

Sociology of COVID 19

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Abstract

There is an urgent need for an altered mass behavioural change to face and take up the COVID-19 pandemic, although much required changes seems contrary to social norms like physical closeness with in-group members. This paper explains how social norms and social identities are critical to explaining and changing public behaviour. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on March 11, 2020 announced that the new coronavirus outbreak can now be characterized as a global pandemic. Global confirmed cases continue to shoot up including in the US, Italy, Spain, and UK. India has also witnessed its 2nd wave of the pandemic in April 2021 resulting in huge human loss and socio-economic exigencies. In response, workers have been sent home, conferences have been cancelled, store shelves have been emptied and the nations are under nationwide quarantine, as a result of which global economy is under grave threat. Coronavirus disease was noticed in 2019 as a new strain that had not been previously identified in humans. It is also explained that it might be zoonotic, which can be transmitted between animals and people. Respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties are some common signs of the corona infected people. What made this outbreak different is the worldwide sense of fragility of human biological life and their demand for “sterile society”, safe from any hazards. It is quite certain that there are lessons to be learnt from this epidemic which poses a big question about the behaviour of human towards nature and other fellow beings. Is it a time to rewrite the behaviour of mass society for safe survival of humankind? A number of researchers today think that it is actually humanity’s destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases like COVID-19, the viral disease that emerged in China in December 2019, resulting in serious health and economic impacts in rich

and poor countries alike. The relevance of social medicine and sociologists seems significant to engage, analyse, theoretically and empirically the impact and changes of COVID19 on society. It is positively hoped that the world will survive the corona virus but to prevent the next big one, we all should rethink our way of life.

Keywords: COVID-19, endemic, WHO, outbreak, quarantine, risk society, pandemic, social distance, self-isolation,, ecological medicine, biodiversity, resilience, lock-down, social medicine, sterile society.

Introduction:

Sociology is defined as a general science of society which involves social life, change, action, stratification, interaction, relationship and consequences of human behaviour. Sociology of Disaster and sociology of health and illness come to the fore when we talk about the dreadful COVID 19 impacting all dimensions of sociology especially the term social distance which certainly is not a new terminology for sociology scholars denoting social inequality. Since the first case found in Wuhan city of China of COVID-19 in early December 2019, it has deeply and extensively affected the society globally even today. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a serious public health and economic crisis of our times as the borders were closed, lock down, and individuals have socially isolated for the collective safe. We are aware that the buzzwords in this scenario doing the rounds are self-quarantine, herd immunity, community spread and isolation which are definitely sociological terms although their connotations bit altered due to the arrival of the fatal virus and its unprecedented social upheaval. Therefore, the impact of COVID 19 on sociological analysis needs to be taken under consideration.

Corona Virus Outbreak

The tragic Coronavirus was found to be more deadly than severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), bird flu, and swine flu in previous years. This tragic outbreak of Corona virus has blatantly exposed as to how a biological and epidemiological issue can have a jolting impact and transform as a social, economic and political subject that has resulted in the creation of social anxiety worldwide. It has led to deep concerns for citizens in all countries, even in societies without a confirmed outbreak. The outbreak of corona virus and its concomitant health economic and social consequences should be prioritized as one of the most important social events in human life in the 21st century. This life threatening outbreak is way different due to the worldwide sense of fragility and helplessness of human biological life and its demand for “sterile society” safe from any hazards. In other words “sterile society” is quite similar to human desire for eternity. Since there is no effective medical cure for COVID-19, other than vaccination for achieving collective herd immunity is a long-term planning gradually taking over and would benefit people in the long run. This means that mass behavioural modifications have become indispensable to deal with the pandemic by ‘flattening the curve’ of infections and preventing medical services from being overwhelmed. From sociological perspective the new kind of normal involves the adoption of behaviour such as maintaining physical distance from people outside your household, regular hand washing or sanitising, the wearing of face masks, uptake of a vaccine when it is offered, and complying with test and trace guidelines to suppress local outburst. However Physical distancing and quarantine rules are particularly challenging due to the impact they have on employment, travel and social interaction having a strong impact on social mobility and dynamism of social behaviour.

Today, convenient behaviour patterns has been replaced by Risk society turning out to be a part of our daily life and activities. a German sociologist, Ulrich Beck explains the term risk society as a systematic way of dealing with dangers and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization for human convenience. This gradually transforms into to

a potential change which he calls “reflexive modernization”, where unintended and unforeseen side-effects of modern life would strike-back on the man-made or modern upgraded systematic ways of human life. Therefore it can be said that outbreak of corona virus shows that risk society is making way for a precarious and vulnerable society. In such a scenario, the need for huge investments is to be made to study risk perception and communication with the aim of managing conflicting opinions on magnitude of hazards and reducing society’s paranoia about issues of public health and personal security

Altered Social Behaviour

- 1) **Maintaining Social distance-** Sociologically, social distance describes the distance between different groups in society, such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender or sexuality. But during the pandemic corona virus it is a physical distance among people irrespective of one’s caste, class nationality or race because this disease spreads primarily through contact with an infected person when they cough or sneeze. It also spreads when a person touches a surface or object that has the virus on it, then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth. Therefore, social distancing is a tool public health officials recommend to slow the spread of a disease that is being passed from person to person. Even the Paramilitary forces were issued directives to enter into battle mode and maintain social-distancing after the first case of corona infected a soldier posted in Leh.
- 2) **Frequent washing of hands-** Washing hands has always been hygienic norm in the society but frequent washing of hands to for protection and safety of people at large as it could cost a life has become a mandatory behavioural norm. WHO has urged the people to clean hands with water and sanitizers as a protection against infection. The hands need to be dried thoroughly by towel. Corona virus disease (COVID-19) spreads when droplets containing the virus get into the body through eyes, nose or throat. Most often, this happens through our

hands. UNICEF has said, 'Washing your hands can protect you and your loved ones'.

- 3) **Avoid touching mouth, nose and eyes-** The omnipresent virus has strictly prohibited us to touch our own self physically and looking at the spread of the dangerous microbe, it is quite likely that this altered norm would be accepted. In the fight against the new corona virus there's one simple measure that we need to stop touching our faces. The World Health Organization (WHO) says we should particularly try to avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth, which can be an effective way of halting the spread of diseases. Viruses can live for days on surfaces from desktops to door handles, and once on our hands can be transferred into our bodies through these entry points.
- 4) **Practising respiratory hygiene-** There are few steps to maintain respiratory hygiene like covering mouth while sneezing and coughing, use of tissues, and washing hands.
- 5) **Use of Masks-**In India, Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare urged citizens to keep wearing face masks adding that we should incorporate it into our lives as this is the new normal. Since the first case, of novel corona virus emerged in China in late 2019 it has rapidly spread throughout the world. This novel corona virus is called SARS-CoV-2 and the disease that it causes is called COVID-19. Google searches related to face masks spiked in Taiwan following the country's first imported case. Even WHO has recommended use of masks as a preventive and precautionary measure to fight this dangerous disease?
- 6) **Physical exercise/yoga for boosting immunity-** The common behaviour of visiting the fashionable food outlets serving junk food has got a jolt and the importance of nutritious food and exercises for good immunity has been re-affirmed in this period of uncertainty and danger. As corona virus continues to expand its tentacles, people are being advised to practice hygiene and eat food which help increase immunity by focussing on physical fitness

by exercising or yoga for at least 30 minutes every day. Therefore, keeping fit and healthy has become more a necessity than a fashion statement.

- 7) **Behavioural Change during Marriage and Death-**In the Hindu Social system Vivaha and Antyesthi are significant as Sanskara which seems not possible without the participation of people. But the new guidelines for maintaining social distance does not allow people to assemble in large numbers. People are learning new ways of consolation and happiness during trauma and celebrations. However, the role of technology during corona cannot be undermined in the form of internet, phones continue to provide solace in times of distress and joy.
- 8) **Self-isolation-** The very basis of Society is social relationship which is not possible without people and mutual interaction. It is based on social processes of cooperation and accommodation which requires involvement. During the pandemic we are left with no choice of involvement but to withdraw oneself from people which involves steps like not leaving home for any reason, except for essential needs but stay at least 2 metres away from other people. And also ensure to not have visitors such as friends and family at home. This again has left us to adopt and imbibe the altered behaviour to survive the calamity.
- 9) **Effect on social mobility-** Generally low social mobility is attributed to rural societies and high mobility to urban societies but the mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the form of travel bans, stay-at-home mandates, and lockdown policies, have affected one and all. The Covid-19 pandemic may change mobility patterns for the cohort of children whose parents are severely hit by the crisis. The cost of living tends to rise among families that battled or lost their members due to corona-virus. Restriction of movement has seized the speed of mobility due to job losses, closure of companies, deaths, and economic losses
- 10) **Avoid Travelling-** On 24th January 2020, WHO also released an update on the travel

and international traffic in relation to the outbreak of corona virus 2019. The transport system has been severely hit with automobile companies running in losses. As an immediate response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global community enforced massive restrictions on public transport and movement in order to limit transmission of the virus and ensure safe passage of key workers.

- 11) **Digital payments-** With the rise of COVID and the hygiene regulations that are to be followed to minimise the risk of spreading the virus, contactless and cashless options are becoming more popular and are being widely used. Digital payments have already been taken into use in most metropolitan cities. Urbanism or urban life is also facing massive changed travelling behavioural patterns keeping in view COVID 19 situation.
- 12) **Work from Home-** this new normal has taken a major space during the pandemic period and technology as means of operation which is being compulsorily learnt which opens up doors for a new behavioural pattern. The dynamics of household chores have witnessed alterations as the demarcation of place of work turning out to be blurred. Indeed the term office and home which were hitherto has come to one location.
- 13) **Greeting behaviour-** In an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus, more people, including global leaders, are using the Indian way of greeting i.e. NAMASTE. People around the world are worried that shaking hands, hugging and kissing on the cheek might spread the virus. COVID19 has seriously jeopardised the informal way of greetings like embracing replaced by waving hands and Namaste from a distance which is quite reminiscent of the physical distance of the lower castes from the upper castes in the social stratification. Maintaining distance even with family members who got affected becomes worse and painful but is in fact a norm which is being accepted for good of all.

Coronavirus - A wake up call

Chief of Wildlife at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) , Doreen Robinson opined- Humans and nature are inseparable part of one connected system, and nature plays a vital role by providing food, medicine, water, clean air and much more responsible to human survival. Our destructive behaviour on Earth in the form of deforestation, pollution, overpopulation, global warming, killing animals, unplanned urban development etc. has damaged the environment enormously in the past century, thereby disturbing the equilibrium of the ecosystem. David Quammen, author of Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Pandemic, wrote in the New York Times. “We have been chopping trees, killing animals, caging them and sending them to markets. We have already caused disruption of ecosystem, allowing viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host and humans are the victims. Most certainly, there are lessons to be learnt from this epidemic. Scientists are sure in inferring that climate change is one main reason for pandemics. Due to global warming, the temperatures soaring high, drought and heat is inevitable leading to food and water shortages resulting in malnutrition, and disease. If the perils of climate change continues to be overlooked then we are preparing the ground for the next big catastrophe that could be more destructive. We are moving towards completely disturbing and messing the delicate balance of the environment.

Researchers today are attributing to human interference of biodiversity that causes conditions for new viruses and diseases like COVID-19 which emerged in China in December 2019, and has taken the world with storm with profound health and economic impacts in rich and poor countries without discrimination. It has been estimated by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that three-quarters of new kind and variant of diseases infecting humans largely comes from non-human animals. In fact, a new discipline of planetary health, is emerging which focuses on the increasing visible connections among the well-being of humans, other living things and entire ecosystems. It is due to various socio-economic

activities of human like massive deforestation driven by logging, mining, road building through remote places, rapid urbanization and population growth, hunger for profit, nuclear tests is making the planet unsafe for future generations as we are losing on sustainability.

Professor of biology at Bard College, New York, Felicia Keeping pointed how changes in the environment influences the chances that humans will be exposed to infectious diseases. Disturbing or eroding biodiversity, will see a proliferation of the species most likely to transmit new diseases to humans, but there's also good evidence that those same species are the hosts for existing diseases. In order to maintain biodiversity, the orientation of human behaviour a about self, society and the environment has to be re-looked, re-organised and understood for the larger interest and welfare of the global inhabitants. We need to start a new biological and social dialogue with the environment including the world of viruses. Even in this current Corona epidemic there are suggestions that food and housing behaviour played an important role in the promotion of mutation in viruses. We need a new interdisciplinary approach with cooperation of sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists as well as virologists, epidemiologists, and public health experts to have a change both in our outlook, perspectives and corresponding behaviour towards environment and in our actions in facing a crisis. It can be said that, this outbreak reminds us how the societies have turned out to be vulnerable both physically, biologically and mentally. We have to improve the resilience not on the biological basis but also at mental, social and spiritual level. Carolyn Raffensperger, an environmental lawyer and archaeologist, Executive Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network, in her best known contribution on the precautionary principle, has pointed about precautionary action to prevent harm in the face of uncertainty. She also came up with a term "ecological medicine" to encompass the broad notion that both health and healing goes along with the natural world. It is positively hoped that the world will survive the corona virus but as a prevention there is a need to rethink our way of life. In other words despite harbouring

so called dynamism, power and profit. The world seems static and powerless in the face of Covid19. Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy has said "Virus is a portal between one world and the next".

Relevance of Social Medicine

We can say that COVID-19 which is a new corona virus predominantly spreading by human-to-human transmission creating havoc throughout the world since its outbreak in December 2019 with thousands of new cases emerging daily during its peak. However, the world has experienced several pandemics of contagious diseases in the past two decades like SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, Ebola, Zika, and MERS in 2014~2016. These diseases not only affects human and economic loss but also long term social and psychological consequences. Therefore in this context the area of Social Medicine needs to be explored as it mainly analyses health and deliverance of care around our understanding in the depth of sociality. It represents the fact that the major share of health determinants are social in nature and the major interventions delves socially in terms of design, implementation, targets and outcomes. COVID19 is a social disease as infections have moved through the social network of contact and relationship within families, communities and global commerce. Therefore, social disease requires social remedies and for this social medicine is required which recommends three things viz integrating health, social and economic responses, bringing care to the needy, focus on broad equity- driven reforms. Social suffering of the magnitude of COVID 19 requires an integrated, caring, and equity-focused response as a social medicine providing myriad ways that tracks health, social and economic life finding connections in favour of a fairer and just society. It shapes the intellectual and moral platform upon which our care giving rests. Keeping sociality as a basis, social medicine intervenes as a solace to do something to bring social care to our response, to care for those in greatest need and making equity central to our recovery. Sociologists and social thinkers and all stakeholders need to come forward with their solutions in times of

deadly life threatening outbreaks or social crisis.

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