

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY BASED ON THE CURRENT SITUATION

PROSENJIT NATH

System Analyst (O), National Institute of Technology
Silchar, Assam

INTRODUCTION:

Difficult times often bring out both the best and the worst in people. While many people were at first paralyzed with fear at the outbreak, many stepped up to help. The pandemic and the resulting lockdown have been an economic and health crisis that has had far-reaching and unprecedented effects on all levels of society. From the daily wager to the CEOs the virus has been the great leveler.

SUMMARY:

Across the globe and spanning all levels of society Covid-19 has changed people's lives unimaginably. In India as in other countries, the pandemic and lockdowns have made a huge impact on the economy both on the national as well as the individual level. The economic fallout has affected people at all levels of society. The household income, job opportunities and access to education have all shrunk. While the breadwinners are losing jobs or looking at lower pay raises, students have been facing the challenges of deferred exams. The Supreme Court of India has been petitioned to make decisions that would affect the futures of all the students in the transition between Class X to higher secondary school and those transitioning into and out of college. Unemployment rates are high and even the self-employed are badly affected. Many SMEs are facing the prospect of closing down despite the assistance offered by the government.

As always, difficulties faced by celebrities and those in the public eye get more attention than the everyday struggles of the common man. The pandemic has had a bad

impact on the finances and livelihood of those who are in the cine and artistic fields. Many actors and actresses have committed suicide and this has grabbed media attention. On the other hand, some celebrities have used their money and influence to emerge as real-life heroes to those suffering due to the pandemic.

When the common man has been unable to go outside the focus has shifted inside the home. Entertainment, work, and education have all gone online in a big way. Those who have access to smart devices and the internet have been continuing their classes online while those who don't have access have been left behind. People have been spending more time watching TV and online through digital media. In this digital age, the broadcast of the good old classic Ramayan by DD has brought families of all ages together in front of the television.

Many people who had refused to shift from physical payments to digital platforms have been forced into it. Now that the barrier of unfamiliarity has been broken, payments will be a lot different even after the pandemic has passed.

IMPACT ON THE INDIAN ECONOMY:

The COVID pandemic is a health crisis that has transformed from a health crisis. The Indian GDP was at a 5% growth figure at the start of the year 2020. However, the GDP of the country saw a steep fall of 9% between April and June 2020. (Keeley, Sandhya, 2020)

In comparison to the world's major economies, India is among one of the countries with the biggest contraction of economies in the last quarter. When compared to the last

year the contraction in the GDP is 23.9%. Historically this is the biggest fall since quarterly figures were published since 1996. This is a huge difference from the median estimate of 18% by economists.

The government is opening up the economy by easing the restrictions that were imposed but there is a huge risk. The pandemic has still got the nation in its grip and India reported the highest number of daily infections in the world on 30th August 2020. What is even more worrisome is that the pandemic is now spreading in huge numbers to the rural areas. The figures in the GDP report is as dismal as those of the pandemic infection figures. The biggest component of the services sector is the financial services and this has shrunk 5.3 % in the last quarter compared to the same period last year. The sectors of transport, communication, hotels, and trade has declined a whopping 47% while construction and manufacturing fell 50.3% and 39.3% each. The output of mining has shrunk 23.3% and gas 7%. Agriculture has grown by 3.4%. (NDTV Profit, 2020)

HOW THE COMMON MAN HAS REACTED TO COVID-19:

In most countries, Covid-19 was at first the disease that was first seen in those who were international travelers or exposed to them. The disease soon spread beyond the manmade boundaries of social class and affected the common man. The tragedy of this has been that while the privileged were able to self-quarantine or home quarantine, the common man does not live in housing that allows such a privilege. The prime example has been the Covid-19 infections in Dharavi. In situations where people live in very close proximity to each other social distancing and quarantine are an impossibility. Yet, the way the citizens and the government have handled it is laudable.

AFFECTON COMMON MAN:

The lockdowns and restrictions that have been imposed to control the spread of Covid-19 have had serious economic repercussions at all levels of society.

A survey of households found that in February 2020, 60% of the surveyed households reported that they had seen no change in their income and only 8.8% reported a fall in income. The month of April 202 saw that around 45% of households had seen a loss in income and 43% had found no change in income. (Keeley, Sandhya, 2020) This is a huge change that quantifies the adverse economic situation that the common man is facing.

UNEMPLOYMENT:

The effect of the pandemic has cascaded across all sectors and levels of employment and society. From the white-collar worker to the migrant farm laborer, the fallout has been devastating. What has been particularly painful is the desperate journeys of the migrant workers back home. The world will forever remember the pictures and stories of scores of migrant workers making their way back home on foot.

The unemployment rate in both rural and urban areas have been affected. Mahesh Vyas, Managing Director, and CEO, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) stated that the employment rate in February was 40% and had fallen to 26% in May 2020. This translates to 14 % of the working-age population losing employment. So, 14 crore people have lost their jobs in this period. The urban unemployment rate was at 25.1% and the rural unemployment rate was 26.7%. The urban areas saw a particularly high surge in unemployment at 30% and 31% in the first two weeks of the lockdown which then became 25% and 23% in the next two weeks. This illustrates the huge negative impact that the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown

has had on employment across India. (Business Today, 2020)

PAY LEVELS:

The TeamLease Jobs & Salaries Primer Report 2020 states that the salary hikes this year will be marginal or even negative. It is only the very super-specialized designations that can expect a pay hike. For new hires, only 6 out of the 17 sectors that were surveyed are offering a salary growth of more than 10 percent. Many of the major sectors are offering less than 10 percent salary growth for the fresh intake of human resources. (NDTV Profit, 2020)

SMES:

Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) are at the very heart of the Indian economy. This sector accounts for 90% of the business in the country and over 50% of the employment media reports suggest that one out of every three small businesses in India is considering closing. A report by the All India Manufacturers' Association (AIMO) in partnership with nine other industry bodies clarifies that the small businesses were already facing issues due to the slowdown of the economy in the last three years. The pandemic has been the most severe stress that the businesses have faced and has caused debts to mount. While one in every three of the small businesses surveyed expressed hope that there would be a recovery in six months an equal number of them are of the opposite opinion. (Financial Express, 2020)

The government has sought to offset this by encouraging more access to credit and publicizing quick loans. The Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) has been expanded to include individual entrepreneurs. This scheme helps those who have already availed credit to obtain additional financing. The amount that was sanctioned under the

scheme was 1.37 lakh crore and 87,000 crores have already been disbursed. Debasish Panda, Department of Financial Services Secretary said that the changed rules will make 1 lakh crore more people eligible for the scheme. The scheme does not cover those who are first-time borrowers or those who have NPA accounts.

Sources in the industry however confirm that the actual disbursement of the loan amounts is far below expectations as most of the institutions such as vehicle financiers and NBFCs are not able to provide the facility to borrowers. The EGCLS scheme has also capped the interest rates of financial institutions and banks a 9.25% pa and that of NBFCs at 14% pa. This scheme will be available till 31st October or until the sum of Rs. 3 lakh crores have been disbursed.

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THOSE IN THE PUBLIC EYE:

Though Covid-19 has been rather indiscriminate in its attacks on the public, a film star or a politician testing positive still grab the public attention. The public has been particularly sympathetic to the public personages and celebrities who have been diagnosed with COVID. This was amply illustrated when the Superstar Amitabh Bachan was admitted to the hospital after testing positive for Covid-19. It was just after the country had witnessed an escalation in a border dispute with a neighboring country. Yet, much air time and headline space were allocated to the border issue as well as regular reports on the health status of the beloved cinema star.

At the same time, the added attention that has come with COVID has also made those in the public eye face intense public scrutiny. This has also made them questionable for their actions. One example is the singer Kanika Kapoor who early in the onslaught of the pandemic in India did not declare her travel

history and attended many large events. She allegedly evaded screening at the airport. (Joy S, 2020) An FIR was booked against the singer in Lucknow. (ET, 2020)

Politicians have also tested positive with Amit Shah, Union Home Minister of India, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia. Many doctors have tested positive and yet continue to serve the public. Dr. SI Padmavati who was the country's first female cardiologist succumbed to Covid-19 at the age of 103. (Times Of India, 2020)

CELEBRITIES SERVING THE NEEDY:

The biggest example of using a public platform to do good in the country was the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) that generated a huge response. Many local politicians and prominent people in society have mobilized funds using their reach to help those in need during the pandemic. However, the standout contribution to public good during the pandemic has been that of the actor Sonu Sood. While he has made a name for himself in cinema playing villains and anti-heroes, he stepped up to be the hero to many people in need during the pandemic. He offered to stay in his Juhu Hotel in Mumbai for medical personnel who were risking their lives and social stigma in the fight against the pandemic. The lockdown created a situation where daily wage workers and migrant workers who had lost their means of livelihood were starving. He started an initiative to feed hungry people across the city of Mumbai.

Migrants across the country who had lost their jobs because of the lockdowns tried to make their way back home on foot. With the lack of public transport and the fear of starving if they remained where they were, these migrants set out on foot. While the rest of the country sympathized and many offered help to

those in need in their immediate vicinity, Sonu Sood stepped up and coordinated with the authorities and organized busses for the migrants to get back home. It is estimated that over 20,000 migrants were able to reach their native towns with their help. 135 Indian students who were stranded in Kyrgyzstan were flown back to India on a chartered flight arranged by Sonu Sood. He has donated 1500 PPE kits to paramedics in Punjab and 25000 face shields to police officers in Maharashtra. He has also helped many individuals who have appealed to him for varied needs and wants such as textbooks to an IAS aspirant and running shoes for an athlete. (Social Story, 2020)

STRUGGLES OF ARTISTS AND ACTORS:

While actor Sonu Sood has been grabbing the headline for his charitable works there are many of those in the artistic field who have had a very difficult time. Many of those in the cine and related fields have taken the extreme step of committing suicide. In most cases, the reason has been financial difficulties that have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 restrictions and the resulting loss of work. Though the pandemic and its economic fallout have affected those are many different strata of life the number of suicides in this field has been very disturbing. The loss of contracts, income, and other limitations have proved hard to handle for some.

The media reported the suicide of Marathi actor Ashutosh Bhakre on 30th July 2020 due to depression. Chandana, a Kannada actress faced relationship challenges that led to her suicide on 28th May 2020 while Susheel Gowda, committed suicide in July 2020. Two siblings who are Tamil actors, Sreedhar and Jaya Kalyani committed suicide in June 2020 due to financial difficulties resulting from the lockdowns. Manmeet Grewal also committed suicide for the same reason. His neighbors

reportedly did not try to rescue him as they feared that he had Covid-19. The most widely reported celebrity death has been of Sushant Singh Rajput though the reason for the same has not been confirmed. (Sujita Kumar Kar, October 2020) Celebrity suicides are a tragedy that has many repercussions as the media attention that they draw and the publicity amongst their fans as well as the general public. They could also lead to many copycat suicides inspired by the tragic loss of a celebrity's life.

EDUCATION:

At the very start of the pandemic, many educational institutions made small steps into online learning. As it became more apparent that the pandemic and the restrictions would be prolonged, more and more institutions started teaching online. The biggest fallout of this has been that the disparity between the privileged and the less so has been exposed. While the actual school and classroom learning level the playing field to a certain extent, online learning is very imbalanced. Many children have little or no access to smart devices and internet connectivity. Having family members at home who can supplement and complement the online learning is an advantage that not all children have.

Schools have closed in 191 countries and 1.5 billion students and 63 million teachers have been affected by the lockdowns in response to the pandemic. Worldwide, around 50% of students do not have computer access and 40% have no internet access in their homes. Stefania Giannini, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, stated that "These inequalities are a real threat to learning continuity at a time of unprecedented educational disruption". (United Nations - News, 2020)

In India, the figures show that though 99.9% of the homes in the country have an

electricity connection, the number of hours that electricity is supplied widely differs. A survey by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-'18 revealed that only 47% of the homes had electricity supplied for more than 12 hours a day. Learning through apps and in short video segments is easily achievable through smartphones. However long term learning, attempting to replicate classroom learning and doing assignments requires the use of larger devices such as tablets, computers, and laptops. But while 24% of the citizens own smartphones only 11% of households have any type of computer and 24% have internet access. When surveyed by the state it is seen that Bihar has access to computers in 4.6% of the households while Kerala has 23.5% and Delhi 35%. With such an imbalance in digital access, the most ambitious of online learning programs fail to deliver to all students equally. (Scroll, 2020)

On the other hand, for those who do have access to computers and the internet, it is heartening to see that many schools and teachers are making a brave effort to continue classes. School fees are another subject of contention between school authorities and the parents of students. The disparity in the access to and availability of technology is another issue that the average unaided private schools are grappling with. Government school syllabus and classes are aired on television, radio, and other platforms that are provided by the government. The elite private schools have the infrastructure to facilitate digital learning. The private schools that fall in neither of these two categories are struggling to cope. To add to their woes, parents are unable or unwilling to pay the tuition fees which makes up only 50% of the normal fee structure. The schools are facing debts that are piling up and little income. There are also increasing dropouts as those families that are very badly affected financially are choosing to send their children to

government schools. Owing to the difficulty in uniform access to online learning and video conferencing platforms it is found that around 66 percent of private schools are using WhatsApp to facilitate online learning. (Indian Express, 2020)

STUDENTS AND EXAMINATIONS:

The students who are at a crucial juncture in their academic education have had a very challenging time due to the pandemic. While most of the states wrapped up the Class 10 and Class 12 examinations before the lockdowns, the CBSE and ICSE boards had a few exams that were pending due to the lockdown. These examinations were then canceled. (DD News, 2020) Students faced much uncertainty when the boards took the time to make concrete decisions. Finally, the matter was taken to the Supreme Court of India. The students of the CBSE and ICSE schools were awarded marks based on an individual formula that each board decided on based on the marks of the papers that the student had attempted. (Indian Express, 2020)

ENTRANCE EXAMS:

The entrance exams for admission to colleges have also been the subject of great debate and wrangling in the media as well as the courts. The NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) for medical and dental aspirants and JEE (Joint Entrance Examination) for engineering aspirants are the most competitive entrance exams in the country. More than 16 lakh students had registered for the NEET and over 9 lakh students for the JEE.

The exams were scheduled to be held on 3rd May and 17th May 2020 respectively. However, when the lockdowns disrupted the board exams, the NEET and JEE were rescheduled for July. They were then rescheduled yet again for September. Since the pandemic was still raging many of the parents

were reluctant to send their children to attend the exams. Students from 11 states petitioned the Supreme Court for the postponement of the exams. But the court rejected the petition stating that "Postponement of exams is a loss to the country." (The Federal, 2020) The issue however has stirred up huge public and political debate. The exams are being held with very strict precautionary measures and stringent safety measures. (Times Of India, 2020) A girl in Coimbatore committed suicide after hearing that the exams were to be conducted as scheduled. (DNA, 2020)

MEDIA AND THE PANDEMIC:

The pandemic lockdowns and restrictions forced people to look for their entertainment and information solely within their homes. The time spent at home has greatly increased. This has changed many consumer habits. This has translated as more time on smart devices and television. When television once saw 'primetime' as the most viewed and desirable spots, things have changed. Viewership for non-prime time programs has gone up 76%. Primetime viewership only grew by 5%. At the same time, the available budget and spending patterns of advertisers have also changed.

Time spent on both TVs and smartphones has gone up, with TV getting the largest share. In both variety and time, viewers are seeking more. Average weekly viewing minutes on TV rose by 38%, even as the average number of channels being watched rose from 16 to 22. Some are obvious, like the sharp growth (76%) in non-prime time as against prime time (which saw only a 5% uptick) viewing, even as weekly advertising time dipped by 26% to 20 million seconds. With people staying at home, TV viewing time is increasing. Advertising budgets have also been hit badly by the financial impact of the pandemic.

One of the very strange media phenomena during the lockdown has been the telecast of the Ramayana by Door darshan. This show has received unprecedented viewership that only seems to be growing. Whether it is nostalgia or turning to spirituality during troubled times, the show has done very well in its repeat winnings. (The Economic Times, 2020)

PAYMENTS:

With the lockdown limiting the ability to go out and shop many people have been forced to turn to online shopping platforms. The major players in online shopping shifted their focus and limited their services to essentials. Naturally, paying online has also followed suit. Those who were previously uncomfortable with online and digital payments were forced to try it. Even after lockdowns are lifted, the new habits learned will tend to stick. One online survey found that over 30% of those surveyed reported an increase in online payments. (Statista, 2020) Another survey reports that in the first 21 days of the lockdown period over 42% more Indians used digital payments when compared to before. (Economic Times, 2020)

UPI or Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has achieved its highest transaction count of 1.62 billion transactions in August 2020 which is 8% more than the number a year ago as per the figures released by the National Payments Corp. of India (NPCI). The values of these transactions were ₹2.98 trillion. In July 2020 ₹2.90 trillion was transacted and one year ago ₹1.54 trillion was transacted. There was a recorded slump in the initial days of the lockdown after which there has only been growing. (LiveMint, 2020) Another report predicts an annual CAGR (Compounded Annual Growth Rate) of 37% to reach Rs 4,067 lakh crore by the financial year 2022. This year the total value of digital payments is Rs 2,152

trillion. This increased adoption of digital payments has occurred on both the consumer and merchant sides of a transaction. It is also seen that with the increased use of smart devices and internet access the digital payment acceptance in smaller towns is also on the rise. There is also increased access to QR codes as well as POS devices.

Vishwas Patel, the chairman of industry group Payment Council of India, and also the CEO of CC Avenues, a payment gateway says that "A large number of new consumers in these areas have switched to digital and contactless payments since they provide a safe and hygienic alternative to cash transactions.". In the days before the pandemic, the bulk of digital payments was card-based. But now most of the shop owners who were surveyed expect that around 50% of the digital payments will be mobile-based such as digital wallets and UPI. (Economic Times, 2020).

WORLDWIDE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC:

The pandemic has tested the response, governance, and healthcare systems of countries worldwide. Some have handled the pandemic better than others. Though the pandemic still rages on across the world there are many lessons to be learned just by studying the way countries have responded.

South Korea has had earlier experience with the 2015 MERS epidemic. The country used many intelligent measures coupled with the fiscal stimulus to weather the pandemic with extensive testing and isolation without closing down the entire economy. It also developed Covid-19 tests and exported many tests and medical supplies to other countries even as it was fighting the pandemic within its borders.

Taiwan is the neighbor of China that was close to the very epicenter of where the Covid-19 epidemic began. The country did not

impose lockdowns. Instead, the borders were sealed and the country stopped the export of masks. Contact tracing was very aggressive and the SIMS of people were tracked to ensure that quarantines were being obeyed. Businesses were very aggressive with the use of sanitizer and taking of temperatures. The public was briefed daily by the officials. Taiwan then helped other countries by sending them medical supplies. Taiwan had learned many lessons from the SARS epidemic 20 years ago and its vice president is an epidemiologist.

Singapore did well at first with very aggressive contact tracing and extensive testing. It is also a state that has previous experience with SARS. It is smaller than in other countries and has excellent policies in place to handle such events. However, the second outbreak in the overcrowded migrant dormitories challenged the government but the outbreak was well managed and contained. The government has also been able to keep the economy going thanks to its deep financial reserves and monetary policies.

New Zealand reacted very swiftly to the pandemic and managed to keep the numbers very admirably low. The country coupled effective messaging to the citizens with the closing down of non-essential services and lockdowns to keep numbers low. The government earned much praise for the pay cut that the Prime Minister and the other ministers took as well as the economic measures that the country has taken to ensure that the people are well supported through financial difficulties resulting from the pandemic. Australia also handled the pandemic in a very well-coordinated and scientific manner that ensured that the numbers and spread of Covid-19 were kept well in check. The country has also released an economic stimulus to help the people and the economy.

Canada has also weathered the pandemic better than most other countries

with a combination of coordinated responses, financial support, and excellent health care for its people. The response to the pandemic was more scientific than political and the results speak for themselves.

Though Germany's neighbors Italy and Spain saw the pandemic ravage the population, German's response contained the numbers early. There was a good response to the government's guidelines. The country has also taken steps to support the economy.

Iceland is a small country that offered free testing very early in the pandemic followed by efficient contact tracing. The quick response avoided the need for total shutdowns and contained the Covid-19 cases effectively. Since the economy did not fully shutdown a small stimulus package released by the government has been welcomed.

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