EXPERIENCING THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CORONA CULTURE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Kundan Ghosh¹ * and Arindam Dasgupta²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Mahishadal Girls’ College, Rangibasan, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India
²Guest Lecturer, Department of Zoology, Vivekananda College for Women, Barisha, West Bengal, India

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2020.1106.5377

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT
Corona pandemic and the process of lockdown are affecting the individual not only at the personal level but also at the level of community, society at large. The present paper deals with various emerging issues - paradigm shift in education during COVID period, fear of the unknown, stigmatization of COVID-19 and cultural continuation with positive ideas. The present endeavour tried to interpret the importance of various aspects during lockdown phase like role of family, connectedness among the group members, technological dependency and crisis management. Both the authors try to portray their own experiences and understandings during the emergence of new Corona culture.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 originated in Wuhan city of China, has spread rapidly all over the world within a short period of time. The World Health Organization declared this epidemic a pandemic. The spread of corona virus has changed the entire geo-political and socio-economic scenario of the entire world. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the whole country has been in lockdown since 25th March, 2020 and when the authors write this article, it has completed 80 days of lockdown. In India, public health experts, government officials, hospitals are taking numerous measures, like social distancing, use of masks, self-isolation or quarantine, strengthening health facilities to control the disease, and asking people to work from home (Bedford, 2020). In West Bengal by the third week of March, 2020, state government started to shut down all the public places including educational institutions to avoid mass gathering. The process of lockdown is affecting the individual not only at the personal level but also at the level of community, society at large. Due to this long-term lockdown a ‘new normal’ life style is emerging among the Indian population. The great lockdown brings different types of shock- social shock, economic shock and health shock. Under this background authors try to understand the changes that are emerging on individual and society during this Corona period.

OBJECTIVES
The present submission tries to understand three major questions- What are the paradigm shift in education during COVID period? What are the major changes emerging in the social structure as well as within culture? How people have responded to it?

METHODOLOGY
This study is based purely on interview method, observation method and self - experiences of present authors. During lockdown period, both the authors experience their own families and their surrounding areas to gather information and then transformed them into the emerging themes. Both the authors live in urban areas of Kolkata and belong to middle class families, so most of the time in this article reflects the emerging experiences of that specific section.

*Corresponding author: Kundan Ghosh
Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Mahishadal Girls’ College, Rangibasan, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India
Major Experiences and Emerging Themes

Being a teacher - experiencing paradigm shift in education

The pandemic of corona virus has changed the entire geopolitical scenario of the entire world. The massive effect spans from household to global changes, from micro to macro and education system received a high jolt on the face. All the schools, colleges and institutes obviously remain closed during the lockdown as the concerned people comprise the youth which forms the backbone of any society, so government cannot take a chance with children and youth-the so called pre-reproductive of ecological age pyramid. And education must go on. Traditional black board, chalk and talk method are not possible due to lockdown in educational institutions. There is a need for change in teaching learning style and methods. But the platforms are not yet there to serve millions of students effectively. Unlike western countries, in India online education is still a new born baby but we needed a self-sufficient adult. The gap is huge and so we needed a makeshift arrangement. The situation led us into some alterations in the field of education to cope with the present situation. Teachers and students participated in class through various online apps like Zoom cloud meetings, Cisco Webex meetings, Google classroom, Skype and so on. The class room has become a new concept, i.e. on-line classroom. But the platforms which most of our schools and colleges chose were actually teaching platforms, not teaching. So technically although it was possible to take classes but the effectiveness remains a big area of concern. Take the example of regular exams. It is not possible for any teacher to take tests on any subject on these existing platforms. You cannot prevent cheating. Even laboratory test and practical classes are not possible to conduct on these platforms. Next was the connectivity issue. Even in urban cities like Kolkata internet connections do not remain stable throughout, so think about the rural areas where smart phones, laptops and even internet is a luxury which most of the people cannot afford. To them the trade-off is between surviving corona and education. Needless to say, they chose the former. So, the overall coverage of education is not uniform throughout any region. Most of the urban schools, in the name of education, continued their teaching on those platforms. The effectiveness cannot be measured. Even the schools started taking extracurricular like drawing, chess, dance etc. online. Even yoga and outdoor game trainings continued online. Clearly, we can understand the straight forward economical motives behind all these. Varieties of other practical problems arose amidst online teaching and it was not even three months. Second author, let me share some personal experiences. Now, students are appearing on two classes simultaneously. Students are always smarter than teachers or in other words they are technologically more literate than us. So, they came up with novel ideas to save time and energy. They take admission in two online classes at the same time and according to their choice or preference they opt to remain present in one class and they simply record the other class and play that recorded class as per their ease. Most of the teachers remain unaware of this very fact. Another practical and dangerous problem that I heard many of my teacher friends complaining about is the circulation of their classes, recorded by the students, to various other students and also to other teachers. This is a serious issue that is very challenging to tackle under this present scenario.

Circulation of notes and study materials were a common practice among students for very long time but now even the teaching style and methodologies of a particular teacher cannot be protected. Nobody was prepared for such an enormous paradigm shift in such a small span of time. Needless to say, the teachers were not ready for that and we all feel helpless because the remedy is not yet ready. Even many teachers began criticizing the teachings of other teachers for some well understood motives. We have already mentioned that whatever platform we were using during lockdown were not proper teaching platforms but a mere meeting platform which we were using because of lack of proper options.

Based on accessibility of high-speed internet connection and student strength, some teachers of rural parts are also conducting classes by creating WhatsApp groups and through video conferencing. As college teachers, each author takes classes on Zoom meeting app and forwarding all class materials to semester wise students through WhatsApp group created by our department. We observed that during online classes ambience of physical class room environment is missing. In physical class room interaction is more prominent, teacher's appearance and gestures create an impact on students. Sometime physical absence of peers also demotivated students to attend the class. Authors felt that it is difficult to control a large number of students on online platform because students join the class and leave the class as their will, which is restricted in physical class room. One more thing we noticed is that feedback system is lacking as many students are not vocal about their doubt, sometimes it demotivates and dissatisfies us. It is noticed that attending online classes remain a dream for thousands of students who lived in remote rural part of our country, where high speed internet is unavailable and due to socio-economic condition of their families, they do not have any android set to participate successfully. So, online mode of education satisfied the demand a large section of students but also deprived a small section of students. It creates social inequality as well as digital inequality. This kind of limited resources lead to egoistic deprivation among the learners.

Sudden lockdown creates some psychological problem and crisis to the students. To overcome the situation teachers and academicians try to make alternative innovation in the field of education. Different academic institutions organized webinars related to present situation and how to cope up with the present crisis on Cisco webex, Google meet and so on. Some organized free seminars, workshops, Faculty Development Programmes for teachers etc. At present, topics of webinar are not only restricted on COVID situation but also cover diverse topics including research methodology, museum studies, anthropological theories and so on. As faculty members, the authors also participated on few. Though, sometimes they are not free from technological glitches like internet connection issues, seat limitations for the participants and so on. With changing demands few organizations started business by organizing paid webinars or webinars. To adopt this format both teachers and students need appreciable changes in their mindset.

So, in order to solve these problems, we need more and more dedicated teaching platforms which can solve, most if not all, these problems. Proper orientation is necessary for the teachers, students and parents on using e-platforms. Besides, emphasis should be given on the preparation of e-material resources and
develop an appropriate assessment mechanism. We need to be ready for the next pandemic. Lastly, a major problem is the teacher-student face-to-face connectedness that we are so used to till now. But this dramatic shift in the field of education is making us, as well as the students/guardians think about a gradual shift to an online based teaching. May be COVID has paved the path and silently made the announcement to an online based educational society. Definitely it will take time but it’s on the cards. This psychological shift has forced every one of us to think differently, at least. As we know, necessity is the mother of invention and adaptation is the result of evolution. So, the quicker we adapt, the greater is our chance for survival.

**Fear of the unknown**

It is observed that there is confusion, anxiety and fear among the common people regarding COVID. New kind of social construction of body emerged now. Now body is seen as a matter of fear. It reached its peak during the pandemic. Authors observed that when somebody coughs around you, it automatically spreads some anxiety and fear among other people. Everybody tries to avoid physical contact with strangers such as handshakes etc and maintain physical distancing. It leads to more disciplined life style and make people more conscious about personal health and hygiene by using masks, sanitizers etc. Nowadays, first author’s mother brings dettol water and sanitizers every time he came from market or outside and then forced him to take bath. Fear of contamination lead to a new type of awareness.

Next point of discussion is how dead bodies are treated now? How is death constructed in new social construction? Corona virus even changed the death ritual performances. Funeral rites after the death of a person affected with COVID are also under threat now. If a person dies due to COVID-19, the body is handed over in a restricted manner to the family members. In some cases, the families are even not willing to accept the bodies of corona patients as the contamination level and chances of infection is very high if not handled with care. In those cases, administrative bodies arrange for the cremation of all those unclaimed bodies. Even, outside the graveyard and cremation ground common mass gathering is restricted as there are chances for the virus to spread. There is restriction on mass gathering in all kind of social ceremonies. In case of obituary and condolence relatives of death person do not want any gathering for pray. Death rituals also are in question due to some fear.

**Stigmatization of COVID-19**

According to Unicef, WHO and IFRC guideline, “the level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors: 1) it is a disease that’s new and for which there are still many unknowns, 2) we are often afraid of the unknown, and 3) it is easy to associate that fear with ‘others’.” (www.unicef.org) Social stigma in health is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. This people are labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated, isolated and experience loss of status because of a link with a disease. Stigma can drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination. It is observed that most of the cases people are not willing to go for test because of this stigma and fear of isolation from family and society. Then neighbours and administrative authorities have to take initiative to send them for medical test. Even those section of people who work from the front in this crisis time, are also stigmatized by others. This section of people includes doctors, front line health workers, nurses and policeman. The neighboring residents most of the time think that as these section of people deals with COVID patients all-time; they may have high chances to spread this communicable disease. Then they discriminated them socially. Ranu Mondal, a nurse working at a private hospital said that, “I live in a rented house with my mother since last four years. My relationship with my landlord is good. But things changed when corona pandemic spread out. They look at me differently when I came back from my duties; even they stopped looking at my face and never asked for any help. Even local shop owners misbehaved with my mother when she goes there to collect some grocery materials”. It reached at such an extreme level that Government started advertisements to build up consciousness among common people- ‘Our health has always been their priority do so do not stigmatize our healthcare workers.’ This kind of stigmatization affects the treatment process as well as their family and community at large. Even recently, first author was informed by the villagers of his ancestral house at a remote village in North 24 pargana district, West Bengal, that stigmatization was also imposed in case of migrant labourers. Labourers are stigmatized by their own village people, when after a long time they return, even when they don’t carry any Corona symptoms. Sometimes agitation and restrictions were imposed on them from entering their own villages.

**Cultural continuation with positive ideas**

We learnt some valuable lessons from this pandemic and about its crisis period management. New Corona culture is emerging. It lead to a disciplined life style and create more consciousness about health care. Now we are gradually adapted with some new kinds of behavioural changes like maintaining of social distancing, using of mask outside the house, sanitizing hands frequently and so on. There were no shopping, no mall hopping, no late night parties, no eating out at your favourite restaurants. We think we not only changed from outside but our system also changed from inside. Our feeding habits changed, now we thrive on homemade food. Our high dependency on street food reduced to a considerable extent. Even we are taking in less pollutants. We, personally, feel detoxified. Traditional food with medicinal values are reintroduced in our daily meal pattern to build more immune power. So, the lockdown overall has many health benefits if we can maintain the necessary awareness to prevent the disease from spreading.

**Strengthened family relationship**

It has a strong impact on our social structure as well. This pandemic strengthened our kinship bonding and increased solidarity. Dimensions of social role and status also changed to some extent. According to my daughter, lockdown is not good. She said, it’s been a long time since I played with my dada and Mouli (neighbour’s son and daughter), when can I again go to their place? In the absence of school and outdoor play, she is constantly praying for the end of this lockdown. But the positive thing is that we can spend quality time with our children and other family members. First author added, now it is possible for me to lend a helping hand to domestic works which was not possible in other times due to busy schedule.
Beside I can spend quality time with family members. My daughter now can spend some extra time with me, playing Ludo and other indoor games. Besides my role as a father, now I am playing the role of teacher as well. Previously her mother helped her with her studies but now she prepares her lessons with my help too.

Family is a social group and basic unit of society. Restriction like “Stay home, stay safe” actually brought us together within our families. Now we can have lunch and dinner together, we can start that conversation that was so long due. Second author, I personally saw my son growing up tremendously in front of my eyes within these three months. Now, I can spare time playing with him and discover so many traits which got overlooked during my normal busy schedule. People now started enjoying the small things in life. We observed that lockdown period also brought an opportunity for the new generation to witness epic mythologies like Ramayana and Mahabharata on Doordarshan, broadcasted again by Ministry of Cultural affairs, Govt. of India. Older generation in the family also get an opportunity to share their fond memories with these telecasts.

Expression of individuality

The COVID lockdown gave us panic, fear, awareness but the most valuable thing it offered mankind is time. Now, it’s time to showcase our innate, hidden talents. Most of the people started nurturing their long-forgotten passion once again. Some became a master chef, some author, some poet, some painter and so on. The effect of social media also played a key role by constantly injecting peer pressure to highlight their own talents to the world. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram is loaded with millions of posts about ‘look what am I doing’ and made sure that nobody is left behind. Amidst the great pandemic continued the self-proclamation.

Corona period revived individuality also. Lockdown and home stay create an opportunity for some people to express his or her personal skills and hobbies. Due to lack of time many people discontinued their hobbies half way in life, but now as they got some extra time, they revived their personal skills like drawing, dancing, singing and so on. First author said, my wife is a home maker, she gets lots of free time after completing domestic work as my daughter’s school and my college is closed now. So, to utilize this extra time productively she started writing short stories and after completing some she uploaded it on some social media sites. Thus, her inner qualities can find expression and her productive energies can be channelized properly now. She also got appreciated by others.

Emergence of new type of connectedness

We are meant for social bonding through physical interactions, that’s how we had evolved as humans for millions of years by sharing and cooperating. Human cannot live without connectedness- if such isolation continues then it will be a punishment. Connectedness provides more psychological strength to human. During this lockdown period they could only remain connected through different social media platforms by using Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom meeting app, video calling and other mediums with their relatives and friends. Emergence of new type of media connection is observed. Even the neighbours now know the name of each other. The social bonding increased during social distancing. May be they are not visiting each other’s place but the chit chat across the varandas and rooftop is also a rare sight before the lockdown. Telephonic conversations with the close and distant relatives and friends also increased considerably during the lockdown. People are constantly sharing all types of news with the near and dear ones with whom may be they were disconnected for years. Through social media we connected with our primary and secondary group members. Both the author experiences that connectedness with their colleague, students, teachers, relatives, friends help them to motivate in work, decrease anxiety and lower the stress level during this crisis period.

But there is hind sight also. Some people are becoming more and more addicted to social media, Netflix etc. They are constantly surfing the net and wasting too much time on these unproductive behaviours. They remain continuously hooked to web series, dramas, movies etc that affect their productivity, attention and mental faculties. Remaining together, they remain disconnected within family.

Emergence of new kind of technology dependency

Beside online teaching, now monetary transactions are also made online through net banking, paytm, Google pay and so on. Technology dependency even for the technologically illiterate persons is a remarkable finding during this crisis period. First author’s uncle has an ATM card facility but he never used it for withdrawal of money from pension account. But due to changed banking timings and to maintain physical distancing, he used the card for the first time. First author always paid electric bill at nearby counter and collect the receipt issued. Previously the authors thought offline mode is simpler and better than online mode of payment. But as there are no other options now, the authors now submit the bills through e-payments. This proves that we are slaves of situational demands. We can adapt to any circumstances irrespective of age, literacy, gender, caste and creed. We are more adaptable than we might think we can. Proper situations bring the proper response in all of us.

Economic crisis and micro management

Economy wise we may be heading towards another great recession. There are already job cuts, salary cuts everywhere. During lock down, work from home was the new culture everywhere, introduced by both Govt. and private sectors. First author’s sister work in a multinational company in Kolkata. She said, my office was closed since the first day of lock down but immediately my office instructed all the employees to continue working from home. So, I am doing all my work from home on the laptop with high speed internet connection ever since. First month I got full salary, but from next month onward there was a 20% reduction of my salary as my company claimed to have incur losses in this period. I have to adjust with this change, it is better than to loss the job. So, most of us are not in a position to spend money for pleasure and luxury anymore. Even if they have money, they don’t have the means to spend them. That is perhaps the biggest irony of COVID-19. Now money is spent for need, not for greed. People now understand micro economics. They now learnt living in a stipulated budget. Importance of small local shops increased more than larger retail shops and malls. First author narrates, never did we bought vegetables and fishes from
mobile sellers who came in front of our house every day morning, instead we bought it from larger markets like Sakher Bazar and Bakultala, Kolkata. My father is of the opinion that those mobile vendors always charge more price than normal, larger markets but now due to lockdown we purchase most of our vegetables, fishes etc. from them. Dependency on neighbouring shops for daily shopping also increased.

CONCLUSION

The present study reflects the impact Coronavirus had on the education sector, daily life style and different cultural aspects. May be the effects of Corona pandemic will continue for long time with us. Now it’s time to create blue prints for new systems and think as how to reconstruct our society? It is very difficult and time-consuming process, because of our large scale of society. Contextually all the scenarios are different. But with the collective will force and empathy we will be able to reconstruct our society.

As we already addressed that both the authors represent a particular section of class, so their own experiences reflect partially of this section. Though condition and suffering also differ from within the same class people and share same geographical territory. This experience leads to a scope for further research in the context. Now our biggest concern is what will happen when things become normal again. Will we forget all these positive traits that we nurtured during the lockdown period? Will we again join the rat race? Will our subtle feelings die? Will we again distance ourselves from society? Will we forget micro-management? Will we stop being empathic towards others? And most importantly, will we stop being human again? These questions will be self-anwered at the right time and at the right moment. For now, we need to survive.

References


How to cite this article:


*******