must be isolated to prevent the spread of the virus. Village panchayats have taken the lead in establishing local quarantine centers with toilets, drinking water, and food. This step also prevented migrants from hiding in their houses. Several village panchayats have already done this with the help of local nonprofit partners. They could also enlist the help of corporates in managing or funding these quarantine centers.

Generating Awareness among Communities and Checking Rumours

Village panchayats, along with local volunteers, nonprofits, SHGs, and other community-based organizations, should undertake awareness generation drives on the symptoms and preventive measures of COVID-19. Panchayats have been recording their information, tracking their travel routes and ailments. When violating the pandemic guidelines, panchayats are also responsible for filing a report with the police. Also, village panchayats can contain the spread of rumors and false information on social media by providing authentic information, reporting fake videos or news to the police, and encouraging the community to check information circulating on social media with the village panchayat. Block panchayat officers should enable such drives by providing locally-trained facilitators and community mobilizers (Foundation, 2020) ^[3]. The panchayat department of state governments should also support village panchayats by providing communication materials, enabling digitization of village panchayats, building their capacity through online courses, and so on. Several volunteer groups were formed across the panchayats to assist the panchayats during the pandemic, demonstrating how they had responded to the COVID-19 crisis with a volunteer army of 50,000 individuals. Panchayats have set the standard for shouldering pandemic responsibilities, and many best practices have emerged.

Discussion: Why the Role of a Village Panchayat is so important during a Pandemic?

As the world grapples with unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, India's state, and central governments have tried to step up to the task. Initially, governments at both levels lacked information and understanding regarding COVID-19 in particular and pandemic situations in general. The most vital lesson of

COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of active and efficient local government at the grassroots level. Strengthening local governance, leadership, communities, institutions, infrastructure, and resources is a prerequisite for all rapid and effective responses to any disaster. Village panchayats need accurate information, guidance, resources, capacities, and infrastructure before acting efficiently, confidently, and autonomously. The COVID-19 pandemic has also taught the nation to be self-reliant and self-dependent. Further, it has proved that the agricultural sector is the only sustainable sector that can protect the maximum number of people's lives in any situation. So, we could create a sustainable economy model through village panchayat, especially with a strong rural economy.

Village panchayats have an essential place in the socio-economic and political world of the nation's people because-

- People are very closely linked to PRIs, and they know how to receive precise local information by listening to the pulse of people.
- PRIs are deeply rooted in the communities in which they are elected; they are held accountable and responsible for critical public needs. Beyond all else, they are responsible to the public.
- PRIs are more approachable to the general public than distant officials because of their proximity to the people. The people directly choose Local governments and thus bear a more incredible feeling of obligation and identity toward them.

Panchayats can be critical in direct cash transfers for persons without bank accounts and requiring financial assistance.

Conclusion

India is a democratic country where most of the population lives in villages. The maximum and speedy welfare of the people is the paramount goal of any democratic country. However, the rural population, who had once migrated to the cities for employment, also returned to their respective villages during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such a situation, there was a sudden pressure on various state governments in the country to find a way to reach the necessary facilities, medicines, awareness, and practical implementation related to COVID-19 at the village level, where this population had gone back from various metropolitan cities. While this task proved to be very challenging for the state government due to the active role of the panchayats, this challenging task turned out to be very easy. Providing face masks and sanitizer to everyone, ration distribution through PDS, employment through MGNREGA, implementation of lockdown, and delivery of essential medicines for coronavirus could be possible at the ground level in time due to the active role of village panchayats. As seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, local government can serve as a model for implementing effective public health measures. The significance of panchayats in planning, implementing, and publicly delivering essential services in the COVID-19 crisis cannot be overstated, as evidenced by practices in several states. However, as part of the first installment of the 'United Grants' for 2021-22, the Union Finance Ministry awarded a massive sum of Rs. 8,923.8 crore to panchayats in 25 states for COVID-19 relief. However, such a phase may come again in the future, so there is a need for all state governments to focus on increasing the jurisdiction of the local government village panchayat and further strengthening it by linking it with additional finance. Village panchayat carries the forces and true spirit of

parliamentary democracy in India and sets splendid landmarks in the prevention and community protection of COVID-19. Engagement of village panchayat in the prevention and management of COVID-19 through community quarantine, temporary medical centers, and social isolation received huge applause. It was appreciated at the national and international levels.

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