**Article file**

**COVID- 19, SOCIAL MEDIA AND HUMANITIES:**

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**Abstract:** With the world experiencing a pandemic, COVID-19, large scale efforts and preparations were being done to fight the microbe. The virus being novel necessitated novel paradigms in this battle. The arsenal possessed by all of us were the time tested tools for the management of any Infectious Disease in the form of Quarantine, Isolation and Physical Distancing. In order to prevent the overwhelming of health systems and to curtail the chains of transmission draconian measures in form of Lockdowns were initiated by many countries. These were never before seen circumstances that needed an active participation by the citizens and the government and civic agencies. Did the Lockdown bring more agony or was it COVID-19 that brought more pain?? Only time will tell!!

**Keywords:** *COVID- 19, Quarantine, Physical Distancing*

With the emergence of a novel pathogen, SARS- COV 2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome- Coronavirus 2) and it making its eerie presence felt within the confines of our environments, the State and Central governments of India invoked a Colonial- era law, Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 to combat a 21st century pandemic, COVID-19 (Coronavirus Infectious Disease 19)1.

The law outlines the necessary strategies that needs to be implemented to contain the spread of infectious diseases. Thus Isolation, Quarantine and Lockdowns became a norm.

A mind boggling, diverse, bustling nation of 1.3 crores was being brought to a complete standstill as announced by our Honourable Prime Minister for 21 days with effect from March 25th, 2020. A pre- emptive measure, India’s Lock down was probably the harshest and the biggest to go down in history of planet Earth2. The intention was to buy the requisite time for the nation to be comprehensively prepared to fight a microbe with a voracious appetite that had been knocking down countries and continents on its pathway.

No other disease/ epidemic has had or in the future will ever garner the unprecedented attention COVID-19 was bestowed upon with on the internet podium.

A pandemic of this magnitude and proportions barrelled in at a time when most of us had our imprint in the digital world in the form of social media accounts on various available platforms.

Thus Social media and its role in fighting a pandemic could be viewed as a double edged sword either as a Blessing or as a Curse based on an individual’s perspective.

Why a Blessing?? With COVID-19’s relentless attacks on health systems, economies and agonizing the world population; thus began scientific research on the Nano organism at a pandemic pace as well. An avalanche of information was accessible on all networks at the click of a button. A state of heightened awareness among citizens was the need of the hour and it could be easily achieved on the electronic and print media.

Why a Curse?? Fighting a pandemic had another angle to it, INFODEMIC, and hence fall prey to false mongering and fake news3. The ability to read between lines of the existent information and to sift through it with keen hawk eyes was a necessity!! Also a curse, due to the ever increasing Cybercrimes.

As days progressed in the Lockdown, the countdown to 21 days slowly began. The Medical fraternity, Government and Civic agencies, formidable Police forces chalked out their plans and measures at lightening speeds to work against the unknown miniscule enemy, SARS- COV 2, while citizens began their individualistic journeys within the comforts of their houses to hone new skill sets, revisit old forgotten hobbies, polishing of acquired life skills and soft skills. The lockdown was an elite privilege for many of the urban middle classes.

But the Lockdown also brought with it unprecedented misery and unimaginable difficulties to the common man:

© A harrowed and troubled son/daughter was concerned about his ailing parent’s next Dialysis session so they could live to see another day..."Will I be able to take them and how will I be able to do it” was their sole thoughts????

© A cancer patient was missing out on his/ her chemotherapy/ radiotherapy sessions (All needed to keep them alive and ticking and keep the cancer cells at bay)

© The wait for Organ Transplant patients just got longer.

© A diabetic/ hypertensive patient was missing out on his medications.

© An individual with Tuberculosis/ HIV/ other myriad number of chronic diseases who required a constant set of medications were unable to procure them. The required money to buy them was there but the stock was unavailable… (70% of the API's- Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients, needed in manufacture of drugs comes from China)

© An anxious to conceive lady would be missing out on her next most important IVF Session!!!

© A pregnant lady was missing out on her precious antenatal check-ups.

© Every pregnant woman would be distressed at the very thought of what would happen next to her and will she be able to reach a hospital on time or not??? Will her doctor be there to treat her or not???

© Children missing out on their immunization schedules!!!

© Overnight, hundreds of families were displaced with no food and shelter. Thousands lost their jobs and were rendered homeless in a matter of hours.

© Daily wagers did not know when their next meal would be, if ever.

© A cataclysmic movement of migrant workers (the invisible forces who drove the Indian economies for decades) was witnessed.

© A farmer was unable to harvest his yield and with crops rotting in the fields, incurred huge losses of efforts and resources!!!

© Someone is on the verge of losing his/her job, thanks to a global recession!!

© Someone is not being paid salary by his/her employer... (No generation of revenues is the reason cited by organizations)

© Cases of domestic violence, mental health issues spiralled upwards.

The list can go on....

With a complete lockdown "the-stay-at-home-almost-always" orders was a new concept that was more difficult to accept and follow than we assumed. It basically robbed us of being inherently human, which is finding solace in another’s company. When in troubled waters or sad or to celebrate happiness or to find peace or even to idle away time, our genetic material always needs to be most often associated with others’ genes!!!

In an attempt to apparently lift their spirits in such gloomy depressing times, a weird set of challenges were hurled at one another on Social media. Newsfeeds on an umpteen number of tasks clogged our timelines on Facebook, Instagram, and Watsapp!!

#Pushups challenges, #safehands challenges, #Dalgona coffee, #Motherhood dare challenges, #Women wearing traditional wear or the saree clad challenges and #couple photos were the ones spreading like wildfire…

Were these needed in these uncertain times?? If they rekindled the scientific temperaments or brought about a change in the social behaviours of the masses, these challenges could have been accepted.

Was it right by the civic societies to play them when a whole contingent of Doctors, Nurses, other paramedical teams, Scientists, Police, Governments, Administrators were toiling day and night, risking their lives in a situation which was firstly uncalled for, unexpected and were totally unprepared for.

One challenge in particular that could have been avoided was posting photos in sarees/ traditional wear/ couple photos. Did it in any way allay the fears or stigma associated with COVID-19??

And it goes like this: "Let's spread positivity amidst negativity”!!! And

"Please do not get offended if you have not been tagged in this challenge”!!!

Doesn't this sound absurd???

This was not about negativity but were harsh realities probably never seen before by many of us!! When would normalcy return back?? If it did, will there be light at the end of this tunnel were the big questions and then we had such bizarre challenges!!

Such digital escapades were happening amidst a crisis!! Not in any celebratory mode!!

Are these digital platforms desensitising us, dehumanising us, robbing us of our compassions??? Are we unable to empathise with a fraternity that is on the frontlines fighting a humanitarian crisis???

Another enemy to be fought in these times when all of us are forced to go digital is Cybercrimes!! There have been reports of cybercriminals resorting to usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to generate nude photos of women who participated in these Saree challenges thus making them vulnerable to extortion and blackmail4.

Social media is a fertile ground to target people. It could be used as a vehicle to challenge ourselves in a more responsible, productive way.

Is it not time for a discipline called "Humanities" to be given more importance??? Its principles and reflections hold more relevance in the present times than ever before. Only if the social aspects of epidemics/ pandemics are well understood by the citizens such conflicts can be tenaciously contested at all fronts. Also dedication by governments/polities towards their citizens and taking them into confidence would go a long way in winning this battle.

COVID-19 is here stay and cohabitate with us like the other numerous diseases. At the outset if the governments through their awareness campaigns had primed and prepared the citizens to lead a life with COVID-19; resumption of economic activities could have been easier.

Ideally the best strategy in this fight should have been to test, to trace and to isolate!!

Also if a change in the social fabric sets in, in terms of participatory citizenship, community responsibilities and spirit of oneness in flesh and soul, the ability of governments to disseminate critical information, ability to convince fellow citizens to follow requisite containment/ relief measures would then be a cakewalk!! The approach to combat COVID-19 or any other societal calamities needs to be two- tiered always- an amalgamation of efforts by both Governments and its citizenry!!! A one sided endeavor can never win battles.

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