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Role of Panchayats in Disaster Management

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This Article based upon “**Stronger At The Grassroots**” which was published in The Hindu on 08/10/2021. It talks about the role that Panchayati Raj Institutions can play in Disaster Resilience Programs taking into account the part they have played in Covid-19 Pandemic Management.

The **73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution** paves the way for the popularly elected local governments to play a substantive role in matters of immediate concern. The amendment envisions the Panchayats as the institutions of local self-governance.

In this context, the role of the **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** in both disaster risk reduction and post-disaster management is very significant.

Unfortunately, these institutions have **not been fully operationalised for the handling of disasters** either during the preparatory stages or during disaster and post-disaster operations.

India, as a whole, **must integrate disaster preparedness into its core system**, starting from the ground-level.

PRI's and Disaster Management

- **Panchayati Raj Institutions in India:**

- **About:** The system of 2,60,512 Panchayati Raj Institutions present across the country, acts as the backbone of Indian democracy.
It is a local self-governance system which represents about 31 lakh members across India.
- **PRIs' Response to Covid-19:** Amid the peak months of the **pandemic**, the PRIs played a remarkable role by providing **essential leadership at the local level**.
 - **Performed Regulatory and Welfare Functions:** 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.
 - **Made Effective Collaborations:** During the pandemic, gram sabhas resolved to adhere to **Covid-19 norms**.
Also, regular engagement with frontline workers like **ASHA workers** and **Anganwadi workers** through committees further assisted in handling the pandemic at local levels.
 - **Organised Local Monitoring Bodies:** PRIs **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.

- **Disaster Management in India:**

- **Vulnerability to Disasters:** India is the **10th most disaster-prone country** in the world with 27 out of 28 States and all of the seven Union Territories being most vulnerable.
- **Inefficient SOPs:** Standard Operating Procedures (**SOPs**) are **virtually non-existent** and even where such SOPs exist, the **authorities concerned are unfamiliar** with it.
- **Lack of Coordination:** The States also suffer from **inadequate coordination among various government departments** and other stakeholders.
The Indian system for disaster management also suffers from the **absence of an institutional framework** at the Center/State/District level.
- **Poor Warning and Relief Systems:** India lacks a proper early warning system. Slow response from relief agencies, lack of trained/dedicated search and rescue teams and poor community empowerment are other important challenges.

Significance of PRIs in Disaster Management

- **Handling Disasters at Grass-root Level:** The devolution of power and responsibilities to the panchayats will result in **flexible and committed response at the grass- root level** in the case of natural calamities.
 - Effective and Strong PRIs, working in harmony with the state government, will help tackle the disaster through early warning systems.
- **Ensuring Better Relief Operations:** Local bodies being nearer to the people are in a better position to undertake relief tasks as they are **more familiar to the requirements of the local people**.
 - This **ensures total transparency** in working and usage of funds as in every disaster situation.
 - They can also be relied upon for undertaking day to day running of civic services, providing shelter and medical assistance to affected people etc.
- **Spreading Awareness and Gaining Cooperation:** Local government institutions have grass root level contact with people and they can **help effectively in spreading awareness** and **ensure people's participation** in fighting the crisis.
 - They are also ideal channels for NGOs and other agency's participation in the rescue and relief operations.

Issues Faced by PRIs

- **Interference from MPs and MLAs:** The interference of area MPs and MLAs in the functioning of panchayats adversely affects the performance of Panchayats.
- **Unavailability of Funds:** The Panchayats are not given enough funds and are **bypassed by State-controlled line departments** that continue to implement programmes falling within the rightful domain of the former.
- **Incomplete Autonomy:** Panchayats **lack systems, resources and capacities to act independently** due to numerous constraints imposed by district administrations and state governments.
 - Instead of becoming 'institutions of local self-governance', as envisaged by the constitution, panchayats **mostly act as field implementers of decisions made by state** and central governments.
- **Unclear Domains of Panchayats:** Though PRIs are a three tier integrated arrangement of the village, block and district level, they have remained largely ineffective as a consequence of **ambiguous jurisdictions and unclear linkages**.
 - Even in respect of **National Disaster Management Act 2005**, the **powers and responsibilities of panchayats are inadequately defined** and left to be determined by respective state governments.

Way Forward

- **Legal Backing for Disaster Management Programmes:** It is crucial to **include disaster management chapters in Panchayat Raj Acts** and making disaster planning and spending a part of Panchayati Raj development plans and local-level committees.

This will ensure **citizen-centric mapping** and planning of resources.

- **Resource Availability and Self-Reliance:** Local governance, local leaders and local communities, when empowered, respond to any disaster rapidly and effectively.

The local bodies require information and guidance and **must have resources**, capacities and systems in place to act with confidence, **without waiting for instructions from above**.

- **Shift in Disaster Management Paradigm:** There is an urgent need for a shift from a risk mitigation cum relief-centric approach in disaster management into an **integrated plan for economic development with social justice**.

Early warning systems, preparedness, preventive measures and awareness among people are as much an important part of disaster management as is recovery planning, rehabilitation and other relief measures.

- **Collective Participation:** Conducting regular, **location-specific disaster-management 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.

- **Financial Contributions from People:** 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.

Drishti Mains Question

Panchayati Raj Institutions are apparently the backbone of Indian democracy. However, in reality, the institutions do not enjoy the autonomy and powers that the Constitution of India envisages them to do so. Comment.
