

IS RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR HARBINGER FOR COVID-19 - INDIAN PERSPECTIVE?

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Dear Editor,

COVID-19 is a novel public health problem that started in China, came into limelight in December 2019, and has been declared as a Pandemic by the World health organization (WHO). This pandemic is a challenging problem for most countries as the disease has high infectivity being transmitted from person to person through the respiratory route. COVID-19 pandemic will have both short and long term implications for our society (World health organisation 2020).

From ancient times, whenever mankind faces any kind of adversity or crisis, they tend to invoke/cite and mix religion and the current pandemic is no exception (Bentzen 2019). As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the intensity the demand of involvement of religion will increase because of the tendency to drift towards religion in times of crisis and because of the financial hardships (Bentzen 2019). Ever since the onset of this pandemic the religiosity of people has increased as political and religious leaders across the world came out with advice and suggestions for their respective countrymen and communities to pray (Bentzen 2020). Myths and misconceptions have deep-seated origin in culture, religion and are frequently substantiated by religious leaders or rulers. Myths are usually linked to an old tradition in society and representing as if they true descriptions of their past. They often lead to taboos and different customs and rituals in society and are frequently very complex (Bascom 1965 & Dundes 1984).

There are different myths and misconceptions across the world associated with the spread of COVID-19. These religious beliefs and practices can have serious implications on the spread of the COVID-19 disease. There are various myths across the world and they vary from religion to religion and region to region. As learned from previous pandemics like Ebola pandemics, religion, traditions, and culture had a wide range of influence on the transmission of pandemics (Ebrahim et al. 2020).

Some groups among Hindus believe COVID-19 occurred due to the consumption of non-vegetarian foods by the Chinese people and that is responsible for the

spread of disease. Some people in India also proclaimed that drinking cow urine or 'gaumutra' will cure or prevent the COVID-19, although scientific evidence for that is lacking. Even one group of people jointly hosted cow urine drinking party to 'neutralize' the effects of coronavirus in India. Few leaders also proclaimed that gaumutra (cow urine), gobar (cow-dung) can help eliminate the coronavirus.

While the people belonging to the Islamic faith attribute COVID-19 to the wrath of God upon Chinese people for mistreating Muslims in China. It is also a common ritual in some religions to kiss the walls of shrines and burial places of their religious figures. Religious gatherings can be the breeding places for the COVID-19 virus and this can be amplified because of the practice of kissing as a form of greeting at such gatherings. Mass gatherings are a common happening during pilgrimages and other religious rituals and not all the devotees have the required knowledge about prevention of the spread of COVID-19 (Huremovic 2019).

In some places where there was a failure to restrain mass gatherings, the recent example being the congregation in Delhi's Nizamuddin area in March of this year. Recently Saudi Arabia's suspension of Umrah pilgrimage has shielded against the massive spread of COVID-19 considering the millions of people that would have otherwise attended, whereas Iran's pronouncement to allow mass gatherings in Mashhad and Qom has been disadvantageous for the containment of the virus. Having said that some religious rituals like the hand, face, and feet washing as a part of the Muslim practice of wudu (five times a day) are very advantageous to halt the spread of COVID-19, but still, the mass gathering may overshadow any such benefit (Ebrahim & Mehmish 2020).

The most difficult challenge in India in the fight against transmission of COVID-19 was a counterproductive attitude exhibited by some religious groups. Even though the authorities have called off many religious gatherings some groups still intend to continue mass gatherings. The reasons for such behavior could be due to poor understanding of the scientific facts and the assumption that everything happens by God's will and has been

well arranged by Him.in advance, which can be determinant for the health of people. This behavior which is also in conflict with religious groups who called for physical distancing has not only happened in India but in the rest of the world too.COVID-19 can infect everyone irrespective of belief, race and social class and the risk is the same irrespective of faith and religious affiliation (WHO 2020, Ebrahim & Mehmish 2020).

As discussed earlier, certain religious and cultural practices may have an adverse effect on the transmission of disease. There are some religious practice, beliefs, and attitude which can affect our mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected religious activities in many ways, it includes the cancellation of worship in many places of worship in different faiths as well as cancellation of pilgrimages at various places. Also, the religiosity of people has increased ever since the onset of the pandemic. All the religious places from Japan to the United States have been closed to prevent the spread of the disease. President Donald Trump chose 15 March 2020 as National Day of Prayer for "God's healing hand to be positioned on the people of our Nation.

In India, as the established COVID-19 cases are starting to rise, various communities are taking different approaches to control the spread of the virus. Most mosques and the temples have restricted entry and cleaning of the mosques with disinfectants is being done along with providing information about the transmission of this disease. community members have been advised to stop congregational prayers at the mosques and temples and pray at home to reduce the person to person transmission. The head religious body of Muslims, Muslim Wakf Board announced a suspension of congregational as well as regular prayers in shrines and mosques affiliated to it. The prayers and congregational gatherings on the occasion of Shab-e-Baraat (holy night for Muslims) were suspended to stop the transmission of the coronavirus.

Similarly, other temples and churches across the country have been closed. The places where temples have restricted entry of people, live streaming of rituals has done to allow worshippers to take part in puja prayer rituals and see deities from home (Aljazeera 2020).

The study of religious behaviors and religious places should be a topic of interest for controlling an outbreak like COVID-19. By sharing scientific information about

COVID-19, religious and faith-based leaders can endorse that information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma about the diseases, and provide reassurance to people in their communities including promoting healthy practices. Religious leaders can under their influence convince the masses by using religious idioms regarding what must be done in dealing with any outbreak from a religious perspective and hence be more effective than civil servants in delivering messages to the community. This outbreak like any highly transmissible disease can extend beyond the control of the respective governments, so it requires all members of society to fight it together. The epidemic poses myriad scientific, technical, and logistic challenges throughout the world and without doubt, we need to marry the worlds of science and religion for sustaining mankind.

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