

Spirituality in the times of epidemics/pandemics: A comparative study based on plague and covid 19

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***Abstract:** There are two diverse ways in which we measure the term religiosity and epidemics. But they do have a common channel of lineage. The names of that link belief and fright or it can have called that both are the opposite side of the same link. It is indeed the medical science that helps us get rid of any health ailment, but through the ages, the genre of human civilization has depicted that how people considered praying to God or practicing religious customs as a method to recover from the disease. In this paper, the authors have tried to highlight the health hazards that were predominant in two eras namely the 19th and the 20th century and how spirituality has linked the two eras with a common note of togetherness, which acted as one of the remedies to overcome the fright formed by the health hazards.*

Keywords: Epidemics, lineage, civilization, hazards

The essential theme of this paper is to highlight the basic connection between spirituality and fear of death during the times of epidemics or pandemics. As of right now, the entire world is bizarre with the fear of a virus that might cause death or fatal sufferings. In West Bengal also the people are passing through this grave situation which has a severe impact on the livelihood of many irrespective of their socio-economic background. The Covid 19 pandemic is not only a virus causing damage to the body it is also ruining the world economy and obliging the mass towards unemployment, poverty and mental illness. This is not only in the case of Covid 19 rather it is pertinent through the ages when pandemics or the epidemics ravaged us. Even in the ancient Ayurvedic texts, we get the references of epidemics.

Now the question is how can we relate spirituality with large-scale morbidity? Here I would like to mention an article which was published in one of the leading vernacular health journals of Bengal in the 19th century when the country was facing the threats of plague as an epidemic. The article described how people took resort to mysticism to enhance their mental strength amidst the grave crisis.

The article started in the following manner, - "Once it was started by a noble-hearted person, 'I admire trouble because without its presence it is difficult to identify who is a true friend.' We shall too commit- 'we also esteem trouble/danger as deprived of its occurrence it's problematic to recognize God, the mind won't be able to pursue His auspicious omnipotence.' All of us are busy to accomplish materialistic pleasure, like how to have a house of concrete, how to make the wife delighted by purchasing five stunning gold ornaments, how to keep our children happy and finally how to have a better situation to some extent in our lives, we are so much engrossed in these thoughts

– hardly we get time to think about God or to indulge ourselves to experience His infinite command and munificence. Here I am not saying that all of us are having the same approach to God. But the majority of us tend to believe in Him only during the time of emergency. “Some of us in a day or a week use to spend half an hour for adorning Almighty, who is an enigmatic, absolute, precious, infinite, immortal, and glorified noble soul. When we are living in an abundant state of happiness, the call from within to reduce love for God seems to us as a mere matter of jargonistic or without the essence of vivacity (nirosh) and bitter (karkosh). There are times also when we have to overlook our allurements for the earthly desires and to rush to Almighty forgetting ourselves. From that perspective, it can be said that our true companion is danger or the crisis which makes our livelihood at a stake.”¹

It seems like praying to God is the last recourse that we do have. For instance, at times when somebody is in a critical condition in the hospital and the doctors also do not know what can the outcome be, they often tend to reconcile to the patient's family saying –“Praying to God, can be your final resort”. Does that mean God is only the last option? But why do not consider his presence from the very beginning, and start praying regularly? It is our eternal belief that we exist because of the Unnamed Almighty and in our subliminal mind, it is this belief of ours that affords us with the spur to proceed in life, not to lose faith, whatever grimed situation may arise, whatever health ailment may occur. Even an old ailed dying human holds his last breath only with the expectation of survival. The belief in almighty escalates that expectation.

The question of HIS existence or non-existence has always been a contentious and debatable issue in our prevailing society. But here the question not about HIS existence. It is about the belief of HIS existence, of HIS subsistence. One of the premier focuses of the author in this write up is that belief. He tried to point out that people should shift this belief from their subconscious mind to the cognizant one. Once they do that they would be able to fight all the battles including the epidemics and pandemics.

Perhaps the author through this piece of writing wanted to make people aware of the prominence of God in our lives which is far more precious than any earthly materialistic desires. He pointed out that how the people in their good times are not that much inclined to spirituality, but during the crisis they use to remember Almighty to get rid of. This particular portion of the article is deemed to be philosophical as well as thought-provoking. It was furthermore stated- “Since the last three years, Plague has entered in Calcutta. When it gets lethal, we are compelled to address God. Last year when Plague became deadly, people started to perform samkirtan (worshipping God through songs accompanied by dance, an act by the disciples of a particular religious sect, here the Vaishnavs) to a great extent. Samkirtan usually ends with the remission of the Plague. This year Plague has taken a terminal shape and again the mass is getting attracted towards samkirtan. Every day the mob from the different localities is coming out on the streets and performing samkirtan . Hundreds of people in groups are getting assembled at the various places and by chanting harinam (the name of Lord Hari, Krishna) creating an aura of splendor for both the audience and the listeners. The Muslims in a large number are also participating in these Naam kirtans (chanting the name of God through devotional songs).”²

From this above-mentioned passage, it is pertinent that how people captivated in spirituality during the time of plague where we find an inclusive approach to religious plurality. Here Hari was not an emblem of a particular sect, rather his presence was omnipotence. This universal manifestation of Hari through music or samkirtan got a holy appreciativeness amongst the devotees. The adherents used to believe that through the chanting of the names of God they would be saved from the grasps of the ailment plague as their strength of mind could help them to overcome their physical and mental sufferings.

The author had portrayed spirituality as a powerful intermediate to boost up immunity. Though scientifically he was not correct, his trust in God cannot be questioned as it enhances mental courage. In India, right now people are worshipping Corona Devi to get rid of the disease. Many of us tend to mock or ridicule this issue, but that is creating some sort of comfort to those who are perhaps feeling restlessness in this lockdown period.

In other words, spirituality is a sacred feeling but not necessarily a religious concept. Any particular religion can preach spirituality but cannot own this concept in a greater sense. From this perspective, it would be presumed that the assimilation of a large number of people to chant the name of God can be seen as an attempt to calm the restless mind and to keep faith in universal brotherhood. Nowadays we can also witness this kind of mentality amongst several people who are trying to create an environment through social media where peaceful coexistence matters irrespective of socio-political, religious and ethnographical identities.

It was also stated in the article, - "Is it practically possible to eliminate Plague by performing Samkirtan? Wise people surely admit that Samkirtan has no power over the Plague. Samkirtan is neither a medicine for Plague nor a precaution from this particular ailment, but we believe through the generations that Samkirtan has an authoritarian control over Plague or *maribhoy* (epidemic). We have mentioned the reasons behind this trust. If there is a *maribhoy* in the country, people's mind gets attracted to it. We can see how day by day, even in hours, people are dying as the victims of Plague irrespective of their financial status, as Plague does not consider who is rich or who has no wealth. Somebody is losing father, someone's son is dead, and a widower is lamenting for his wife who is no more, on the other hand, a poor wife who has lost her husband left all aspirations for life – is it possible to tranquil our mind after repeatedly witnessing all these heartbreaking visions? If you have no other option excepting to listen to those howling of "Balo Hari Hari bol" (addressing Lord Hari, Krishna), "Ram Naam Satya" (The name of Lord Ram or his auspicious presence is the only truth in this world) through day and night, do you think, it's possible for anyone not to be frightened, shocked and anxious? If in a householder's place, amongst the 10 families, 5 to 6 families would have died just in a short period of 2 to 5 days, then those who are alive, could be they able to aspire for life? Therefore, in whatever form the *maribhoy* (epidemic) appears, people get terrified, worried, nervous and restless." ³

The author knew it well samkirtan is not the remedy for plague but it made them mentally strong enough to accept the reality. Similarly, nowadays people rushing to the temples, churches, or mosques if possible, are mostly aware of the fact that their faith in God would make them courageous to face the turbulence. Though due to the fear of contamination, people are not allowed to assemble in a large number maintaining the norms of social distancing, but in their subconscious mind, the

majority of the people are keeping prayers to assent the fear. They want to conquer the fear with the help of their will power. During the plague epidemic, though the British government put the norms of quarantine, people did samkirtan and perhaps did not face any threat from the Government. It is important to find out more references on how the colonial Government tackled the problem of plague in Bengal to make a comparison with the present situation.

The above-mentioned article was an important piece of how the natives tried to calm their minds during the epidemics. It talked about the mental health issues where spirituality acted like an allegory. This article was on spirituality indeed but it did not preach any religion. From this particular perspective, it seeks appreciation. We expect this kind of writings even now as they are inspiring. Unfortunately, in the present situation through social networking sites, we hardly get such a calming peace of thoughts. It is a truth, that home isolation makes people mentally ill and physically fragile especially if it continues for a long. During the colonial regime, particularly when the plague epidemic was going on, there were rules on quarantine, but these were aimed at those who were coming from outside Bengal. We need to have more researches on it.

Lastly, the article ended with this kind of note- "We all know and can understand that, if the doctor is nearby the patient, or comes to visit him/her every day, that does not cure the ailment, but still if the doctor won't come the patient gets anxiety and with his presence he/she feels secure. This trust in many cases can work like a magic spell. If the medicine is ineffective, the doctors are doubtful and confused about the illness, and if that particular disease takes a virulent shape then what is there which can make people undaunted, confident and valiant? Do we have any other option except surrendering ourselves to the feet of God? That's 'why, if there is Plague or any other maribhoy , people do address God, perform Naam kirtan of God, focus on the precepts of Him to achieve morale boost. The mass of Bengal, for this reason, perform samkirtan. Either you can address Hari, or Jesus or Allah, - the main concern is dedicating yourself to God when there is trouble. It's based on people's discretion to choose their paths of devotion. People do believe through naamkirtan (chanting the holy name through kirtan) they would be able to get rid of their household responsibilities as samsar (household) causes unhappiness (samsarbhiti, afraid to be a part of the samsar) and could be successful to get out of the danger which are they facing, - this particular belief inspires people to surrender to God. Where this belief is firm there they get results. The readers of Swasthya must be aware of the fact that trust can also heal illness. Where this acceptance is firm there the outcomes are more optimistic and highly assured. The acceptance of religion has now become a shadow of dusk for the educated society. The illiterate society, women of our country and menials (itor) still have faith in God. As they strongly believe, that's why are getting positive results by scrupulously dedicating themselves to adoring God (hatya- sitting at a temple and not leaving the place until the wish gets fulfilled) at Tarkeswar (famous for Shiva Temple, where thousands of pilgrims visit every day) and the other places. I have rarely heard that educated people got their wishes fulfilled by doing the same. You can label it either as superstition or dark belief or anything else, but for us, the main concern should be the outcome. When we have seen that the menials are getting affected by Plague to the most, women are dying more in numbers than men, then if they could be religiously rejuvenated by samkirtan and become faithful followers then who says we would not be succeeded to achieve the fruitful results? From this perspective, it is justified to consider that samkirtan can decrease the effects of the Plague. Let the Government does in what it

believes, let the subjects allow acting according to their faith. We will be pleased if both the outcomes can indicate an auspicious culmination.”⁴

In this last paragraph, the author had given importance to both spirituality and science as both are needed to heal the body and mind. Similarly, in the present situation, we have to be spiritually furbished as well as physically strong enough to face the turbulence. People are doing yoga and meditation to keep themselves free from tensions and anxiety. Some people have to go to the office also during this lockdown and they are more vulnerable to the coronavirus but people have belief in the Almighty and are accepting the reality. Though the idea of having samkirtans are not or won't be welcomed in the present situation virtual worshipping is possible in this 21st century as to how ISKON had the Rathajatra this year in Kolkata and made it virtual for the devotees. In Puri, people were not allowed to participate in the Rathayatra but the live telecast made possible the darshan for millions of believers.

Conclusion/Observation:

This article aims to make a thoughtful survey between the two health hazards which took place 20th and 21st centuries respectively. Here spirituality has linked the two eras with a common note i.e. togetherness. Love and affection for each other is the best remedy to keep people strong when there is a predicament. When the author wrote the article at that time the awareness of mental health was not pertinent. Through his article, he advised others to stay calm and resorted to devoutness. Similarly, nowadays many people at home are showing their faith in God to overcome the difficulties. The economy of the nation is under threat, the health facilities are shaken and the political condition is also disturbing. Many people including celebrities committed suicide out of depression and we are all exposed to the harsh realities of this materialistic world. We need to soothe our mind and soul to have a better life, though we are not sure when we will be able to back to normal life again. People started believing in the term known as the 'new normal' and those who live below the poverty line either jobless right now or have to go out to earn money by risking their lives. Science is showing some positivity but till now there is no confirmed vaccination for the virus. Hope we will be able to find out a solution shortly.

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