

It is imperative to make disaster resilience an inherent part of community culture

The Panchayati Raj, first adopted by Nagaur in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959, has expanded vastly. There are now 2,60,512 Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represented by about 31 lakh elected members across India. This system of local self-governance, where people in the villages participate in the decision-making process, is the backbone of democracy.

The People's Plan Campaign and Vibrant Gram Sabha Dashboard, rolled out this year, aspire to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system by making gram sabhas more vibrant.

A bottom-up approach

Unlike other disasters like earthquakes, COVID-19 is an unusual crisis as it is long-drawn and affects people everywhere. When the traditional top-down disaster response system was compromised during the bad months of the pandemic, it was PRIs that played a remarkable role. They helped reduce risks, responded swiftly and thus helped people recover quickly. The PRIs provided essential leadership at the local level.

They performed both regulatory and welfare functions. For instance, during the nationwide lockdown, PRIs set up containment zones, arranged transport, identified buildings for quarantining people and provisioned food for the incoming migrants.

Moreover, effective implementation of welfare schemes like MGNREGA and the National Rural Livelihood Mission quickened the pace of recovery while ensuring support to the vulnerable population.

Gram sabhas act as a sounding board for diverse ideas and opinions. They provide a platform to build consensus and make resolutions in the community's interest. During the pandemic, gram sabhas resolved to adhere to COVID-19 norms.

In addition, regular engagement with frontline workers like ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers through committees bridged the trust gap between the community and the officials.

By representing diverse communities, PRIs mobilise them effectively. During the COVID-19 crisis, they organised community-based surveillance systems involving village elders, the youth and self-help groups (SHGs) to keep a strict vigil in quarantine centres and monitor symptoms in households. More recently, their role in mobilising citizens for COVID-19 vaccination is exemplary.

Building capacity

The Yokohama strategy during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in May 1994 emphasised that it is important to focus on disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness rather than disaster response alone, to reduce vulnerability. In this respect, certain initiatives can be taken to build the capacity of PRIs.

One, it is crucial to include disaster management chapters in Panchayat Raj Acts and make disaster planning and spending part of Panchayati Raj development plans and local-level committees. This will ensure citizen-centric mapping and planning of resources. Various insurance products customised to local needs will build financial resilience of the community.

Two, conducting regular location-specific training programmes for the community and organising platforms for sharing best practices will strengthen individual and institutional capacities. Assigning roles to individual members and providing them with the necessary skills can make such programmes more meaningful.

Three, since the community is usually the first responder in case of a disaster, community-based disaster management plans would help.

These would provide a strategy for resource utilisation and maintenance during a disaster. Such plans should tap the traditional wisdom of local communities which will complement modern practices.

Moreover, financial contributions from the community should be encouraged through the establishment of community disaster funds in all gram panchayats. It is imperative to make disaster resilience an inherent part of the community culture now more than ever.

GS World Team Input

IN THE NEWS

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) :-

- ➔ Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a system of rural local self-government in India.
- ➔ Local Self Government is the management of local affairs by such local bodies who have been elected by the local people.
- ➔ PRI was constitutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to build democracy at the grass roots level and was entrusted with the task of rural development in the country.
- ➔ In its present form and structure PRI has completed 26 years of existence. However, a lot remains to be done in order to further decentralization and strengthen democracy at the grass root level.
- ➔ The following committees have played a role in the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India:
 - Hanumantha Rao Committee (1983)
 - GVK Rao Committee (1985)
 - Im Singhvi Committee (1986)
 - Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State Relations (1988)
 - PK Thungan Committee (1989)
 - Harlal Singh Kharra Committee (1990)

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Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

Q. Which of the following committees are associated with the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India?

1. Hanumantha Rao Committee
2. G.V.K. Rao Committee
3. L.M. Singhvi Committee

Code:-

- (a) 1 and 2 only (b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 and 3 only (d) All of the above

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. "The potential of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India has not been fully utilized yet." Examine this statement with special reference to disaster management.

(250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.