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ROLE OF PDS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT OF COVID-19: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON RATION SHOPS IN PIRAYIRI PANCHAYAT

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Abstract: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic disease by the World Health Organization (WHO). The current article studies the role of Public Distribution Systems during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Pirayiri Panchayat. The objective of the study is (I) To study the public distribution system and its benefits, (II) To identify the challenges faced by ration shopkeepers during this pandemic crisis in the distribution of goods to the beneficiaries, (III) To propose recommendations based on the findings. The research design is qualitative, and the Criterion sampling technique had used for the study. Data collected from primary sources like ration shopkeepers. This study's significant findings are that the ration shops in the Pirayiri Panchayat distribute the goods to the consumers by obeying all the protocols to be followed during this pandemic situation. From this study, it is evident that by providing assured supply of food grains, the PDS has become an essential source of food security for rural households. Moreover, PDS ensures food security and ensures people's lives through the proper distribution of goods by restricting the mass mobility of the people. The current study aims to analyse the significance of PDS in ensuring the safety of the people. This research also studies the strategies used in the local ration shops to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Keywords: Public distribution system, COVID-19, Ration shops, Panchayath, Dependency and safety.

Introduction

The public distribution system (PDS) of India was established by India's Government under

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the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution and managed jointly with state governments. It provides subsidies on food and non-food items to eligible people based on their economic level. This scheme was launched in India in June 1997. Food Corporation of India, a Government-owned corporation, procures and maintains the PDS. Subsequently, the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was launched in 1997. TPDS aims to provide subsidised food and fuel to the poor through ration shops in their localities. The Source of food grains provided under TPDS is from farmers. It is then allocated to states and delivered to the ration shop (food distribution outlets under TPDS), where the beneficiary buys his entitlement. The centre and states share the responsibilities of identifying the poor, procuring grains, and delivering food grains to beneficiaries. In September 2013, Parliament enacted the National Food Security Act 2013. The Act relies mainly on the existing TPDS to deliver food grains as legal entitlements to low households.

Categories of Public Distribution System in India are Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS), Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), PDS for General BPL, PDS for APL, Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). The Public Distribution System (PDS) a vital role in India was to act as a price support program for the consumer during the food shortage of the 1960s (Role of the public distribution system in providing food security in India). The objectives of the Government of India's food security policy are:

1. Ensuring adequacy or sufficiency in the supply of food grains, and
2. They are distributing food grains at an affordable price.

In India, targeting was more focused during the nineties; first, Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) was started by India's Government in 1992 to provide essential commodities to the people living in remote, backward hilly areas. The Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) began in 1997.

From the pre-independence era to now, Kerala has consistently maintained better and equitable health standards owing to its' political commitment, high female literacy, social and economic reforms like the land reforms, the Narayana Guru movement, several social movements, access to better health care, and an excellent public distribution system (PDS). These movements have been across various religious and social groups, thus reducing inequity. Kerala has significant proportions of various minority religious groups, which not only coexist but also thrive together. It has been hailed for its religious plurality and communal harmony from historical times. (Meyer

& Brysac, 2011). Kerala sets a model not only for the cause of eradicating poverty and improving the standard of living of the people living below the poverty line but also for ensuring the safety of the people during this pandemic crisis. Kerala implemented the PDS as a universal system during this pandemic situation by providing food kits to Kerala's local people.

Local food systems are very weak in a developing country like India. About 91 percent of the total workforce is from the informal sector who entirely dependent on daily wages as a mode of living (Praharee Pashudhan. Impact of COVID-19 on Food Industries). They include agricultural, migrant, and other workers. These vulnerable groups and their families were the most affected people during this pandemic context. The sudden imposition of the countrywide lockdown was an effective effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus. However, the local food systems were disrupted.

Although India is a developing country that aims for socioeconomic progress, hunger, and poverty prevailed. To deeply understand the country's socioeconomic shock, this study aims to identify the pandemic's immediate effects on the local food systems and the resilient measures adopted by the government to cope with it.

1. Review of Literature

George (1996) attempted to analyse the public distribution of food grains and their income distribution effects in Kerala. He tried to estimate the possible impact of rationing on the incomes of the consumers using the relationship. The results for Kerala suggest that the system is economically viable. Further, ration rice, according to this study, accounted for a significant share of rice consumption of consumers belonging to low-income groups.

Johan et al. (2013) analysed India's food security issue during the last few decades and analysed the working of PDS with some macro measures. Their paper also tries to identify the part of the population that deserves food security in general. They also analysed the availability, storage, and procurement of food grains; assessed the effectiveness of PDS; identified the discrepancies in the system, and find ways to remove the anomalies and make the delivery mechanism more efficient. They mentioned that the targeting of individuals as a part of PDS had not solved hunger. The exclusion of genuine beneficiaries has led to the collapse of providing food security to the needy. They suggest that states should give better flexibility in designing their food security system, and robust social audit mechanisms must in action.

Bhatt et al. (2012) attempted to study the efficiency of PDS in Kashmir. They found much

misappropriation in supplies of PDS. They observed that ration shop owners had less profit and often sold their goods in the open market to earn more. The ration shop owners were also involved in misappropriating supplies and provided much less to the consumers. The supplies were also of lower quality and not provided to the beneficiaries on time. The study suggested that proper monitoring should be in place so that corruption might be minimised. They proposed that a minimum social security level must be provided to the old, sick, and disabled.

Arora (2013) examined food subsidies in India and also analysed the reasons behind the failure of PDS in many parts of the country. The article utilises the 61st round of National Sample Survey Data on households' monthly consumption for the year 2004-05 and examines the Public Distribution System's role in ensuring price stability. The study pointed out that the two primary objectives for initiating this food security program were to provide nutritional support to the poor through subsidised and cheap food grains and maintain price stability. It has mostly failed in meeting its goals. It has failed to reach the poor in most states other than the southern states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, where it has been partially successful.

A recent study by the Centre for Socioeconomic and Environmental Studies reveals that people in Kerala relied heavily on the public distribution system to survive the COVID-19-induced lockdown. It states that 92% of the households made purchases from ration shops during the lockdown, and 16% of visited ration shops during the lockdown after a long gap (Subsidy Category), and 85% of the non-priority category, made purchases using their ration cards during the lockdown (Martin, 2020).

Even when the world faces this pandemic crisis, Kerala stands at the forefront, making policy reforms to concentrate and incorporate the primary sector, accelerating agricultural production, ultimately focusing on better quality of life. The services of PDS is availed to all the people in Kerala irrespective of their economic status during this pandemic context. (Shaijumon, 2020).

2. Transformation of PDS in Kerala Due to Pandemic by State and Central Directives

Kerala was successful in setting an example for the other states in India regarding COVID-19 mitigation. Kerala's Chief Minister took immediate actions to uplift the most impoverished section from the risk of hunger and starvation. The significant actions are as follows:

- The government announced a free ration for one month through the Public Distribution systems (PDS) and Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (SUPPLY CO). The

government provided 35 kg of rice for below poverty line families, which constitutes 11.3 percent of the total population in the state, and 15 kg of rice for others.

- The Biometric database system is not used now in PDS due to the risk of transmission determined by the user's fingerprint contact with the machine. However, it is made mandatory for those who are using a portable ration card. Even then, the security of such migrant people is ensured.
- The strict use of mask and proper sanitisation facilities is ensured.
- Kerala's government distributed food kits consisting of 17 items worth INR 1000 (USD 13), starting on 8 April for every household in Kerala. These food commodities were sourced from the suppliers registered under Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation and the National Agriculture Cooperative Marketing Federation of India. This project is funded by the Kerala Chief Minister Distress Relief Fund. This scheme implemented for the first month of the pandemic, and the officials are planning to continue the scheme according to the severity of the situation.
- Followed by Kerala's initiative, the Central Finance Minister of India announced a 1.7 trillion rupees relief package to take care of the poor's food security measures. It had funded by the Prime Minister's Gareeb Kalyan Scheme. The minister announced the distribution of free provision of 5kg of rice or wheat per person, 1 kg of pulse per household, along with free cooking gas monthly for the next three months to the poor. (Pothan, P. E., Taguchi, M., & Santini, G. (2020). Local food systems and COVID-19: A glimpse on India's responses. *Rome: FAO.*)

3. The Methodology of the Study

The researcher has chosen a qualitative research design for this study. The study's primary data was collected through structured, in-depth interviews with the ration shopkeepers in the Pirayiri Panchayat. The Criterion sampling technique used in the study and Sample size was confined to seven as there are only seven ration shops in the Pirayiri Panchayat. The secondary data collected from books, journals, magazines, newspapers, reports, and websites. The study aimed to identify the changes in local people's consumption pattern and behaviour during the lockdown period due to COVID-19, shortage of essential products or services. The study also inquired how far the consumers and the shopkeepers followed the government's safety measures

stipulated by the government? The interview was conducted between 22 May 2020 and 30 May 2020. The primary data characteristic was in the form of audio, as the interview was organised through telephone. The researcher analysed the data by interpreting the primary data based on the secondary textual data background.

The primary data used in this study have not been collected from PDS beneficiaries due to the aftereffect of COVID 19. Furthermore, most people do not have the accessibility to fill the survey through Google form and lack online literacy. Analysis of the performance of PDS in the study area with a limited sample size was very challenging, and the reliability of data is based on the response of the ration shopkeepers.

4. Findings and Recommendations

4.1. Findings of the Study

Table No. 1 Changes during this lockdown

Sl.No	Protocols in PDS	The dependency of local people on PDS	Goods and services of PDS
1	We are strictly following the instructions given by the government to prevent the spread of COVID-19.	Most of the people are collecting the goods from the ration shops during this lockdown. Even many of the APL cardholders are availing the services regularly during this lockdown.	Goods are available enough for distribution to the beneficiaries. The consumers are also well satisfied.
2	We ensure social distancing while distributing goods. Sanitisers are also given to use after the delivery of goods.	Due to socioeconomic status, local people have made use of the ration shops to buy essential items during the lockdown.	Good quality goods and services are delivered here. Consumers are well satisfied.
3	We strictly follow the rules and regulations for COVID-19 mitigation. Some local people fail to maintain social distancing and to use the mask. So we strongly urge them to obey the rules. And we provide goods only to those consumers who wear masks	Compared to the context before the outbreak of COVID-19, more people depend on ration shops to receive their benefits.	Here we distribute goods and services properly.

1. The ration shops distribute the good to the consumers by obeying all the COVID-19 protocols.
2. The study reveals that local people have used ration shops to buy essential items during the lockdown.

3. The ration shops in Kerala deliver quality goods and services.
4. Most of the households in Kerala have depended on PDS during the lockdown. People also follow the protocols declared by the government for the mitigation of COVID-19. The ration shop keepers ensure the people's safety by strictly maintaining the social distancing and masks
5. This study shows that most people availed PDS services during this lockdown period regardless of the economic differences.
6. Dependency on nearby ration shops reduced the travel to the other places for purchasing purposes. Hence the community spread of COVID -19 is prevented to an extent.

4.2 Recommendations

1. A monitoring mechanism needs to be evolved through the significant involvement of Panchayat elected representatives (ward members) and other sections of society, such as members of youth clubs, self-help groups, and Mahila Mandals. The formation of such a monitoring mechanism would prevent the exclusion of genuine beneficiaries, enhance the fair price shops' proper functioning, and control the diversion of food grains.
2. The Information must reach the cardholders well in advance per period (month) regarding the availability and distribution of items through the FPSs.
3. There has to be a regular distribution of oil and pulses every month, and the quantity allotted should be sufficient.
4. Computerisation of ration card data for proper distribution and to check leakages should be adopted. Computerisation of ration card data can reduce malpractices in allotment to a greater extend.
5. In addition to the supply of essential consumable commodities at FPS, agricultural inputs like improved seeds, fertilisers, etc. may also be made available to the farmers, which would help them access, as they may purchase the inputs and commodities together under PDS.

Conclusions

Overall, COVID-19 pandemic is a critical period in Indian history. Science and technology, along with globalisation, had enabled us to take adequate measures to mitigate COVID-19. The bold and decisive leadership of the central and state governments has implemented tremendous strategies to protect people's livelihood from the aftereffect of COVID-19. The "break the chain" slogan had pierced into people's minds by using a mask, sanitiser, maintaining social distance, and

staying home for a promising future ahead for the entire world. The government is making all efforts to make the PDS more effective by ensuring the goods' availability, affordability, and accessibility to the poor through strengthening the PDS. The prime aim of PDS is to ensure an adequate supply of essential commodities of acceptable quality at an affordable price to the general public, particularly the poor. PDS has indeed achieved dramatically in its objectives. A universalised PDS was first implemented in Kerala during the lockdown. This study outcome proves that such interventions of the government have been a great relief to all sections of society. The increased dependency of non-priority category on PDS may induce high pressure on the state government. Therefore, the share of food grains allocated to Kerala from the centre requires to be increased. By providing an assured supply of food grains, the PDS has become a vital source of food security for rural households. Moreover, PDS ensures food security and ensures the safety of the lives of people. The people's safety is ensured through the proper distribution of goods by restricting the mass mobility of the people during this pandemic context.

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