Feature Article

Social Distancing & Isolation (Quarantine) in Indian Custom and Culture

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"Every culture is valuable to that particular population largely for emotional and territorial reasons. But the significance of Indian culture is that it is a scientific process towards human liberation and well-being. No other culture has looked at a human being with as much depth and understanding as this culture has. No other culture has looked at it as a science and created methods to evolve a person into his ultimate nature."

– Sadhguru

Abstract

'Culture' is the true reflection of the total way of life of a given society. This profusely influences the health conditions of people living in a that society. An endeavor is made herein to analyses the Indian customs and culture vis-à-vis the social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine on the backdrop of the recent past crisis of coronavirus pandemic. It is believed, the post-COVID-19 world is going to be different, and people would pay more positive attention to the age old practices of social distancing and self-isolation. Mind of people must be open maximal conscientiously, though minimizing the physical contacts, at this time of contagion.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, Pandemic, Self-isolation, Tradition.

Introduction

Today, humankind is facing a truly unprecedented situation. The incredibly serious coronavirus, the deadly pandemic is affecting all of the families, the businesses, the communities, and the way of life. In order to combat and prevent, social distancing and quarantine/isolation has emerged as the most doable social practices in the current chaos of corona pandemic. The COVID-19 Pandemic around the globe has taken every human being seriously, bringing out the best and worst of human emotions – empathy, sympathy,

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kindness, culture, social behavior and cohesiveness under scanner, and scrupulous reflections. People needs understanding the corona both in scientific and the public way. In this context, this article attempts to compile comprehensively on such practices as age old traditions in Indian culture, with examples. Many may look as grey science, but that is what also undeniably a part and parcel of the way of life. It is believed that the post-COVID-19 world is going to be different.

The religious rites and rituals followed routinely at birth of an infant, during adolescence, at the age of puberty, on occasions of nuptial tieups, and at the death of a person. Indian society understands life, the interrelatedness between the society and its individuals; the intricate relationship between society and nature. Indian rituals may appear to many as if a set of meaningless acts of a supersitious community, but if analyzed in-depth, in perceptive angle, they are truly multi-dimesional expressions of set of symbolic actions manifesting how these culture is lived by the individuals of a society; and passed on from one generation to other that has shaped and strengthened the identity of its members as well as the society, inculcated in its ambit many acts of scrupulous and reason based themes, such as social distancing in terms of preventing communicable diseases.

Indian culture and traditions are well known across the world; often the religion is called *Sanatan Dharma* – an eternal way of living. People very well know and hail that the culture is diverse and unique, but often fails to recognize and understand the underlieing principles. Owing to its unique customs and traditions, which often seens quite intriguing, most of them originate from the age-old scriptures and texts, which have directed and modulated the life for thousands of years as described via fascinating traditions and customs [1], and listed here only relevant items to this topic, *viz.* Greetings, and few Religious Customs. Needless to cite, greetings such as *Namaste* is one of the most prevalent Indian custom, though it is not only limited to Indian territory. The *Namaskar* or *Namaste*, is amongst the five forms of customary greetings as cited in the *Vedas*. People mean to say 'May our minds meet' [1],

when people fold their palms and keeping before the chest. Mere physical contact is not important in terms of societal values, but reaching one's heart or mind is much more important. That is what following the principle of social distancing, conscientiously.

Eating with hands – a very common Indian tradition may not appeal to modern civilised class. However, it has its own merits. Fingers act as sensors, prevent one's mouth from burning when the hot food is ingested. Traditionally, left hand is considered to be contaminated thus avoided for eating. One must thoroughly wash his/her hands with soap and water before eating making the process more hygienic[1]. Eating with hands in India, definitely necessitates one to wash thoroughly, at least those many times, as one eats. Certainly hygienic practices are followed in ancient India, as evidenced by scriptures as *Sushruta Samhita*, suggesting a physician should take efforts to prevent diseases as much as curative remedial measures. Physical exercise and hygienic practices [2] are crucial preventive means.

Methodology/Procedure of issue approach
Literature collection and compilation under this study included assemblage of data/information from various sources viz., digital library mostly, databases, online portals, podcast published online, personal experiences, direct field observation and internet browsing.

Defining the terms
Social Distancing
This is an act of keeping social (better say physical) contact to a bare minimum to preemptively minimize the spread of a communicable disease, by means of staying safe indoor (=home) as much as possible, avoiding crowds, public places, transport. This is different from quarantine or isolation. The term 'social distancing' was coined Robert Park in 1920s. Social distancing is not a new concept, doesnot mean only frequent washing of one's hands, ironically which is the most advised one thesedays [3].

Protective sequestration, in public heath language, is social distancing measures adopted to protect still a healthy population from an epidemic

before the infection reaches the population. It is sometimes, referred as reverse quarantine or reverse *'cordon sanitaire'*. This is typically considered under exceptional circumstances where implementation and enforcement are feasible practically. Voluntary compliances of the sequestered population is of prime importance. Thus, when such practices are inculcated in cultural practices, obviously yields better and long-term effects.

Quarantine

It is a restriction on the movement of goods and people in order to the spread of pests and diseases. It may include communicable diseases, but lacks confirmed medical or clinical diagnosis. Being different from medical isolation, this implies confirmed case of an infection with a contagious disease, as has been isolated from the healthy or uninfected population. Known since the biblical times, this can be traced from history. Noteworthy quarantine examples in modern history *viz.*, plague village Eyam (1665) during bubonic plague in England, East Samoa during 1918 Flu pandemic, Yugoslav smallpox outbreak in 1972; and of course the recent COVID-19 Global Pandemic. The purview of this article is not to enlist those events, but to trace out the common practices as prevailed in Indian culture relevant to social distancing and quarantine.

Seclusion is the act of isolating from society. It inludes the state of being secluded, or a place that facilitates it (= secluded place).

In quarantine, people potentially exposed to a contagious disease are separated with restriction on their movement to ascertain if they become ill later on. This reduces the risk of them infecting other healthy individuals. Thus the definition differs from isolation, which is the separation of people who have been diagnosed with a contagious disease from people who are not sick; but, these two terms quite often are used interchangeably. The term 'quarantine' was first used in 1127 (Venice, Italy) with regards to leprosy and was widely used in response to the Black Death. After a long gap of three centuries, UK properly implement quarantines in case of pandemic plagues. Latest, quarantine has been used in the coronavirus outbreak. This outbreak witnessed entire cities in China effectively under the mass quarantine. Thousands of foreign nationals returning home from China were subjected to self-isolate at their residence or in the state-run facilities. There are precedents for such measures, such as the city-wide quarantines imposed in China and Canada during the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Likewise, entire villages in some West African nations were quarantined during the 2014 Ebola outbreak [4].

Eventhough, 'quarantine' and 'isolation' are used interchangeably, they differ in meanings in public health domain. The former term, Quarantine is to separate and restrict the movement of individuals (also plants or plant parts in agriculture), those have been exposed to infectious disease, but not yet known to be sick or ill. Isolation is a complete separation from others of an individual reasonably believed to be infected with such communicable diseases.

Discussion on Literature

Containment strategy in community

'Social distancing' can be traced back to at least the fifth century BC [5]. The biblical book of Leviticus cites such measures in leprosy. Jewish writings also support this aspect. Rabbinic literature prior to the advent of germ theory, did not recognize the origin of contagious diseases, however did cite there was knowledge social isolation in preventing their transmission. The Indian culture also witnessed this self isolation for leprosy patients. Indian texts, the *Laws of Manu* (1500 BC), the *Atharava Veda* (circa 2000 BC) mentioned various skin diseases like leprosy. The Laws prohibited contact with leprosy patients and punished those who married into such families, thus ostracizing those with the disease for their past sins [6]. In India, there are around 800 leprosy colonies – the secluded places.

Tracing to Indian Culture and Religion

Since the oldest of days, man has known many contagious diseases which threatened his very existence and his civilization. The people of India, through use of a combination of indigenous science and medicine, have combated and contained such diseases. In olden days, a greater percentage of the population lived in rural areas. These rural

people used cow dung to ward off diseases. The dung was mixed with water and splashed outside the house. Cultural designs were inscribed on this mixture with chalk powder, called *muggus* or *kolams*. These measures reduced the incursion of harmful microorganisms into the house, thus minimizing the spread of diseases. The rural people were quite careful regarding their protective measures against contagions. On the contrary, in the current era of concrete jungles, with cemented structures and roads, the use of cow dung in mud roads or houses has reduced substantially. This has made people vulnerable to diseases, eliminating a vital protective layer earlier offered by cow dung, resulting in no impediment to the contagions' incursions into the houses. However, inclusion of materialistic (cow dung, herbs, botanicals etc.) are beyond the scope of this article.

The sacred scriptures have mentioned that people have always been moving from one place to another, visiting other people in their homes. Earlier, before entering the house, people used to wash their hands, feet and faces with water which was kept outside. These basic measures of cleanliness proved effective in limiting the access of germs, and the diseases they carried to the house. Therefore, the diseases did not spread to other people in the house [7]. Unfortunately, the modern era has drawn an end to such good practices through the so-called 'forward-thinking'. These days, the moment people enter the house is accompanied by hugs and handshakes. Although these are basic etiquettes which display friendliness, the elders never practiced such things. What they did was greet other with a *Namaste*, also standing some feet apart, thereby also preventing the spread of respiratory diseases to some extent. They did not compromise on sociability – they used to be friendly and talk with everyone, all the while maintaining a safe distance. The combination of the practices of cleansing their selves and maintaining a safe distance ensured a curb on the spread of communicable diseases in traditional India. People have stopped following these good practices in their zeal to blend in with the 'modern' Western world, which, according to them, has a superior culture [7].

If a particular household was stricken with disease, then people used to avoid visiting them until they recovered from the disease. This form of social distancing also put effective curbs on the spread of harmful pathogens. For example, if an individual is afflicted with small pox, they were kept in isolation for a minimum of twelve days, during which time neither members of their family nor outsiders would visit them. This is also a form of contagion-checking quarantine in ancient India, [7]. Also prevalent was the practice of treating one's own home like a temple. Although modernists might find this practice unscientific, the custom led to the habit of not wearing footwear in houses. This greatly reduced the possibility of a germ invasion. Deep scientific reflection has also revealed that this practice also helps in reducing the spread of diseases. In the olden days, they used to say that when someone dies, there is a high probability that someone else might also die. They said that when someone dies, there is a chance that the dead body might still carry harmful microbes which may pass on to a healthy person. Here again, outsiders are seen maintaining a period of social distancing from the mourning family for twelve days to avoid contamination. The custom of burning the dead body also eliminates any pathogens or germs which might be dwelling in the corpse after death. This custom was also prevalent in ancient India and also contributed to reducing the spread of diseases. According to them, burial of dead bodies does not contribute to stopping the spread of contagions [7].

Home Quarantine/Isolation in Odia culture
Lord Jagannath of world famous Puri temple, quarantines himself for 14 days before the annual Rath Yatra. The annual ritual called "Anasara" (isolation) for 2-weeks, as part of which Lord Jagannath stays away from the public. According to mythology, the Lord developed a fever after brisk bathing on Snan Purnima day and fell ill. Thereafter, the deities, Lord Balabhadra, Devi Subhadra and Lord Jagannath, were taken to "Anasar Ghar" (isolation ward) where they underwent treatment and recovered after 14 days. The "Anasar" ritual of Lord Jagannath is an integrated part of the Odia culture and tradition. As quoted in *Madala Panji*, the temple almanac that the Lord had faced at least 22 lockdowns

in events of attacks by invaders to the temple. The *Madala Panji*, since 12th century, it is a chronicle of the Jagannath Temple (Puri, Odisha). It narrates the historical events of Odisha related to Jagannath and the Jagannatha Temple. According to Shree Jagannath Temple history, the Lord has remained in isolation on different occasions (a total period of 170 years), as claimed by Bhaskar Mishra, a researcher in Jagannath culture. After 1736, the doors of the temple were closed for the devotees in March 2020 on account of COVID-19 lockdown. Odisha government banned of visitors' entry to this sacred shrine in an attempt to stop the spread of coronavirus [**8**].

In a recent study, Brook et al. [**9**] made a rapid review of the psychological impact of quarantine taking 3166 papers primarily but narrowed down to 24 relevant papers in the review. Herein, negative psychological effects inclusive of naratives on post-traumatic stress, anger and confusion were cited. Stressors included longer quarantine duration, infection fears, inadequate supplies, inadequate information; the resultant frustration, boredom, financial loss, and also the stigma. Some researchers have apprehended long-lasting effects. They explained the public on the benefits of quarantine to wider society for a larger cause.

Groomed in an orthodox Brahmin family, during 1970 to 1990s, senior author himself eye-witnessed and experienced personally many quarantine/isolation measures in day to day life as well as in special cases of communicable disease infection times. While in the age of around ten, this author and his two-year elder sister fell ill from measles, and both of them were quarantined/isolated in a separate room, all the usable items were separated and this includes as those items now the government as per modern science is avoiding. The Indian Ministry of Health & Family Welfare [**10**] guideline is to avoid strictly the sharing of household items such as drinking glasses, dishes, cups, utensils, towels, bedding, or other such items with other people at home. In Orissa, smallpox, along with many other diseases, is referred to most colloquially and most often as 'Mother' or as 'Thakurani' i.e. Goddess. In Tamil, it is 'Mariamman' [**11**]. During infection, neem leaves/twigs were placed besides the bed. After getting well, people were bathed with turmeric water. I vividly remember, the customs of the home, being inspected strictly by my mother. People were supposed to wash and clean the hands and legs thoroughly, put off the outside dresses (not allowed inside home). Even, indoor people were changing clothes if going to toilets. The kitchen room was maintained with utmost sanctity, people were only allowed to enter the kitchen, after bath; and not allowed to touch kitchen room items. Mother used to wear a separate cotton saree, during cooking. Such practices are very common in higher castes across the length and breadth of country. All such instances are examples of physical distancing, inculcated in day-to-day activity in the life. It is a common practice that, after death of someone in a family, the entire family was kept in self-isolation. Family members were treated as if untouchables, not allowed going outside home. Outsiders were visiting the bereaved family only after 12 days of death. The reason is definitely here upon sound scientific footings. However, there is no attempt herein to glorify the custom and culture only. Sometimes, after specific days, people are supposed to take bath, change the sacred threads (in Brahmin caste), to make them pious, even though they have not visited the bereaved family and got the news only. This act is of course, blind belief and superstition.

Washing away stigma and isolation

Informing communities about the scientific reality of any communicable disease is the need of the hour. Certainly, conscientiously following the guidance of scientists, governments, and other authorities will help people to remain calm, caring, and safe at this challenging time. While knowledge and education might sound very basic, this tool is a silver bullet in eradicating the COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

- Public health and ethics in any community focused more on practices and particular cases than theory, resultantly some concepts (many times people call them believes?), methods and boundaries remain largely undefined. Public health is primarily concerned with the health of an entire population, rather than only for an individual. Inclusive is the promotion of

health care through prevention of diseases and disability.

- The definition as adopted [**12**] by World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) for *Traditional Knowledge* is "knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity." The Indian customs and cultural practices relevant to social distancing and quarantine/isolation, in this time of pandemic is worth reflecting and can be followed judiciously.

- Despite the rich culture in this aspect, ironically enough, and regrettably some filthy practices in the commonplaces, such as spitting *paan* stains and phlegm are part of the public property decor. People couldn't get literature on plague, another pandemic that the globe has witnessed multiple times in past. The carrier rat is rather revered in Indian traditions, as *Vahana of Ganesh*, dedicated Karni Mata temple [**13**] in South India. Public must be aware of the potential contagious diseases from rodents as well. Like Covid-19, leprosy is a disease that often results in isolation of patients. As leprosy is a mildly infectious bacterial disease, this isolation is often devastating and often unwarranted. The Leprosy Mission has continued to reduce this stigma relentlessly. Indian customs and culture has shown hatred to lepers, which should not be extended to COVID patients. Covid-19 is a highly contagious viral disease, in contrast leprosy is a mildly infectious to which 95% of the world population is immune. Although the two are very different scientifically, the social consequences stay almost parallel as isolation is the issue [**14**].

- Many good practices, the intellectuals thrust upon the common public, to strictly follow on religion lines, rather than accepting them on reasoning. May be, this was then an easily way to make the ignorant public adopt these practices in their common life. Time is ripe now, to make the public aware of these facts, to their benefit. There is utter need to reverse the clock and turn to the practices of yore to

defend ourselves against diseases. This can be done by following the *Shastras*, *Puranas*, *Vedas* and indigenous medicine and science. This is necessary to lead a better life, free from the curse of diseases.

Public must learn that, quarantine and isolation are not a matter of shame, rather an act of responsible citizen, for the sake of society and societal benevolence. Last couple of days, in the current crisis of corona, the buzz words are social distancing and quarantine. If some suggestions are to be believed, in the post-Covid world, working with social distancing might just become the new norm. Probably a good place to start is to rephrase "social distancing" term to a more accurate "spatial distancing" or "physical distancing." Though one maintains social distancing in time of contagion [**15**]; but must be mentally or socially close to each other, this should be the mass motivating *mantra*. Social distancing can effectively used as a mean of prevention, as rightly narrated as *Ramvan* by Indian Prime Minister Modiji.

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