
India's communities show self-reliant pathways out of COVID, but is its government listening?

Ashish Kothari¹

Abstract

With the onset of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown in India did not impinge upon the economic activities in the Kunariya village in the Kachchh region of western India. This included works under the MGNREGA. During the entire year of 2020, Kunariya did not have a single case of COVID-19 infection, nor did it experience any significant loss of livelihoods, unlike a huge swathe of India that was affected by both. Even during the devastating second wave, those who got infected recovered fully. This article raises an important question as to what made Kunariya resilient to both the health and economic impacts of COVID19, the answer to which is the habit of sincere implementation of schemes, and allocation of funds received from the Union and State governments. It also describes the resilience of the village of Sittilingi in the state of Tamil Nadu. What connects both these cases is the indomitable efforts of elected representatives at the Panchayat levels, along with that of sensitive officials, politicians and civil society organizations.

Keywords: COVID-19; Kunariya Village; Sittilingi Village; People's Participation

As news of a strange new viral infection reached it in March 2020, Kunariya village in the Kachchh region of western India swung into action. Even before India's Prime Minister announced a national lockdown on 24th March, the village had already put into place restrictions on entry and movement, physical distancing, wearing masks, and awareness programmes on staying safe. Yet it also insisted on the continuation of economic activities, including works under the country's Employment Guarantee Scheme that enabled the poorest to earn a living wage. Throughout 2020, Kunariya did not have a single case of COVID-19 infection, nor did it experience any significant loss of livelihoods, unlike a huge swathe of India that was affected by both.

But what of the deadlier 2nd wave of 2021, which left millions gasping for breath, and penetrated even villages very far from the urban epicentres of the infection? "We have had a few cases of infection, but all recovered well, and again, we never stopped our livelihood activities", said Suresh Chhanga, the elected

¹ Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives, Pune, India
Email: ashishkothari@riseup.net

sarpanch (head) of the village, when I called him up in early June 2021. Vaccinations were also proceeding as rapidly as doses were available; in another couple of months the village was entirely covered.

The above description raises an important question as to what made Kunariya resilient to both the health and economic impacts of COVID19? On a visit to the village in January 2021, in that short interregnum between the first and second waves of infection, I dug deeper into its remarkable story (Kothari 2021). Over the last 2-3 years, Chhanga motivated its panchayat (village council) and young people in the village to optimize the use of funds coming to it from the union and state governments, set up processes and institutions for enhanced people's participation, with particular focus on education, health, livelihoods, water, and regenerating ecosystems. Even in such a short period, this mobilization stood the village in good stead when COVID hit.

Kunariya's story is exceptional, but it is not the only one. 1500 kilometres further south, in the state of Tamil Nadu, the village of Sittilingi has its own tale of resilience. When the neighbouring state of Kerala announced the first COVID case in January 2020, Panchayat President Ms Madheswari called for an urgent meeting with relevant government departments, and a civil society institution called Tribal Health Initiative (THI). The village went into disaster control mode, including mass awareness campaigns, 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 THIⁱ, 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 (Vikalp Sangam 2021a).

In 2021, the 2nd COVID wave hit the village much worse. But the community was ready with the necessary awareness programmes on safety protocols people should follow. The THI hospital was converted into a COVID treatment facility. While unfortunately three people lost their lives out of about 450 people who came for treatment, Dr. Regi said: "without the state of readiness and the preventive health work done over the last year, which significantly reduced the inflow of patients, the casualties would have been probably 10-15 times higher". Agricultural activities and the sale of farm and pastoral produce continued, thereby averting economic distress.

Kunariya and Sittilingi represent that fringe of India's communities that have resisted the general trend of health and economic breakdown in COVID times. They provide key lessons for the kind of COVID recovery pathways that India could take. The national network Vikalp Sangamⁱⁱ ('alternatives confluence'), comprising over 70 people's movements and civil society organizations, has put together several dozen such stories from across the country in association with other networks like Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) and Community Forest Rights Learning and Advocacy Network (Vikalp Sangam 2020; Vikalp Sangam 2021a-d; Vikalp Sangam and CFR-LA 2020).

In the central Indian heartland of forest-dwelling *adivasis* (Indigenous peoples), collective rights to the forest have enabled villages to establish community funds. These became a vital source to support migrant workers from these villages who, laid off in the cities, returned home but had nothing to fall back on. Women farmer groups like North-East Network and Deccan Development Society have over the years established local self-reliance in food, and were able to feed their families during the months of economic lockdown. The Mahila Umang Samiti, comprising women self-help groups in 100 villages of the Uttarakhand Himalayan region, was able to procure the produce of 400 farmers, and deliver it to customers. In many of these examples, women have had to challenge old gender and caste inequities, as also re-establish their organic, indigenous seed-based farming.

Groups under Kerala's state-supported Kudumbashree programme, that has provided dignified livelihoods for lakhs of women, worked with panchayats and urban ward sabhas to spread awareness about COVID, 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, reached relief to over 40,000 families, and is using its *Vaapsi* ('returning') programme of restoring livelihoods, to establish localized barter and exchange systems promoting dignified livelihoodsⁱⁱⁱ. Youth in many parts of the country went out of their way to help communities tide over the crisis (Vikalp Sangam 2021d). In Kolkata, young members of the NGO Prantakatha mobilized support for 32 elderly homeless widows through their programme *ador* (Bengali for 'deep affection and care'), generating not only relief materials but a sense of community solidarity that kept the women safe.

Other than these, there are hundreds of other initiatives of local self-reliance or self-sufficiency and solidarity in food, livelihoods, water, energy, sanitation, housing, and other basic needs across India. These are initiatives that have significantly reduced distress migration to cities and industrial zones, in some cases even encouraged a return to villages. They teach us that the future of a sustainable and just society lies in *localization* instead of economic *globalization*, that has left hundreds of millions of people across the world in a precarious situation. Such a move could also significantly reduce the need for the frenetic trade and travel that characterizes globalization, and is a major contributor to the climate crisis.

Importantly, these radical alternatives are also about people and communities claiming power where they are, rather than be dictated to by governments and corporations. Various forms of what Mahatma Gandhi called *swaraj* - self-determination and freedom with social and ecological responsibility - can be glimpsed in them. But they are also arenas for challenging the many traditional and new inequities Indian society is riddled with, including patriarchy and casteism. And they show us the power of building on traditional and local knowledge systems, supplementing them with modern knowledge where relevant.

Building on the several examples of such alternatives, the Vikalp Sangam network has come up with a framework of holistic transformation that encompasses political, economic, social, cultural and ecological spheres, with a core of ethical

values like solidarity, diversity, autonomy, non-violence, and rights with responsibilities towards other humans and the rest of nature (Vikalp Sangam 2017). Similar transformations are being increasingly seen in many other regions of the world, though all are still marginal to the dominant exploitative and unsustainable system (Kothari 2021b).

Unfortunately, as with governments in most other parts of the world, the Indian state appears unwilling to learn these lessons. Since mid-2020, Prime Minister Modi has announced a series of COVID recovery packages, labelled *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* ('self-reliant India'). The name is grand, but in actuality there is little in them to support the kind of self-reliance the above initiatives are demonstrating. Instead, the stimulus plans are ecologically illiterate and dangerous; over 60 new coal mining blocks have been put up for auctioning, many of them in India's biodiversity hotspots and heartlands of Adivasi (indigenous) populations (Kothari 2020a). In fact over the last few years, the Modi government has increasingly privatized the economy, pursuing MoUs with dozens of foreign companies, diluting laws protecting the environment and labour rights, putting heavy tax burdens on handicrafts, and forcibly acquiring land, forest, and other resources vital to the rural economy to hand them over to corporations (Kothari 2020b). This continues a trend started when India announced 'economic reforms' in 1991 under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the last 30 years of economic globalization, India's labour force (over 90% of which is in the informal or unorganized sector) has become increasingly insecure, devastatingly vulnerable to crises like the COVID-time lockdowns. According to the Azim Premji University (APU), 230 million Indians have been pushed into poverty in 2020, due to economic lockdowns. Unemployment was already at a high of nearly 6% before the pandemic; it has crossed double digits in mid-2021 (APU 2021).

The public health sector has been systematically neglected; with allocation to it remaining around 1% of the total budgetary outlay, India ranks at 179 out of 189 countries in prioritization of health in the government budget (Kulshreshth 2021). One painfully visible result of this was its inability to cope with the 2nd wave of COVID19 in April-June 2021; its increasing privatization has also taken healthcare out of reach of tens of millions. Agriculture, on which over 50% of India depends for livelihoods, has also received either neglect, or the forcible imposition of corporate control. This includes the promulgation of three laws on agriculture in the middle of the pandemic in 2020, all oriented towards greater commercialisation and private companies, which led to the country's largest ever farmer occupation of the streets around Delhi. This protest continued for over a year till the government finally agreed to promulgate the laws, and meet some of the other demands; as of the time of writing this, farmers are waiting to see if the government actually meets them.

It does not need to be like this. Rather than 'business as usual' disguised in the form of the *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* packages, the Indian state could have initiated a very different recovery. Statements issued by the Vikalp Sangam platform in both the first and second waves pointed to how this could be so (VSCG 2020; VSCG 2021).

Between agriculture in all its forms and crafts, for instance, and the regeneration and conservation of natural ecosystems and the land, there is a potential to provide dignified livelihoods to 200 to 400 million people. Add decentralized manufacturing and infrastructure, and services, and one could reach the vast majority of India's workforce. Why cannot textiles, footwear, tourism, banking, and most other sectors of production and services, be managed by community enterprises spread across India? Already there are hundreds of examples of this, some from ancient times like handlooms, some new like homestays and community-led tourism, that we can learn from. The re-orientation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme, and its extension to urban areas, could have catered to such sectors. Suresh Chhanga, sarpanch of Kunariya, told me his dream is for the village to produce all items of daily use in the household: "we spend Rs. 4 million *every month* on these, why should we line the pockets of corporations when we can produce it all here?" He is in good company; this was Mahatma Gandhi's dream too, when he spoke of 'village republics' governing themselves and being self-reliant for basic needs.

How would funds be generated for such a recovery package? Economists and social commentators have suggested that a mere 2% wealth tax on the richest 1% of Indians, coupled with an inheritance tax, could generate more revenue than the total *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* package (Mander et al. 2020). It would be enough to support universal rights to food, employment, health care, education, old age pension and disability allowance (Jan Sarokar 2020). But a government that has deeply entrenched itself within crony capitalism, is unwilling and unlikely to take such steps.

What India and other countries in a similar situation need is a rainbow new deal, supporting the above kinds of livelihoods (Kothari 2020c). But given that its government is going in the opposite direction, it will have to be communities and people's movements, with whatever help they can get from sensitive officials, politicians and civil society organizations, to use the COVID crisis as an opportunity for moving towards a just, sustainable society.

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