

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Dealing with Covid-19 Crisis

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The context

Pandemic, by its nature, requires a decentralised response to contain and mitigate it. Local governments or panchayats, therefore, have the potential to play a significant role in containing and managing the impact of the pandemic.¹ However, in the current scenario, with the exception of a few states where panchayats have played a significant role in managing the pandemic, other states have not realised the potential of panchayats.

¹ Pradeep Chhibber & Rahul Verma. 2020, March 31. Not just IAS and police, India's Covid-19 fight must use panchayats and municipalities too. *The Print*.

Richard Mahapatra. 2020, April 24. Panchayati raj day: Pandemic and the panchayats. *Down to Earth*.

Historic constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th) that conferred constitutional status to local governments led to a three-tiered democratic local government structure. In order to make these panchayats as institutions of self-government, the 73rd amendment mandated that the legislature may devolve powers and responsibilities to panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) to enable them to prepare plans and implement schemes for economic development and social justice, including those listed in the 11th Schedule. While the PRIs have been given a role to play in local resource management, they have not been given any concrete powers in disaster management despite being the first responders. The National Disaster Management Act, 2005, makes a passing reference to local authorities and only the zilla panchayat president is given representation in the District Disaster Management Authority.²

² PRIA International Academy and National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. 2020, April 24. *Role of panchayati raj institutions in disaster preparedness and management—Lessons from Covid-19 pandemic (Webinar)*.

Status of decentralisation in Tamil Nadu

Generally, decentralisation advocates, while extolling the Kerala and Karnataka models of decentralisation, have viewed Tamil Nadu's efforts at decentralisation critically. This is because the Tamil Nadu model of decentralisation exhibits a sandwich approach where significant power and authority still rest with district collectors.

A comparison between 2012–2013, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016 reports that rank states based on the level of devolution shows that Tamil Nadu has made a significant improvement in the cumulative devolution index ranking (Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Overall Devolution Ranking of States Across Three Reports (2012–2013, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016)

| State | 2012–2013 ^a | 2014–2015 ^b | | | 2015–2016 | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|---|--------------------|
| | Devolution across states | Devolution in policy | Devolution in practice | Ranking of states in the aggregate index of policy adjusted against practice | Cumulative Devolution Index (Improved Index + Normal Index) | |
| | | | | | Improved Index (DPi) | Normal Index (DPa) |
| Tamil Nadu | 5 | 6 | 15 | 8 | 2 | 4 |
| Kerala | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Karnataka | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 |
| Rajasthan | 4 | 7 | 14 | 7 | 9 | 9 |
| Andhra Pradesh | Not covered | 14 | 20 | 18 | 8 | 11 |
| Telangana | in this report | 13 | 17 | 15 | 7 | 5 |

Note. ^aV.N. Alok. 2013. *Strengthening of panchayats in India: Comparing devolution across states*. Indian Institute of Public Administration;

^b'Chapter 2: Ranking of states in devolution' in Tata Institute of Social Sciences. 2015. *How effective is devolution across Indian states, 2015: Insights from the field*. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

In Alok's (2013) index of decentralisation, Tamil Nadu ranks 5th overall and 2nd in terms of how closely it follows the mandate of the constitution. In the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) reports (2014–2015 & 2015–2016), Tamil Nadu's performance shows significant variation between the two periods. The Improved Index (DPi) ranking for Tamil Nadu 2015–2016 is 2 (higher than Karnataka) and Normal Index (DPa) is at 4. While during 2014–2015, Tamil Nadu scored 6 under Devolution in Policy (DPo) and 15 for Devolution in Practice (DPr), thus giving it an aggregate index rank (DPa) of 8 for policy adjusted against practice,

in 2015–2016, the scores are 4 (DPo) and 9 (DPr), respectively, giving it a DPa of 4. This shows that Tamil Nadu still lags in the Devolution in Practice ranking aspect of the composite index. This points to the inherent challenges in measuring devolution. At the state policy level, there have not been any significant changes or measures to improve devolution. Two reasons may be attributed to explain this shift: (a) the increased weightage given to devolution of finances, which pushes Tamil Nadu's rank higher; and (b) the provision of data by state officials. In the 2014–2015 report, Tamil Nadu scored lower ranks due to non-provision of data.

Devolution Index³ mainly tends to be an aggregation of the performance ranking of the three Fs devolved to the PRIs—namely, Functions, Finances, and

³ In addition, TISS reports include IGT (Infrastructure, Governance, and Transparency) along with the 3 Fs (Functions, Finances, and Functionaries) in the calculation of the Devolution index.

⁴ pp. 58–60 in *Tata Institute of Social Sciences. 2016. Devolution report 2015–16: Where local democracy and devolution in India is heading towards?* Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

⁵ pp. 58–60 in *Tata Institute of Social Sciences. 2016. Devolution report 2015–16: Where local democracy and devolution in India is heading towards?* Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

⁶ Village panchayats can levy entertainment tax, advertisement tax, tax on agricultural land, and surcharge on additional stamp duty.

Functionaries. If we unpack the Devolution Index further along these three Fs for Tamil Nadu, we find a wide variation in the performance of these three domains. Tamil Nadu has transferred all 29 subjects to PRIs. In the 2015–2016 TISS report, Tamil Nadu scored 7th rank in Devolution in Policy and 11th rank in Devolution in Practice⁴ under devolution of functions. This is because many of the functions devolved are supervisory in nature without concrete powers of execution. Village panchayats (VPs) have the responsibility of providing basic services, such as roads, electricity, public distribution system (PDS), drainage, and sanitation. Even in some of these domains, the technical responsibility rests with the higher tiers. Regarding finances, experience in devolution of finances shows that Tamil Nadu has been performing consistently well in the devolution of finances. In the 2015–2016 TISS report, Tamil Nadu scored 3rd in Devolution in Policy and 2nd in Devolution in Practice.⁵ However, much of the funds devolved are tied grants leaving VPs with limited access to untied grants. Although panchayats are empowered to levy a wide range of

taxes,⁶ in reality, only a few of these taxes are levied. Lack of adequate functionaries directly working under the control of VPs continues to be a problem in Tamil Nadu. The rank for Devolution in Practice for functionaries reflects this by assigning Tamil Nadu a dismal 17th for 2014–2015. Although the figure improves in the 2015–2016 TISS report to 5 (in Policy) and 3 (in Practice), this is misleading as the functionaries that are devolved to work at the VP level are from the line departments and are not under the control of VPs.

In sum, we can say that although Tamil Nadu may not be a laggard state, it is far from being a model state. Tamil Nadu scores high on devolution of funds and functions but not functionaries.

Current scenario in Tamil Nadu

PRIs, particularly gram/village panchayats, have been at the forefront in handling the Covid-19 crisis in states such as Kerala, Odisha, and Karnataka.⁷ The Tamil

⁷ Niranjan Sahoo. 2020, April 25. Panchayats and pandemic. Observer Research Foundation.

⁸ Chapter VIII: Functions, Powers and Property of Village Panchayats, Panchayat Union Councils and District Panchayats, Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994.

⁹ Reorganised districts of Kancheepuram, Chengalpet, Vellore, Tirupattur, Ranipet, Viluppuram, Kallakurichi, Thirunelveli, and Tenkasi.

Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994⁸ (item numbers 139–141) provides VPs with exclusive rights, in case of ‘dangerous diseases’ to take actions, such as closing of public places of entertainment and ensuring that minors suffering from such diseases do not attend schools. In addition, it also gives the panchayat union councils the right to implement compulsory vaccination programmes in such areas. Hence the VPs in Tamil Nadu have the legal mandate to play an important role in containing Covid-19 by enforcing lockdown and quarantine measures.

In Tamil Nadu, panchayat elections, which were to be held in 2016, were held only in December 2019, in two phases, and in only 27 districts; in nine districts,⁹ panchayat elections were not held. A total of 9,624 VPs went for elections out of around 12,524 VPs from 314 blocks in the state during the 2019 panchayat elections. In the rest, panchayat secretaries are continuing to run the VPs at the local level. This has led to two systems of governance operating at the local level. Post pandemic, it would be interesting to assess and compare the effectiveness of these two models of local governance in managing the impacts of the pandemic. Where elections were held, the newly-elected representatives have had to face the mammoth challenge of managing the pandemic within months of taking office. Unfortunately, the media have not reported much on the ways in which local bodies are handling the Covid-19 situation in Tamil Nadu. But preliminary telephonic survey in some districts of rural Tamil Nadu shows that local governments have been actively involved in tackling pandemic-related issues. In the initial phase, the VPs in Tamil Nadu were involved in handling the following tasks.

- creating awareness
- disinfecting and sanitising of the VPs
- ensuring lockdown protocols
- ensuring delivery of essential services
- tracking and tracing cases, and enforcing quarantine measures

In addition, some enterprising VP presidents also took to distributing masks and personal protective equipment, using their own funds. Traditional methods of sanitisation using neem water and turmeric and providing herbal infusions, such as Kabasura Kudineer, to boost immunity have been tried. Panchayats in Tamil Nadu have been closely working with government departments and district

administrations in implementing Covid-19–related programmes, such as the PDS, which offers free and subsidised ration to cardholders, and is monitored by VPs at the village level. During the pandemic, Government of Tamil Nadu provided

¹⁰ *The Hindu BusinessLine*. 2020, March 24. Covid-19: TN to provide financial assistance of ₹1,000 to all ration card holders.

¹¹ Sowmiya Ashok. 2020, April 5. Welfare schemes, well-oiled PDS helping Tamil Nadu's poor. *Hindustan Times*.

additional ration through the PDS and direct cash transfer of ₹1,000 per household with ration card.¹⁰ VPs have been ensuring effective distribution of these commodities while maintaining social distancing and providing protective gear, such as masks and sanitisers, to the cardholders through self-help groups (SHGs)¹¹ and home delivery of ration for the most vulnerable groups. In the initial phase, these efforts paid good dividends with very few cases coming from the districts. However, with single-source–related infections and the

Koyambedu wholesale market in Chennai emerging as a hotspot, the infection spread to other districts, particularly to rural areas. The situation has been further exacerbated by migrant workers returning from Chennai, other states, and abroad.

Reverse migration to rural areas has put intense pressure on essential services and rural infrastructures at the panchayat level, such as the provision of healthcare facilities—not just Covid-19–related healthcare but also maternal care and childcare, immunisation, and Integrated Child Development Services scheme's facilities. Families returning with children will need access to education and educational materials, subsidised housing, and access to clean water and sanitation. This will put enormous pressure on scarce panchayat resources.

There have been criticisms that panchayats in Tamil Nadu are acting as implementing agencies of the government rather than as local self-governments and that their potential has been wasted¹² in the fight. In this

¹² Deepak Karthik & Padmini Sivarajah. 2020, April 21. Local bodies a wasted force in grassroots fight against Covid-19. *The Times of India*.

context, there is a need for a greater role for panchayats in managing both the infection as well as other impacts related to Covid-19. So how should the Government of Tamil Nadu involve VPs in managing this crisis? Panchayats, as

governance institutions at the local level, already have mandated roles to play in several critical sectors of the economy under the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994. These should be used as entry points by the VPs in their efforts to manage the pandemic in both short and long terms.

Sectoral interventions by the panchayats

With all 29 functions under the 11th schedule devolved, some with direct and others with supervisory powers, VPs in Tamil Nadu intersect with several sectors in discharging these functions. In the context of the pandemic, VPs, in addition to

providing basic services to the electorate, will have to assume larger responsibilities through sectoral interventions.

Given the massive reverse migration to rural areas, in the short term, VPs are likely to be under intense pressure to continue to monitor the Covid-19 situation as well as ensure food, housing, and employment for the returning migrants as well as the current population. The government should focus on some short- and long-term measures to ensure that the VPs are able to manage the situation.

Short-term strategies

Health and managing Covid-19

As mentioned elsewhere, VPs in Tamil Nadu have the mandate to enforce lockdown of public places and ensure quarantines in case of any new Covid-19 infections arising within the panchayat jurisdiction. VPs should be authorised by the state government to enforce these provisions strictly in the short term.

- VPs should also ensure that people in high-risk category are identified and ensured adequate healthcare.
- Programmes dealing with immunisation and antenatal care should proceed uninterrupted.
- In the short term, since access to public healthcare is limited at the VP level, panchayat union councils may be allowed to partner with NGOs working in the health sector and/or private health facilities (that are already registered under the Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme) to provide affordable health services to VPs falling within the panchayat union council jurisdiction.

Education

Tamil Nadu government has been providing free laptops to 10th and 12th standard students studying in government and government-aided schools. This, to an extent, has reduced the digital divide in the state.

- VPs need to ensure that students living within the panchayat jurisdiction have access to online schooling by providing space, such as the adult literacy centre or reading rooms, for the poorest of the poor and also uninterrupted internet connection at these centres.
- VPs will also need to carry out a census of children in the panchayat area to identify dropouts due to reverse migration or economic distress owing to the pandemic and ensure that they are enrolled in schools.

Employment and livelihoods programmes

This is a critical domain that requires both short-term and long-term strategies. VPs are mandated to provide 100 days of labour on demand under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). During the initial lockdown, Tamil Nadu government had provided 2 additional days of wages to all the households registered under MGNREGS.

- In the short term, the demand for MGNREGS has already gone up. VPs need technical help to come out with innovative ideas that ensure social distancing and safety measures while generating employment through MGNREGS. State and central governments should relax the conditionalities attached to MGNREGS.

¹³ N. Ramesh. 2020, May 2. Panchayat offices to turn into employment exchanges. *The New Indian Express*.

- Rural Development and Panchayati Raj department had instructed panchayats in Thanjavur and Thiruvarur to act as employment exchanges by registering agricultural labourers requiring work and providing such labour for farmers requiring wage labour.¹³ Such initiatives should be scaled up.
- Tamil Nadu panchayats have the advantage of SHGs created under the Tamil Nadu State Rural Livelihood Mission linked to them. This institutional linkage between the SHGs and the VP allows the VP to use SHG members for initiating common livelihood programmes at the panchayat level. Dairy, tailoring, and cottage industries like papad- and pickle-making are some common livelihood programmes being undertaken by the SHGs which need to be supported by VPs.

Water management

¹⁴ *The Hindu*. 2020, April 24. Tamil Nadu govt sanctions ₹499 crore for Kudimaramathu scheme.

¹⁵ Item 133 under Chapter VIII: Functions, Powers and Property of Village Panchayats, Panchayat Union Councils and District Panchayats, Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994.

In April 2020, the Tamil Nadu government sanctioned ₹499 crore for Kudimaramathu scheme,¹⁴ which is aimed at restoring water bodies in rural areas in association with farmers' associations. The power to maintain irrigation works and the execution of Kudimaramathu rest with VPs.¹⁵ VPs should be encouraged to take this up on priority basis as it also provides employment in addition to restoring and improving water bodies.

Agriculture and organising public markets

While VPs do not have any direct role to play in agriculture, the panchayat union council has the mandate to undertake tasks to improve agriculture, agricultural stock, and so on.

- The block-level PRIs can initiate strategies to improve agricultural sector through VPs. VPs currently have been given the responsibility to organise and manage public markets under the Panchayati Raj Act, which can be used as a platform to ensure regular sale of produce during the lockdown period while maintaining social distancing norms.

Food security

While the government has taken care of the issue of food security through PDS, this is an area that will require constant monitoring and long-term strategies to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2—zero hunger—is not compromised.

- This requires initiatives that build on the philosophy of the midday meal schemes and provide either free or subsidised cooked food to the vulnerable groups, with the help of SHGs through community kitchens or adult literacy centres at the village level, especially for the returning migrant families.
- Tamil Nadu government is also bringing in ration card portability so that they can be used anywhere in the state. This provision should be activated at the earliest so that the migrants moving within the state can access ration anywhere in the state.

Increasing tax collection capacity at the village panchayat level

In the present scenario, the already precarious tax collection at the panchayat level is likely to deteriorate further due to the adverse economic impact of the pandemic on the rural economy.

- In the short term, the state government must provide access to soft budgets to VPs take care of Covid-19–related activities, such as sanitisation of the panchayat area and provision of food for vulnerable groups.

Local-level planning

However, all these suggested interventions will have to be carried out within the ambit of local-level planning to ensure coherence.

- VPs should be given the authority to amend the gram panchayat development plans (GPDPs) to include Covid-19 activities as well and divert the 14th Finance Commission funds to deal with emergency situations. This is especially important as VPs have limited access to untied grants to take care of the sanitisation needs of the panchayats. Since GPDP is a participatory planning exercise, this would be an effective method to assess the current situation at the panchayat level in terms of loss of employment, food security, school dropouts,

and so on. This will help not only in planning programmes to tackle the impact of the pandemic but also keeping track of the losses incurred to progress made in SDGs achieved in the last 5 years.

- Government of Tamil Nadu had initiated a data-based planning process called Participatory Tracking (P Tracking) for Village Development Plan in 2017–2018, which was a participatory, household-level census to inform GPDP. This database had collected information regarding employment and food security at the household level, among other indicators. In the February 2020 budget, Government of Tamil Nadu institutionalised P Tracking method as a way of data collection to inform the planning process at the local level. P Tracking database, along with the Participatory Identification of the Poor (PIP) list—prepared under rural livelihoods programmes, such as the Pudhu Vaazhvu Project—can be used to help identify the poorest of the poor at the community level for intense targeting.

Awareness creation

Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj should highlight best practices in Covid-19 management as well as in dealing with issues of food security, hunger, and employment generation, from Tamil Nadu and other states, and disseminate them to all the VP members.

Long-term strategies

Health and managing Covid-19

In the long run, there is a need to recruit health functionaries specifically at the VP level.

- Given that this is a contentious issue, Government of Tamil Nadu can explore the possibility of providing a registry of all retired auxiliary nurse midwives and other health professionals living within panchayat union council jurisdiction and permit VPs to hire them during the time of health emergencies like epidemics and pandemics.

Local-level planning

There is a critical need to energise the third constitutionally-mandated body—the almost defunct district planning committees (DPCs)—to come up with a comprehensive plan for revitalising the rural economy by involving all three tiers of PRIs along with urban local bodies in the aftermath of Covid-19.¹⁶ DPCs have become notional entities which are often used for political appointments.

¹⁶ Mani Shankar Aiyar. 2020, May 6. [The panchayati front: Tap potential of local self-government to fight COVID-19.](#) *The Indian Express.*

- DPC membership should be revamped to induct experts and subject specialists to help prepare a comprehensive district-level plan. There is a need to bring coherence to the planning process at the district level and to bring the urban and rural priorities within the context of the district and in line with the state's objectives in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- For instance, the special emphasis being placed on skill development by the states and the centre needs a decentralised approach to assess the gaps in skills requirement at the substate level in a coordinated manner. Further, with reverse migration, there is a need to take stock of skilled labourers available at the district level. An apex body, such as the DPC, can facilitate, coordinate, and match the needs with the requirements of both the urban and rural population and link them with suitable employment opportunities.

Increasing tax collection capacity at the VP level

It is important to improve the tax collection capacity of the VPs, with higher number of functionaries and better incentives to collect taxes. This would ensure that VPs have access to untied grants to take care of local exigencies and are not dependent on government funds.

- In line with the literature on behavioural science and tax collection,¹⁷ we offer a variation that provides social pressure in a manner that is not pejorative. For instance, the house numbers of all the houses in a habitation/ward should be displayed on wall posters along with the status of their tax payment. Juxtaposed with this message will be the poster detailing the cost required for repairing/providing a service in that habitation. Based on behavioural principles related to social identity and salience, this is expected to generate discussion among citizens and subtly compel defaulters into paying their taxes on time to avail the benefit.
- Local SHGs may also be used for tax collection purpose, thus relieving the burden on the VP secretary.

¹⁷ Till Olaf Weber, Jonas Fookien, & Benedikt Herrmann. 2014. *Behavioural economics and taxation* (Taxation Papers Working Paper N.41-2014). European Commission.

Development planning

In the backdrop of large-scale reverse migration, it is now essential to critically rethink the model of development adopted by the state.

- Viewing the pandemic as an opportunity, there is a need to think outside the box. The process of development needs to become decentralised and shift its emphasis from urban to rural areas, from metros to small towns, and particularly to subdistrict level as that will be the site where jobs will have to be created.

- Under the district administration, both district panchayats and panchayat union councils have the potential to play an important role in regenerating the rural economy through their standing committees.

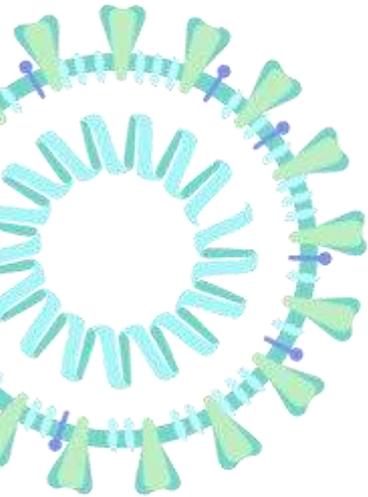
Sustainable Development Goals

It is also essential that the state does not lose track of the SDGs. SDG 3 which deals with health has had a direct impact on other SDGs like Poverty (SDG 1), Hunger (SDG 2), quality of education (SDG 4), and access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6).¹⁸

¹⁸ Ruchika Shah. 2020, June 5. In the post Covid-19 era, an opportunity to build back better. *Forbes India*.

¹⁹ Abdullah Shibli. 2020, May 20. Sustainable Development Goals: What to salvage from Covid-19. *The Daily Star*.

- This ‘pandemic pause’ as Abdullah Shibli¹⁹ calls it, has given us time to rethink, review, and revisit our understanding regarding which SDGs to re-prioritise, but this should not be at the cost of critical SDGs like poverty and hunger.
- Local governments will have to play a critical role in ensuring important SDGs like poverty and hunger are mitigated by collective action at the local level, including government and non-governmental actors along with the civil society by continuing to build on the social capital that this pandemic has generated and energised at the local level. 🌱



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