



# INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: KOTDA MADH

Lakhapat Block, Kutch - Gujarat

How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
in the midst of a pandemic.



## CORONAVIRUS TEAM: An Effective Intervention With the Youth

**Kotda Madh Juth Gram Panchayat** lies in the Lakhapat block of Kutch District, around 95 kms west of District headquarters Bhuj. This Panchayat includes four villages, Sukhapar Vandh, Kalravandh, Murachban, and Kotda Madh.

The Panchayat, Sarpanch and citizens have become models in their approach to the pandemic, with their exceptional participatory approach and focus on addressing each other's needs regularly and efficiently.

The Sarpanch and Panchayat members received word of the pandemic from their phones, all **information from the governments' side** was through the medium of videos, scanned notices and guidelines on social media or websites.

This was **relayed to the citizens** by a car that made rounds in all villages, with a microphone with information of what the virus is, its common causes, the current situation and stay at home orders by the government.

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*"Since the lockdown has started, we have been conducting the process of sanitizing villages. They come once in every 8 days, and just finished one round yesterday!"*

*- Rajak Kumbhar, an active member of the community*

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Around 24 people came back after an overseas pilgrimage and work to their homes. They were quarantined by the Panchayat at their respective homes with a stock of ration. Aarogya workers also came to check them and monitor their health status, also solving any issues that they might have.

The Primary Health Centre also came for a mobile testing with Aarogya workers, out of which only one had come out as positive, becoming the second case in all of Kutch district to be positive.

Necessary medicines were provided to the villagers, for other illnesses and requirements by the PHC which had been given a temporary space in Kotda Madh's Anganwadi for two months, and the doctor would come to take regular checkups.



*(above): Sanitization taking place.  
(below): The Sarpanch making COVID announcements.*

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*"Only one case came in our village, when there were only 2 cases in all of Kutch, the second one was here, since they had all travelled together as a part of the Hajj Yatra."*

*- Adhambhai Rayma, Sarpanch*

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*Widespread Sanitization, was carried out by volunteers. This was done with a tanker of sanitizer and spraying hose.*

In the process of organizing action for the pandemic, **a committee of 10-12 people was formed** by the panchayat to take responsibility of ensuring that everyone's needs were met. This committee included the Sarpanch, Adhambhai Rayma, Hiren Bhatti, the principal of the primary school as well as teachers and volunteers.

After making sure that the volunteers were less prone to the virus (since they were younger in age), only 10 people were allowed to move between villages for work. **These volunteers would not enter homes, but simple transfer whatever was needed from the source, like a shop to someone's house.**



A volunteer handing over supplies at a citizen's home

Their work included collecting ration cards, making a list of people's requirements and then delivering it to them at home.

The Panchayat distributed mobile numbers for aid to every citizen, such that if anyone needed absolutely anything at all, they could call the number and would receive it at home, so that no one had to step out of their house even once.

As for the mid-day meal, dry ration kits were created by the primary school and sent home to the children and their families in a similar fashion.

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**"The 10 people who were outside, went to the children's homes to give textbooks, notebooks and extra work. Not everyone could go everywhere, but the team of 10 people was doing everything themselves.**

**We wish we could open the school but we also have to listen to the government guidelines and not gather 50 children or more together at once"**

**- Hiren Bhatti, Primary School Principal**

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A **blended mode of education** is being followed right now, with education being **both online and offline**, as teachers visit the homes of the enrolled children.

In a day, around 5 children are being taught by each teacher, according to a schedule divided between them. If there are any doubts, a maximum of 2-5 children are allowed to come to the school such that they clear their doubts and leave.

According to the Principal, even though there is a limited presence of teachers in the school, they are trying to make sure that everyone receives attention and are able to keep up with their studies and clear doubts accordingly.

The school is also adapting to **new methods**, by sharing links to Youtube videos with solutions to papers, prepared by the teachers. They are sent on a common Kotda Madh panchayat school group, so that in a case with lack of communication or time, it can be covered by means of video.



(above) Ration being carried to people's homes by volunteers, (below) temperature checks of shopkeepers.

In the villages, almost everybody does farming, and very few people do mazdoori. For those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, they have work as manual labour on farms in surrounding villages itself.

The Panchayat provided kits to every citizen from their side every 15 days for two months, until the situation came under control and they were able to assess the possibilities and situation better.

According to Kasam Husen Padyar, an active member of the community, companies do not help, even in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility, let alone keeping in keeping villagers as permanent employees. They keep hiring 'outsiders', and not the people who come from surrounding areas.



*The COVID team in meeting.*

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***"For the village, we stayed here all day and night. We would explain to the villagers not to leave their homes and not let them either. If any disease or problem arises, everybody is ready to listen, they all understand. We used to practice farming, but we left that too because of this."***

***- Adhambhai Rayma Sarpanch***

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**Collective action** is only rarely so effective. An exemplary effort by the Panchayat of Kotda Madh and the young volunteers did not allow the repercussions of a dangerous pandemic and lockdown to be felt.

It brings into light what happens **when decision making and relief processes involve different perspectives** and allow for the potential for help to be fully harnessed.

**CASE  
STUDY**

**NOV 2020**



# **INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: VADASAR VILLAGE**

**Bhuj Block Kutch - Gujarat**

**How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
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## LOCAL PRODUCE: Utilizing Existing Resources Timely

**Vadasar** is a village placed at around 17 kms away from Bhuj, in the district of Kutch, Gujarat. With a population of 947 citizens as per the 2011 census, it forms a Gram Panchayat with **Priti Ben as Sarpanch**.

As the pandemic continues to disturb our current natural order, it makes policy on paper fall behind the efforts of individuals that are borne out of empathy and kindness

These can be seen prominently in the way the Panchayat and Sarpanch of the village Vadasar worked for their people over the last few months.

What became important upon the announcement of the lockdown and "officialiation" of the Coronavirus pandemic was the **relaying of information**, which was handled by attaching sound systems to cars. The idea was to **make sure everyone received the same, accurate and verified information**, which is why stress was placed on the fact that every street, every area of the village had to be covered when relaying the rules and regulations that had been set by the central government.

In fact, the Panchayat chose to carry out **sanitization processes and announcements of new information and updates at the same time**. This also added to the increased attention the villagers paid to what was being said. To carry out this process, a motor-run spray fan was used, filled with sanitizing liquid, and driven through the village roads. It was and is an appropriately local solution to a worldwide problem.



*Motor-run sanitization.*

Priti Ben, the Sarpanch took the initiative to **buy materials completely individually for masks**. They were cut and stitched by locals, who in the process were able to achieve **gainful employment**. She then ensured that these were **distributed to everyone ward-wise** in the village. This becomes an important common point in this case, i.e. an initiative to do what was needed for people because of the ability to understand their perspectives and concerns.



*Masks that were stitched and distributed ward-wise.*

The village in itself, has three entry points and restrictions had to be set upon the movement of people in and out of the area. To control this, the **roads were blocked with volunteers**, who created a barrier to unnecessary (and none, at some point) entries and exits.

And with restrictions on travel, even within the village, the daily requirements for survival come into question.

So, for people requiring **medical facilities apart from COVID-19 related ailments**, a Whatsapp number was dedicated to solving these supply issues. People in need of regular medicines could send a picture of the medicine needed, its name and the quantity to the number. The panchayat ensured that these were delivered to the household, by sourcing them from Bhuj in their place.

The Panchayat also noticed that those eligible for ration were not receiving their share of essentials.

Hence, as a step towards equality, it was ensured that all households, regardless of economic, social or financial background were provided with ration.

As for livelihoods, such as those of the farmers producing perishable items, a solution was found to benefit the entire village. Tie-ups were formed with the “sabzi-wallahs”, such that vegetable and fruits were sourced by the Panchayat and distributed to every house directly.



*Vegetables and fruits on the way to being distributed across the village.*

Since its inception as a central concept and scheme, The Mid Day Meal Scheme has received many revisions, the latest in 2007 (with revisions made since 2009 onwards to improve the implementation of the scheme).

Naturally, this was also a part of the efforts made by the government to ease the population, especially young children, into the lockdown period.

There were an overwhelming number of people unable to collect these provisions, and so the Panchayat decided to take matters into their own hands and **provide relief to non-recipients in the form of monetary aid or dry ration.**

For those below 18 and above 65 years of age, **strict rules prohibited their movement outside their homes,** and so volunteers took over the responsibility of travelling and receiving supplies on their behalf.

In another display of initiative, the Sarpanch herself became a part of this process, making sure it ran smoothly.

In a similar fashion to that of vegetables, **free fruits were also distributed** among the residents, through a tractor that let them take what they wanted.

Vadasar Panchayat’s work is a shining example of **what can be done with existing resources and time.** The difference is made when an understanding of the present needs is solved in time, equitably and responsibly.

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*“We noticed that the poor were not getting ration. We decided that each and everyone should receive it, and 100% households of the village were provided with ration.”*

*- Priti Ben, Sarpanch, Vadasar Gram Panchayat*

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*Ration being received by beneficiaries, vegetables being taken based on requirements.*



# INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: KUKMA VILLAGE

Bhuj Block, Kutch - Gujarat

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## ROZGARI:

*Inclusive, Equitable and Effective Interventions.*

As a Juth (group) Panchayat, Kukma Juth Gram Panchayat combines the villages of Kukma, Nani Reladi, Moti Reladi and Lear from the district of Kutch, in Bhuj block. A **'model' panchayat** has consistently displayed the pros of decentralized leadership, under the guidance of current sarpanch Kanku Ben Amritlal Vankar.

It is no surprise that their **response** to the global pandemic has been inclusive, equitable and effective.

Upon the dissemination of the news around the Corona virus, there was **no word or training given to the panchayat** from the government, regarding the incoming pandemic. Instead, information was received through social media, news channels, or Whatsapp messages and subsequently clarified with NGOs such as SETU Abhiyan and Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan.

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*“First and foremost, the most important thing was understanding what COVID-19 was and explaining that to people.*

*A sense of dread had fallen over everyone, and priority was given to reiterating the fact that the virus must be fought against and how this could be done, instead of fearing it. It was about letting everyone know about the new way of life we had to learn to lead.”*

*- Sarpanch, Kanku Ben*

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To **increase awareness** while maintaining social distancing, rickshaws with loudspeakers attached to them were announcing the virus' origins, symptoms, prevention methods, etc. on a daily route. Huge posters were put up in public spaces, along with the utilisation of social media for this purpose as well.

The panchayat was **open on all days** and did not close even once, people could walk in with their grievances and concerns and register them immediately for relief measures to start in their favour.

Proper sanitisation, hand washing and wearing of masks were and continue to be maintained at the office. **Drones** were used to keep check of the citizens following proper homestay. **Sanitation processes** were carried out daily with motors, across the village.



*A drone was used to monitor unnecessary movements in the village when homestay was mandatory.*



*Motor-run sanitization, being overseen by the sarpanch. (right): Sanitisation best practices being taught*

Unlike other villages, Kukma does not have a single road connecting it to other parts, but four instead. Locking the village from four sides was a difficult task, as there was, and continues to be constant movement in and out of the area.

**25 youth volunteers** for the panchayat were prepared to take information of any incoming persons, along with posted police at the different entrances to the village.

These volunteers also aided the panchayat by providing information about those who are in immediate need of ration, food supply and any medical assistance.

For perhaps the **most pressing issue, i.e. on the medical front**, the area's private doctors chose to shut down their practices and hospitals, in the fear of getting infected themselves when the lockdown began.

To decrease the strain on the Primary Health Center (PHC), a meeting was called by the panchayat. This included all doctors, both private and public, as well as the owners of the two medical stores and the laboratory operating in the village.

Together, a solution was found, all services agreed to resume, and operation timings were agreed upon. Strict instructions were issued to only give medicines to those who had prescriptions from certified doctors to avoid mistreatment or self-treatment of potential Coronavirus patients.

**ASHA workers** were also called to a meeting with the panchayat, after they had conducted a survey.



**ASHA workers meeting the Sarpanch and receiving supplies of masks, gloves and sanitisers,**

This allowed them to share their experiences, understanding and progress of the villages' situation in context of the virus.

*Wikipedia defines 'Rozgari' as*

"कोई व्यक्ति जीवन के विभिन्न कालावधियों में जिस क्षेत्र में काम करता है या जो काम करता है, उसी को उसकी आजीविका या 'वृत्ति' या रोजगार या करियर (Career) कहते हैं।"

*(When a person works in a specific sector during a given period of their life, the sector that they work in, or the work that they do is known as their Ajeevika, Vriti, Rozgari or their Career.)*

Since there was no rozgari due to the travel restrictions, the panchayat chose to **employ women** by ordering upto 60,000 masks from them. After talking to an NGO, they were also able to give them orders for Rakhis.



**Women stitching masks that were distributed free of cost over the period of the lockdown.**



**Migrant workers getting tested and receiving medical check-ups before going to their home states.**

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**"I am happy that my son was involved in this process with 2 other boys. We still videocall and meet the families of those we could help in getting home!"**

**- Sarpanch, Kanku Ben**

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Kukma village is surrounded by various factories and industries, which meant that the sudden lockdown in March left a very large number of **migrants** stranded. As soon as government travel restrictions were lifted, the **Panchayat worked on getting them to their respective homes**. They were able to avail the services of either a private bus or government train, which required online bookings, clearances and passes.

Since the migrants were unable to do this, in terms of both access and ability, the panchayat stepped in by assigning the responsibility to a single volunteer, solely for this purpose. At times where the migrant themselves could not reach the panchayat office, they went to the worker's farm or place of stay instead with a laptop.

The uninformed lockdown also brought with it, **two extreme situations**. One would be the human tendency to panic and overindulge in buying 'necessities' for survival, with the other end of spectrum leaving nothing for a majority of people.

Once information of the latter reached Kukma's Panchayat, they created a register. Whoever required ration, they could get their name, address and mobile number written with the Panchayat. They received ration and basic needs within 2 to 3 days. Infact, similar registers were maintained for other needs as well, such as medical assistance and complaints regarding delays in aid.

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***“Every time there were new lockdowns or new rules emerged, the whole village was informed. The village cooperated with us immensely, records and processes were duly maintained. There were no cases registered of violence against women, lack of medical care or that anyone has gone hungry.”***

**- Sarpanch, Kanku Ben**

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Since the notification for the opening of businesses in Kutch was released, the panchayat chose to not follow the rules that allowed shops to open till 9 pm. Instead, the **village was opened from 8 am in the morning till 1 pm in the afternoon**. This ensured that there were no people on the streets until absolutely necessary in the evenings and required the cooperation of the sellers, the police as well as Aarogya workers through a meeting with the Trade Association.



**Trade Association, police and concerned persons meeting the Sarpanch to discuss reopening plans during Unlocks.**

Moreover, to ensure that those who went to receive the ration faced no problems, the Panchayat also provided drinking water, sanitizer, masks and the drawing of circles to maintain social distancing under police supervision.

All policepersons, Aarogya and Panchayat staff were given refreshments, in the form of 'nashta' and tea, free of cost in the afternoons for the initial three lockdown periods.

The village's **main bazar and sabzi market** have always remained crowded and remarkably busy. To reopen it, the whole bazar was shifted to a larger and more open space. Cloth gazebos (mandaps) were created for the sellers to sit and sell out of, and everyone was provided with sanitation stations and masks.

Moreover, strict social distancing and a sequential 'turn-by-turn' system was followed.

This idea, completely unique to the region of Kutch led to remarkable results being observed by the Panchayat. Along with a decrease in crowding, all the buyers were able to find what they needed to buy in one place from upto 52 sellers.



**The bazar, now shifted to open grounds.**

**“There is an area** in our village where people make and sell brooms on a daily basis, going door-to-door. When we reached their settlement to give them a food kit, I was intrigued by how they were surviving in the lockdown, unable to sell in person.

We discovered 12-13 families with a stock of around 700 brooms and decided to buy them! The idea was that they could use the cash on top of the ration provided by us, such as to buy milk, vegetables or for their personal medical needs.

Now I have no idea what to do with the brooms but feel satisfied knowing that they received immediate help.”



**Kankuben with the brooms she bought and now distributes around the village to government offices and sweepers working in the village!**

According to Kankuben, the grievances and problems of females specifically, increased during the lockdown. They had to care for children, men, and their elders, all while also managing their household.

She wondered what the condition of women was at the time and decided make groups for only females on Whatsapp. Everybody was contacted either through calls or messages, and seminar was organized in-person during Unlock 4.

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*“One of the points discussed was how girls’ education was affected during the lockdown, and what they had to face with the family at home by consistently being away from school.”*

- Sarpanch, Kanku Ben

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Another change we have observed this year is the incoming (and unavoidable) **shift to online education**. The debate, specifically in the Indian context revolves around accessibility on a few fronts. Firstly, to the students themselves, in the form of data and smartphones/digital devices. Secondly, to the teachers themselves by way of the aforementioned issues as well as extra infrastructure needed to conduct classes online with satisfactory materials, etc.

And so, with schools still being shut, studying online for government school students proved and continues to be a difficult task. As children could not afford online education, the teachers began to travel to the children to teach them, and give them homework, corrected marksheets, etc. Infact, it is the system in place at the time of this case study being undertaken as well (Nov 2020).

The Panchayat even tried to gather 8-10 children in each 'moholla' but were denied permission at the block level.

As for the **provision of benefits and ration** for school children through the central government, the Panchayat, the School Management Committee, the principal, and teachers started to meet before the **Public Distribution System** would be due to deliver ration.

They would then identify the easiest way to get this to children, such that they themselves do not need to travel to receive food. In the beginning, mid-day meals were only provided to those with BPL cards (not APL cards), but the lockdown brought everyone down to a similar playing field.



***Social distancing being maintained while all beneficiaries of PDS receive ration.***

Hence, at the request of those facing difficulties, the maintenance of a register was initiated that included their names, ration card numbers and mobile numbers.

These details were sent to the collector and mamlatdar for review, with a request for the provision of ration to be extended to those people as well.

This **process took place before the government announced guidelines for ration** to be given to everyone, regardless of BPL status.

What is left now, is how the common man deals with the pandemic from now on, and whether they choose to do it in isolation or with the cooperation of their extremely active community leaders.

The idea of innovation in these times is to **go beyond just policy implementation**. This, for Kukma’s Panchayat and Sarpanch Kankuben meant going ahead with what was required at the bare minimum and then fitting the norms presented to suit the needs of the community, not copy paste a system that might not work for them.

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*“With the removal of restrictions, the common man has become much better informed and will do what they can from their side. As of now, the situation isn’t in any one’s control, not the village, not the country, nor the world.”*

- Sarpanch. Kanku Ben

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**CASE  
STUDY**

**NOV 2020**



# INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: **RAMPAR VILLAGE**

Anjar Block, Kutch - Gujarat

How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
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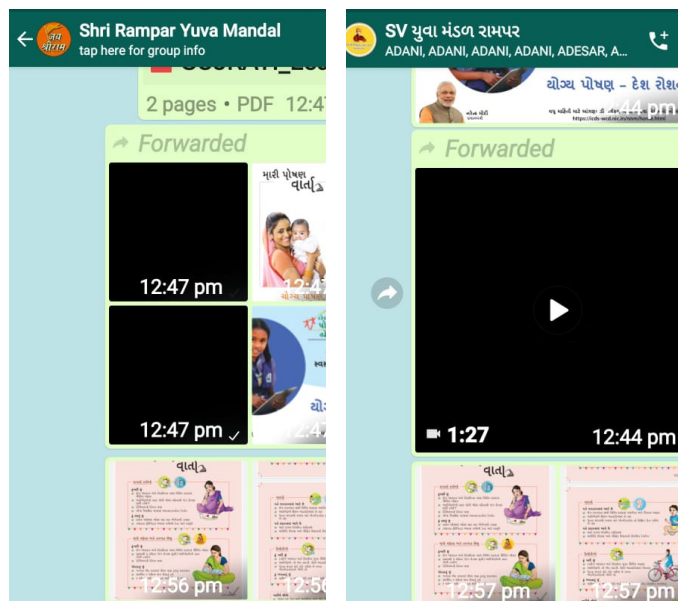
# CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:

## *An Equitable Approach to Giving Back*

The village of **Rampar** is included in **Anjar Taluka**, under the district of Kachchh. Falling 42 kms towards the East from Bhuj, It has been referred to as a "model" panchayat previously with respect to their work on community grazing land, and now their response to the global pandemic.

Their **first glance** at the incoming struggles was the shutting of the nation for a day, in anticipation of the lockdown starting in March. As soon as Panchayats were given **guidelines** regarding what to do at a village level from the government, they began the process of **information dissemination, ensuring stay-at-home orders and sanitization**. This dissemination included new pamphlets and instructions regarding businesses, livelihoods and rations that the panchayat claims to have duly received almost immediately.

As an organized panchayat association in Anjar, they have a Whatsapp group with their mamlatdar, collector, etc.



***The utilization of social media to pass on important pamphlets and information.***

According to Naran Bhai, former Sarpanch and advisor to the panchayat, they did not have a lot of issues regarding compliance with new rules and format from the villagers' side.

To ensure that this happened, many tasks were carried out. **Walls were painted** with the do's and don'ts surrounding the disease, such as regular hand washing, avoiding public spaces and gatherings, etc., **notices were printed** on the Panchayat's official letterhead and posted around the village, and information was relayed in the form of **announcements** in two ways – through speakers present at places of worship, such as the mandirs, masjids and even the panchayat office, and through a rickshaw with a loudspeaker attached to it. It went to every lane and street of the village, updating residents about developments and keeping them well informed.



***1. Painting of walls in the village & 2. Announcements and information being disseminated to the village through speakerphone.***

Considering the way that the pandemic has spread across the world, transmitting severely due to the **globalization**, the village considers itself lucky for having only one person coming home from out of the country. Another two residents returning to their home state from Maharashtra informed the Panchayat in advance, such that they could all be put in **separate quarantines** and be helped by the Aarogya team in the village itself.

Since **testing for the virus** has also been pivotal in predicting trends, patterns and policy response over the course of this year, it was natural for the leadership in the village to promote the same. The Primary health subcentre for Rampar conducted tests multiple times and the medical team was called. Naran Bhai says,



***“Not a lot of people were willing to get tested in the first place, because they were determined to convince everyone that they themselves did not have the virus.***

***This was because of both the stigma around the virus in society and their fear of the quarantine facility. They thought that they would either be killed or treated incorrectly.***

***So, I volunteered to get the test done first myself so that they would not be so scared to do the same.”***



On the **ration shop of the village**, signs were placed and updated according to the information and orders passed onto the panchayats, whether they were directions from the district, state or central government. This ensured that everyone knew what **hours the shop would be operating** through and allow them to plan their time out of the house accordingly. This effective communication strategy even worked for the distribution of Mid-Day Meals that were directly handled by the school itself. Individually packed packets of monthly ration were handed out to older children that were called on certain days of the month to collect and further distribute the same.

One of the most interesting things in Rampar’s case was their **inclusion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into their COVID relief efforts**. United Nations Industrial Development Organization defines it as the following,

***“Corporate Social Responsibility is a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders.***

***CSR is generally understood as being the way through which a company achieves a balance of economic, environmental and social imperatives (“Triple-Bottom-Line-Approach”), while at the same time addressing the expectations of shareholders and stakeholders.***

***In this sense it is important to draw a distinction between CSR, which can be a strategic business management concept, and charity, sponsorships or philanthropy. Even though the latter can also make a valuable contribution to poverty reduction, as CSR will directly enhance the reputation of a company and strengthen its brand, the concept of CSR clearly goes beyond the latter.”***

According to Hindu Business Line, **upto crores of rupees were donated to several government funds** by corporations and pricte individuals. One report states that India Inc.’s CSR obligations in two months on COVID-19 related concerns amounted to Rupees 7,537 crore, out of which Rs. 4,316 crore were in donations to the PM Cares Fund and the remaining was spent on many other relief funds across the country, such as in donations towards immediate needs including masks, sanitizers, protective gear kits, food and ration.

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There have also been announcements regarding a few in-kind donations which include online counselling helplines, e-learning resources, making free or discounted testing kits available.



***CSR efforts showcased by Welspun, operating in Kutch.***

Rampar village’s Panchayat contacted the companies operating near it in April, such as a plant by Adani where the locals are also employed. Since they were planning on releasing relief funds and providing essentials, the panchayat was able to obtain over 400 kits for the whole village, that lasted a single family for an entire month and included rice, wheat, pulses, spices, cooking oil, etc.

The village is a mix of many communities, from Dalits, Rabari, Ahir, Muslims, Brahmins, etc. all residing in one area.

Hence, **initial distribution of kits included everyone**, regardless of their social or economic standing. The Panchayat believes that,

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***“Everyone should get ‘nyay’ (justice), no one should say that ‘you did so and so for them, but not for us.”***

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Another striking feature was the insistence by the village leaders to maintain their standing on **prohibiting the clicking of pictures**. Acknowledgement on paper was indeed sent out on letterheads, but the idea that the villagers were receiving something by someone higher than them was clearly taken a stand against. So, whichever companies required photographic ‘proof’ of the kits were politely thanked and not taken assistance from.

The third time aid was received, a **committee was formed including members from all communities** to ensure that distribution was carried out keeping people’s circumstances and need in mind. There were also instances in the first round of distribution where upto 80 households did not accept the food kits, to divert the resources to those who needed it.

While ‘giving back’ to the community, in terms of philanthropic or charitable efforts is important, it is also essential for it to not remain a system of ‘token-ism’ or get reduced to a ‘tax-break’. **Allowing needs to be heard, and more importantly reaching out, creatively to those who can help not just oneself, but one’s community forms the need of the hour**. The pandemic has truly highlighted the helping hand that organizations and companies can extend, as well as their ability to.

What is inspiring, especially in this case is when it successfully reaches the right people at the right time, when one asks and reaches out to collect this aid.



**CASE  
STUDY**

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# **INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: KUNARIYA VILLAGE**

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# 73rd AMENDMENT:

## *The Pursuit of Decentralization during a Pandemic*

**Kunariya Gram Panchayat** was established in 1961 and comes under Bhuj block, Kutch. Kunariya Juth Gram Panchayat includes **three villages, Rudramata, Kunariya and Nokhania**. Over the last few years, the Panchayat in Kunariya has been moving at an accelerated pace towards increased development.

From initiatives on women's empowerment to generating large amounts of employment under the MGNREGA scheme, the current elected panchayat (since 2017), has been making remarkable strides to **embody the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India**.

According to a report by NITI Ayog,

*“The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has added a new part IX consisting of 16 Articles and the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The 73th Amendment envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures... Articles 243A provides that the Gram Sabha may exercise such power and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a state may be law provide. The 73rd amendment thus envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of Panchayat Raj System. “Gram Sabha” means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. In the Panchayat Raj System Gram Sabha is the only permanent unit. Duration of Panchayat i.e. Mukhiyas and other members of Panchayat continue for 5 years only from the date appointed for the first meeting, but the villagers do not change.”*

COVID – 19, with its unique circumstances, continues to leave a large impact on the world. Navigating this requires a **proactive and practical approach, that is carried out keeping the recipients in mind**. The idea of a Gram Panchayat, under the Panchayat Raj system gives citizens an exactly this opportunity to take a step forward and make an impact.



*The distribution of free masks by the Gram Panchayat.*

**Raising awareness around the virus itself took priority** through many innovative methods. For example, a rangoli was made to involve children in the process and get critical information regarding preventive methods and practices out to the general public, such as making social distancing and stay at home orders more comprehensive.

According to Suresh Chhanga, the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat, there was a **gradual release of information over the total lockdown period** from the government; and so between the first 21 days of the first lockdown, the Panchayat received several notices and guidelines from both the state and central governments.

The first precautionary method, for protecting both oneself and others from contracting the virus continues to be face masks and the frequent

sanitization of hands and surroundings. Since the government was unable to widely provide these to the residents, the panchayat distributed both masks and sanitizers, funded by donations and aid from several Non Government Organizations, donations, trusts and their own funds.



*COVID do's and don'ts represented through a rangoli.*

And as markets for the entire world were interrupted, the country's economy experienced the worst fall on record.

According to Economic Times,

***“India's April-June quarter GDP contracted by a massive 23.9 per cent year-on-year (YoY), the first GDP contraction in more than 40 years. As per the National Statistical Office (NSO), gross value added (GVA) came in at -22.8 per cent.”***

This also resulted from a tremendous fall in the job market, in both the formal and informal sectors. Hence, the struggle was evident in terms of 'rozgari' for the people, and the first few weeks were the most painful. Once more clarity could be found, the **practice of demanding work began in association with the Panchayat via MGNREGA by April 15**. Out of the 40 Lakh rupees the village raised through its participation in the MGNREGA scheme, 69% is claimed to have been deposited in womens' accounts over the last six months of 2020.

The **Public Distribution System** was adjusted to fit the people's needs while also keeping the pandemic in mind. For this, the ration shop was opened for residents ward-wise. For example, the morning two hours were reserved for those living in a particular ward number, while maintaining strict social distancing and the enforcement of face masks being worn by all. Accordingly, on the 29th of March, 87 households were given **free essentials from the Panchayat's side**, such that they would last for 15-20 days at least. A similar scheme was announced by the central government in April, following which grain and essentials arrived at Kunariya and 264 household received provisions, free of cost.

A household survey, undertaken by the Panchayat was in process. It was completely managed and run by 5 women volunteers of the village, running thrice through the months of lockdown by starting in March and ending on October 20th. Adapting to the new circumstances, the survey became another means to distribute know-how regarding the pandemic, the virus, and preventive methods, this time from a reliable source to again, mainly to the women of the house.

For education to slowly reintegrate itself into students' lives, the panchayat felt the need to create a child-friendly environment, to subsequently deal with the psychological effect of the lockdown on children. The idea was to start to think of getting children away from the shadow of the impending financial burden that their parents'

may be facing, or the frustration of being stuck inside their houses for so long. A COVID response team had been formed for similar issues, and included members from their Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) preparation team, with 6 out of 11 members being women, some teachers and volunteers for children already.



***left: Bharti, a member of the COVID response team; right: the disaster management committee in a meeting***

As an initiative to broaden learning beyond textbooks, children were encouraged to learn their family's traditional art forms and catch a glimpse of rural technology, from the making and playing of musical instruments, copper bells, crafts to detailed handiwork!

It was found that 18 girls from the village were eligible for promotion to senior secondary higher education, i.e. from class 8th to 9th. All families of these girls were contacted and persuaded to enroll their pupils for pursuing their studies, and almost all of them had done so by the month of August. In the region of Kutch, the condition of **higher education** is far from satisfactory. Out of 73,000 students eligible to be enrolled in higher education, only 52,000-53,000 actually do.

There exists a noticeably big gap which the government has been trying to approach through home learning, television lessons and other platforms, but the problem is whether the attendees have a smartphone or television in the first place, which is the root problem when choosing a platform for them to engage in.

The Panchayat struggled with restricting people's movement, especially in the beginning. Eventually, **order was developed through community participation and cooperation.**

The sarpanch remarks on the predicted second wave of infections,

*“The understanding of the public regarding Coronavirus and its situation will take a little time as people are exposed to many different sources, such as phones, television, community word, etc. a lot can happen now, we have learned from the past.*

*In March, we were just thinking that something like this exists. We may have heard about it once or twice, but we had not faced it ourselves, such as Ebola/Zika Virus. This one we have faced, so now we know that if a lockdown is being announced, what we have to do for the people, which things are those that will be necessary for us to have in handy, how to take care of the elderly - especially since we have the data on patients of non-communicable diseases already, it will help in covering up for them as well. We were not able to do this before, but will be able to do it now onward.*

*As for the economy, there are many things that we were getting from outside that we can produce for ourselves in the village, and so rozgari will be generated.*



*A digital marketing workshop, organized by the Panchayat for the craftsmen of the village.*

*And so, even if a second wave is coming, the harm that the first wave has done will be much greater as compared to what will happen in the future - especially in terms of reducing risks!”*

**CASE  
STUDY**

**DEC 2020**



# **INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: KANTHKOT VILLAGE**

**Bhachau Block, Kutch - Gujarat**

**How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
in the midst of a pandemic.**



# QUARANTINE:

## *Initiatives to Equitably Maintain Safety*

**Kanthkot village** is located in Bhachau Block of Kutch district in Gujarat, India. It is situated around 26 km away from sub-district headquarter Bhachau and 110km away from district headquarter Bhuj. Kanthkot village is also a gram panchayat.

With over 500 households to be potentially affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the response the Kanthkot Panchayat was able to generate along with their citizen's participation is exemplary. By making their own system of quarantine and coordinating it for returning villagers, they were able to successfully prevent the virus from spreading, along with providing for everyone's needs.

When the nation-wide "Bharat Bandh" was announced, the Gram Panchayat relayed information regarding the virus through stickers and pamphlets across the village. These talked about social distancing and how to obey it. Masks, Sanitizers and gloves were provided by the panchayat to everyone, and they continue to do so in the month of December from the Panchayat's office.

A large number of the locals from the village worked in Maharashtra and overseas. Once travel was opened, and they were bound to return home, a lot of discrimination and misunderstanding around their arrival. The family members naturally thought that they would come back infected – meetings

were taken with each samaaj to clear these misunderstandings. They were informed of the government lifting these restrictions, which meant that those returning should be welcomed home instead of being shunned out of the village.



**COVID do's and dont's presented on pamphlets, announcements regarding COVID-19 being made around the village through a speakerphone attached to a bicycle.**

In anticipation of their arrival, the Panchayat prepared a plan of action such that the villagers returning home would not lack any facilities. After taking advisory from the elders of the village, 106 houses were emptied, as people living alone were asked to stay with their families to make space for the incoming people. The Up Sarpanch, Khenagarbhai Lakhabhai Sangar says,

*"We asked people living alone, such as two brothers to stay together and empty one house. This way, we were able provide 106 houses in the Patel area with all conveniences - water, toilets, electricity and a clean environment to the villagers returning home."*

*When a person would come to the village, we would allot them a room, give them a key and ration for a month at once."*

If anyone required any sort of provision, such as gas, they would message on a common Whatsappgroup that had been created for this purpose, stating the room number they were in, and what they needed.

Once those quarantined for 14,16 or 18 days came out, they were used to contact those who were coming back, as they knew how many vehicles were making their way towards the village and with how many people.

A **system was thus successfully created** such that those in quarantine via the Kanthkot Gram Panchayat's help were given food and daily provisions in packets that were to be kept outside the house. This was possible with the **help of extremely responsible and very active volunteers** who would manage transport and taking care of those in quarantine.

Other illnesses, such as diabetes were also treated in quarantine with the Asha worker and a doctor, who had the responsibility of taking care of all medical needs for the villages.

Of course, once quarantines ended, the houses were again sanitized very well, and handed back to the owners. When asked to move in, it was made sure that the owners' houses were not disturbed and in good condition.

Initially, the **quarantine centre was planned to be set in the anganwadi**, but the Mamlatdar denied permission for the same, saying that the responsibility of those coming back to the village is the Panchayat's.

Thus, by creating a quarantine centre elsewhere or having 50-100 people in one place, the panchayat felt it to be counterproductive.

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***"If one person got the virus, it would spread to a 100 people at once, and then onwards to 500 or even the whole village."***

***- Khengarbhai Lakhbhai Sangar, Up Sarpanch***

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Those **dependent on farming and animal husbandry** were provided for by the panchayat and all their produce was bought for distribution within the village. This ensured that there was no need for anything to be sourced from outside the village, everything could be found locally.



***Meetings being taken to inform groups in the village about the virus, effects and preventive measures.***

In fact, the **police was not needed** to enforce lockdown or to prevent people from moving out of their house until absolutely necessary.

There is a high school in the village. Although many efforts were made to **shift education online, it did not work due to various reasons**, ranging from connectivity to access to mobile phones. The process of going home and teaching the students has started, and the panchayat hopes to work on strengthening the education system.

Although there are guidelines and rules for how the process of quarantine should be conducted, such as the quarantine centres created by the government, it can thus be seen that the **same guidelines can be followed at a micro level as well.**

What is required for such an intervention to work, is a participatory approach and a willingness to give up one's own comfort for the greater good and a great deal of patience and expertise in managing the initiative taken.

CASE  
STUDY

NOV 2020



# INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID - 19: KODKI VILLAGE

Bhuj Block, Kutch - Gujarat

How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
in the midst of a pandemic.





# THE PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM:

## Implementing a Public Policy for the People

Kodki Gram Panchayat is included in Bhuj block of Kutch. It lies close to 14 kms away from the city of Bhuj and has been consistent in its approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When democracy is described to the young and to learners, it is said to be **"the government of the people, by the people, for the people"**. The Coronavirus pandemic brought back the essence of this, that is, the people. A decentralized system of governance, such as that of Panchayati Raj has thus now shown to be an effective and intriguing method to bring the power of helping citizens back to them.

The Gram Panchayat in Kodki took this as an opportunity to display their dedication to their people, for they **did not close** even once during the period of the national lockdown, determined to make sure that residents and the village did not suffer.

The first line of defence on a personal level becomes **masks and sanitization**. As supply chains resumed operations, we have seen a large influx of many varieties of masks on a daily basis. But when world-wide shutdowns were in place, **providing these to the population of 3,107 people** was a difficult and necessary task. So, the panchayat bought materials and gave them to the village's tailors and had masks stitched and distributed free of cost. With two tractors borrowed from the village itself, motorized sanitization took place for days. Currently, the entire village area and the Primary Health Centre (PHC) are also sanitized particularly when positive cases are reported.



*The PHC of the village and its premises undergoing sanitization with the tractor.*

Also having understood that **policing and restrictions will only go so far**, they tried to insure the community's cooperation with regular updates on new rules, policies, etc.

A Panchayat employee continues to travel to every mohalla with a microphone attached to a car and carries out information dissemination. Notices and posters were also put up in each public and residential area.

They took government guidelines, such as those pertaining to ration, relief, lockdowns, and safety measures and **adapted them to suit the needs of their residents instead**. For example, the village was completely isolated and shut down for 2 months.

To ensure that there was no unnecessary movement, cards were issued with the Panchayat's authorization that were monitored by 10-12 volunteers, as the police was not able to be present for more than once a day during these months.



*The tractor used for sanitization, retrofitted to serve a new purpose. It belongs to a farmer from the village itself.*

The *Public Distribution System (PDS)* is a part of the Indian Food Security System by the Government of India to create *subsidized access to food and non-food items for India's poor*.

For example, under this system, each family that falls below the poverty line (through BPL cards) is entitled to 35 kg of rice or wheat every month, while those above the poverty line (through APL cards) are eligible to 15 kgs of the same.

"Essential" commodities distributed through the Public Distribution System include staple food grains such as wheat, rice, sugar and cooking fuels like kerosene through fair price shops (also known as ration shops) established widely across the country.

The Food Corporation of India is responsible for procurement, storage, transportation, and bulk allocation of food grains to the state governments for further distribution inter-state.

According to the *Department of Food and Public Distribution* under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, GoI,

*"The Central Government extends price support to paddy, coarse grains and wheat through the Food Corporation of India and the State Agencies. All the food grains conforming to the prescribed specifications i.e. Fair Average Quality norms offered for sale at specified centers are bought by the public procurement agencies. The producers have the option to sell their produce to FCI/State Agencies at support prices or in the open market as is advantageous to them.*

*The procurement policy is open ended and no targets, as such, are fixed for the procurement of food grains."*

In March, India's Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman announced the distribution of 5 kg of wheat or rice and one kg of preferred pulses free-of-cost every month over the months of April to June, to 80 crore people across the country to deal with the economic impact of the lockdown amid the coronavirus outbreak.

To quote her, *"That means every beneficiary would be entitled to get 12 kg of food grains per month for next three months. Five kg will be free under PM Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana while 7 kg will be available at subsidised rates over ration shops."*

And so, how these policies reach the people is as, if not much more important since these policies impact such a large section of the nation's daily needs and wellbeing. In keeping with this spirit while maintaining social distancing and avoiding crowding of public spaces, the Kodki Panchayat displayed great strategic and empathetic intent. Even those rendered incomeless due to the pandemic, who did not necessarily fall into the category of 'BPL' were provided for by the Panchayat.

Moreover, only a handful of people were asked to collect their ration on each day, and they were informed of this via the mohalla.

A *timetable was made for shops to open*, with meetings held between SETU Abhiyan, the Panchayat's talaati (secretary), the shop owners and the panchayat itself. This led to a *structure where time was allotted* in the morning (8 a.m. to 12 p.m.) and evening (4 p.m. to 7 p.m.), and this kept changing in accordance with government rules with each Unlock.

In order to dissuade people from panic buying and hoarding, limits of 5 kg were set for most commodities, in between the days of the lockdown's announcement and its commencement. This ensured that the wealthy were not unnecessarily taking away from those who were buying minimal amounts for survival.

It also prevented stocks from running out until new supplies would come in, which had been uncertain at the time.

As for the provision of **Mid-Day Meals** to school going children who were home, if the initial 21 days of lockdown are taken specifically into account, the food grains to be distributed amounted to 1 kilogram of rice, per child.

The Kodki Gram Panchayat took the responsibility of packing these, into individual "thelis" for each child, finding their place of stay and mohallas and delivering these to them. This process was carried out with in **coordination with the teachers** and food distributors, which created a pre-existing effective system for the government guidelines to work with.

.And in the spirit of best practices, the schools in Kodki are able to independently manage the Mid-Day Meal provision until date, since schools have still not opened (as of November 2020).



*Akshaya Patra vehicles that usually provide Mid Day Meals in the area. (Image for representation purposes only)*

Again, as the world undergoes many shifts in daily routines and the way we have lived till now, a substantial change has occurred in the **delivery of educational services across the world.**

With the two very contrasting schools in Kodki, one being private and attended by the Non Resident Indian population and the other government operated, there exists a large gap in the way online education is being accepted into these children's lives.

For those with accessibility issues, teachers have begun to visit mohallas on alternate days, with books and study materials to ensure that normalcy in schedules and study patterns returns eventually.

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***“Schools should open with social distancing, online education has not been as effective as in-person teaching. Labourers and farmers [forming a large percentage of the population] can no longer stay at home and educate or pay attention to their children during the day.”***

**- Devji Maheswarj, Village Leader**

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But the feasibility of this reopening that the panchayat is looking forward to does not look very bright, given the rising COVID cases and the natural tendency of children to socialise. It would also mean more monitory work for the Panchayat.

Around **100 people (with families)** had migrated to areas in and near Kodki for jobs, and were also **struck homeless** by the lockdown. The Panchayat made a list of their names and forwarded it to the Mamlatdar (head of district), who helped the migrants gain benefits and ration from government released guidelines.

These migrants were not particularly interested in going back home to Palanpur (Gujarat), whereas 12 from Uttar Pradesh were desperate to get back to their home state. So, lists were sent to the Police Department and Mamlatdar, such that SETU Abhiyan was able to aid the travellers in filling forms, obtaining permits and **travel arrangements to successfully reach home.**

“

***“There were a few people simply unwilling to wait till trains started to go home, they would start walking home on foot every morning and had to be brought back by the police. Even after assistance and cooperation from the police departments in provision of ration, they did not want to delay going home any longer. We organized ‘chakras’, accompanied by Police officers from Mankuva for them, so that they could wait at the quarantine centre in Bhuj and get home on their own terms instead.”***

”

As for the large number of residents working outside the country, they are **mandated to announce their entry to the panchayat**, such that the PHC can be prepared and they self-quarantine for two weeks.

But of course, all this effort came with its own set of **challenges.** For one, not everyone seemed to be willing to listen to rules, and the police had to be called to help keep crowds from forming, or to ensure that people wore masks. Since the neighbouring and nearby villages also use Kodki's ration shops, banking services and health services, they are used to gathering in the same area.



***The Panchayat's office in Kodki, along with the truck used for garbage collection and sanitization.***

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***“There was always a lot of crowd from the other villages, and we had to repeatedly explain the rules to them, We created barricades in front of the three main roads of the village and placed volunteers there, who asked the reason's behind everyone's visits before letting them enter the village. In a book, we maintained a record of the cars entering too.***

***We faced many difficulties in this, as Kodki falls on the way to Bhuj city. That means that there were so many people travelling, while some would also not want to answer our questions.”***

”

The people were and continue to be at the centre of their efforts, in the capacities that they are able to help. If the Panchayat did not know behavioural traits, the area, the travel or even the production systems in Kodki, such a successful response towards the pandemic could not have been generated.

This case study is an example of the glowing benefits decentralised and local governance can bring to people, when done well and with the right intentions.

**CASE  
STUDY**

**JAN 2021**



# **INSPIRING PANCHAYATS IN THE WAKE OF COVID – 19: KURAN VILLAGE**

**Bhuj (Banni Pashchim) Block, Kutch - Gujarat**

**How ordinary citizens empowered the countryside  
in the midst of a pandemic.**



## THE ZERO CASE VILLAGE: *How Prevention Is Better Than Cure*

**Kuran** is the last village of Gujarat, India on the road to Pakistan. About a kilometre from the village, the road hits India Bridge, manned by the 136th battalion of the Border Security Force.

Passage beyond the bridge is restricted, after which Rann can be found for upto 80 kms in the form of an endless salt marsh.

The COVID-19 virus has uniquely impacted areas around the world, with a wide range of effects, both social and economic due to the health crisis that it brought with it. But Kuran is unique in the way that it still faced a multitude of these consequences, even though the impact on health of coronavirus was not felt by the village.

There has to be applause for the fact that all preventive measures were and continue to be undertaken by the panchayat and villagers, even if not one person has tested positive for the virus. This can also be linked to the fact that the measures taken to curtail the spread of the virus did actually work, for even undetected viruses did not end up spreading. To date (as of 13 January 2021), there are zero cases of coronavirus in Kuran, Khavda.



*Kits containing essentials being distributed to the villagers.*

Initially, **information was provided** to the Sarpanch, Lakhaji through the Khavda Police station and SETU Abhiyan's centre in Khavda. The Kuran Gram Panchayat were told that the country is going to be under lockdown from 25 March 2020 onwards with instructions for the way ahead.

**Masks were distributed** from the Panchayat's side twice, as a part of the ongoing MGNREGA work. One MLA also provided them with a temperature checking gun which was frequently used.

Although there were and remain to be zero positive cases, the **Panchayat prepared the community hall, the panchayat office and school** according to the guidelines provided by the government for quarantine in case a positive case was found in the village.

The village's **main occupation** lies in daily wage work or labour and so, upon the lifting of travel restrictions, a few boys working in Pune and Mumbai returned. They were quarantined in their homes for 18 days, which was later reduced to 14 days as well as testing for the virus. **They tested negative.**

Since they all quarantined with their families, there was no need for an extra provision of food or ration. Still the Panchayat distributed kits for the village as well, containing ration and basic necessities.

For ailments other than the virus, when a villager fell sick, the sarpanch took him to Bhuj in a car. If anyone needed a specific medicine, they would send the prescription to the Panchayat and it would be sourced for them from either Khavda or Bhuj on their regular trips.

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*"As lockdown is decreasing, the disease is increasing. The hospitals that were empty in Bhuj a few months back, are now full to their capacity. I had to take my wife to Bhuj for treatment, but they said our appointment would come at 8 p.m., so we returned without seeing the doctor."*

- Lakhaji, Sarpanch

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In terms of **employment and rozgari**, almost everyone in the village works as laborers. The lack of work available thus became the biggest issue for Kuran village, given the lockdown on almost all activities. In pursuit of employment, the panchayat had digging of sand and dirt done in the taalav under the MGNREGA scheme. This went on for a month and a half. Employment and shutting of businesses continue to cause hindrances to the villagers' daily lives.

The **village high school**, however was able to resume its offline teaching in the second week of January, while the primary school remains shut. An online mode of education has been adopted but the Sarpanch believes it to be ineffective, as the children do not concentrate and instead use these means for playing games instead. However, the **messaging and teaching communication** from the school's side has been regular.

There is also a **never-ending water crisis** in the village - and issues surrounding the same got inflated in the lockdown period.



Taking **ration from the shops** and getting it home was problematic for the villagers for almost three months. Khavda's police personnel assisted them in the same. Every 8 or so days, the police would cooperate with the panchayat to allow cars to move into Khavda for 2-3 hours. Since transportation was shut (on top of the village being remote), it was a huge cause of worry. With coordination, they were able to **allow ration and medical supplies to reach the village** in time, for alternative weeks.

“

***"In case of more difficulties or other rules, the Panchayat will help in whatever way it can, it has to. Whether it is about aarogya, ration, or illness."***

***- Lakhaji, Sarpanch***

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With effective implementation of guidelines and obeying of preventive measures, the **Panchayat in Kuran was successfully able to curb the spreading of the worldwide pandemic to their community.**

It is a **model to look upto**, as they did not let go of precautions, even when there seemed like the virus was seemingly "gone".

It is scalable and important perspective of looking at the pandemic, as well as **how prevention proved better than cure.**

***Left: Sanitization of hands being followed, along with distribution of masks before a gathering.***