

# **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICS DURING COVID-19**

Crisis, Solidarity and Change in a  
Global Pandemic

Edited by  
Breno Bringel and Geoffrey Pleyers

## **Self-Reliance as an Answer to the Pandemic: Hopes from India's Margins**

*Ashish Kothari*

Can you imagine Dalit women farmers in Telangana, once facing hunger and deprivation, contributing 20,000 kgs of food grains for COVID-19-related relief? Farmers on the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border continuing to send organic food to Bengaluru consumers even during the lockdown? Villages in Kachchh and Tamil Nadu handling anti-COVID-19 health measures, with minimal outside help? And Adivasis (indigenous people) in Central India with community funds able to take care of migrant workers who have had to come back to their villages?

These and many other stories across India show the potential of empowered rural communities to cope with crisis. And they expose the tragedy of a path of 'development' and governance that has not recognized, or worse, has taken away, the extraordinary agency of ordinary people to manage their own lives. COVID-19 has pointed sharply to our horribly unequal society, in which hundreds of millions of people do not have food, livelihood and basic-needs security, even as 1 percent of the richest own or control most of the country's wealth. It has also brought into focus the utter chasm between the nation's rulers and its poor. It has highlighted how safeguarding nature, not only for its own sake but for human survival, is so crucial.

### **Women farmers and community-supported agriculture**

"I grow 40 kinds of crops on my rain-fed land and don't use chemicals; I have enough food to last my family in the lockdown period and beyond", said Chandramma, one of Telangana's Dalit women farmers. She was participating

in a webinar organized in April 2020 by the network 'Vikalp Sangam', a process bringing together people's initiatives in alternative pathways of well-being. She is part of the Deccan Development Society, whose women's *sanghas* are active in 75 villages.

Through these, several thousand women who were on the margins of casteist, patriarchal society have revived their dryland, millet-centred agriculture, and increased overall production while retaining control over land, seeds, water and knowledge. Having achieved *anna swaraj* (food sovereignty) and self-sufficiency, in COVID-19 times these women are feeding landless families in their villages, contributing 10 kgs of food grains per family to the district relief measures, and daily feeding one thousand glasses of nutritious millet porridge to health, municipality and police workers in nearby Zaheerabad town.

The second story is from a village self-help group (SHG) in the Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu. In 2017, the SHG launched a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative with help from Navadarshanam, a community founded in 1990 to live ecologically sustainable and simple lives.

The initiative helps local organic farmers plan their operations based on commitments from urban subscribers for a weekly box of vegetables, fruits and groceries. All revenues are passed on to farmers, due to which incomes have risen between 10 and 20 times for some of them.

Remarkably, during the lockdown, CSA deliveries are continuing without interruption. This has helped farmers avoid a problem millions of their counterparts elsewhere have faced: making distress sales to whoever buys at very low prices. And consumers in Bengaluru, even in the zones where COVID-19 infection rates have been highest and the lockdown most intense, continue getting fresh, organic produce. Of course, all norms for physical distancing are being followed.

## **Communities safeguarding themselves against COVID-19**

In Kachchh, the village of Kunariya set up a crisis management team, used social media to raise awareness about COVID-19 and facilitated a full health survey. Three hundred and sixteen needy families, including those of visually impaired and differently abled individuals, single-women and other marginalized people, were assured all basic necessities using panchayat (village council) funds or local donations.

All this happened because over the last few years, dynamic facilitation by its sarpanch (elected village head) Suresh Chhanga has enabled Kunariya to move towards greater public participation in governance of local affairs. It has also been able to build effective bridges with the government authorities, implement schemes and laws like MNREGA and the Food Security Act, create transparency in the use of budgets and strengthen women's voices in decision-making.

When I phoned Suresh Chhanga, he excitedly recounted what they did with children in the lockdown period. Recognizing that they are stuck at home, bored or even in some cases facing aggression of equally bored or worried adults, the panchayat encouraged elders to teach them whatever special skills they had—music, crafts, cooking, traditional technologies, gardening—or engage them in environmental activities like caring for trees.

Then there is the Sittilingi Panchayat in Tamil Nadu, which mobilized itself as soon as Kerala announced the first COVID-19 case in January. Panchayat president Ms Madheswari called for an urgent meeting with relevant government departments and a civil society institution called Tribal Health Initiative (THI), and went into disaster control mode. This included mass awareness campaigns, enforcing physical distancing in all places of public gathering and isolation of returning migrants. As an income generation initiative, local tailors were asked to stitch masks in bulk. This panchayat has had many years of inputs by THI, an initiative by Drs Regi George and Lalitha Regi to create an Adivasi-oriented health facility along with organic cultivation, education, empowerment, crafts and other livelihood activities.

### **Self-reliance in tribal communities**

Other stories of resilience from tribal and other forest-dwelling communities come from many parts of India, where they have been able to restore their collective rights to govern and use the forests under the Forest Rights Act 2006. For instance, several villages in eastern Maharashtra, after two centuries of centralized control by the Forest Department through which revenues from the sale of forest produce like bamboo were mostly cornered by contractors and the government, have been able to do their own harvesting. This has been crucial to securing availability of nutritional forest foods, medicinal plants and culturally and spiritually important sites. Sustainable harvesting of forest produce has earned villages substantial income, part of which has gone into community funds. In settlements like Rahu in Amravati district and Kukdale and Salhe in Gadchiroli district, these funds are being used to help returning migrant labour or landless people obtain basic relief materials. Civil society organizations Khoj and Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi have been active in these areas, but in Gadchiroli there is also the remarkable mobilization of 90 villages into a Maha Gramsabha (federation of village assemblies), towards greater self-rule, resisting mining and economic self-reliance.

### **Small-scale manufacturing**

Many communities have also shown the enormous livelihood potential of rural, small-scale industries. The India's crafts sector has involved 150 to 200 million people, second only to agriculture. Government policies have

severely disabled them, but in places like Kachchh, innovation in local supply and production chains and in design has revived handloom weaving, such that youth are coming back into it—a form of reverse migration.

Kuthambakkam village near Chennai has demonstrated how small-scale manufacturing (for instance of solar fan-bulb kits) and grain processing have helped families avoid having to migrate out for work. Its ex-sarpanch Elango Rangaswamy has come up with a solar-powered way of making disinfectant as a response to COVID-19, which he says can be set up cheaply in any village for both employment and disease prevention.

From other parts of the country come inspiring stories at a larger scale. Groups under Kerala's state-supported Kudumbashree programme, which has provided dignified livelihoods for thousands of women, worked with panchayats and urban ward sabhas to spread awareness about COVID-19, set up community kitchens to cater to those needing food aid and mass-produce sanitizers and masks. Goonj, a civil society initiative working in 20 states, is bringing relief to over 40,000 families and using its *Vaapsi* programme of restoring livelihoods to create or re-establish localized barter-and-exchange systems that enable dignified livelihood generation. In Madhya Pradesh, Samaj Pragati Sahayog is working in several hundred villages to revitalize the rural economy and substantially reduce outmigration, and has reached over 13,000 families with relief packages. For this, it procured wheat from a local farmer-producer company, so that cultivators did not have to resort to distress sale.

## Lessons from the margins

What can we learn from these and many other such stories of COVID-19-time resilience? Are they in our prime minister's mind when he seems to realize the need for self-reliance and waxes eloquent on it in addresses to the nation in the middle of the pandemic? Perhaps not, for his government simultaneously pursues memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with dozens of foreign companies, dilutes laws protecting the environment and labour rights, puts heavy tax burdens on handicrafts and continues to forcibly acquire land, forest and other resources so vital to the rural economy only to hand them over to corporations. His government's stimulus plan to move out of the COVID-19 lockdown is ecologically illiterate and dangerous.

What these initiatives are demonstrating is the opposite of this. Self-reliance is about the revitalization of rural livelihoods (leaving aside cities for the moment). Note that I am talking here about *livelihoods*, not jobs; these are occupations linked to everyday life, social relations and culture, providing the body and soul with satisfaction. For the vast majority of people in our industrializing economy, jobs are *deadlihoods*, soul-deadening mass-production places where one desperately waits for the weekend to 'enjoy'

oneself (if you happen to be one of the lucky ones in IT or government or banking), or worse, where you go to sleep wondering if you will have work and an income the next day (if you are part of the labouring class).

Hundreds of initiatives for local self-reliance or self-sufficiency in food, livelihoods, water, energy, sanitation, housing and other basic needs around India tell us of the urgent need to move towards *localization* instead of economic *globalization*, which has left hundreds of millions of people across the world in a precarious situation. They tell us that clusters of settlements can be self-reliant in basic needs, significantly reducing distress migration to cities and industrial zones as well as widespread trade and travel. They tell us that communities can govern themselves, while making the state accountable. They tell us that achieving all this also requires struggles to remove patriarchy, casteism and other forms of discrimination that traditional occupations can be mired in. They show us the power of using hybrid knowledge systems and respecting cultural diversity (while rejecting religious identity politics), as well as the need to reconnect with nature while respecting all of life. They also point to many transformations that need to happen in India's cities, but that is a subject for a future article.

If the Indian state is really interested in rural self-reliance, it needs to support a rainbow New Deal, supporting dignified livelihoods through agriculture, pastoralism, forestry, fisheries, crafts and small manufacturing in each village; to help set up producer-consumer links eliminating exploitative corporate middlemen and retailers; to reserve most production in labour-intensive small- and medium-scale workshops; to stop pandering to large corporations (Indian or foreign); to eliminate goods and services tax and other burdens on hand production; to ensure minimum support prices for primary sector products, and so on. Its current policies are, by and large, the complete opposite, and there is little in the COVID-19 recovery or stimulus packages that points to any fundamental shift. The packages are also socioecologically bankrupt. Given this, it is left to communities themselves, with help from civil society (and some sensitive state governments), to use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for moving towards justice, equity and sustainability.