



COMMUNITY INITIATIVES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A RAY OF HOPE FOR INDIA?

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ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the emergence of community conscience and active help by the community during the Covid-19 crisis in India. As the Government struggled with ways to contain the spread of the virus, and provide treatments to the affected, the neighbourhood community came forward and lent active support in whatever ways they could, starting from distributing food and necessities, to hospitalization of the sick. These community initiatives made noteworthy contribution in preventing starvation of the marginalized class, rendering necessary medical assistance to the affected people, and helped spread awareness which went a long way towards curbing the spread of the virus.

KEYWORDS- Covid-19, community support, Covid-19 awareness, community initiatives during Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic hit all sections of the population, and in multifarious ways. The challenge faced by the Indian government in this regard was also staggering, with the graph of the number of affected rising every day. From the first reported case on January 30th 2020, it showed a staggering surge over the next months, and by 9th June 2020, the total amount of covid cases rose to 266598 all over India (Pal & Yadav, 2020). As it was proving to be a near impossible task for the Government to curb the situation singlehandedly, in the nooks and corners throughout India, we saw the important role the neighbourhood community played in providing the humanitarian needs of the hour.

From the time of independence in 1947, India has come a long way to the 21st century. Rapid infrastructural and technological development gave impetus to more individualism and competitive mentality. The community bonds fell by the wayside in developing India. With the economic reforms, and the emergence of new types of employment and specialization of education, there is much less time for participation in the community activities. But the pandemic must have given rise to the old nostalgia when people stood beside people in times of need, and community bonds were strong and dependable. It might also be the dawn of a time when people started to realize the value of community, and might one day give rise to a stronger united nation.

THE CRISIS CREATED BY THE PANDEMIC

On an international scale, the high contagiousness and the fast spread of the Covid-19 virus necessitated extreme measures (Bhadra et al, 2021) like putting the country on

lockdown. As India declared a lockdown on March 2020 to contain the pandemic, with its vast population of over 1.38 billion (Worldometer, 2020) and the diversity of different social classes, the outcome was not experienced in a similar way by the upper, middle, and lower classes. The lower class population experienced the lockdown as a parallel pandemic by which they were affected; even if they could escape getting affected by Covid-19, the stoppage of all sources of income made their everyday survival a challenge. The daily wage earners, hawkers on the roadsides and on moving carts, sellers of myriad products on trains, household help- all of this population suffered heavily due to the lockdown. The squatter settlements and the slums, where the virus spread like wildfire, were barricaded by the authorities; in the middle of the chaos, the government concerned themselves more with curbing the spread with hardcore measures. But the lack of insight on the part of the government regarding the vulnerability of this major portion of the population did not help matters, in fact it worsened their problems. Both the central and the state govts failed miserably in this respect. Some welfare measures, like distribution of rations or depositing a meager sum in the bank accounts of the poor were endeavoured by the government, but owing to the huge population, and inadequate planning, such measures amounted to drops of water in the ocean. For the common people of India, it is also a grave reality that most of the illiterate poor do not have bank accounts, and news of the distribution of rations often did not reach the needy.

THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Amid the incompetence of the govt in handling the specific problems of the poor, and their efforts to contain the virus situation, a parallel handholding was being born on the



level of the community. In several neighbourhoods, the affluent upper classes and the middle classes started building community kitchens, distributing food, clothing, and items of daily necessity. Local club buildings were lent for covid treatments, and healthy people bought and delivered food to the doorsteps of the sick. The slums which were designated as covid hotspots or the 'red zone' and heavily barricaded and monitored by the police, lack of basic resources became a crisis since no one could move in or out of the place. The neighbours in the slum came forward in helping out, sharing whatever little resources they had. For the children and the old who needed hospitalization, the community helped in every way they could, from buying food and medicines, to arranging transport for carrying the sick to the health centres. Initiatives like oxygen on wheels by the neighbourhood youth came as a timely drive to fight the situation. What is particularly noteworthy is that most of these initiatives had no support of the government or the NGOs, people stood up for their community and rendered help. Amidst widespread fear, anxiety and uncertainty, where food prices were hiking due to problems in manufacturing and national level transport, and the number of cases of Covid-19 rising by leaps and bounds, these initiatives empowered the community in a major way.

Very few of those activities became news worth reporting in newspapers, or covering in electronic media. These community initiatives mostly had no sponsorship, but spontaneously started as the need of the hour. As is well understood, the government had no clear idea about the intensity of the suffering of the people and their special needs arising from the social category they belonged to; in most cases keeping all people indoors was their primary concern. The rations distributed by the government had extremely long queues, and were not distributed regularly. Moreover, rations were given on the basis of citizenship documents like the Voter Identity Card, or the Aadhar Card, which many families did not have. Rations were also given on the basis of families, disregarding the difference in size of the families. So, a family of eight got the same amount of ration as the family of three. This led to intense food crisis in the families, and nothing could be done about it due to the lockdown. In such a situation, food distribution in the community emerged as a dependable source of help, and sustained many families from going to bed hungry. What is more is that these initiatives from the community filled an essential gap of communication between the government and the citizens.

CONCLUSION

It will be beneficial for the government as well as the citizens if the government realise the power of the community in rendering essential help in unique situations like a pandemic or an epidemic, it might also be helpful in stopping evil social practices like child marriage and dowry. In several respects, the community can be a very effective medium through which the government can get social work done, and mitigate crisis situations, which might be much less effective if done through the police or the political parties. Although Non Governmental Organizations have been doing good work throughout india, and have been quite effective in addressing several problems of the underprivileged class in interior rural areas, a sociological

analysis of the effectiveness of engaging the community scores higher. In the absence of a policy or will of the govt, such community initiatives will likely to remain in the dark and as isolated incidents, completely relying on the goodwill of the fellow citizens. But with the help of policies that acknowledge and empower the community, the govt is likely to become stronger, provide better governance, put an end to social evils, and pave the way for a more united India.

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