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## Role of Gram Panchayat in COVID pandemic: Some highlights from Haryana

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of Gram Panchayats, a form of local self-government, in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Haryana, India. Local self-government involves empowering grassroots leaders through democratic decentralization, enabling local experts to oversee and manage targeted relief and development initiatives for the community, including areas such as education, welfare, and security. The paper emphasizes the importance of effective local environmental management, particularly in dealing with natural resources. It also discusses the steps taken by Gram Panchayats in Haryana during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Local government, gram panchayat, COVID-19, decentralization, amendment

### Introduction

The concept of Panchayati Raj has been present in India since ancient times, with references found in texts such as Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and the Mahabharata. The Vedic period saw the village as the primary unit of administration, with the Sabhas and Samitis being the popular assemblies. During the Mughal era, the system continued to function independently and exercised powers of taxation, administration, justice, and punishment <sup>[1]</sup>. However, the British rule introduced a highly centralized system, which was a mix of British and continental patterns. It was only after Lord Ripon's famous resolution on local self-government that the decentralization policy gained momentum. Mahatma Gandhi's "Gram Swaraj" directive was also instrumental in promoting rural self-governance. The Constitution's creators included Article 40, which called for the formation of rural Panchayats and granted them necessary powers <sup>[2]</sup>. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution gave PRIs legal protection and paved the way for millions of people to participate in local governance. Today, PRIs have authority across the nation, and India has been committed to decentralization since the passage of these amendments.

The Panchayati Raj system in India is a unique decentralized governance model that empowers the rural population with decision-making power in local governance. In 1992, the Indian Constitution underwent its 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, facilitating the creation of Gram Panchayats as fundamental components of the system. These Panchayats play a vital role in fostering rural development through the encouragement of inclusive growth and participatory decision-making processes <sup>[3]</sup>.

The significance of Gram Panchayats in effectively managing the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas has been underscored. In Haryana, these Panchayats have played a vital role by implementing government guidelines, disseminating information, and raising awareness about the pandemic among the local population. This essay will delve into the specific contributions of Gram Panchayats in Haryana during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting key initiatives and analyzing their impact on the community. By examining their role during this crisis, the paper aims to offer insights into the importance of the Panchayati Raj system in fostering community-driven development and resilience.

### Objective

1. To identify the role played by Gram Panchayats in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Haryana.
2. To highlight the challenges faced by Gram Panchayats in effectively responding to the

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COVID-19 crisis.

3. To provide recommendations for improving the effectiveness of Gram Panchayats in responding to future health crises.

### Local self-government in Haryana

The state of Haryana, established on November 1, 1966, was formerly a part of Punjab in India. The history of Panchayati Raj in Haryana reveals a less than favorable trajectory, with the existence of the 'Bhaichara' panchayat, a community-based organization with undocumented structures, roles, and functions. Traditionally, these panchayats were overseen by the land-owning peasant caste for dispute resolution and local governance functions. Before colonial rule, Haryana had a system of traditional Panchayats, and during the colonial period, three acts were enacted in Punjab to legalize and assign judicial functions to traditional Panchayats.

Post-independence, the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act of 1952 replaced the 1939 Act<sup>[4]</sup>. The Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1961, based on the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee's decentralized governance model. Until 1966, Panchayati Raj made gradual progress in Haryana as part of Punjab. Afterward, progress accelerated but not significantly, with irregular elections for Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis. The government exerted heavy supervisory control, leading to a lack of autonomy.

In 1973, the Zila Parishad was abolished, ostensibly due to functional overlaps with Panchayat Samitis. However, political motivations were suspected, as the leadership did not want to share powers with Panchayati Raj. Consequently, from 1973 to 1995, Haryana had a two-tier Panchayati Raj system. The three-tier system was reinstated in 1995 after the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

The Haryana Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 replaced the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act 1952 and the Punjab Samitis Act 1961. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act brought about significant changes, emphasizing decentralization and resulting in transformations in behavioral patterns, living standards, economic conditions, educational achievements, and political and social awareness of leaders. In summary, the grassroots democratic institutions in Haryana faced challenges such as irregularities, uncertainty, bureaucratic indifference, and overall politicization.

### Functions of Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994

These local organizations' main goals are to advance social justice, infrastructure growth, and local economic development. The Panchayati Raj performs a number of duties, including<sup>[5]</sup>:

- To construct essential infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, power plants, hospitals, and other facilities.
- To build and sustain community resources.
- To advance agriculture's growth through effective management of irrigation and water systems, land development, and soil conservation.
- Encourage education.
- To upgrade medical facilities and raise public knowledge of health.
- To develop forestry, dairy, poultry, and animal husbandry sectors in society.
- The Gram Panchayat is obligated to fulfill Sabha area needs within financial constraints and established rules.

- Responsibilities include overseeing various matters and subsidiary structures in categories like General, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries, Social Forestry, Khadi Industries, Rural Housing, Drinking Water, Rural Electrification, Non-conventional Energy, Poverty Alleviation, Education, Cultural Activities, Sanitation, Public Health, Women and Child Development, Social Welfare, Public Distribution System, and Maintenance of Community Assets.
- Tasks range from resolving issues in Gram Sabha meetings to promoting agricultural development, maintaining public infrastructure, regulating markets, and implementing welfare programs.
- The Gram Panchayat also handles any other functions entrusted by the Government or Local Authority.

### Problems faced by local self-government

#### Functional Problems

The state government has the authority to transfer functions to local governments. States frequently fail to delegate sufficient duties to local governmental entities for a variety of reasons, which has a negative impact on the efficacy and efficiency of the system. Sometimes, the state government sets up other groups to do projects in areas like farming, health, and education. This weakens the power of local entities that are supposed to handle these things. Also, some local entities don't have the right tools to do their jobs. To fix this, the act provide that says each district should have a District Planning Committee. This committee is supposed to bring together the plans made by local groups. But, lots of research indicates that even though committees for planning actions exist on paper, they still need to get better in real life.

#### Financial Problems

Financial issues hinder the effectiveness of devolving functions without ample funding. Panchayati Raj faces a significant problem as it doesn't receive enough funds for development, even after 25 years of decentralization. This funding gap is remarkably low compared to other thriving economies. Both urban and rural local governments find it challenging to generate sufficient internal funds and heavily depend on external sources. Inadequate funding for panchayats contributes to negligence, corruption, and delays in progress.

#### Functional Problems

Local organizations often face challenges as state government representatives impose restrictions on their operations. Moreover, local government offices lack sufficient staff and expertise, hindering their ability to support elected bodies. Strengthening their capabilities requires hiring and training employees, but a shortage of resources makes it difficult for local bodies to do so.

### Role of local government: Protecting Human Rights and Environment

All levels of government, including local, are follow international human rights laws. Local governments are at the forefront of ensuring human rights for all, closely interacting with citizens to address their needs and concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the vital role of local governments in resolving social and political issues. The global move towards decentralization further underscores

the responsibility of local governments in upholding human rights through regional laws and initiatives.

Rural local bodies, created in 1992 by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act, hold significant power for conservation. The decentralization brought about by the amendment strengthened these "Village Republics." Gram Panchayats, protecting their forests, can improve rural areas with the motto "Think globally, act locally" for the environment <sup>[6]</sup>. This can lead to increased availability of drinking water, growth in animal and bird populations, and a rise in the groundwater table. However, these reserved woods are guarded by the state's forest department, unreserved forests and unclassified wastelands fall under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat.

### Role of Gram Panchayat in COVID Pandemic

Gram panchayats, which are the institutions closest to the people and are highly trusted by communities, are critical in the fight against COVID-19 in villages. They facilitate participatory decision-making and consultations with stakeholders at the local level, as emphasized by Amartya Sen. To combat COVID-19, over 2,60,000 gram panchayats in India must mobilize for grassroots action and work closely with primary health centers, ASHA workers, local health volunteers, and district administrations. Gram panchayats can take various steps, such as establishing quarantine centers, promoting awareness, building trust, enabling safe operations of local markets, ensuring food and livelihood security, strengthening panchayat-level planning, and collaborating with nonprofits <sup>[7]</sup>.

### Initiatives at the State level during COVID-19: Haryana

Drèze and Sen (2013) noted that while social movements aimed at promoting more accountable governance, such as the campaign that led to the implementation of the "India's Right to Information (RTI) Act (2005)", originated in the economically disadvantaged state of Rajasthan, the efforts to improve governance quality and achieve equitable development outcomes have yielded mixed results in both Rajasthan and Odisha <sup>[8]</sup>.

- Dy. CM Mr. Dushyant Chautal spoke to the emergency rooms of Gram Panchayats. Mukhiya in regards to the state's preventative measures".
- Identification of people who have recently travelled domestically or internationally.
- Placing individuals under quarantine who may have symptoms at their places.
- Community awareness-building regarding COVID-19 prevention through three days of nonstop loudspeaker announcements.
- Directions were also provided to ensure that the necessary amount of necessities were available at the village level so that no one would experience any difficulties.
- For the food crisis, a WhatsApp helpline number has been established.
- Various sarpanches made donations to the state relief fund.
- The 125 migrant workers were sanitized, and rations were provided to them.
- The panchyat of Bal Jatana which not only donated land for hospital but also made contribute of rupees one crore in the cost of hospital.
- Isolation center being setup in every village to do health

check-up of the villager.

- The state government has reinstated the traditional 'Thikhri-Pehra' (community policing) in rural areas to monitor and control the spread of COVID-19. Volunteers were chosen to patrol based on Gram Panchayat's schedule <sup>[9]</sup>.
- Due to the ongoing pandemic COVID-19, Gram Panchayats are unable to hold the Gram Sabha meetings. Hence, the concept of e-Gram Sabha has been launched by the State of Haryana. The proceedings of these e-Gram Sabhas would be uploaded on GP website.
- PRI members conducted door-to-door awareness campaign regarding COVID-19 at village level.
- Sarpanches and Panches were involved for FGDs (Focus Group Discussion) to make village people aware regarding COVID-19 during the festival seasons. Leaders with opinions other than politics were included to voluntarily contribute to this pandemic situation.
- PRI members actively advocated for the installation of the AarogyaSetu app among the general public to foster awareness.
- Focus group discussion was organized at village level by Panchayat Secretaries members to educate and make people aware about COVID-19 <sup>[10]</sup>.

Several village panchayats in Haryana have donated to the COVID fund in recent months, including Palra in Gurugram, Sersa and Rampur in Sonapat, Bal Jattan in Panipat, and Nasibpur in Narnaul. Palra donated the highest amount, Rs 21 crore, while Sersa, Rampur, and Bal Jattan donated Rs 11.5 crore, Rs 2.5 crore, and Rs 10.5 crore, respectively. Nasibpur donated Rs 5 crore on July 30 after an appeal by Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar. Narnaul Block Development & Panchayat Officer Pramod Kumar stated that the village was motivated to donate after the CM's appeal <sup>[11]</sup>.

The Prime Minister of India has played a significant role in leading and guiding the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He held a video conference with hundreds of sarpanches from across the country to mark the celebration of Panchayati Raj Diwas <sup>[12]</sup>. Calling panchayats as vital links of development and democracy, Prime Minister launched a slew of important schemes including unified e-GramSwaraj portal and mobile application and Swamitva Scheme. The Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare maintained close communication with all state and union territory administrations to evaluate their preparedness and response measures, identify areas for improvement, and ensure coordination. The Committee of Secretaries, led by the Cabinet Secretary, conducted regular reviews with relevant ministries such as Health, Defence, External Affairs, Civil Aviation, Home, Textiles, Pharma, Commerce, and other officials, along with state chief secretaries.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, local self-government is one of the most innovative attempts at governance change that our country has ever made. Putting a country's government in the hands of its citizens at the local level is undoubtedly good. But like any other system in the world, this system has flaws as well. Financial mismanagement and bad administration are ongoing issues. There are numerous channels and

organisations within the Panchayati Raj system for informing the people about the public benefit and welfare. These can be used to raise awareness about the need to preserve the ecology and the surroundings. All of this depends on local governments taking the initiative, state governments supporting local governments, the integrity and sincerity of the non-officials managing the local governments, and corruption-free regulating authorities. Local government entities serve the public first and were the first to raise the alarm during every pandemic. Serving the basic necessities of the people is another aspect of the guardian position. The lack of resources is currently the biggest issue facing the majority of local governments; during a pandemic, this problem will worsen and have more dangerous local effects than the coronavirus. Through job loss, the epidemic widens the difference between affluent and poor among men and women, and it further energises these inequities.

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