

**Special Issue:**

COMMUNICATION &amp; COVID -19 PANDEMIC

**STIGMA AND BIGOTRY REVIVED DURING THE COVID- 19 PANDEMIC**

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**ABSTRACT**

The world is affected by a pandemic which has totally shattered the healthcare system and brought about a massive loss of mankind. The fear amongst the masses of an unknown virus and loss of lives has turned the society topsy turvy. The pandemic has created lasting affects both physically and psychologically. The stigma and discrimination attached to the virus has divided the society between “we and they”. Stigmatization is a social process which excludes those who are potential threat for others for the smooth working of the society. Since the pandemic the country has undergone a dramatic shift, from agreeing to live mutually the situation to “othering” has aroused.

In a country like India discrimination and social stigma holds a long and powerful history. Discrimination based on caste, class and gender has infected the nation time and again unless it was outlawed atleast on paper. Wherein the current scenario to defect the illness social distancing and quarantine are powerful tools people are taking it to another level. The affected, people around them, people serving them have all been categorised as the ‘other’ as this somehow provides the society with an order amidst all the distress and disharmony. This need to find order even in the worse situations by belittling others and overpowering their needs has left a lasting fatal impact on the well being of the nation.

**Keywords:** *Stigma Bigotry, Covid-19*



Casting away, discrimination and stigma have been a part of the Indian subcontinent for far too long. Our history stands witness to times when society was formed and ran successfully by discriminating people against one another. Be it caste, class, gender, race, ethnicity people have suffered way too much for way too long. Governmental interference and laws tried curbing the ills of discrimination but too little success. Though openly stigmatization might have stopped but even today people bare the brunt of it. Years from those ancestral times and into modernisation yet our generations are infested with the ills of discrimination and injustices.

The term Stigma was coined by Goffman in the year 1963, to highlight those features of the society where individuals are devalued and considered unfit to be a part of the mainstream society. The process of stigmatization, what it does is it strengthens the stigmatizers against the unforeseen future and troubles by outcasting people who seem to be a problem. Social stigma tends to add disgrace to a person as it sets him or her apart from the others.

Social stigma in the context of health is far worse. It is associated with people who are infected or can be suspected as carriers of a disease. Such stigmatization increases the suffering of the already vulnerable people and it is unfortunately associated with anyone and everyone linked to the patient.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been the biggest human massacre experienced post the Second World War. The value of human lives has been reduced to nickel and survival has become our biggest challenge. The whole world has come to a standstill and the healthcare systems are crashing. There is distress and adversity everywhere one looks with death knocking on doorsteps.

Since absolutely nothing or very little is known about the virus it is making situations worse. As far as Covid-19 is concerned the world is spiralling in darkness. Knowledge is said to be human strength, knowledge is what makes humans stand out amongst other living creatures. Situations like the pandemic has drained all human knowledge and driven mankind defenceless in the face of adversity. The biggest challenge of Covid-19 is not the illness rather it is the world of the unknown, the questions of whose answers still stand unanswered which is causing havoc far and wide.

Since Covid-19 is being this all powerful and mighty people are criminalising those who are unfortunately infected by it. It is the way of the world that when the powerful and the mighty cannot be demeaned or won over, society starts tormenting the ones who are already victims of it. Something similar is happening in the world with Covid-19.

The pandemic has driven the mutually coexisting society into a rift. The population infected by the virus is being labelled as the 'other' and is being disapproved of. This 'othering' is helping people fill up those blank spots left from the lack of information about the pandemic.

Stigmatisation is a process through which people try to find balance in their lives. By attaching labels on people the society secures a safe place and acquires a justification for dividing the society in between 'us and them'. While the stigmatizers create a safe space for themselves the stigmatized undergo both physical and mental distress through it.

The pandemic which blew its first wind of destruction somewhere around March 2020 has taken a toll on humanity. Humanity is suffering large and wide. Pandemic still seems to be indestructible. The country has suffered unrecoverable loss of people. Families have been cleaned out by the virus there is destruction and grief everywhere. Life has come to a complete standstill and taking one day at a time has become the new normal. Money, job, career have all taken a backseat staying alive has become the most important aspect. Sadly, relief still seems to be a farfetched dream.



The fear of social stigma is not allowing people to report their symptoms or getting tested. The castigation of the patients is to a level where the physical illness seems easier than the mental torture. This is just making situations worse. Not disclosing their illness and moving around the number of infections are shooting up and it is becoming difficult to keep people safe and alive.

Individualism is on its peak now. Where the WHO (World Health Organisation) passed guidelines to control the pandemic people have taken it to a different level. 'Better safe than sorry' is being used to cover up the selfishness humans have come to. Social distancing, quarantine and isolation have been powerful tools to control the spread but they have also become tools in the hands of the powerful against the weak.

Countrywide lockdown helped in saving humongous amounts of lives from the pandemic. It helped us avoid social transmission what it also did was solidify the nexus of power dynamics. Where the majority stayed at home and enjoyed family time in sheer luxury the poor migrant workers were driven jobless and homeless. On returning home they were not allowed to enter their villages in the fear of being carriers. They were kept outside the vicinity with little or no arrangements to food or water. The only mistake of those workers was that they returned home when there was no work.

People staying in rented accommodations also bore the brunt of the pandemic. The landlords have kicked their tenants out if they have reported any symptoms attached to Covid-19. Even before a person could be tested and declared a patient of Covid-19 they seem to lose their houses. Sick, miserable and on the streets homeless is what people have undergone. No food, no place to rest and no proper support all this have resulted in patients submitting to the disease and a family in losing a loved one.

The fear of the virus has overpowered humanity. Nobody wants to help one another. Hoarding of food and medical supplies for future use is all people can think off. Families who have no Corona patients but the purchasing power are busy hoarding medicines just to feel secure and prepared without giving a thought about those dying due to the lack of medical supply.

Even in such time's people can't stop thinking of profits. Hoarding, black marketing are a regular activity now. To save their dying loved ones, families would agree to pay anything for medications and other necessities people are misusing the situation and selling it at four times the actual price. Someone's need is becoming someone's business is where it becomes evident how mercenary mankind has become.

Ill- treatment with those who are sick and in need is becoming an everyday tale. Unfortunately, the discrimination is not just against people who are sick it is also being carried against their families and the healthcare workers trying to be of help in such stressful times. Doctors and nurses have come forward and recited tales about the injustices of people. The doctors serving in Covid hospitals are walking or cycling their way to work as the public is abstaining them from using public transport due to the fear of being infected. Healthcare workers are being kicked out of their houses. They are being abused, beaten up, spit on and tortured if they are unable to save patients.

The sanitisation workers, cleaners, rag pickers who are doing their best to stop the chain of infections by stepping out of their houses and working for the benefits of one and all are being discriminated. Nobody is ready to hand them even a glass of water for being the brave warriors against the Covid-19. Shrinking morals and demonic way of life has become the latest trend.

We need to stop and think. Think of what are we doing. We are criminalising the ones unfortunately infected rather than helping them fight the illness. We are creating categories 'infected' and 'fit'. We are turning our backs against our near and dear ones in times of desperate needs. Someone is dead and no one from the family is turning up to claim the body. Kicking the old out of the house as they are more prone to be infected. What has the world come to. We need to stop and think.



Acknowledging the affected as victims rather than the source is what will be helpful. Standing together in the face of adversity can be our power and not dividing the society. Times are tough but so are we. If powerful and resourceful use it for helping the ones in need it will help us come out of this disaster sooner and stronger. The stigma and the discrimination needs to stop otherwise the psychological brunt of the pandemic will be borne longer than the physical ones.

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