



## ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYAT IN HANDLING POST-COVID MEASURES IN INDIA: AN EVALUATIVE STUDY

### Political Science

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### ABSTRACT

Dealing with globally spread Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 is a big issue for India, like most of the other countries of this world. Restrictions of lockdown have shattered various sections of our country. These sections need national attention with top priority to bring back normalcy. In this area, protecting health and livelihood of rural areas come as significant parts in a Covid protection measure. Here, we should particularly mention the role of *Gram Panchayat* without whom, this task would certainly be difficult to handle. Rural areas of India are still very backward if we compare them with our urbanized zones. In those remote villages, *Gram Panchayat* is the self-governance body that is functional to maintain safety and well-being of the rural people. Our Government has launched a number of arrangements and schemes in current years providing *Gram Panchayat* surplus and improved support for handling rural issues. In a crucial time as this Covid-19 pandemic, such initiatives and even more should be sanctioned for our *Gram Panchayats* boosting their efficiency to keep safe our rural population, make them properly aware about the deadly disease as well as ensure provisions and security to stabilize them. Issues, such as, migrant villagers and supporting their dropped economy are something that become their additional responsibilities. In our Evaluative Study, we have found exclusive methods in which our *Gram Panchayats* have worked to support all the above stated problems. We have identified certain innovative approaches applied as post-covid preventions measures in rural areas that can be further enhanced to deal similar crisis.

### KEYWORDS

Gram Panchayat, Covid-19 pandemic, Grass-root workers, Decentralization, Rural development,

#### 1. Hypothesis

This Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India' intends to identify the areas of shortcomings that are predominant in India's rural areas, particularly adverse at the time of Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the methodologies *Gram Panchayat* should endorse as their post-covid remedial measures.

#### 2. INTRODUCTION

Since 2019, our world, even after so much of advancement, once again is a poor victim of a global medical catastrophe - Covid-19 Pandemic. It is continuing to wreck our planet in 2021. India, like many other nations, has implemented its strongest strategies to protect our people and bring back stability in severely damaged segments, such as, economy, health, social life, education, global transportation, foreign policies, defence and other areas.

Based on its mode of transmission, Covid-19 is considered to be an urban disease where city people are at higher risk of getting infected. This theory was observed to be somehow valid at the time when the disease hit with its first wave in India. As part of globally advised precautionary measure, our Government too adopted nationwide 'Lockdown'. As a result, people in every part of our country had to stay inside their homes with limited access to the outside world for the purpose of essential requirements only. But, this procedure hugely disrupted businesses, productivities, jobs, education, public activities and national/international connectivity of our country.

Consequently, remote areas came under its affect. There are number of factors in which India lags behind significantly in terms of sufficiency of resources in many of its rural areas. At the time, when interconnectivity, supply and scope of income become restricted, these problems get obviously enlarged. Let's explain briefly about it here. Despite insufficiently equipped with medical or nutrition provisions, most of the undeveloped/underdeveloped rural areas of India escaped the first lash of Covid-19 wave. '*Gram Panchayat*', the self-governance body of rural India gets the credit here to organize and work actively in spreading awareness and provide adequate support to keep safe the villages.

Still, that was not a point of relief here. Risk of Covid-19 transmission became evident when large number of jobless people migrated back to their villages from cities. This issue led another set of major shortcomings that are currently the focal concern for *Gram Panchayat* as well as India's Central Ministry. In our Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India', we have selected those surveys, researches and analytical observations, where role of *Gram Panchayat* is discussed for its contribution in handling Covid-19 aftermath of rural areas. Before coming to our Literature Review discussions as given later, let us introduce the key affected rural areas that we concentrated for this Evaluative Study.

**Managing Health Precautions:** In many rural sides of India, it is unfortunate that even today, available medical help remains only at basic level. For any major health troubles people are to come to the cities for their treatment. Dealing with that critical shortcoming, *Gram Panchayat* teams have arranged for members to conduct foot survey of their zone to take down daily reports and provide medical support, immunization and other necessary provisions available. Let's say about some significant cases of prompt post-covid measures that are thoroughly explained later in the enlisted resources of our Literature Review.

A report of Lakshi Bhatia in TOI<sup>1</sup> says that ASHA workers of Maharashtra, the female community health service team are working extra hours with less payment to ensure proper Covid-19 protection, such as, awareness of social distancing, immunization, arrangement of isolation, measures of quarantine, periodic health report collection and others.

The returnee migrant issue is a big health rural problem that *Gram Panchayat* members have dealt with significant responsibility and command during lockdown time past year. To ensure post-covid protection and provide shelter, support and security to these migrants, local functionaries have established temporary migrant camps to quarantine them for a specified period, along with medical and all basic amenities, such as, beds, warmers, food, water, TV and sanitation facilities. In the report of Miganta Mohanty of our Literature Review, thorough description is given about this post-covid measure as done in Odisha in lockdown 2020.

Lakshi's Report<sup>1</sup> also says about some big achievements, such as, role of grass-root workers of Kerala that is confirmed by Dr Joy Elamon, director general, Keral Institute of Local Administration. There, *Gram Panchayat* health team have prepared Covid-19 prevention guidelines from May, 2020, including First Line Treatment Centres with 100 beds to attend mild and moderate patients. Not only that, they have kept arrangements for emergency too. Thorough precautions are made to block the spread of infections in any other parts of the State.

**Educating on Covid-19 Awareness:** To make villagers aware on Covid-19 facts and precautions, spreading timely awareness on Covid-19 is another prime work. For that, *Gram Panchayat* prepared their team of foot soldiers as a part of post-covid protection scheme, to make door-to-door survey. More than that, in other areas, such as, Pipradih panchayat, Covid workers have arranged Covid-19 prevention campaigns putting posters and giving public announcements.

Aid of social networking is also taken by the rural grass-root workers, such as, they have made whatsapp groups to stay correctly informed. In some areas, as mentioned in our Literature Review, plans are implemented for video conferencing, telephonic messaging/

telecounselling to establish contactless/distant communication with rural people conveniently, at the post-covid time when physical communication is restricted.

**Maintaining Supply of Provisions:** Teams of women self-help groups in many villages, such as, Rajasthan and Gujarat are providing every possible support, from making Covid-19 safety equipments, such as, masks, gloves, medical kits to cooking food for patients/vulnerable people/quarantined/isolated kids. They even made arrangements for emergency volunteers for this purposes. There are many NGOs and Social Workers who have actively joined in this operations and improved its capacity. Some such contributions are listed in our Literature Review.

Teams of community workers are engaged to ensure uniform distribution of essential provisions, such as, food, medical aids, safety and sanitization kits, to every individual in a zone, particularly the vulnerable groups, including, single women, old, disabled, isolated. In different rural areas, such as, Maharashtra, Odisha and Bihar, *Gram Panchayat* members have incorporated instant telephonic facilities, such as, SMS and whatsapp group features to make prompt communication and know about urgent needs and help of villagers.

**Ensuring Economic Safety:** This part is a sudden setback that occurred without any initial preparedness or anticipation. But, local functionaries handled reverse migration issue with their available methods and provisions. An important one is, role of MGNREGA that works for rural livelihood generation. Now, as said in one of the researches that is discussed later, this program needs importance and added features to be capable to support jobless migrants. Various re-skilling and micro-entrepreneurship programs are being arranged in these rural areas to open scope for such jobless migrants. States, like Rajasthan, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh<sup>2</sup>, have adapted alternate job options.

**Identification and Protection of Vulnerable Groups:** To secure health and security of vulnerable groups, such as, single women, aged people, isolated individuals, landless and disabled persons, community workers made regular visit to locate them and keep record during post-covid time. Communication is built with them through local volunteers and their health status is also checked periodically. To ensure safety and track the transfer of villagers, volunteers are arranged in village borders, such as, in Ranichuan Panchayat to record the visitors and restrict illegal transfers.

**Arrangement of Support and Funding:** In this mass crisis, local government needed sufficient fund to procure essential needs, such as, medical kits, safety equipments, basic supplies and others. For that, in some rural areas, Finance Commission Funds are utilized. In some States, like, Odisha and Punjab<sup>3</sup>, *Gram Panchayat* received Government financial support to handle the Covid crisis.

Once, we obtained these above stated post-covid protection records, next we searched for related surveys and researches done in this area to corroborate our Evaluative Study.

### 3. Objective

This Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India' is composed to emphasize the objective of sufficiently empowering India's *Gram Panchayats*, that is, they should be given more power and scope of flexibility to be able to handle rural problems under their control without any external dependencies, both during major crisis or normal days.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

To meet the objective of our Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India', we decided to proceed with multiple resource channels for collecting original and unadulterated information. Firstly, we interacted with the researchers and surveyors of this area who have done related works. With their suggestions and references, we started to search various reports, surveys, journals and research publication to prepare a substantial Evaluative Study on this subject based on latest authentic information and procedures that are being following in this procedure.

### 5. Literature Review

**1. Case Study by UNNATI (Organization for Development Educator), Gujarat Inter Agency Group and UNICEF (2020)** <sup>6</sup> conducted in rural areas of Gujarat to analyse the Covid-19 preventions response methods followed by frontline workers and

*Gram Panchayats* suggests about decentralization of grass-root governance in its conclusion. To justify their inference, they have chosen three institutional groups – *Anganwadi* Workers, ASHA team and *Gram Panchayat* and evaluated their relationship, interdependence and scope of work in rural areas of Gujarat based on their Covid-19 response.

In this study, importance of *Sarpanch*, the elected head of Gram Panchayat is particularly highlighted, since he serves as a link between the community and government. His power and provision to take a decision will make it easier for ASHA and *Anganwadi* to work in the concerned area to ensure social security and health. The study talks about the shortage of essential provisions during lockdown, such as, medical support, training, basic supplies, proper coordination, funds, livelihood management, social security and various others. Side-by-side, it indicates towards the inevitability of enhanced facilities and authoritative powers that should come under *Sarpanch's* (Elected Panchayat Head) periphery.

**2. Divya Raj and Jhumur Dey (2020)** <sup>5</sup>, in their Assisted Telemedicine for Rural Healthcare Ecosystem Project Report of E-Health Research Center (IIT-Bangalore) that collaborated with PHIA Foundation and Patharitech Private Limited for this venture, says about lack of scope and availability of telemedicine support in rural areas that they have tried to evaluate and overcome in their project. They chose Jharkhand as their study area and observed the usability of telemedicine support for the migrant workers who have returned to these villages currently.

In their inference, they have emphasized on the vitality of incorporating Telemedicine facilities in the rural areas of India. As its main reason, they mentioned about long-distance gap (6-7 km approx.) between fully functional health centre/hospital with the remote rural zones and scarcity of public transportation. However, ignorance, insecurity and unawareness for such pandemic and this digital health platform are the major hindrances that may come in the process of providing telemedicine consultation services.

Still, according to their study, telemedicine facility should be made available in remote areas, particularly at the post-covid lockdown time when social distancing norms are compulsory to follow. Additionally, this study refers telemedicine as a efficient option of health training for community health workers, such as, ASHA team. So, that connects with our objective of empowering grass-root workers in rural zones through digital platform (video/app based) to enhance their self-sufficiency.

**3. Suvita (NGO) (2020)** <sup>5</sup>, in its project report on using a remote model to recruit volunteer immunization ambassadors talks about their initiative to accelerate awareness drive of child immunization during Covid-19 pandemic. In their project, they utilized mode – one by direct sending SMS to infant's caregivers suggesting them the necessary immunizations methods. Another way is by selecting influencers nominated by a village community to act as immunization volunteers spreading infant immunization awareness.

Like the report of Divya Raj and Jhumur Dey, here too, need of telecommunication plays a vital role in providing training in remote area community workers. Since, these digital/telecommunication based models have a better communication, monitoring and moderating features from distant places, they are foundation tools to reach out to access to the remote areas for the purpose of giving information and training. That, ultimately will be helping the *Gram Panchayat* members and community workers in their easy functioning for rural development.

**4. Miganta Mohanty et al. (2020)** <sup>5</sup>, in his report of Covid-19 control measurement incorporated in rural areas of Odisha, talks about the proactive roll of *Gram Panchayat* and State's various other grass-root functionaries. He acknowledges State's decentralized approach followed with the help of grass-root workers, *Sarpanch* and all other rural governance bodies that helped to bring down its Covid mortality rate lower than national average. At this crisis time, Odisha is the ONLY State to give *Sarpanch* Collector's power to well-define his responsibilities with the community. With this justified step, local government obtained an authority needed for its direct responsibilities of such huge crisis.

This report is a thorough description on how the crucial lockdown time is handled in rural Odisha after March 2020. All major post-covid

issues, such as, spreading awareness, making quarantine arrangements for returnee migrants, deployment of foot soldiers for door-to-door survey and report, arrangements of health and safety equipments, supply of essentials, regular monitoring are covered. They all are suggestive on the efficacy of rural self-governance bodies when necessary freedom is allowed to them to execute their responsibilities.

5. **Gayathri Vasudevan et al. (2020)**, in the research on MGNREGA during Covid-19 pandemic sites the importance of including livelihood generation resources in rural areas to secure rural financial well-being. As a solution plan, the research explains about MGNREGA and its significance when lakhs of migrants had to return to their villages out losing their jobs.

Social and Financial security receive equal priority as the concerns of health management during the circumstances as experienced in Covid-19 lockdown in India. Particularly, in rural areas, where several had to return back as a result of job loss in lockdown, this research proposes about migrant re-skilling and micro-entrepreneurship programs for MGNREGA with minimal expenditure. Such post-covid initiatives are the baseline for uplifting rural livelihood, expelling the fear of financial insecurity and dependence in financial aids or moving out for job search.

6. **Anwesha Dutta and Harry W. Fischer (2020)**, in their research on disease prevention and social security in rural India during Covid-19 days describe the compulsion of timely coordination between the local government (*Gram Panchayat*) and the higher administration in order to manage a big crisis as this Covid-19 pandemic. The research is conducted with three regions – Odisha, Rajasthan and Kerala. Their research suggested about a few new interaction approaches, such as, cross-sectoral and multi-scalar interaction that should be put in place for the purpose of easy coordination with higher administrative levels.

In this research, communication links and roles of local governance bodies (*Gram Panchayat*) as well as higher administrative players, such as, District Magistrate, *Tehsildar* to State and National Departments, are analysed and clearly defined so that they all can align correctly to ensure rural people's safety, security, health and financial benefit. Also, this analysis notes the coordination terms of local governance with its associated functionaries, such as, health workers, NGOs, ASHA teams, self-help groups, *Gram Panchayat* women members and others.

## 6. Findings and Conclusions

From the resources that we studied in this Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India', we found certain obstructions and their solutions in terms of this major crisis. The solutions that are gathered, if implemented in a systematic manner can help in reshaping rural India as a self-sufficient domain. Let us first enlist our findings before making a firm conclusion:

1. In the scenario of such a large-scale crisis, the role of *Gram Panchayat* has obtained much importance in handling the safety, health and security of the rural community. Being the self-governance bodies who are directly involved with the rural issues, they had the immediate responsibility to tackle post-covid problems and there, they worked remarkably well. Still, there are major gaps, such as, lack of awareness, communication, preparedness, medical provisions, supply and funding.

2. Improvement of health facilities should be given foremost importance now, particularly, in the remote parts of India. Health of women, kids, elderly people and vulnerable category, such as, isolated or suppressed groups are not to be ignored. Many remote areas are scared to take modern medical provisions, where, sadly, patients are either handled by force or persuasion. So, lack of education and trust is also a player here to hinder rural development.

3. Scope of re-skilling and empowering rural people should be made broader giving sufficient priority. This is required to remove the great feeling of financial loss and insecurity that is stressing amongst the jobless migrant people of rural India. To fulfil this purpose, improvement of rural habitat as well as adequate need assessment is needed immediately.

4. *Gram Panchayat* funds are still limited and actually too less to deal with a large scale disaster, as the situation of post-covid protections. Although, aids are provided to some local rural bodies, there are many parts where shortage of funds created a big obstructions. Such as,

procurements of basic supplies, medical aids, safety tools, quarantine measures and others.

5. Better interrelation and coordination with parallel and higher level administration is still a concern for the rural areas of India to build trust and security for the people living in underdeveloped/undeveloped regions.

From the above findings and other opinions that we collected through our Literature Review and study of information resources<sup>14</sup>, it is now understood and sufficiently validated that grass-root level institutions, such as, *Gram Panchayats* are the key players who work to meet the rural issues and bring suitable solutions. They build up the beginning interaction medium with higher administrative bodies for any major/minor concerns of rural areas that need attention. For the sake of achieving development and security as we plan for our rural parts of India, these local bodies should receive rights and authority that they deserve.

## 7. Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the conclusion as made above in our Evaluative Study on 'Role of Gram Panchayat in Handling Post-Covid Measures in India', there are some improvements and readjustments required in the India's administrative policies that should be given proper consideration in coming days. Accordingly, based on our findings and inferences, we have the following recommendations that are aimed to support rural development:

- *Gram Panchayat* should be recognized for its roles and responsibilities and accordingly, should be allowed with sufficient administrative power to execute their formal activities. This idea can proceed in the formation of decentralization of local rural governance to enhance its functionalities and independence.
- At the point of decentralization, adequate funding should be allowed in local government's account to make it capable for its operations.
- Unbiased and transparent mode of coordination system should be implemented to fastract rural issues and development missions.
- In terms to recover from Covid-19 disruptions, regular interactions and assessment should be made with local people to record their health, social and financial status. For this purpose, more manpower is required and more associated bodies should be involved. Suitable funding should be arranged to make their tasks convenient, such as, tools, safety gears, reporting.
- Government support is essential and for that grass-root government should take initiatives and prepare their agenda and build awareness to get timely updates on Government latest policies and approaches.
- Proper scope of livelihood generation should be made available to the jobless and vulnerable groups who are currently placed in rural sides of India. This is achieved with improvement of rural habitat, adequate skill development training and open job market options.

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