

## Rejuvenating Gandhian Arguments: Importance Of Self-Sufficient Village Economy During Pandemics

Dr. Ruolkhomzo<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Nameirakpam Bijen Meetei<sup>2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur.*

<sup>2</sup>*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur.*

**\*Corresponding Author:** - Dr. Ruolkhomzo

*\*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Canchipur, Manipur, Pin-795003, India.*

### Abstract

The present paper focussed on understanding Gandhi's views on the self-sufficient village economy and its possible relevance in pandemics like the COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdowns. In order to explore this, the researcher collected primary data from 250 villagers of the five villages of the hill areas of Manipur. The researchers have used questionnaire tools as a means of primary data collection. Data was collected using the random sampling method. Sample sizes of 250 responses were collected on the basis of convenient sampling. The collected data were tabulated and interpreted using the simple percentage method as a data tool. Besides, in-depth interview with 30 persons was also conducted to better understand the need for a self-sufficient village economy in the remote villages of the hill areas of Manipur particularly that of the five villages i.e. Rovakawt, Leisen, Parvachawm, Parbung, and Kangrengdawr. The paper argues that the main problem for the villagers during the lockdown was when they were seriously ill. During the field visit, it is found that there is a lack of infrastructure like electricity, road connectivity, etc. in the study area. Therefore, the concerned authority should look into the matter and provide at least the basic infrastructure required by the villagers. If modern health facilities accompany the idea of a traditional self-sufficient village as favored by Gandhi, the economic and social damages of pandemics like Covid 19 can be reduced substantially.

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Self-sufficient, Village Economy, Relevance, Pandemic.)

### Introduction

Not only the loss of many lives across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year.

Millions of enterprises face an existential threat. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforces is at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food.

The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and has laid bare its fragility. Border

closures, trade restrictions, and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets, including for buying inputs and selling their produce, and agricultural workers from harvesting crops, thus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe, and diverse diets. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed millions of livelihoods at risk. As breadwinners lose jobs, fall ill, and die, the food security and nutrition of millions of women and men are under threat, with those in low-income countries, particularly the most marginalized populations, which include small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples, being hardest hit.

Millions of agricultural workers – waged and self-employed – while feeding the world, regularly face high levels of working poverty, malnutrition, and poor health, and suffer from a lack of safety and labor protection as well as other types of abuse. With low and irregular incomes and a lack of social support, many of them are spurred to continue working, often in unsafe conditions, thus exposing themselves and their families to additional risks. Further, when experiencing income losses, they may resort to negative coping strategies, such as the

distress sale of assets, predatory loans, or child labor. Migrant agricultural workers are particularly vulnerable, because they face risks in their transport, working, and living conditions and struggle to access support measures put in place by governments. Guaranteeing the safety and health of all agri-food workers – from primary producers to those involved in food processing, transport, and retail, including street food vendors – as well as better incomes and protection, will be critical to saving lives and protecting public health, people's livelihoods, and food security.

In the COVID-19 crisis food security, public health, and employment and labor issues, in particular workers' health and safety, converge. Adhering to workplace safety and health practices and ensuring access to decent work and the protection of labor rights in all industries will be crucial in addressing the human dimension of the crisis. Immediate and purposeful action to save lives and livelihoods should include extending social protection toward universal health coverage and income support for those most affected. These include workers in the informal economy and in poorly protected and low-paid jobs, including youth, older workers, and migrants.

Particular attention must be paid to the situation of women, who are over-represented in low-paid jobs and care roles. Different forms of support are key, including cash transfers, child allowances, healthy school meals, shelter, and food relief initiatives, support for employment retention and recovery, and financial relief for businesses, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. In designing and implementing such measures governments must work closely with employers and workers. Countries dealing with existing humanitarian crises or emergencies are particularly exposed to the effects of COVID-19. Responding swiftly to the pandemic, while ensuring that humanitarian and recovery assistance reaches those most in need, is critical.

Mahatma Gandhi wanted a self-sufficient village economy where the villages should produce their basic requirements. His idea of a self-sufficient village economy has become more and more relevant during the COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown. The restriction of movement during the lockdown has affected how people access food, disrupting the production of certain food products. All hotels, restaurants, marketplaces, shops, public transport, educational institutions, etc. were closed. As a result, many people lost their jobs due to the lockdown. The agriculturists could not sell their agricultural products. It is learned from the lockdown there is a need to be self-sufficient for at least the basic needs of life. Therefore, the present

paper studies the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's views of a self-sufficient village economy in the five villages of the hill areas of Manipur.

### **Gandhi's Views Of Self Sufficient Village Economy**

Mahatma Gandhi believed that the economic good of all lay in adopting the principle of swadeshi or self-sufficiency. Though Gandhi used the principle of swadeshi earlier as a political weapon to boycott foreign goods, particularly of the British, it acquired an economic overtone gradually. He later used this concept along with the other economic idea viz., decentralization, as a technique of building an economic system that was purely Indian and mass-based.<sup>i</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi believed in a self-sufficient village economy. He wanted villages to develop their economies to meet the basic requirements of the villagers. He wanted "every village to grow its food crops and cotton for its cloth. He insisted on the consumption of locally grown products and food. The villages should be self-sufficient in matters of their vital requirements. It could have a reserve for its cattle, recreation, and a playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops excluding marijuana, tobacco, opium, and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school, and public hall. It will have its water works ensuring clean water supply".<sup>ii</sup> It should be "the duty of the village people to maintain cleanliness in and around the village including public wells, tanks, and rivers".<sup>iii</sup> The houses are to be built with locally available materials. It will have sufficient light and ventilation. It "will have courtyards enabling the householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. It will have wells according to its needs and be accessible to all".<sup>iv</sup> The village streets and lanes will be kept clean".<sup>v</sup>

Gandhiji said in 1921, "Just as we cannot live without breathing and without eating, so it is impossible for us to attain economic independence and banish pauperism from this ancient land without reviving home-spinning wheel to be much as a necessity in every household as the hearth. No other scheme that can be devised will ever solve the problem of the deepening poverty of the people".

In 1934 Gandhiji wrote in Harijan, "Khadi is the sun of the village solar system. The planets are the various industries that can support Khadi in return for the heat and substance they derive from it. Without it other industries cannot grow.....and also without the revival of the other industries, Khadi could not make further progress. For, villagers to

be able to occupy their spare time profitably, village life must be touched at all points. The spinning wheels provide the people with food, cloth and make them self sufficient”.

According to Gandhiji “village economy cannot be completed without the essential village industries such as hand-grinding, hand pounding, soap-making, oil-pressing, etc. The village industries give employment to millions of people and provide an outlet for the creative skill and resourcefulness of the people. Large-scale industries will eliminate the spinning wheel and the handloom, and through large-scale industries, the wealth will be concentrated in the hands of a few. On the contrary, the village industries will lead to distribution of national income among the millions of people in thousands of villages. Gandhians are not against machine per se if it meets two aims: Self-sufficiency and full employment. According to Gandhi, there would be no objection to villagers using even modern machines and tools that they could make and could afford to use. Only they would not be used as a means of exploitation of others”.vi Gandhi’s view on a self-sufficient village economy may be regarded by many as an ideal, however, during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the need arises for self-sufficiency.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic In Manipur**

The first case of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India was reported on 30 January 2020, originating from China [6]. Slowly, the Pandemic spread to various states and Union Territories including the state of Manipur. The first COVID-19 case in Manipur was confirmed on 24 March 2020 on a young student who was returning to the state from the United Kingdom.vii The state reported its first COVID-19 death on 29 July 2020 was a 56-year-old man who succumbed to the disease at the Regional Institute of Medical Science (RIMS), Imphal.viii Since then COVID-19 positive cases continue to rise in the state leading to the imposition of a complete curfew in most parts of the districts and the extension of lockdown as a whole in the state. As of 30 August 2021, the total number of COVID cases in Manipur is 113702, including 3492 active cases, 108403 recoveries, and 1781 deaths.ix

### **Impact Of Lockdown Across The Globe**

The imposition of lockdown and curfew has led to untold hardships for people across the Globe. It has “affected how people access food, disrupting the production of certain food products. The challenge of food security within this period is mainly associated with human and vehicular movements’

curtailment, the disruption of the food supply chain, and export restrictions. These have resulted in the depression of the price of some cash crops because of the reduction in global demand and the hiking of prices of other foods because of increased demand among the locals. Many countries’ restrictive measures have resulted in shifts and fluctuations in international trade, finance, and investments. Across the economies of many countries, commodities associated with agriculture and pharmaceuticals were affected by the sudden stop of economic activity. Restrictions and stockpiles by Governments became a cause for concern over food security and prices of commodities”.x

Educational institutions across the Globe have been closed down as part of the lockdown efforts to curtail the spread of the virus.xi Developing countries with poor internet networks, limited finances to access the internet, and unavailability of electronic devices for student’s use are faced with challenges in moving to online learning.xii This is compounded by a shortage in electricity supply and educators who are not versed in the use of digital technology for instruction.xiii The closure of schools has effects on students as they experience a disruption in their education.xiv Besides, the lockdown also has diverse effects on research and researchers across various learning institutions. It is also to be noted that the lockdown has affected tourism, sports, leisure, hospitality, gender relations, mental health, etc.

### **How The People Of Manipur Are Affected By Lockdown?**

On the evening of 24 March 2020, the Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown, limiting the movement of the entire population of India as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic in India. As such, the Manipur state was under total lockdown. All hotels, restaurants, marketplaces, shops, etc. were closed. Public transport services were also put on halt. As a result of this many people lost their jobs due to the lockdown. The agriculturists could not sell their agricultural products as there was restriction on the movement of people. The lockdown has disturbed the academic calendar of educational institutions. Even though online classes have been adopted this is a problem for poor people. Parents are struggling to buy a smartphone that supports online classes. Besides, there are network problems, particularly in the hill areas of Manipur. In some places, it is very difficult to get a network and some students need to climb trees to get a network. This is a real problem during online examinations. On the other hand, the

lockdown helped to improve the efficiency of people in using technology. It has significantly changed the way people use technology.

The lockdown has also created lots of tension and anxiety among many people in the state. People are getting distressed about being quarantined and many of them are trying to escape the quarantine center. To help people manage their mental stress during the crisis, Mental Stress Management Team has been formed in many places.

In terms of food security the people in the rural areas particularly villages in the hill areas are in a better position than the people in the state capital and towns. The reason is, that during lockdown restriction of movements is stringent, and the people in the state capital and towns cannot go out to buy even food items. However, the villages in the rural areas do not have many problems regarding food because they can get most of their essential food items in the village. Here comes the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's views on the self-sufficient village economy during the lockdown. The people in the villages of hill areas of Manipur grow almost all their essential food items for their own consumption as well as for commercial purposes. Even though they cannot sell their agricultural products outside the village during the lockdown but they do not face problems like state capital and towns for their essential food items.

### Gandhian Arguments And Their Relevance

In Manipur, the lockdown has been strongly enforced by Government personnel. But in many of the villages in the hill areas of Manipur, there are no Government personnel stations in the village to enforce the lockdown in the village. In the absence of such Government officials to enforce the lockdown, the village authority headed by the village chief played a very important role in enforcing the restriction to contain the pandemic. Many villages in remote areas have to fend for themselves. In every village, COVID-19 Task Forces were set up to look after COVID-19-related matters in the village.

A notable restriction imposed in almost all the villages in the hill areas of Manipur was that villagers were not allowed to go to other villages, and no one was allowed to come to their village without the permission of the village COVID-19 Task Force. But inside the village, the villagers were allowed to visit each other freely. Besides they were allowed to go and work and collect their agricultural product in their respective jhumfield. They can also go to the forest to collect firewood, wild fruits, and vegetables from the forest. They

can also catch fish, crabs, snails, etc from the rivers. They can get fresh and clean water from the streams and rivers. As such, villagers in the hill areas of Manipur in general do not have many problems like the people in towns and cities regarding essential food items. They could get almost their essential food items within the village.

**Table-1** Age and Gender Wise Respondents

Age	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Up - to - 30	30	10	40	16
31 to 40	32	21	53	21.2
41 to 50	28	30	58	23.2
51 to 60	25	24	49	19.6
61 to 70	20	10	30	12
Above 71	15	5	20	8
Total	150	100	250	100

Source: Primary Data

**Table-2** Social and economic conditions in five villages during the lockdown

Serial Number	Items showing situation of village economy on essential food items and others during lockdown	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
1	Whether they have enough rice?	150	100	250	100
2	Whether they have enough vegetables?	150	100	250	100
3	Whether they have enough fish, meat, etc?	100	80	180	72
4	Whether they could go to their jhumfield?	150	100	250	100
5	Whether they get safe drinking water?	150	100	250	100
6	Whether they have any problems in availing health care?	20	16	36	14.4
7	Whether they have problem regarding online class for their children?	150	100	250	100
8	Whether they have playground/ recreation place for the villagers?	145	95	240	96
9	Whether they have mental stress?	30	35	65	26
10	Did you have local handloom of your own?	120	95	215	86
11	Do you think self-sufficient economy is required?	150	100	250	100

Source – Primary data

### Data Interpretation

Table-2 describes the situation of the economy mainly on essential food items and others of the five villages in Manipur during the lockdown. It

shows that 100% of the respondents do not have any problems regarding rice. Again, 100% of the respondents have enough vegetables and 72% of them could get fish and meat. 100% of the respondents have no problem in going to their jhumfield. And 100% of them get safe drinking water. 14.4% of the respondents have problems in availing health care during lockdown. 100% of the respondents have problem regarding on-line class for their children. 96% of them said that they have playground and recreation place for the villagers. 5.6% of them expressed that they have mental stress during the lockdown. 86% of the respondents said that they have a local handloom of their own. 100% of the respondents said there is a need for self-sufficient village economy.

### Information extracted from interviews

A 30-year-old man said, “During the lockdown, we are not allowed to go to another village and other people from outside are not allowed coming to our village. However, inside the village we can mix around with other villagers. We are free to go to our jhumfield and work there. We can get most of our essential food items from the jhumfield, forest and rivers. We rear cattle, chickens and catch fish for our own consumption as well as for commercial purposes. After the lockdown, we realized more and more the need for self-sufficiency mainly on essential food items. The education of our children is the main problem during the lockdown. The Government ordered all educational institutions to close down and start online classes. We are poor people and many of us could not afford to buy a smartphone that supports online classes. Besides, we also have network problems in our village. The lockdown has disrupted the education system of our children.

A 55-year-old woman said, “I live with my husband and my two daughters are already married in other villages. Since we are not allowed to go to other villages I cannot visit my daughters and grandchildren who are in other villages. After COVID-19 and the lockdown, we realized the importance of growing our food. Before the lockdown, we don’t grow rice even though it is our staple food. We have a bamboo farm and the money we get from the bamboo farm we used to buy other essential requirements. But after the lockdown, we realized we need to be self-sufficient. Many of the families in my village including my family started clearing the jungle and we grow rice and all kinds of vegetables. At the end of the year, we harvested paddy which would last for more than a year. We also started rearing cattle and chickens for our own consumption and also for commercial purposes.

My husband catches fish from the river. We can also collect mushrooms and other wild leaves and fruits from the forest. So regarding essential food items, we don’t have much problem during the lockdown. But the main problem is we don’t have electricity in our village. If the Government could provide this we shall be very much thankful to them”.

A 60-year-old woman said, “During the lockdown, we don’t have much problem regarding food because we can get most of the food from the jhumfield and forest. Besides, the Government has distributed rice from time to time. But we have a problem when we get sick. There is no health center in our village; as such we need to go to another village to see a doctor. As there is a restriction on movement during the lockdown we faced certain problems. Besides, our village does not have electricity and the road condition is not good, therefore it is very difficult to go to other places, especially during rainy seasons, and sell our farm products”.

Thus, most of the respondents in the study area do not have a problem regarding essential food items during the lockdown. During the lockdown, they realized more and more the need for self-sufficiency particularly that of essential food items. However, regarding online classes and health care, they faced certain problems during the lockdown. Besides, the road conditions in the study areas are in bad shape. During rainy seasons it is difficult for them to go to other places.

### Findings Of The Study:

Based on the Data Analysis and Interpretation of the study the following are the major findings:

100% of the respondents do have sufficient rice and vegetables during the lockdown. The main staple foods of the people in the study area are rice. They usually take meals twice a day, i.e. in the morning and the evening. Their meals comprise cooked rice and curry (mostly vegetables and sometimes meat). It is found that the Government has been distributing rice from time to time during the lockdown. They have enough vegetables which they collected from their jhumfield and forest. They catch fish from the rivers and meat which they reared or catch from the forest.

100% of the respondents also said that they can go and work and collect their agricultural products from their jhumfield. As mentioned earlier, there is no Government personnel posted in many of the villages in the hill areas of Manipur. As such, the Village Authority headed by the chief was responsible for enforcing lockdowns in their

respective villages. They formed their COVID-19 Task Force to deal with COVID-19-related matters in the village. 100% of the respondents said they have drinking water that they collected from the streams and rivers.

14.4% of them have problems availing health care during the lockdown. It is found during the field visit some of the villages in the study area do not have even primary health care centres. They have to go to another village to consult a doctor. As there are restrictions on movement during the lockdown, they faced hardships in availing of health care. It is also found that for minor illnesses some of them used local herbs to treat their illness.

100% of the respondents have problems with having on-line classes for their children. As the study area is in the remote areas of Manipur, it is found that they have a network problem. Many of them can't afford to buy a smartphone that support online class. As such, the lockdown has disrupted the education of their children. 96% of them have a proper playground for entertainment and recreation.

Regarding their mental stress, 5.6% of the respondents expressed mental stress during the lockdown. 86% of them have local handloom of their own which they used for weaving their clothes as well as for commercial purposes. 100% of the respondents realized more and more the need for self-sufficiency particularly in essential food items during the lockdown. During the lockdown people who never grow rice and vegetables have started growing rice and vegetables. During the field visit, it is found that some of the villages do not have electricity and the road conditions are in a bad shape.

From the above findings, the people in the study area do not face problems in having essential food items during the lockdown. They grow most of their food items in their jhumfield. They reared animals and birds for their own consumption as well as commercial purposes. In almost every house there are local handlooms to weave clothes for themselves and also to sell in the market. Many of them during the lockdown realized the need to produce their basic requirements. However, they faced certain problems in availing of healthcare as there are no healthcare centers in the village.

They also faced problems for their children in having online classes as the internet connection is very poor and many of them do not have smartphones which support online classes. Besides, the road conditions of these villages are in bad shape. Since there are no Government personnel stations in the village, the Village Authority headed by the chief was responsible to deal with any problem in the village. The villages in the study

area do not have much problem in getting their essential food items as compared to the towns and the state capital of Manipur. After the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, people realized more and more the need for self-sufficiency particularly in producing essential food items. Thus, Mahatma Gandhi's idea of a self-sufficient village economy is more and more relevant during the COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown.

### **Suggestions Of The Study:**

The followings are the suggestions to the Government and other Authorities/Bodies to help the villagers in the study area to make them self-reliant:

Most of these villages in the study area are in hilly areas, as such, it is difficult for them to do farming during the dry season. There are some villages where there is no electricity connectivity. If electricity is provided, with a water pump they can do farming all year round. Most of the villagers still practice traditional methods of farming. Technical experts in farming should be sent to these villages to train them to increase their farm products.

Road connectivity is also very bad in these villages. During rainy seasons they are cut off from the rest of the world. The concerned authority should look into the matter and improve the same. Even if the villagers grow commercial crops it is difficult for them to sell their products due to the bad condition of the road particularly during rainy seasons.

The loan should be provided to these villagers at a subsidized rate so that they can start their own entrepreneur. Primary health centers should be established in every village and at least one doctor and one nurse should be posted in every village. At least one smartphone should be provided to every household for an online class for their children.

### **Conclusion:**

Gandhi's views of a self-sufficient village economy have become more and more relevant during the COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown. The research studies found that the five villages i.e., Parbung, Leisen, Parvachawm, and Rovakawt do not have much problem in getting essential food items during the lockdown. They could get most of their food items from the jhumfield and forest. During the COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown, they realized more and more the need for self-sufficiency and therefore many people who have never grown food items have started growing all kinds of food items. The villagers have certain problems in availing of health care during the lockdown as there is no health care center in some

of the villages. It is also found that there is a lack of infrastructures like electricity, road connectivity, etc. in the study area. During the monsoon seasons, they cannot sell their products to other places because transportation is not possible during rainy

seasons. Therefore, the concerned authority should try to provide at least the basic minimum infrastructure to these villages so that the living condition of these villagers can be improved to a certain level.

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