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Role of NGOs in India for providing relief during Covid -19 pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected all aspects of society and human activity, with devastating socioeconomic impact. The pandemic also established the growing importance of civil society organizations and citizen collectives as foundations of social responsibility, technical proficiency, providing a systematic

base for officials to legitimize their verdicts and activities. This paper intends to identify the resurgence of collectives and civil society organisations and the reflexivity and social resilience inherent within these collective actions that contributed to covid relief efforts within the context of India.

Keywords: Pandemic, Civil Society Organizations, Social Responsibility, Covid Relief, India

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a menace to society, highlighting existing inequalities within Indian society and exacerbating them. In India, from 3 January 2020 to 11 May 2021, 249,992 deaths COVID-19 deaths were reported ^[1] while livelihoods were lost when unemployment rose to 23.5 per cent in April 2020, according to Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy which has highlighted the need and implication of pandemics-related research. These statistics indicated the adverse impact of Covid-19 on Indian society as the health crisis ascended in India. This crisis triggered a decentralized collective effort that operated in the space between state and the market. Civil society organisations, both formal and informal, occupied this space as a matter of civic duty.

All types of collective effort occupying the space between government and the market cannot be identified as CSO. CSOs have traditionally been identified as organisations aiding government effort. Tandon (2002) ^[2] defined civil society as organized individual and collective initiatives for common public good ^[3]. This paper adopts this broad definition to encompass a wide variety of organized efforts and interventionist measures undertaken to mitigate the covid-19 crisis and build social resilience. Social resilience is conceptualized as the coping, adaptive and transformative capacities of societies in response to extreme events ^[4]. Within this conceptualization lies the reflexivity through which civil societies have responded during the crisis in India. In this context, the relation of civil society organisations and social resilience is analysed and presented with examples of emerging collectives, donation sites and efforts undertaken during the ongoing pandemic.

The focus of CSOs during covid crisis

India acknowledged Covid-19 as a national public health risk in March 2020 and subsequently announced stringent lockdowns to control the spread ^[5]. The sudden nature of these announcements pushed the millions of citizens into an exacerbated uncertainty and insecurity of shelter, food and livelihood. The subsequent "migrant crisis" highlighted the precarious nature of informal employment in urban centres of the nation. Amongst many initiatives that responded to mitigate the vulnerabilities of the migrants was Stranded workers Action Network (SWAN) formed in April 2020 by volunteers to connect relief to workers stranded across India ^[6]. This collective has been documenting data and functioning as network solutions for covid relief for the migrants.

Another precarious group of people pushed into uncertainty was those dependants of daily wages. With full lockdown, loss of livelihood and no place to return to, daily wage earners struggled for food security. Crowd sourced fundraising sites such as www.ketto.org and www.giveindia.org have been raising lakhs of rupees for organisations and individuals that have been providing meals and cash relief for daily wage earners. GiveIndia's "Support COVID-19 hit families" mission launched on 28 March 2020 to provide direct-benefit-transfer as financial assistance to daily wagers and migrant labourers who had lost their jobs due to the COVID lockdown raised ₹3.82 crores by April 14 2020 with support from over 7900 donors ^[7]. Khaana Chahiye Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Mumbai established to combat hunger. It was founded on 29th March as a relief effort during the COVID-19 lockdown. The foundation has been involved with serving 4,650,000 meals in the past year ^[6].

On social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, individuals have been highlighting the plights of aggrieved and distressed citizens who they have come across to directly aid them to make them food secure.

In the first wave of covid in 2020 in India, collective efforts were focused on mitigating the sudden impact of the lockdown which was most adversely felt on livelihoods of people. Food aid, hygiene packages, transportation effort for migrants were the focus of fundraising and CSO efforts. CSO efforts responded to the visible distress of the vulnerable population who were suddenly food and livelihood insecure. NGOs like Goonj and Akshay Patra raised their covid relief efforts for food, ration, daily essentials and basic health safety items like masks and soaps.

As the second wave of Covid-19 caught the citizens and government alike in April 2021, relief measures by CSOs which had focused on food and livelihood security turned attention towards a crashing healthcare system. Across social networks and media, demands for essential medicines and oxygen supply were being raised^[9]. The second wave of the Covid turned relief efforts towards countering a crumbling healthcare system. This does not preclude the collective efforts of CSOs towards food and livelihood in the ongoing lockdown of 2021. This was in part because the systems and networks established last year as an immediate response to distress situations still existed. Their systems and networks of collective are now also being used for supporting hospitals, healthcare centres with oxygens and medicines like remdesivir. For example, ambulance service charges skyrocketed during the initial phase of the second covid wave excluded access for most. Now, volunteer organisations like 'Help now ambulance services have built the largest network of private ambulances in Pune, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi. Jeevan stambh foundation has been providing free ambulance services in NCR Delhi. Some NGOs are providing oxygen cylinders to patients for free. Notably Hemkunt foundation, Khalsa Aid International, KVN foundations, paytm foundation, Zomato feeding India, Sakina foundation are few of them.

The ongoing efforts are not just limited to providing relief but also information. SOS lists for medical supplies, hospital beds and ambulances are created and updated on social media and spread across existing networks. Twitter opened a dedicated resource section for covid-19 related resources in India^[10]. Covid resource websites which are crowdsourcing data on hospital beds, plasma donations and medical supplies are being circulated^[11]. These are decentralized efforts to disseminate lifesaving information.

In conclusion, CSOs have responded to the crisis in India over the course of a year in four ways. Firstly, they have been crucial in providing immediate assistance due to their grassroots network and rise in volunteer work. From doctors to autorickshaw drivers, people have volunteered time, effort, and money to build networks that help people cope with loss of socio-economic security. Their immediate presence and lack of red tape in their functioning to address the pandemic makes collective efforts more responsive. Secondly, across online and offline platforms, organisations and individuals alike have mobilized resources, financial and non-financial, to counter the impact of the pandemic. CSOs worked to raise money and essential items not just to ensure they are available in the area but also to ensure they are accessible as resource shortages are not just a matter of demand exceeding

supply but also of efficient management of resources. Thirdly, they are crucial in disseminating information and countering infodemic. Collectives, especially through social media platforms, communicate and verify critical information pertaining location and availability of essential services across India. CSO have been fact checking messages, fake news pertaining to the coronavirus. Lastly, CSOs have created pathways across India for greater civic engagement. The established network of relief providers, civil society activists and volunteers have become crucial in the fight against Covid-19.

With this context, CSOs should not be seen as just aiding government effort but as the third pillar of development. Strengthening CSOs and fostering civic engagements can only prove beneficial to human development and social justice. CSO operate within the space of social resilience which empowers them with a transformative capacity over society. Civil society is contingent on being responsive to the gap left by the market and the state. As long as the gap exists, CSOs will adapt to the need of the time and produce transformative action within the society. Which ensures their continuity unless they are disincentivized or heavily penalized by the state or market for their influence. With the state and market counting on civil society's continued efforts in the ongoing pandemic, it is necessary that CSO be aided in their efforts by government and market so that during times of extreme events, humanitarian relief is not stuck in red tape of apathy.

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