

Role Of Religion During Covid-19

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Abstract: We are in a biological war or in a psychological war in coping with the present predicament. It is estimated that the devastation brought by this pandemic is more than the atomic explosion in Japan. COVID-19 has brought drastic impact on the society- Hyper globalization got deactivated, micro and macro pictures of the world are exposed, economic systems hampered, work from home is progressive in the new normal, internal security is at risk. Thus Covid-19 has influenced every segment of society including the religious domain; it is very much challenging the religious scenario and individual religiosity. This misery is lashing the country in an up normal way. In this emergency religion continues to influence and advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations. This article examines the impact of COVID-19 on religion and the role of religion during this pandemic.

Keywords: Religion, Covid-19, resilience, pandemic, confidence, charity

I. INTRODUCTION

Blaise Pascal, a mathematician and philosopher states "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every person which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the creator." We live in an age of technological advancement and scientific revolution. We know that more than 84% of world population adheres to religious faith. The search for truth and hunger towards the divine has not vanished from humanity in spite of all scientific and techno based digitalization. Thus religion has a far-reaching contribution towards the well being of individuals in the society.

The novel corona virus disease (Covid-19) that has been ravaging the globe has thrown normal life out of gear. We are informed by the media that millions of people around the world lost their precious lives and infected numbers increases day by day. Our country is on war against this devastating pandemic and on the process of controlling it. We know that lock-down enabled significantly to preventing the virus from community spread. At the same time it turned out to be the reason of the misery for thousands of vulnerable communities, including the migrant laborers. Covid-19 has touched every segment of society irrespective of religious and cultural milieu. In this predicament what does a virus have to do with

religion? How Covid-19 has impacted religious lives of people? What is the role of religion in combating COVID-19? We would discuss further.

II. WHAT IS COVID -19

According to Hawker (2005) 'pandemic' means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world. When we trace the genesis of the recent pandemic outbreak it is underlined that it is a new infectious viral lung disease began in Wuhan, China, which appeared towards the close of 2019. Moreover it is assumed as a disease associated with the corona virus crossing the interspecies barrier. Though the pandemic is alarming on a global scale there are also scientific approaches to resolve the present predicament with medicines and vaccination. Medical experts try to connect the COVID-19 with previous acute respiratory syndrome like SARS and MERS.

In this period of pandemic and lockdown, importance of social distancing is most significant to check the spread of Covid-19. As senior citizens, children below ten years of age

and pregnant ladies are more vulnerable to the corona virus, they are particularly said to stay at home.

What are the possibilities that one may get infected by the virus? It is by coming into close contact with a person who has COVID-19. COVID-19 is primarily spread from person to person. It is also possible to become infected from respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. There is another means by which one may get it through touching a surface or object that has the virus on it, and then by touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

How can we protect ourselves from the infection? Practice social distancing- Stay home as much as possible and avoid close contact with others. Using masks- Wear a mask that covers nose and mouth in public settings. Frequent hand wash-Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use an alcohol based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. (Cdc.gov)

III. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RELIGION

Recent few months became very crucial and challenging, because COVID-19 has gone global affecting everyone in the society. It is inferred that almost all sphere of the society including education, economic and health apparatus have got affected. It is disrupting vehemently our social system and our spiritual domain too.

According to the practical guidelines designed by World Health Organization (WHO) (April, 2020), most religious leaders and communities of faith will make decisions to cancel services and other gatherings for some time in the COVID-19 pandemic. Large gatherings are already banned or are being discouraged in many countries. Religious leaders should remember that they are important community role models for reinforcing these recommendations and showing how communities can still maintain connection by conducting faith activities remotely/virtually.

Due to lockdown temples and religious centers are closed thus the Hindu community around the world uses their home to continue their personal devotion. It is inferred that the normal way of prayers, pujas, worship patterns and exposition of religious texts are very much lacking. They are not able to celebrate their famous festivals like Ram Navami, Rath Yatra, Ugadi, and Vinayagar Chaturthi. Moreover the distinct festival of Jainism, Mahavir Jayanthi was celebrated in a polite manner the special rally was very much missing. Sikh religious leaders suspended the services at Gurudwara and decided to telecast the entire event virtually. It is also same with the Buddhism in order to avoid gatherings and maintain social distancing.

When we throw light on the impact of Covid-19 on Islamic community, Ramadan and Eid-al-Fitr festivals were not celebrated in a grand way. Due to pandemic this year their pilgrimage to Haj also was cancelled. Mehmet Ozalp (2020) asserts that one of the first changes brought about by social distancing has been to the Muslim custom of shaking hands followed by hugging (same gender) friends and acquaintances, especially in mosques and Muslim organizations. Visiting the sick is considered a good deed in Islam. However, in the case of COVID-19, such visits are not possible. Checking up on

those who are sick with phone calls, messages and social media is still possible and encouraged. Congregational prayers in mosques are important for Muslims in instilling a sense of being in the presence of the sacred, and a sense of being with other believers. Accordingly, they line up in rows with shoulders touching. This arrangement is extremely risky during a pandemic. As Muslims continue to deal with the corona virus pandemic, they, like everyone else, are wondering how their lives might be changed afterwards.

COVID-19 has made enormous impact on Churches in India and around the globe. One of the major concerns is that there is a paradigm shift from individual worship to online worship service, even new YouTube channels came into existence. The zoom platform received more light and which became a major tool during this pandemic season. It is used widely to bring awareness about the pandemic context and much of theological discussions and preaching is done through it today. Moreover many theological seminaries and institutions around the world have begun their regular academic classes online. Formal education about religious studies and pastoral care made virtual nowadays. Missiologists and theologians looked at this approach in a positive way that they can sit at one place and take the message across the table without further travel. Due to lock down and pandemic Churches became more electronic and more virtual relationship is maintained, but it lacks real interpersonal communication and feedback.

Katherine Marshall (2020) draws our attention to the practical point of religious life in line with priests' mentions that Clerics have found it difficult to give spiritual support and guidance to the sick, especially to those who are quarantined in hospitals. When, their loved ones suffer lonely deaths, families and communities in different corners of the world face restrictions on traditional mourning rites. Many funerals- usually a time for communal fellowship in the face of loss- are conducted with few, if any, people physically present.

Thus COVID-19 has punched deep inroads in human life. In this contemporary context reassuring holistic growth became a great challenge. Now we require a fresh thinking on rebuilding the community. There is an urgency of systemic approach to rectify the devastation caused by COVID-19. Whatever window we have we need to use it for betterment of the community. The author would like to flag three major tenants that religion can play to protect the society from further damage in the light of present phenomena.

IV. ROLE OF RELIGION DURING COVID-19

A. RELIGION INSTILLS HOPE

Economic times reports that the COVID-19 has infected over 20 million people worldwide and more than 7 million died. The impact of COVID-19 is not restricted to a particular part of the globe but it is worldwide. Its influence on the society is on alarm day by day. What may be the solution? How could a normal individual face such a devastating and unseen enemy. It is no normal to a common man. In times of crisis and uncertainty, many people look to religion for guidance and consolation. That is to say that the emotional

aspect of an individual or state of mind is in a stage of wavering very much during pandemic and it needs more stability. In this outlook religion instills hope among them so that they may face life realities with much strength.

Religious leaders and faith communities play a unique role in creating relationships and connections between people across age groups, professions, and neighborhoods. In addition, religious leaders are often linked into other service organizations through their professional and pastoral roles. As a result, these leaders and organizations are uniquely positioned to reinforce connections between people who may be isolated during periods of physical distancing. Maintaining and strengthening relationships during this distressing time can fortify the mental and spiritual health of your members and followers and contribute to resilience in the larger community. (WHO 7 April, 2020)

According to Smith et al (2000) while people use religion for coping with various types of situations, religion is used mainly for coping with negative and unpredictable situations. Leaning on the divine we realize the fact that we are distressed but not destroyed altogether, there is a hope and time of restoration in spite of loss and pain. This is the hope religion tend to offer to its adherents. The COVID-19 crisis certainly goes in line with the criteria for being an event that could instigate religious coping. The responsibility and burden one has to carry in order to rectify the past few months in individual life is so huge, that can only be solved if one has a positive attitude in the present milieu and hope for a better future.

We would also infer that an alarming tendency to seek the divine and offer prayer among the people nowadays is more prevalent. People are trying to connect with God and experience a remedy in the present pandemic context. In this respect religion continues to offer individuals a green signal that there is so much of inner strength available in the presence of divine being to make one face the challenge fearlessly. Don't go near the virus but don't fear that is the mantra. Thus the emotional part of individual is taken care by religion through intrinsic religiosity.

B. RELIGION FOSTERS CONFIDANCE

Religious belief serves as a tool of motivation in the life of the individual and the community. During this pandemic people are often met with various life challenges and pushed to handle unexpected issues. In such a milieu a prayer, song, text from the Holy Scripture bring enormous strength and motivation to them. The author believes that the personal relationship with God affects every aspect of individual life. Faith in a personal God enables people to cast their cares upon God and walk further with confidence, that is to say that strong religious faith helps them to draw the needed strength from it.

Kalpna Srivastava (2011) asserts that religious beliefs affect how individuals deal with stressful situations, suffering, and life problems as it enhances acceptance and one's ability to function competently in the face of stress and adversity. In the language of Krägeloh CU (2020) religiosity reinforces religious coping, which is the use of cognitive behavioral techniques to manage stressful situations in light of one's

spirituality or religious beliefs. Moreover studies in connection with religious practice reveal that people frequently count on religion to cope with stressful situations. Positive religious coping involves engaging in religious practices, seeking social support through religious leaders and congregations, and reframing stressful events in reference to their relationship with God.

Offering prayers and daily meditation on religious texts seem to have positive impact on people during vulnerable situations. When they are faced with anxiety, isolation, and unexpected events we would see that in comparison to others religious people gain certain amount of inner strength and unusual encouragements. For instance, meditation and yoga have been demonstrated to relieve tension and anxiety and stabilize emotions. In order to help people to handle the perilous COVID-19 context and overcome the trauma of the pandemic, religious agencies have activated online counseling services to offer psychosocial support to the vulnerable individuals. This reinforces the concern over emotional well-being of the victims and helping them cope with the ordeal and distress that normally occur in a time of pandemic. This approach will be a great boost in strengthening them to foster confidence, so that they would be able to face challenges with much inner energy.

Kali Robinson (2020) reports that religious leaders regularly offer prayers and words of support to their communities; they have doubled down on those messages in recent weeks to ease worries over the virus. The Pope asked his followers to pray for those keeping public services running in Rome. Iraq's senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, said that medical staff are as important as those who defend their national borders and encouraged his followers to pray for caregivers. The Conference of European Rabbis advised synagogues on how to respond to the outbreak and urged people not to panic. Many religious groups continue to provide charity services, including donating medical equipment to undersupplied communities, and leaders have expressed concern for particularly vulnerable groups. Interreligious cooperation among the religious leaders is another landmark in shaping people's attitude, behavior and tuning them to focus on combating the virus with one accord. It is very much evident in the pandemic context around the globe.

C. RELIGION PROMOTES CHARITY

Religious agencies have been promoting charitable activities in a greater extend during this pandemic. Churches, Temples and Masques have started food distribution centers and community kitchens in slums, city peripheries, transit points of migrants and vulnerable areas where COVID -19 infections are severe. We could witness a lot of instances like covid-19 infected Hindu man who died was buried by Muslims. This pandemic situation has made people to care for one another. In fact there is a sign of unity and solidarity among the people in extending their helping hand to each other irrespective of their religious affiliation. W.J Wildman et al (2020) traces that many religious communities are disseminating practical health information and offering urgent financial help in the wake of rapidly degrading economic

conditions. Countless activities have been carried on by various religious groups in combating the COVID-19, to mention few:

The Hindu Women's Society has helped in Srilanka to improve the shortage of medical supplies especially protective equipment for healthcare workers. We have taken part in offering psychological support for the patients and healthcare workers and supported health education for the public. Healthcare workers – including doctors, nurses and paramedical staff – are in the front line against the COVID war and need to be looked after at all times. Together we will defeat this pandemic says Sivanandini Duraiswamy (2020) President, Hindu Women's Society.

The Mahavir Mandir Trust in Patna has donated Rs 1 crore to the CM Relief Fund for fighting Covid-19 pandemic in the state. The Trust's secretary Acharya Kishore Kunal said: "Our main motive is to strengthen the government's plan to recover from the catastrophe and provide food to the poor people." The Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust, Shirdi (Ahmednagar), donated Rs. 51 crore to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund in Maharashtra. In addition, the SSST is providing free food to all patients and their relatives at the Shri Sainath Hospital, Shirdi Orphanages, old age homes, a school for deaf and dumb, destitute and needy, police personnel and others through the Shri Sai Prasadalya.

Asia Pacific special reporter Shuriah Niazi (April 16, 2020) clarifies that Muslim charities and other voluntary organizations are helping the poor in India during a nationwide lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the novel corona virus. The Humanitarian Relief Society is involved in relief operations during the lockdown in various districts in the southern state of Karnataka. Its general secretary, Mohammed Makakada, said they have distributed \$200,000 worth of food items to the poor. "We give food kits to the poor. A single kit contains food items worth around \$16 (1,200 rupees). These were given to poor people and migrant workers from other states," Makakada.

Students Islamic Organization of India is also helping the needy during these difficult times. "Being a student organization, initially, we worked to provide food and temporary accommodation to students as the lockdown was sudden and several students were stranded in their rented rooms or hostels and needed support. Later, we decided to help migrant laborers. We continued our work to provide succor to them. We are carrying out relief work in different cities," said the organization's general secretary Syed Azharuddin. He further added "We helped around 100,000 laborers, most of them from the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. We are working in 24 states with 1,000 helpline centers and around 10,000 volunteers,"

As per the report from National daily The Hindu (March 27, 2020), The Christian Coalition for Health (CCH), which has over 1,000 hospitals and over 60,000 in-patient beds across the country, extended its support to the nation and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in combating the novel corona virus threat. In a letter to Mr. Modi the Coalition said hospitals in its network were already working with local authorities in many places. "Over the past weeks the member organizations have been holding coordinating meetings and webinars to help the hospitals for disaster preparedness for any eventuality of

the spread of COVID-19 to the areas where the hospitals are situated," a release from the CCH said. The coalition includes healthcare facilities managed by Catholic and Protestant groups and served by more than 1,000 nun doctors and 50,000 Christian nurses.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Bombay through its network of partner organizations across Raigad, Thane and Mumbai, is reaching out to over 5,000 households and over 100,000 beneficiaries, with essential supplies amounting to Rs. 5,000,000 (approx. \$65,000). The beneficiaries include tribal, poor migrants, the elderly, trans-genders, rag-pickers and other vulnerable persons. (Robin Gomes, 4 April, 2020) These examples demonstrate that religious communities have an important role as partners in ensuring the basic amenities of life among the needy. Thus religious communities continue to share their available resources faithfully with the needy, vulnerable, including minorities, migrants, refugees and the COVID-19 infected people through multiple means to recover confidence, hope and care.

V. CONCLUSION

An unforgettable terminology of this year can be traced as 'COVID-19', because no segment of society is untouched by this devastating virus. Everyone in the world is directly or indirectly affected by it. Amidst the role of religion during Covid-19 never be forgotten, as people are worried and going through a great dilemma contemplating about the future and struggling to cope up with the present pandemic context religion serves as a tool in sharing the resources with the needy and most vulnerable in the society. By protecting people in their emotional life through prayer and affirming positive messages, inspiring hope and resilience in especially where people are very much affected to COVID-19. Though this virus demands physical distancing but requires united societal action to resolve it. 'We will heal We will raise up'.

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