

# COVID-19 Through Social Lens

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## Theoretical Perspective

There is a popular mythological saying in India – *Hey Raam tere liye sab samaan (Oh God Ram, for you all are equal)*. That is true for most of the disease when Tartaglia spoke that “disease does not discriminate”. This comes true in the case of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) – a health hazard that, at the aggregate level, did not discriminate anyone – rich, poor, women, men, educated, uneducated, young and old, urban and rural people. Even age is not the real factor, although in the beginning it was told that children below 10 years and elderly people above 65 years of age are comparatively more vulnerable. Anyone can get afflicted with the disease regardless of her/his nationality, profession, economic status, or family cohesion. I thought of researching it from the perception of social change. Nicholas (2020) correlates human civilisation with larger cities, exotic trade routes, and increased contact with different populations of people, animals, and ecosystems and says that the more likely pandemics would occur.

Social change is a dynamic process and has been studied by different scholars at different points of time and in a different context. Zevallos (2017) has attempted to explain how social change happens and mentioned about various responsible factors, nobody had imagined that the society will pass through a phase of unprecedented social change triggered by a single factor – COVID-19 (referred here as Corona) that has forced the societies across the world, so he did not even mention about any such circumstances. Even when Dunfey (2019) defined social change as changes in human interactions and relationships that transform cultural and social institutions that result in social change movements, there was no mention of any such disastrous force leading to social change.

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Frankel (1978) talked about special conditions that lead to social change. De la Sablonnière (2017) talks about the typology of social change and indicated towards psychological threat that may lead to dramatic social change.

However, Davies (1962) did talk about social changes because of the environment giving reference to human-environment correlation; an increase in the number of people affects the environment and ultimately increases the impact of a natural disaster. Lumen, perhaps, did not take any cognizance of the health disaster of last centuries that caused massive destruction on the planet. Maclver and Page (1962) too describe “Social Change as a process responsive to changes in man-made conditions of life” that go beyond human control. Recently, in its note, the UN indicated that the Corona outbreak shall, although affect all segments of the population; would disproportionately impact the health and economic well-being of poor people. (Report of UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 06 April 2020)

Corona, discredited as the repeat of faded history of human disasters of the planet is yet another devastating health hazard that started from Wuhan city of Central China from the beginning of January 2020 and had already reached Thailand, Japan, South Korea, USA, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Vietnam, France, Nepal, Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Cambodia, Germany, Sri Lanka, Finland, and United Arab Emirates before the virus raised its head in India on January 30, 2020. By the time even the China administration realised the problem and its magnitude, it has gripped everybody, every race, every religion, and every region, mainly through the tourists and others who traveled for business or others who had come in contact with Corona infected people. People are more worried about the well-being of their children as it is human psychology that no matter how bad one suffers personally, the shiver comes with the realisation that ones own children may get a threat to their life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and finally, looking at its rapid spread across the globe, on 11 March 2020, the WHO declared it as a ‘Pandemic’. This news sent a severe to the whole world. In the beginning either people did not comprehend it or they did not take it seriously. In many countries, preventive care was not taken till it took a dangerous turn. In India, gravity came only with the call of Prime Minister of India for a Janata Curfew (Public Curfew), and the whole of India remained confined to their homes throughout the day. Respective state governments also started issuing advisories. State governments of Maharashtra had already declared shutdown of all non-essential services in Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune, and Chinchwad w.e.f. 21 March 2020.

Scientists got to know that people are getting impacted by Corona that is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or speaks. These droplets are too heavy to hang in the air. The only controlling factor for the disease is by using a mask to filter the droplets and by keeping a distance of 6 feet from another person in order to stop its spread. Although there were several myths about Corona like ‘it cannot survive when the temperature rises to 30 degree Celsius’, ‘it would not affect those who consume alcohol, and it affects women less severely.

### **International Horizon**

Much has been written on Corona, its medical properties and its therapeutic aspects, on employment, on agriculture loss, and overall economic impact. The paper discusses the social perspectives in the management of COVID-19 linking with different facades of social life. It is examined by segmenting the society and explaining how each segment experienced this first occurrence in their lives. It also touches upon the structure and the function of society. The paper deals mostly with the Indian situation, but extrapolate the social situations of other developed countries.

To start with, let us focus on the impact of the pandemic on the lives people in other countries. In Spain - one of the worst affected countries, both the rich and poor suffer equally. All go to the street under strict police vigilance and drone patrolling the streets to keep pedestrians at home and when they reach the departmental store, they may find that the shelves of toilet paper stocked up while the wine aisles are empty.

The young generation as well as the adults miss their plenty of kisses and hug which is customary form of greeting for male and female acquaintances who kiss each other, usually on both cheeks. Their eating with friends and legendary night lives is now a matter of past. Young women practice meditation and yoga to pass their time. One lady who used to run up and down the building’s stairs for exercise — a neighbor’s young daughter would sometimes cheer her on — now other tenants just put up a sign asking her to stop. They were so scared of Corona spread. Students are kept engaged by their teachers through online assignments. They are getting bored with this compulsory load and miss their classmates and school ambiance. It’s not that they did not opt for online modules or courses, but this was in addition to their other outdoor learning and activities. Now they have only this mode or television or mobile phone – too much of screen time that has led to put strain on eyes. Worst sufferers are over nine million people (nearly one-fifth) in Spain who are over 65 years of age and

advised not to come out of their homes. For their weekly requirements they depend on the public supply system that may not reach in time.

Italy was the first democracy to impose a lockdown. The Corona has impacted this unruly, freedom-loving Western society that is known for being noisy and who live their lives in public. Italy has a strong family tradition and the young Italians often live with their parents even when they are adults. In usual time they often have a family outing to bars, pizza restaurants, and evening spots which they miss the most. They especially missed the evening gatherings with friends either outside or inviting friends to home. Corona has made them discover a sense of containment. The younger generation is the most frustrated lot. Now they don't go to the cinema with friends and neither do they engage themselves in sports. They have to glue themselves to their TV screen and be busy with social media. The elderly population over 65 years, which is more than 20 percent of the total population, is enjoying their leisure watching television, listening to the radio, and reading newspapers. The Corona has made them stay at home and manage the household activities together.

As in most of the cases, in the beginning, Italians were also skeptical about the danger of Corona and mocked at appeals for social distancing. Some demanded to lift the lockdown, some had drink party with several people and thousands of Italians packed ski resorts. However, the mood changed when the death graph went up. But, when they became serious, they also demonstrated that democracies can be just as efficient as dictatorships (Mediatore Del Transferimento Technology). Italians, not normally known for their patience at queuing, have been lining up diligently in front of supermarkets, bakeries, and pharmacies, keeping a safe distance. Italians proved that they feel more responsible for everyone's well-being.

However, all has not taken it as easily as others. A group of people in Palermo loaded their shopping carts in a supermarket and refused to pay for their food at the checkout. The situation took dirty turn and Police were called to intervene.

When we focus on Iran, another badly affected country, we find the city of some nine million became a ghost town. The bus carries a single passenger, gloved and masked; a cyclist rides alone on a three-lane highway, and a young man plays guitar on a rooftop singing a cheerful tune to the barren construction site behind him (*Getaka News*, 2020). Only a few people on road, men covering their faces with face masks and women covering faces with dupatta or Niquaab, experiencing limitation, boredom, and distance in everyday life. Corona already changed their relationship with their surroundings.

The economy is restraining the working class to stay away from the workplace Bizaer (2020). A young lady from the lower middle class in Tehran city did not go to work for 45 days, but “with bills mounting, she made the difficult decision to return to work, when the restrictions were eased. She takes help from her colleague who picks her up in the morning to avoid public transport. For people like her who can’t live without an income, it is really hard to choose between making money and trying to stay safe. ...The Coronavirus epidemic has deepened the misery of the poor. Many have lost income due to the recession, and cannot afford hygiene items at skyrocketing prices to resist the disease.”

The Corona has impacted American society in many ways – from working to socialising, and their interaction in the gyms. Children missed their classmates and friends, graduating students missed enjoying much-awaited convocations—a lifelong happy memory. People canceled their birthday parties, medical conferences, and sending children to school. They feel like meeting people, hugging them, and greeting friends and colleagues but are constrained by advice to maintain physical distance and remained behind closed doors and sever connections with others. Many of them avoided going out of home for groceries or work. A study published by Pew Research Centre (2020, March 30) reports on how the American adults feel about the Corona impacting their social lives. The paper reported that 91% of the Americans are missing going to any party, 77 per cent of them do not go out to eat in a restaurant, 42% don’t feel like going to store for buying their provisions, and 38 per cent did not want to go to meet friends and relatives at their homes. Elderly residents of nursing homes missed family visits.

Some information has also been collected from other countries where the havoc of Corona is not much. The Australian population can be divided into three age groups; youngsters, adults, and senior citizens. It merits mention that in those countries, children above 18 years are usually expected to have a separate living. The restrictions due to Corona, this generation miss their going to school/college and their usual evening activities of visiting malls, bars, restaurants, and other public places. They also miss their common interest like horse riding, fishing, attending concerts, etc. Some millennials have opted to return to their parents’ homes instead of remaining in their apartments. They miss their dating and long drive. School closures and household isolation has put extra responsibility on parents to take care of children when they are at home most of the time – from the paid economy to self-help. Elderly people, who can manage their cleaning, cooking, and housekeeping, they cope up and others call social service centers for their supplies and help. This is the best time in Sweden when they

enjoy the weather. Swedes miss their usual sunbath outside their apartments and at the beachside. It is told that drinking beer has increased in Sweden after the corona as people have more time sitting at home and they pass their time looking outside from their window while enjoying their beer. They fear that this no movement situation continues for more time, it is going to affect their health.

Back home, we can also divide Indian society into three categories of the upper class, middle class, and lower class and further based on deep understanding can divide it into observable sub-categories. We also have to see them from urban and rural lenses where two distinct classes of farmers and labourers exist in rural India.

### **Urban Lives in India**

Oxfam (1917) has mentioned that one per cent of the Indian population is the super-rich who holds 73 per cent of the wealth generated. They are industrialists, the high places executives, or professionals. One can count their economic loss, but in terms of social disturbance, they are the least sufferers. Despite the fact that the staff or employees were operating from home, and did all possible transactions and coordination on the phone and/ or computer. They had enough space to move around and since their travels were restricted by law, their family got valued time to live together. Many of them had their domestic help residing in their villa and many others called them and provided a place to stay. Their supplies were uninterrupted. The aged population in these households who are still fit and used to go to family workplaces for an hour or so and as well attend social gatherings and functions are getting tired of sitting at home and initially started to complain. One of them got irritated – “Everybody tells to stay at home, what should I do sitting at home all the days”.

The salaried class - 23.7 per cent of the total employment in India, except those who were on emergency duties, were confined to home but they did not have to worry about their regular purchases and expenditures. Their needs were met by ATMs and banks, which operated with minimal staff. This class missed their social interaction in the workplace as well as in their neighbourhood. Even if they were inclined to interact, the other parties were skeptical and maintained distance. Tea parties and occasional pot lucks were missed. This category of people lived in two types of accommodation; those staying in independent houses have little better living than those staying in flats and high rising towers. They were confined to their homes. The discussion is not complete till we talk about a privileged category of urban salaried labourers who work as domestic support – maid-servants, drivers, gardeners, etc.

Another sub-set of this class has nearly 40.0 lakh people (2017 data) who are in direct employment in IT industries or who are forced to work from home using the IT platform. They are extremely uncomfortable as their workload has increased. On telephonic interviews, they were screaming that since human power is less they are getting more work from the company and they find it difficult to cope up along with the domestic work that they have to do themselves as their domestic support stopped coming due to Corona restrictions. Anybody coming from outside has to take care and wash their hands, anything that they get from outside has to be properly washed before it is consumed. One working IT couple mumbled – “honestly both of us do not know how to cook a proper meal. But now whatever we can and learn from YouTube, we prepare with limited supply. It so happens that we don’t like the food and try to blame each other. It sometimes leads to bitter discussion and strained relation, although it is temporary”. During their regular office days, they are mostly dependent on the canteen facilities they get in office and food packs, which often they pick up on their way back home or order it online. The other difficulty they face is the availability of advanced technology and the communication bandwidth that they were getting in their office set up. They say that if the lockdown continues for a month, it is going to affect their health – mental agony and back pain.

The students of senior classes and colleges is another sub-section. Those who were serious struggled with computer-based available materials and the homework that they get from school/college. However, many of them who were not very comfortable with computer-based learning had little difficult time coping with this. Others just used this as vacation.

The worst suffering at the household level was of the aged people. As per 2011 census, almost 15 million elderly Indians live all alone and close to three-fourth of them are women. If they are part of a larger family, someone else is taking care of the household affairs including purchases and they have to just provide supporting hands. However, in the urban areas there are many empty-nesters – the old couple staying alone and unable to take care of the household work or go out for purchase. By this age most of them had stopped driving themselves. They are lucky if their neighbours are kind enough to ask – if they can bring something for them and drop at their door. We can just imagine the type of adjustment they have to make for their living. Living with minimum requirements – minimum cooking, minimum food, no change of bedsheets for days and not having their towel changed every alternate day. It is a general observation in my colony and neighbourhood that many of the adults and oldies do not save regularly. Some of them started growing beard. Soon they were eagerly waiting for the barber’s shop to start functioning.

All these people suffer from social distancing stigma and feel depressed that they are not able to meet their near and dear ones, even in the events of joy or sorrow. Some marriages in the family have been postponed because important relatives could not make it and some have been solemnised in minimum possible ways. The real misery they felt when someone very close in the family passed away and they just could not be present there for their final rites. Reportedly the administration had been very kind, in many cases, making them feel the helplessness due to lockdown.

### **Rural Folk in India**

Let us shift our focus towards rural Indians which has 68.84 percent of its population (Census 2011) and 59 percent of its workforce that's dependent on agriculture (FAO, 2016), they are managing their farm, farmers themselves with part-time working for other farmers, and those who solely survive by working for others' farms. Recent urbanisation has polarised the resources in urban areas and agriculture did not get its pie; that farmers find it difficult to sustain their farming. The input-output ratio has reduced and many of them gave away agriculture. The second generation of farmer managers' families got educated and managed to shift to the urban areas, so this category is almost missing in rural India, except in states like Punjab and parts of Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, and sugar-growing areas of Maharashtra where modernisation of agriculture has taken place. The third component – the farm labourers always look for their livelihood outside and there is large migration to the urban areas. The government has initiated The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MANREGA) programme to give some assured employment to the labour. Corona has the least health impact on rural and tribal India as they aren't in contact with international and urban carriers so far. Still there is awareness created by the massive campaign and they are conscious about the hygiene and distancing factors. For them maintaining a distance will not be a problem as they live in open space. The poor who do not have space inside the house, most of them sleep in open.

### **The Indian Labour Force**

A sizeable number of population is at risk, i.e. the innumerable number of labourers who migrate for various durations in search of greener pasture. The migration happens from villages to towns, cities, and metros. There is no definite figure of daily wage and other contract labourers work in the factories, with construction companies, and work as domestic help. A large number of these labourers lost their jobs because of the lockdown – and hence, no income for them. An estimated figure from Delhi itself comes to approximately 30 lakhs.



Half of them stay in makeshift accommodations or slums wherein one room of 10x10 square feet space at least half a dozen of them stay together. The proximity is based on the village/area they come from. Similar is the situation in other major cities. For them there is no scope of their maintaining social distance.

The first blow to this category of people got when their employers sensed the impending Corona problem and asked them not to come to work, a couple of days before the lockdown was imposed. They started fleeing the city for their hometown – 100 to 2000 km of journey. Those who were from neighbouring districts or states, they could make it fast. Others made a beehive scene at the railway stations and bus stands. Mumbai started 17 special trains for the labourers for their far way placed.

This created problem for society as well as the administration. Since they were coming from Corona infected cities and were traveling in cramped public transport intimidating spread of the virus, the Chief Ministers of the receiving States started protesting against the cities allowing the labourers and others to travel to their hometown. They confessed that they did not have sufficient testing facilities and provisions of isolation for the people who are coming from different places and may carry the virus. This was a critical social dilemma for the receiving home states that they have to show their reluctance to receive their people.

The second kick in the teeth was the final lockdown, which closed the options of leaving the station – no train, no bus, no other means to travel. They were stranded. The respective governments and the socially concerned institutions and NGOs, and industries came forward with their social concerns. Some State governments offered funds to be transferred to their accounts and increased their ration supply. But there are a large number of them who are on daily wage and neither has a bank account nor a ration card. Cooked food and food ingredients were now being distributed to the people who had their income which served them hand to mouth and had nothing to eat. The number is huge and the efforts made were limited to certain localities with restrictions on people's movement. Many of the labour areas were poorly covered or not even covered.

The last nail on the coffin was accommodating them in makeshift camps (scope of social distancing at these places can be debated) and allowing them to sleep under the flyovers or wherever they could. As the days of lockdown passed by, many of them exhausted their means to survive. They also started to visit shelters providing free foods. The number started swelling and the resources with these benevolent organizations either started shrinking or remained constant.

Miss-managements should not be ruled out. Hunger broke the patience and these people started fighting for their survival, as a result of incidents that took place in Surat and Kashmiri Gate shelters in Delhi, in Aurangabad and a few more places didn't come as a shock! On telephonic conversation I was told that "the hunger-stricken people prefer going to jail where their food is assured and some space to sleep".

At the later stage when the lockdown prolonged and the supporting hands were constrained by their limited resources, this lot of labourers lost patience. There was a protest for managing their return to homestay, revolt against not allowing them to leave the containment zone, and march on foot to somehow reach their native place. They were people of no means and many of the villages/towns from where they were passing through, gave them food. Their horrifying stories were well covered by media. In a telephonic conversation, I tried to know why they are so adamant for returning to their native place and why did they decide to take up the hazardous journey of 500 to 1500 km being well aware that it was not an easy task. The author presents their argument and finds the social norm as the main considerations – "*Ghar mein baant boont kar kha lenge. Agar marana hee hai to ghar mein marenge, apno ke paas marenge*" (at our native place we will share with others whatever limited means we have. Even if we have to die out of hunger, we prefer to die at our place, will die where there are near and dear ones around). This sense of 'OWN' is deeply rooted in Indian social norms, especially among the communities from the eastern part of India.

### **Corona Control and Ground Realities**

Time and again it was reiterated that Corona can only be avoided by two simple steps; covering face with a mask or any safety means to protect the spread of the virus and keeping social distance from a probably infected person –since we aren't aware of whether one is infected or not, the distance maintained should be around six feet. Protecting spread through masking ones face is a practical solution, but the question that arises is; who can maintain this distance? The situation of Gulf countries is said to be neither better. Mumbai is the worst Corona affected city of India. It is known as the most densely populated city of India with 73,000 people per square mile. Other than population density, the city has 41.3 per cent of its population living in a slum, known as the world-famous slum of Dharavi is also part of Mumbai and it has a population of one million. It is also a city of large number of migrant labourers and Mumbai airport handles major international traffic too. With this demographic distribution, chances of Mumbai getting more affected are obvious.

When the news of Corona came to public knowledge the first impact was restricted travel. Most of the people avoided travel by public transport – air, train, bus, and others which were considered a risk. Meanwhile, there was enormous public pressure on the administration to allow the students as well as the labourers to go back to their respective places, a provision that would demand special arrangements and relaxation of the lockdown rules. The process started with Uttar Pradesh facilitating students to go back to their homes. Similar was the situation on the labourers' front. They also wanted to go back home and had staged a protest. From 01 May 2020, special trains were arranged for the labourers from different parts of the country to make them reach their home state/city safely. No one is sure how the clause of social distance would be maintained when 50+ people travel in one compartment with four toilets, the same doors, and the same pantry. But there isn't any immediate solution to this problem.

### **Looking Back at the Social Reality**

Even during the hike of the pandemic, Indians have not compromised on their usual social and cultural practices. This was apparent with Corona affected people belonging to one community deliberately defying the government norms for organizing some social gathering. Gathering for prayers, organisation of marriages, etc. have also been reported. There are unfortunate incidents of misbehaviour with health workers, aggressive attitude towards police and other government personnel, mishandling of cleaning staff, asking the vegetable vendors their caste/religion, denying medical facilities for specific group, etc. are some reflections of unfortunate social evils. Level of anxiety was equal among the essential service providers – the police and the health workers – as well as those serving at different centers.

At household level, those who did not know how to wash utensils started doing it themselves, never did car washing started doing all these and many other household chores. Shoba De (2020) rightly said that when you clean your toilet yourselves, the street of the posh colony is washed by residents themselves and each member taking care of their gardening and watering is a big social adjustment, if not change. People have realised the contribution of home-help and other services provided by other people on a daily basis and have learnt to be more polite to the people who are guarding their society, the lady who lifts the garbage, the boy who delivers water bottles. The jobs that seemed to be miniscule are no more miniscule, instead the ones that are the most important. It has made people realise that such jobs are more painstaking and filled with efforts.

## **Political Variances**

Many of the states run by other political parties, compelled by the social situation and fear of spreading the virus amongst their citizens, undertook their own course of action along with the Union Government's directives. Maharashtra did not announce lockdown but imposed total shutdown in four major cities of Maharashtra – Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune, and Chinchwad, effective from 20 March 2020, even before the Prime Minister asked for Janata Curfew from morning through the evening on 22 March 2020. The mood was more explicit when it came to extending the lockdown from 14 April 2020.

Many other Chief Ministers belonging to the ruling BJP or supporting BJP also had the same social pressure and had already expressed their views in public for a need to extend the lockdown. The PM held an online consultation meeting with the Chief Ministers and took two-three days to make this announcement, keeping in view the holistic situation. But, even before the Prime Minister made the formal announcement of an extension of lockdown on 14 April 2020, several States run by opposition parties namely Punjab, Maharashtra, Telangana, Delhi, West Bengal, Mizoram, and Puducherry (UT), had already announced the extension of lockdown till 30 April 2020. Even BJP ruled states as well as other states like Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Mizoram made their announcements. Similar viewpoints emerged when the Government of India was to extend the lockdown beyond 03 May 2020. This shows that although the situation created by Corona may result in many facets of social change at macro level, the social edifices would remain the same.

## **Conclusion**

There are many angles of studying the impact of COVID-19 and it would not be complete if the social angle is not covered. The problem has affected different layers of heterogeneity of societies all over. On a blanket statement we can say that it has affected the entire globe, but it has a differential bearing on each section and sub-section of the society. This disastrous health hazard has impacted the world economically, psychologically, and also has affected the social fabric—the main binding force to keep the community united. This virus has worried the vulnerable population not only because it could affect their health and well-being, but because through them it is a threat to their “own” (near and dear) people and they don't want them to suffer for no fault.

Different social strata have suffered differently; some did not get domestic support and others did not get daily supply; some wait to greet and meet their friends and others struggle to meet two square meals, social events gave a deserted look and on the other side huge crowds are protesting for their return

to home. Social realities are not only well reflected in the ground-level process of lockdown, but it is also reflected at the highest level of operation. At every stage the social frame and the norms are obvious. However, when it came to their survival, with each passing day, the cross-section of society ultimately wants to be closer to their near and dear ones who will be ready to share with them, whatever they have.

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