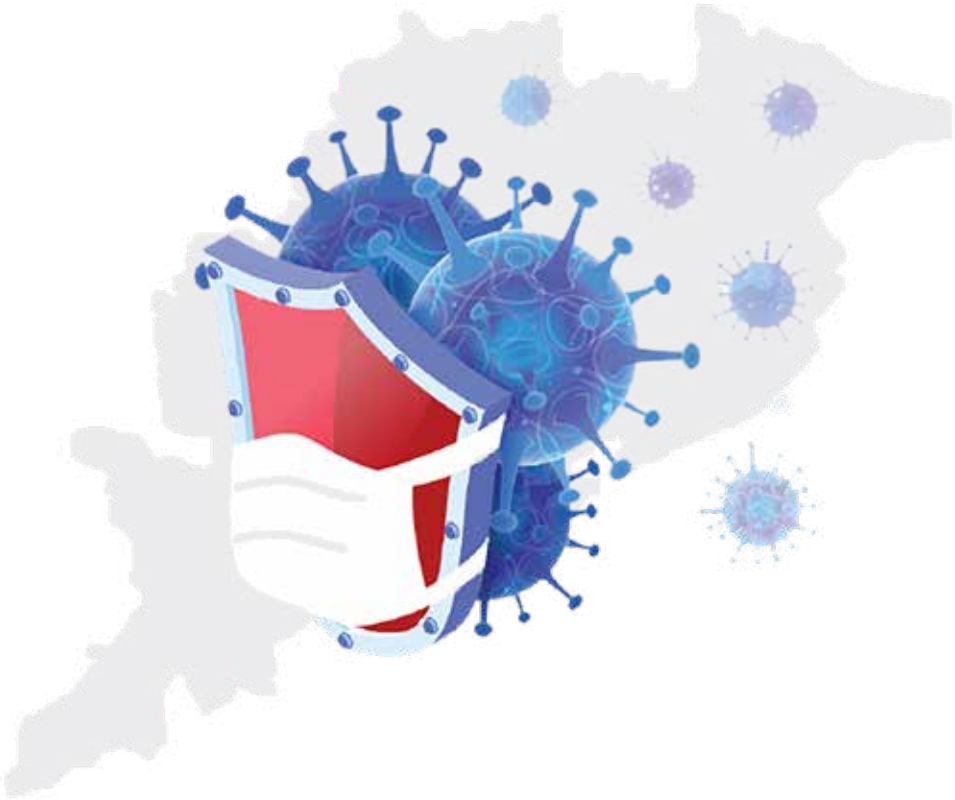
Response to COVID-19

Odisha



Women lead the fight against COVID-19 in the state of Odisha, India

As the world continues to grapple with the novel coronavirus, efficient responses to the pandemic continue to present a challenge for many countries. Some parts of the world — like Odisha in India — are less talked about and perhaps less well-documented but continue to hold out quiet hope for low caseloads and, even some behavioural changes in the society.

India, a country of great diversity, varies greatly in terms of its geographical, social and economical characteristics, from state to state. Some areas face frequent natural hazards like floods, cyclones, heat waves, droughts, etc. Odisha, a state located on the east coast of India, is hit by cyclones every year—including one super cyclone in 1999 wherein about 10,000 people died. Amidst the pandemic this year, Odisha also had the challenge of tackling the cyclone Amphan, which developed in the Bay of Bengal. In such a scenario it becomes quite challenging to evacuate people while ensuring adequate social distancing and providing a hygienic environment, among other things. Odisha's previous experience in handling disasters helped in tackling the pandemic, using the learning of their past disaster management.

Odisha, known for its ancient Hindu temples and some scenic areas, has a population of 43.7 million; just a little less than the population of a country like Argentina, living on 1/18th of the geographical area of Argentina. The majority of the population in Odisha depends upon agriculture and allied services, though the major contributor to GDP is the services sector. One third of its population is below the poverty line and 23% fall in the Scheduled Tribe category and face multiple deprivations. Despite having abundant natural resources, Odisha is one of the major source states of migrants, who go to other states for work. In the face of national lockdown, a large number of migrants from Odisha have returned to the state. This has posed additional challenges.

Steps taken

The state took a series of steps at an early stage to contain the spread of the virus and to break the chain of infection. As soon as the first case was reported in Odisha on March16th, Odisha was one of the first states to announce the lockdown, even before the central government imposed the lockdown. Odisha was also the first state to set up hospitals to treat only coronavirus patients.

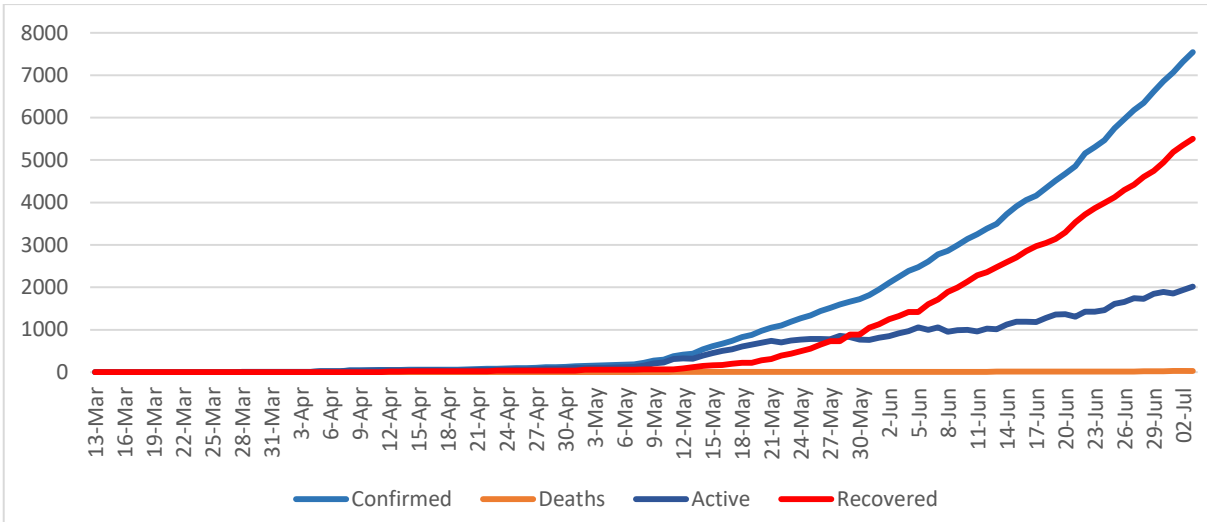


Fig. Covid-19 case load data of Odisha

In select cities that experience maximum public footfall, drones were used for surveillance and for disinfecting crowded spaces with minimal risk to frontline coronavirus warriors.

Additionally, Odisha engaged Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) to assist with awareness generation, ensuring public health and hygiene and providing food security in rural and urban areas to poor and vulnerable groups, especially during the lockdown.

Women leading from the front to contain the pandemic

In Odisha, women are at the forefront of the battle against the pandemic. Seven million women of Mission Shakti have taken the lead in crucial initiatives responding to the pandemic, helping contain the spread of the virus providing various community services.

SHGs helped implement the 'Mo Jeevan' pledge to all habitations across the state, educating 15.3 million persons so as to break the chain of contact. Many of them have also helped spread awareness about social distancing and safety in rural areas.

These groups have been engaged in ensuring public health through 1339 Mission Shakti SHGs who have experience in stitching garments and producing jute items; they own commercial tailoring equipment and

have made a commitment to undertake mask-making as a philanthropic activity. Thus, 6.5 million reusable face masks were produced, sold at nominal prices to frontline workers. Another 0.3 million masks were distributed free of cost by SHGs among the poor and the vulnerable as a precautionary measure to contain the pandemic. This not only helped protect public healthbut also it promoted the livelihoods of the rural woman.

To ensure the food security of the poor, vulnerable and adversely affected households, the collective strength and commitment of these Mission Shakti SHGs have enabled impoverished households to avail of hot, cooked meals free of cost twice a day during the lockdown. To do so, 7312 SHGs have been engaged in free kitchen management, providing 19.1 million meals in urban and rural areas of |the state.

During the lockdown, the availability of rations and vegetables posed a major challenge across urban and rural areas because of movement restrictions. Addressing this challenge, 598 SHGs were strategically involved in setting up dry rations, vegetables and fruit shops across the state with the help of district administrations, thereby providing services to more than 0.4 million households. This novel initiative of Mission Shakti has helped citizens at this time of crisis, with livelihood support to SHGs.

The lockdown witnessed disruptions in the supply of perishable vegetables due to restrictions on the supply chain; leading to the inability of farmers to sell their vegetables. This resulted in the non-availability of fresh vegetables in urban and rural markets, while farmers suffered from financial loss due to the wastage of vegetables at the farm level. With the active support of the district administration and the District Horticulture Office, 500 SHGs procured 171 tons of surplus vegetables from 1500 farmers for onward trading in local markets and supply to free kitchens managed by SHGs as a best practice, saving farmers from the distress sale of vegetables. This ensured the financial stability of farmers and SHG workers, along with food security at a time of crisis.

Children-focused interventions

During such unusual times, children face different kinds of psycho-social distress, requiring interventions to tackle their source, at times. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, children's continuity of learning has been affected for the most part, due to closures. Parents too underwent a lot of stress during this period; financial, psycho-social and existential, in some cases. The idea of meaningfully engaging with children was therefore conceived to reduce the impact of uncertainty, promote happiness and ensure the healthy development of children, especially the holistic development of children during their early years. These engagements are therapeutic for parents / grandparents and caregivers (elder siblings) as well, and help them to recuperate and cope with this unprecedented situation.

The Odisha government's initiative, Mo Pratibha, an online competition with different categories such as art, painting, slogan writing, poster making, short stories and poetry, is one such intervention which helped engage children to imbibe creativity as well as spread awareness about the pandemic; thereby helping the community to contain the spread of the virus.

Tackling the huge influx of migrant workers

Migrant workers are the ones who have had to face the brunt of the lockdown. Inter-state migrants, large numbers of whom have been stranded in their cities of work, were among the worst affected in the nationwide lockdown imposed since March 24th. This was a huge challenge for the Odisha Government, owing to the huge influx of stranded migrant workers. But the state government swung into action and multi-faceted approaches such as a single unified portal for registration, contact tracing, monitoring health & compliance with quarantine norms, online e-Pass

to facilitate the movement of people, medical camp management at major locations along with the provision of food and accommodation etc.were adopted to ensure the containment of the virus and ensure the well-being of the distressed workers.

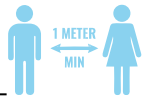
Inter-state migrants, large numbers of whom were stranded in their cities of work, were affected in the nationwide lockdown. The immediate challenge was to reach out to all the stranded migrant workers and provide them a safe and secure environment. Helpdesks were set up in other states such as Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and New Delhi. Such Helpdesks played a key role in helping the nodal officers in respective states to reach out to migrant workers in different locations and ensure food / dry ration, accommodation and health facilities.

Pre-registration of such migrants ensured adequate preparedness in terms of infrastructure and SOPs to handle the incoming migrants. On return, these migrants workers of different ages were not only screened thoroughly, but also the symptoms of flu, cough, & cold etc., were checked through Mobile Health Units. As many of the migrant workers were in stress, expert counsellors from universities were invited to interact with the migrant workers and tender necessary advice to deal with the crisis. Yoga and physical exercise sessions through trainers were also organised to engage the workers with some physical activities and keep them mentally fit. Special care for women and girls was taken through the distribution of personal kits and sanitary pads Similarly, special care for pregnant women and lactating mothers was taken in the camps by ensuring doctors, medicine and care.

An On-line Grievance Redressal Portal exclusively for in-migrants was also set up to ensure quick redressal of their grievances.

Lastly, the involvement of women in awareness generation, public health and ensuring food security not only promoted the livelihood of women SHGs but it also helped in challenging gender stereotypes. It has set an inspiring example of new possibilities, enabling livelihood diversification of SHGs during the pandemic.

Social Distancing: Community Based Monitoring



Odisha Government has associated Gram Panchayats (units of local self-Government in rural areas) with managing institutional quarantine facilities. These institutions have taken an active role in developing community awareness for adhering to physical distancing norms. The Government also brought in necessary regulations

Outcomes and Way Forward

Despite receiving about 0.6 million migrants, Odisha is still one of the states where COVID-19 spread is contained. The number of confirmed cases per million was quite low earlier, and while this has increased since the first week of May, the state still fares better than other states in the country, at around 9000 cases and 46 deaths. Odisha is among the bottom four of comparable states, in terms of the total caseload.

While Odisha's tackling of the pandemic has been a quiet success story, there is a need to remain vigilant and sustain these efforts for many months. The leadership of communities and especially of the women of Odisha inspires confidence that the state is up to the task!

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