

Review Article

Role of Panchayats in Disaster: A New Vista for Disaster Management

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ABSTRACT

Natural Disasters cannot be prevented, but their impact on the lives and the socio-economic aspects of the people can be reduced to a considerable extent. In the past, people have countered the effects of the disasters with their own efforts and have overcome the trauma of the calamity. While the Government has the role to help its people in distress, the people themselves have greater responsibility to withstand together to face such eventualities and help the Government to help themselves in this process, rather fully depending on it. No state-level administration will be able to meet the requirements of communities, unless communities come forward to solve their own problems. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), the representative body of the people, is the most appropriate institution from village to the district level in view of its proximity, universal coverage and enlisting people's participation on an institutionalized basis. Their close involvement will go a long way in getting people prepared for countering natural disasters as well as involve them in all possible preventive and protective activities so that the impact of the disasters are mitigated and the people are able to save their lives and property. The PRIs can act as catalysts to social mobilization process and tap the traditional wisdom of the local communities to complement the modern practices in disaster mitigation efforts. Besides PRIs will also provide a base for integration of various concerns of the community with that of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based organizations (CBOs) which are engaged in various developmental activities at the grassroots level. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members can play a role of leadership in Disaster management at all stages. Right from the preparatory stage up to the handling of the long term development activities for risk reduction. Panchayats must adhere to the humanitarian imperatives during relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in order to protect the rights and dignity of each and every victim of a disaster. Relief, they should remember, must be treated as a right rather than as charity.

Keywords

Role of Gram Panchayats;
Disaster Management;
Preparedness;
Early warning;
Relief

Introduction

Disasters are not totally discrete events. Their possibility of occurrence, time, place and severity of the strike can be reasonably and in some cases accurately predicted by technological and scientific advances. It has been established there is a definite pattern in

their occurrences and hence we can to some extent *reduce the impact of damage* though we cannot reduce the extent of damage itself. This demands the study of disaster management in methodical and orderly approach. A disaster is said to take place

precisely because the losses originated by a given event overwhelm the capacity of a population (local, regional or national) to respond and recover from it. Disaster risk emerges from the interaction between a natural hazard - the external risk factor – and vulnerability - the internal risk factor. Disaster may be termed as “a serious disruption of the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using its own resources” (UN/ISDR, 2004).

Role of PRI bodies in Disaster

The PRI is a statutory body elected by the local people through a well-defined democratic process with specific responsibilities and duties. The elected members are accountable to the people of the ward, rural community, block and the district. Keeping the above in view, the PRI, the representative body of the people, is the most appropriate institution from village to the district level in view of its proximity, universal coverage and enlisting people’s participation on an institutionalized basis.

Their close involvement will go a long way in getting people prepared for countering natural disasters as well as involve them in all possible preventive and protective activities so that the impact of the disasters are mitigated and the people are able to save their lives and property. The PRIs can act as catalysts to social mobilization process and tap the traditional wisdom of the local communities to complement the modern practices in disaster mitigation efforts. Besides PRIs will also provide a base for integration of various concerns of the community with that of the NGOs and Community Based organizations (CBOs) which are engaged in various developmental activities at the grassroots level.

Hence there is a need to define the role of PRIs in Disaster Management and sensitise local communities through them to develop coping mechanism in preparedness and mitigation measures of disaster to minimize its destructive effect on life and property at local level. The disaster management cycle requires massive efforts in all its aspects like prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, restoration, rehabilitation reconstruction work. These include addressing situations like lack of coordination at all levels in the restoration and relief work, non-involvement of the people, over dependency on government, inadequate relief and restoration work, lack of awareness among people regarding potential danger of cyclones and other disasters, lack of knowledge on availability of funds and resources etc,. Thus, the entire preparedness with regard to meeting emergencies like cyclone, flood and drought etc., calls for a constructive role and greater commitment on the part of the PRIs (Goel, 2006). The PRI members can play a role of leadership in Disaster Management at all stages. Right from the preparatory stage up to the handling of the long term development activities for risk reduction, PRI can lead in several ways. Gram panchayat has played a pivotal role in disaster management. The impact of disasters on people living in vulnerable areas and losses to their property can be minimized by a pro-active role played by PRIs at the grassroots level.

How PRI bodies can lead

It must be conceded that wherever it has strong roots, PRI has played a crucial role in mobilizing people in various situations of crisis. However, it is a fact that it is difficult to pre-empt disasters and also to predict their magnitude. But the impact of disasters on people living in vulnerable areas and losses

to their property can be minimized by a proactive role played by PRIs at the grassroots level. Apart from great organizing skills, it may call for courage and leading from the front. The PRI members can play a role of leadership in Disaster Management at all stages. Right from the preparatory stage up to the handling of the long term development activities for risk reduction, PRI can lead in several ways. A broad outline may include activities like:

Pre-Disaster

Organizing awareness campaign and promoting community education on disaster preparedness.

Articulation of community need for developing preparedness plan through community involvement and Panchayats ownership.

Identifying the resource gaps both physical and manpower and replenish the same through capacity building.

Establishing synergy with local agencies including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)/ Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

Dovetailing Risk Reduction into various development programs of national and state governments.

Encouraging people to insure assets and livestock.

Establishing convergence with local institutional structures created for implementing education, health, livelihood and social justice and so on.

Activating the disaster Management Plans with the participation of the community.

Formation of Task forces and their capacity building.

During Disaster

Arranging emergency communication through available resources.

Evacuation to temporary shelter and running relief camps.

Supplementing rescue and relief efforts in coordinating different agencies.

Monitoring of Relief distribution.

Safe disposal of carcass and arranging safe drinking water and sanitation.

Post Disaster

Damage assessment particularly assisting in identifying victims for compensation and its distribution.

Formulating rehabilitation and reconstruction plan of houses and other local infrastructures.

Enforce minimum specification for safe reconstruction.

Supervise and monitor long term reconstruction and mitigation projects. Mobilizing special funds to use disaster resistant construction technology in vulnerable areas.

Role of panchayat in managing information

Collection, analysis and dissemination are the three phases of managing information. This would not only help in predicting natural disasters, but also help communities plan their agricultural activities.

Table.1 Role/ Function of Gram Panchayats Disaster Management Committee

Sl. no.	Committee / team	Role / function		
		Before disaster	During disaster	After disaster
1.	Early warning, forecasting, transport	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listen to the news. 2. informed the villagers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Warned the villagers. 2. Send information to others department. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Link with the block and district.
2.	Infrastructure, shelters and food management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain records of available food grains. 2. Identified the shelters 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arranged shelters 2. Make arrangement for vulnerable people 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collect relief materials from block and district. 2. Make necessary repairment.
3.	Sanitation, health and first aid	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make necessary arrangement for pregnant women, children, old and disabled persons. 2. Arranging health camp 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take immediate steps for the injured people. 2. get ready for distribution of food and drinking water 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reach the spot and given support. 2. Support other team
4.	Search, rescue and evacuation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Repair damaged portion 2. Organizing awareness camp for the villagers 3. Acquire training 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rescue the injured people 2. Searching missing people 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help villagers to get back their home. 2. Maintain proper communication facilities. 3. Contact with the other members.

Collection

Authentic information plays a vital role at the time of need like the disasters. Panchayats should make an attempt to collect information from all relevant sources. In addition, they should make an attempt to check its authenticity and validity before passing it on to the community. Some of the sources from which Panchayats could collect information may be Radio, Television, Govt. sources, District Disaster Mitigation Cell and from Newspapers and News Agencies.

Analysis

Panchayats can form a committee of responsible persons who have access to the sources mentioned above so that they can get the right information at right time. In this respect, some of the senior citizens of the local communities should be made members of this committee, so that they can help in identifying certain local geographical indicators, which would enable people to predict future climatic conditions.

Dissemination

Panchayat functionaries can disseminate the information to the people in several ways. This can be done through notice boards, radio, TV, telephone, appropriate signals, word of mouth, and volunteers of disaster management teams as well as through the local NGOs.

Role of panchayat in planning and capacity building

Community-based disaster preparedness (CBDP) approaches are increasingly important elements of vulnerability reduction and disaster management strategies. They are associated with a policy

trend that values the knowledge and capacities of local people and builds on local resources, including social capital. CBDP may be instrumental not only in formulating local coping and adaptation strategies, but also in situating them within wider development planning.

Panchayats have a very important role to play in both preparedness and mitigation in mobilizing and organizing the people as well as facilitate their capacity building. Communities should be motivated to make their own short term and long – term DM plans for Disaster Mitigation for which Panchayats bodies need to lead from the front in building their capacities through regular training in this field. A sustained effort in this direction will not only reduce the dependency of the people on the Govt. but also help mobilize sizeable resources locally to counter disasters and reduce the burden of the Govt. to a great extent.

Issues in role of PRIS in disaster preparedness and management

The role of Panchayats is important in view of their proximity to the local community, universal coverage and enlisting people's participation on an institutionalized basis. It is possible to ensure accountability and transparency through the institution of Gram Sabha.

Hence there is an emphasis to involve Panchayats in Disaster Management and sensitize local communities through them to develop coping mechanism in preparedness and mitigation measures to minimise its destructive effect on life and property at local level. In the event of a disaster all people in its impact zone are affected but the poor and vulnerable (disabled, widow, orphans and children) people suffer the most, as their ability to absorb losses is low.

The specific benefits of community participation accrue from involving people in their own development, as can be seen from the following considerations:

People can be sources of useful ideas, such as those from indigenous technical knowledge and skills;

Also, the communities and people can participate in decision-making process with regard to implementation of development schemes, which are pertinent to disaster reduction measures. And thus, people's voices and choices can be more appropriately reflected in development programs and the commitment of the implementing functionaries like leaders, officials and NGOs can be reinforced further (GOI-UNDP 2002-2009).

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