

Pandemic of Prejudice: Social Symptoms of Coronavirus

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Aristotle famously said that man is by nature a social animal and the key word is animal. Man's relationship with society defines a human being not only as an individual but also as a species. The humankind feels proud in being the most "civilized" of the animal kingdom claiming credit for the ascent from the grossness of struggle for existence to a refined understanding of the principles governing the universe. Nevertheless, deep down the animal instincts are still there and resurface at the time of crisis. The covid-19 pandemic is the greatest challenge witnessed by the world community in recent history creating a sense of fear and confusion caused by an enemy which is invisible and seemingly invincible in its ever changing mutations. The fight has brought to the fore not only the primal instincts of self-preservation but also the existential anxiety of loneliness. This paper proposes to study the stigma, prejudice and discrimination practiced under the pretext of the pandemic situation highlighting the deep-seated biases and insecurities in the human mind. Milton rightly said that "the mind is its own place" and the devious workings of the mind are a universal phenomenon. Therefore, prejudice and stigma remain common factors in Indian as well as in the global context. Since the enemy is an invisible virus, the combative energies have to find something tangible to vent their forces. This has led to the identification of target groups which have become the recipients of hatred, malice and sometimes even physical assault. Actually, the target groups in all communities are the marginalized people who are vulnerable to the atrocities of the powerful.

As this paper aims to investigate prejudice with special reference to the pandemic situation, it would be helpful to begin with a definition of the same. Prejudice refers to a set of negative attitudes, beliefs and judgements about whole categories of people and about individual members of those categories because of their perceived race and ethnicity. Gordon Allport, a renowned American psychologist in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) observes, "Prejudice is an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group or an individual of that group....(and is an) aversive or hostile attitude towards

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a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore, presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to that group”¹. This definition proves beyond doubt the irrational nature of prejudice. There seems to be no justification for abhorring a certain set of people without any logical reason. Nevertheless, prejudice is a rampant phenomenon defying national boundaries and brazenly practiced across communities alienating and targeting the group perceived as other or different. Prejudice has been studied and categorized by scholars studying society and psychology giving rise to many interpretations to understand it. According to Susan Olzak’s Ethnic Competition theory², ethnic prejudice and conflict increases when two or more ethnic groups find themselves competing for jobs, housing and other goals. This sounds familiar and seems to be a modern malady as the shrinking of distances have made us residents of a global village living uncomfortably close to the world community. But, this is not a new problem and can be found in history of all nations. During 1870s, in the US, the white population feared that Chinese immigrants would take away their jobs leading to white mob violence and protests. Eventually, it paved way for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882³ that aimed to stop the unwanted influx of Chinese immigrants to the US. Similar racial prejudice has colored the Chinese immigration in Canada historically testified by the 1885 Chinese Immigration Act⁴ which imposed a 50\$ Head tax on all Chinese persons entering Canada which was raised to the prohibitive amount of 500\$ in 1903. The tax was introduced to stop the entry of people from China as it was felt that they would not be able to shell out such a huge amount and act as a deterrent. These Acts are proofs of the aversion for a particular race and the extreme steps taken to protect one’s territories from the unwanted influx of foreigners. In the modern era, Canada is known for its open door policy welcoming people from all over the world because its economic and demographic growth depends on immigration. But the pandemic has changed this traditional perception and various surveys conducted post pandemic indicate the wariness for immigrants. A poll conducted by Institute for Canadian Citizenship⁵ reveals that 64% new Canadians fear rising discrimination amid the pandemic, 63% are worried about taking public transit and 53% are worried about going out in public. These are alarming figures and indicate the havoc this must be creating for people at the receiving end.

Another reason for prejudice is explained by frustration or scapegoat theory⁶. According to this theory, people become frustrated and tend to blame their troubles on groups that are often disliked. In 1348, after the Bubonic Plague, which killed more than 1/3 of European population, Jews were blamed either for deliberately spreading the plague or for angering God because they were not Christians. A similar behavior was repeated when Germany suffered economic hardships after WWI making Jews a

convenient scapegoat eventually leading to the rise of Hitler and Nazism. Thus, prejudice can be used as a political tool by unscrupulous forces and has dangerous implications. The origin of the virus in China gave rise to the tendency to blame all its population for the mistake of a few. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were instances of racial crimes against the Asian community not only from China but Korea, Vietnam etc. The biased behavior finds easy targets because of the distinctive facial features. These groups have not only been financially impacted but also facing discrimination and harassment in the countries where they have been living sometimes for generations. The popular opinion may have some basis in the public display of prejudice by world leaders like Trump calling Covid 19 a Chinese virus. The racist discrimination seems to get aggravated by negative media coverage of the political events. The Chinese Canadian National Council began recorded 1150 cases of anti-Asian racism incidents between March 2020 and February 2021⁷. These eruptions of violent episodes are essentially the tip of the iceberg hinting at a malaise of a more serious nature which needs to be accepted, identified and addressed. In the wake of the pandemic situation, similar events were reported all over the world. On 14th March 2020, at a Sam's Club in Midland Texas, a white man stabbed three members of an Asian American family including two children aged 2 and 6 because he thought that they were Chinese and infecting people with the corona virus⁸. On 12 March 2020, the owner of a Chinese takeaway was spat on in the face by a teenage boy who demanded to know if he had coronavirus. This happened in U.K.⁹

Closer home, similar hate crimes were directed towards people hailing from North Eastern states. Violence and biased behavior towards the visibly different citizens of the country has been experienced, discussed and reported before but the corona situation brought this latent bias to the forefront. On 22nd March 2020, an M. Phil student from Delhi University was spat on by a man calling her coronavirus¹⁰. This incident is particularly shocking because it took place in the campus area which is a meeting point of students from all over the country and the presence of students from diverse states and countries is normal and accepted. There was such a spurt of these incidents that Kiren Rijju, Member of Parliament who hails from Arunachal Pradesh, had to ask state governments to sensitize residents against such stigmatization. On 5th May 2020, 16 American senators including Kamala Harris wrote a letter to the Trump administration to address the episodes of discrimination in America highlighting the hate crimes against African Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) during the pandemic¹¹. It did not come as a surprise when the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had to urge governments around the world to enact measures preventing discrimination and violence against Asians due to the Pandemic.

Another target group which has emerged in the wake of this pandemic is the medical fraternity. Ironically, they are called frontline warriors in the fight against this global enemy. During the first lockdown in India, P.M. Narendra Modi gave a call for appreciating these heroes and people heartily participated in the symbolic gesture of thanking them by banging plates, clapping, beating drums on 22nd march. Yet, incidents of violence were continuously reported by doctors who were harassed in the line of their duty. Stones and bricks were pelted when they were went for contact tracing in Indore¹². In Surat¹³, a doctor was threatened by her apartment residents for travelling to work. Doctors at a hospital in Pakistan were verbally and physically attacked after a patient died of coronavirus¹⁴. In Bangladesh, bricks were thrown at the house of a doctor after he tested corona positive to drive him and his family out of the locality¹⁵. If this is how doctors have been treated, one cannot even begin to describe the stigma experienced by the patients. Suffice it to say that many friendly neighbors were unmasked revealing scared and selfish strangers.

On 16th April 2020, Resident Doctors Association of AIIMS wrote a letter to the Home Minister seeking a strict implementation of the Health Services Personnel and Clinical Establishment Bill. The RDA wrote, "We, as health care professionals, are not as scared of infections as we are of being assaulted and abused by the very community we treat"¹⁶. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported more than 600 incidents of violence, harassment and stigmatization between February and July stating that majority of health workers have experienced violence on their workplace that varies from country to country on their threshold of violence¹⁷. ICRC urged governments to implement laws against attacks on health care workers during pandemic to provide safer working environment. In April 2020, India made violence against health care workers a nonbailable offence punishable by up to 7 years imprisonment providing some relief to the medical fraternity. It has been two years since the emergence of Corona but the knee jerk prejudicial response is evident in most countries banning the flights from South Africa and neighbouring countries when the latest variant Omicron was reported. A similar ban was imposed on India when Delta variant emerged.

In conclusion, it can be observed that pandemic may be erupting once in a century but prejudice is a constant presence in our lives. History repeats itself and wisdom lies in learning lessons from the mistakes of our shared past. If one ponders over the current affairs against the backdrop of history an eerie similarity is clearly visible indicating the basic insecurities which are lying buried under the polished exterior of education, advancement and sophistication. Deep down, mankind is still fighting like animals for their territories which they feel need to be marked and protected. Nevertheless, there

is a bigger need to learn from the failings and transcend to a higher plane of living. Pandemic like Covid-19 can be defeated with the help of vaccines but it is not so easy to overcome prejudice which is safely snuggled in the mind and thoughts which also need to be guarded against infection.

End Notes

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2. <https://www.researchgate.net>>262 retrieved on 16.01.2022
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