

COVID-19: THE PRACTICE OF UNTOUCHABILITY DUE TO STIGMATIZATION

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Abstract: *Humanity today is facing one of the biggest challenges of the century. The novel coronavirus is spreading rapidly to the extent of being declared as a pandemic across the world. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns for everyone across the globe. People are in dismay for what is happening with them and at the same time are disturbed to see the conditions of others, particularly the marginalized. There is a sudden shift in people's daily routines. Apart from the fears, anxiety, and sadness, people's sense of irritability has started piling up. Amid such a deranged spread of COVID-19, one of the important concerns that are even more deleterious than all the above highlighted negative impacts and needs to be urgently attended to be stigmatization associated with the pandemic. The research paper would like to explore the Practice of untouchability due to stigmatization during COVID-19.*

Key Words: *COVID-19, COVID-19 and practice of untouchability*

Objective:

To know the practice of untouchability during COVID-19

Research Methodology:

The present paper is based on secondary data, literature and discussion with experts.

Concept:

Untouchability is a curse to the social fabric of secular India. Untouchability in simple terms can be understood as a practice whereby a particular class or caste of persons are discriminated against on the ground of their being born in that particular caste or on the ground of their being members of those social groups involved in menial jobs. The discrimination can be in the form of physical or social boycott from society. For instance, the members of so-called higher castes such as Brahmin, Kshatriyas, etc. would not dine or sit with a person of lower. It was believed that people of higher castes could become impure even if a shadow of an untouchable person touches him and to re-gain his purity he had to take a dip into the holy waters of the Ganga.

Covid-19: Concept of practicing untouchability:

During the pandemic, COVID-19 untouchability was practiced in society. Corona Affected families or people discriminated against on the ground of COVID-19. The discrimination can be in the form of physical or social boycotts. Corona affected persons were treated as untouchables. Untouchability like prohibited from eating, sitting, social gathering with each other.

Social distancing:

The practice of social distancing means staying home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The practice of social distancing encourages the use of things such as online video and phone communication instead of in-person contact.

Physical Distancing:

Physical distancing is the practice of staying at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching a disease such as COVID-19.

As noted above, “social distancing” is a term that was used earlier in the pandemic as many people stayed home to help prevent the spread of the virus. Now as communities are reopening and people are in public more often, physical distancing is used to stress the importance of maintaining physical space when in public areas.

Covid-19 patients treated as untouchables once posters pasted on their homes says SC:

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) said however that its guidelines do not contain any instructions or guidance regarding affixing of posters or other signage outside the residences of those found COVID positive.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the ministry, said the Centre has not prescribed this practice and some states might be pursuing it on their own to prevent the spread of the virus.

This practice has nothing to do with "stigmatizing" the Covid-19 patients as it is aimed at protecting other people, the law officer told the bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan, R Subhash Reddy and M. R. Shah. Kalra, in his plea before the high court, had contended that freely circulating to Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and on WhatsApp groups, the names of persons who tested positive for Covid-19 was "leading to stigmatization and drawing of unnecessary attention". The petition had stated that Covid-19 positive persons "ought to be given privacy to cope with and recover from the illness in peace and away from prying eyes".

"Rather, they are being made the center of public attention...," it had said. It had also claimed that this has resulted in persons "shying away and deliberately choosing not to test themselves" to shield themselves from the "public embarrassment and stigmatization" which is also caused by pasting posters outside homes of Covid-19 positive patients.

The top court said however that the ground reality is "something different" and as once such posters are pasted at their homes, they are treated as untouchables.

Mehta said the Centre has filed its reply to the plea in pursuance of the top court's direction asking it to consider issuing nationwide guidelines to do away with practice of pasting posters outside the homes of Covid-19 patients.

Tushar Mehta, Solicitor General, submits that affidavit on behalf of the Union of India has been filed on November 30. Let the affidavit be placed on the record. List on December 3, the bench said in its order.

Lav Agarwal, joint secretary with the ministry, has filed an affidavit saying that all states have been intimated to this effect that the MoHFW has not issued any such guideline to identify the Covid-19 patients.

The Central government, through MoHFW has already communicated to the Additional chief secretaries ...secretaries (Health) of all the states and UTs pointing out that the MoHFW guidelines do not contain any instructions or guidance regarding the affixing of posters or other signage outside the residences of those found Covid-19 positive.

"The Central government has therefore requested all the states and UTs to ensure scrupulous compliance of MoHFW guidelines on this behalf," the affidavit said.

The apex court on November 5 had asked the Centre to consider issuing the guidelines to do away with the practice of pasting posters outside the homes of Covid-19 patients.

It had directed so without issuing any formal notice to the Centre on one Kush Kalra's plea seeking framing of the guidelines.

The bench had observed that when the Delhi government has agreed in the high court not to paste posters, why the Centre cannot come up with guidelines dealing with the matter for the entire country.

On November 3, the AAP government had told the Delhi high court that it has instructed all its officials not to paste posters outside homes of Covid-19 positive persons or those in home isolation; and the ones pasted have been ordered to be removed.

The government had told the high court that its officials have also not been allowed to share details of Covid-19 positive persons with their neighbors, resident welfare associations, or WhatsApp groups. Kalra, in his plea before the high court, had contended that freely circulating to Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and on WhatsApp groups, the names of persons who tested positive for Covid-19 was "leading to stigmatization and drawing of unnecessary attention". The petition had stated that Covid-19 positive persons "ought to be given privacy to cope with and recover from the illness in peace and away from prying eyes".

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The Consequence of Stigma Due to COVID-19:

- The model of stigma-induced identity threat talks about the negative consequences stigmatization brings for the overall well-being of the people when they appraise the stigmatizing situations and identity threats.
- The patients of COVID-19 are stigmatized and hence are bearing the consequences that are far more pernicious than the condition in itself.
- Social rejection has created a barricade between them and society with repercussions for their physical, psychological health, and well-being.
- The patients are fearful of being shamed and stigmatized by society, extreme enough to exhibit the symptoms of hysteria.
- Social ostracism is responsible for people not seeking treatment or reporting symptoms and thus impeding an early detection of the virus and its effective control
- The conditions are not even favorable for those who have tested negative for coronavirus. An individual in Madurai and another one in Himachal Pradesh committed suicide on facing a social boycott even after being tested negative for coronavirus.
- People are apprehensive about the possibilities of unknowingly carrying the coronavirus
- All these ill effects of the pandemic when associated with the rising stigmatization and discrimination are expected to have far-reaching consequences for the Indian society.
- Other stressful concerns of people include witnessing the difficulties of the underprivileged and facing the economic crisis, increased frustration with other people, disordered regime, unpredictable future and the virus itself, maintaining physical distance, curtailed travel, and lack of or incorrect information

India's Reactions and Measures to Reduce Stigma:

Taking serious consideration of the entrenched stigma associated with the disease in Indian society, the Government of India has been taking active and cognizant measures to curb it. Particularly important is the launch of a caller tune, a public health communication strategy, and appealing to the general public to fight the coronavirus disease, not the diseased. The government has also tried to boost the self-esteem of the doctors, health care professionals, police, and hygiene staff by calling them "corona warriors" and encouraging the general public to pay tribute to the health care professionals. The entire country got together in clapping for the coronavirus warriors from their houses' balconies, they lit up candles outside their houses, and Indian fighter jets showered flowers on the hospitals housing COVID-19 patients. These measures played an important role in reducing stigma and fostering togetherness.

By the end of March, within 15 days of announcing the nationwide lockdown, the Indian Finance Minister, N. Sitharaman, announced an INR 1.7 trillion relief package labeled the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. It was projected that under the scheme, 800 million Indians would receive 5 kg of wheat and rice for 3 months (in addition to the 5 kg they were already receiving). One kilogram of the preferred pulse was added to this distribution. Furthermore, 60 million farmers registered under the PM-KISAN scheme (who received INR 6,000 per year in three equal installments) were given the first installment upfront for the fiscal year starting April 2020. MNREGA workers' wages were increased from INR 182/— to INR 202/—. The government also provided relief for other marginalized groups, allocating INR 1,000 each for 30 million senior citizens, widows, and disabled Indians and INR 500 per month for 3 months to the 200 million women who were Jan Dhan account holders. Furthermore, women covered under the Ujwala scheme (83 million families) were allocated free LPG cylinders for 3 months. Over 2 crore construction workers received financial support totaling Rs 3,066 crore under the Building and Construction Workers' Fund.

All these actions were aimed at retroactively easing the crisis that was hurled at the Indian working class. At the fore of promising proactive measures to protect these workers is the effort spearheaded by the UP government. They have set up a Migration Commission for the employment of laborers in the state to ensure their social–legal–monetary rights. Any effort toward rehiring workers post lockdown would now require states to seek the UP government's permission and follow protective procedures that the commission would outline.

Apart from schemes aimed at helping the working class, the government also delayed the tax filing deadline under the “Vivaad Se Vishwas Scheme” from March 31 to June 30, 2020, and expedited the income-tax refunds process, to release all refunds up to INR 0.5 million.

Conclusion:

COVID-19 is a pandemic phenomenon that caused society and resulted in the practice of untouchability due to stigmatization. The social distancing/physical distancing maintained with corona affected people which gradually practicing untouchability. Stigmatization by the pasting poster out of the home by the administration gave a stigma to that family or people were treated as untouchable, which shows the evil practice of untouchability. It gave immense socio-psychological change in the mindset up of society.

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