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Social Media and Social Distancing: Moving towards a 'New Normal'

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ABSTRACT

In this age of easy accessibility of data and information via social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter etc. the major concerns are the 'facts' that are being circulated. However, this very accessibility has helped in generating mass awareness among the Indian population in times of the pandemic Coronavirus/ COVID 19 episode, which has emerged as a global threat. This article is a humble contribution to the understanding of how social media empowered people with knowledge about the virus. The thrust of this work lies in understanding common life and how people were slowly being acclimatized to a 'new normal' just before lockdown was announced in India owing to the COVID 19 crisis. The research work is based on participant observation and case study method, wherein, I have taken into account the lives of some of the domestic help and daily wage workers who have not completed their formal education, yet actively follow WhatsApp or other such social media platforms. This work stems from their actions, reactions and activities that I had observed before the onset of the lockdown. I have drawn herein how the social media as a virtual contact had impacted and brought about social, cultural and behavioural changes in their everyday lives during the COVID 19 pandemic, social change which otherwise is based primarily on one to one contact.

Keywords: Coronavirus/COVID-19, Social media, Social distancing, Social change, Lockdown in Delhi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The affordable social media platforms, their easy accessibility and availability in the Indian context have been much in debate. The launch of the android mobile phones bundled with low tariffs that allow easy access to the online sources has made its way into the everyday lives of the masses. Almost every Indian, be it in rural or urban India,

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is a proud owner of a mobile phone. Today, mobile phones are listed as an essential item, with some having dual SIMs, while others are in possession of more than one phone.

WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are some of the social media platforms that allow social communication. These platforms are widely used for forwarding, receiving and sharing of information that is known as messages more so via pictures and videos. Ingram (2018) has reported WhatsApp as the major source of fake news in India. As per Singh (2019) WhatsApp had amassed 400 million users in India, making it one of the most popular messaging platforms that was created in 2009, and presently owned by Facebook.

In the past few months as India too became a part of the Lockdown episodes to combat the COVID 19¹ pandemic, it is the social media that has kept everyone connected. India saw a surge in the usage of social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter etc. However, the major concerns stem from the 'facts' that are being circulated. As social media is not free from its own biases, manipulation of discourses is also much in the limelight (Singh, 2020).

At this juncture, this work looks at how the common people have perceived and are trying to adhere to preventive measures to ward off the virus, through the knowledge that is being imbibed and put in practice, which is widely being circulated via social media sources. This account is based on participant observation and case studies that delves into the lives of the common people in Delhi to understand how they were moving towards a 'new normal' before the onset of the lockdown. It takes into consideration the role that social media has played in creating cognizance about the pandemic Coronavirus. This paper argues, notwithstanding the 'dark forces' of social media, the very easy accessibility to information via social media platforms, the virtual

The 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei, China, in December 2019, and was recognised as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. Initially named as novel coronavirus. Novel stands for a new pathogen of a previously known type, later as the strand was detected as COVID-19 it was renamed as such.

world has helped in generating awareness and bringing in social and cultural changes during the COVID-19 episode, which is now a global threat.

The discussion would not pertain to the authenticity of the videos and messages that are being circulated in the social media sites. The aim here is to understand how social media as a virtual contact has reckoned itself as a medium for social change, that has helped in spreading awareness as people moved towards a 'new normal'. I shall be sharing some of the perceptions, interpretations, and the precautionary measures to combat Coronavirus, based on social media communications, that are adherently being incorporated by people in their daily lives today. My informants for this article are people who have not completed their formal education, yet are active on social media platforms, and with whom I had interacted on a daily basis before the onset of the call for complete lockdown in India announced on 24th March, 2020. I have also taken into consideration some observations shared by my colleagues and friends about their domestic helps.

Why to eat snake and bats? Restrictions on Non-Vegetarian Food

On a cold winter morning, around early January, 2020 as I opened the door for my domestic help Vijaya, the first thing she jabbered about was "What kind of a virus is this? Why do people need to eat snakes and bats?" Her question indicated that she was well informed of global affairs, and not concerned with the neighbourhood gossip alone. She had used the term virus and not disease or bacteria. It was still the initial stages, on 31st December, 2019; China had reported cases of people being infected with the novel virus in Wuhan province. The news channels reported that the mode of transmission had been from animal to human, with the cause of the virus being speculated as arising probably from eating bats, though not confirmed.

Soon after the report by China, the social media sites were flooded with market scenes from Wuhan. The widely circulated videos were of the meat markets. Vijaya stated that she felt nauseous after viewing the videos. The first step she took was to ask her husband to forgo non-vegetarian food. She cited the grossness of the meat markets in the videos and requested that I too refrain from cooking, consuming and online ordering (home delivery) of non-vegetarian food for a couple of days. My weekend indulgence

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of cooking non-vegetarian food also came under her scanner. As Vijaya lamented about non-vegetarian food and its viciousness, the picture that immediately flashed in my mind was the cartoon of the cock widely being circulated in social media during that time. The cock in the cartoon was complaining that: "whatever disease or virus or bacteria attacks the human world, we are the first ones to be blamed for it". This image was doing the maximum rounds in the social media sites. News of mass slaughter of poultry was also much in circulation, though no videos were available. Food as to what to eat and not eat was one of the initial concerns that had stormed the social media platforms leading to restriction in terms of non-vegetarian food.

Speculations and Anxiety: Where are we in the Global count?

The news of Coronavirus endemic (on 11th March, 2020 World Health Organization declared it as pandemic), its rapid spread and death toll in China, and the news of outbreaks in European countries like Italy and France made its way. Singapore was another much talked about space and how the government initiatives could tackle the issue and keep it under control with its proactive measures. The cases in the USA and UK made us sit back and think. This was the time social media reports of Tom Hanks and his wife travelling from Australia and being tested positive for the virus flooded the social media sites. The news of the Canadian Prime Minister's wife, who fell prey to the virus while returning from the USA, made us realize that the situation can quickly go out of control; the nature of the virus was such. The reports on the celebrities caught much attention in the social media circuits.

Till then it was still distant news, but slowly it was coming closer. The news of cases detected in Kerala and Mumbai around Mid-February were the warning bells for us in Delhi. Yet, we continued with our daily lives discussing the virus during our lunch and tea breaks. Some of us were being warned by relatives to buy mask, sanitizers² and

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As novel corona virus/COVID 19 cases continue to grow; health officials are urging people to practice good hand hygiene. The illness can spread from an infected person to others through air by coughing and sneezing or by touching a contaminated surface and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes prior to hand washing. "If you wear a face mask, you can prevent those droplets from hitting your face or mouth before they drop to the ground," Dr. Adalja says. https://www.prevention.com/health/a30677242/can-face-mask-prevent-coronavirus/ accessed on 23rd March, 2020, Sanitizers are being promoted for maintaining hygiene of hands, as we often touch our face, which could lead to contamination.

stock up on essentials, as the supermarket shelves in many of the affected countries were fast going empty. Panic buying had become the norm in those countries and the videos circulated via social media, slowly woke us from our slumber. The video clips of long queues in South Korea for procuring masks were alarming. However, the first reported case in Delhi on 2nd March, 2020 reported by all the media channels made us sit up straight and it was no longer a distant happening, but a reality that has hit us hard.

2. SOCIAL DISTANCING: A NEW FACET

During this time, Vijaya was concerned about the safety of her school going daughter. She had taught her daughter not to touch her face, yet as a kindergarten student she many times couldn't remember the instructions. The announcement of the closure of schools and colleges for students by the Delhi government came around the second week of March. This made Vijaya sigh with relief. The day the announcement was made she was much calmer and the anxiety in her diminished by leaps and bounds. This was the time social distancing was being discussed as the only preventive measure. As per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) recommendation, social distancing involves "remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining distance" whenever possible to limit the ability of the virus to spread (Bates, 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic saw social distancing as a means to minimize contact in order to contain and limit transferring and spreading of the virus. In the Indian context social distancing and social isolation however, are not new terms, as it has been much prevalent in the caste-based society. Social distancing was recommended as a behavioural practice to lower the risk of contact and not as part of maintaining ritual purity during the pandemic times.

Videos mostly TikTok³ on social distancing started doing the rounds on the social media platforms. Most of the video content in circulation, though hilarious, had a strong

TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social networking service owned by ByteDance, a Beijing-based company founded in 2012 by Zhang Yiming. It is used to create short dance, lip-sync, comedy, and talent videos. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TikTok. Meme is an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users. Often with slight variations the memes are widely circulated via the social media platforms. Presently the TikTok videos are banned in India.

message. In most videos people were seen running helter skelter or like a bullet shot while trying to distance themselves from any person either sneezing, or coughing. Others showed how couples threw each other out of the house if they coughed or sneezed. Some showed people trying to maintain distance while taking the stairs, lifts, standing in queues etc. Vijaya, recounted one of the prominent videos that showed a masked man opening the front door for his partner, she (masked as well) in her excitement hugs him with groceries and all. But as the lady sneezed, the man promptly threw (almost kicking) her out of the house, and the bag of groceries met the same fate. Wherein, the man quickly changed his clothes. The messages were clear - keep distance and remove everything contaminated at the earliest. There were the instructional videos too, that promoted coughing or sneezing into the arm or elbow rather than into the cup of the hands, as we normally do, or to move around with a mask and gloves. The national videos in the social media platforms were still pre-conspicuous by their absence, what we had were videos from the affected countries.

How prepared were we to face the situation? The social media sites gave us the answers. The awareness level in the community was surprisingly high. It was not only a matter of discussion among the academia, the health professionals or the bureaucrats, but the common person who comprises the chunk of our population was increasingly aware. Vijaya, every morning would come up with the latest happenings, facts and figures which were not just rumors, but were also about prevention and precautions. She would not touch anything in the house till she had washed her hands with soap and water; even I had to close the door once she walked into the house, as she didn't want to usher in the 'dangerous guest' (Srivastava 2020). Vijaya feared that she might have polluted (contaminated) herself while walking to my house, as the virus was also suspected to be airborne. The concept of purity and pollution today had a new meaning. It is no longer a part of the ritual activities but washing hands was slowly becoming a ritual in itself to combat the virus.

Vijaya was constantly seeking answers to queries of how we can prevent it from spreading as the vaccine was not available. The non-availability of vaccines was her major concern. The knowledge about the benefits of vaccination as a precautionary measure owes it to the charitable hospital where Vijaya had vaccinated both her

daughters. She would browse the social media sites and update me about the new videos on precautionary measures, mostly home remedies like drinking hot water, including lemon and garlic among the food to be consumed every day. The basic idea was to strengthen immunity and not fall prey.

The day she learned about these as 'effective precautionary measure' she insisted on adding garlic in almost every food item except rice and roti. Sharing a recipe of how to drink garlic juice which included boiling flakes of garlic in water for 20 minutes and thereafter drinking the water throughout the day, Vijaya was much enthusiastic about incorporating it in daily routine for her family. Likewise, for lemon juice, she was specific, as per the videos doing the rounds in the social media platforms, it had to be added in hot water. The logical reason as per the videos was that the hot water would kill the virus as it cannot sustain heat. However, some videos and audios also promoted that drinking warm water or any liquid would stop mucus from getting stuck in the airways, as once it gets stuck; it becomes hard leading to dry coughs. Some videos, at the same time negated the effectiveness of these home remedies leading to much confusion, yet others cited quotes from Vedic scriptures and ancient healing techniques including Patanajli⁴, to present them as authentic sources. The effectiveness of the home remedies that were rapidly doing the rounds on the social media platforms is still not known, however, many were trying to incorporate some of them in their daily lives, and at this juncture prevention was the mantra. Without any research to prove effectiveness, everyone resorted to comply with whatever was being circulated.

Sanitizers overnight becomes the knight in shining armour: The New Normal

Information and precautionary measures were not shared by my domestic help alone, even in the office the lady who comes to clean and the one who runs errands like making tea, had their own share of stories. The cleaning lady asked for a duster to clean the surfaces, while earlier she used to carry her own duster, the reason she gave was to

Patanjali was a sage in India, thought to be the author of a number of Sanskrit texts. The greatest of these are the *Yoga Sutras*, a classical yoga text. There is doubt as to whether the sage Patañjali is the author of all the works attributed to him as there are a number of known historical authors of the same name. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted over the last century to the issue of the historicity or identity of this author or these authors. *Raghavan*, *V.; et al.* (1968). *New Catalogus Catalogorum*. 11. *Madras: University of Madras. pp.* 89–90. lists ten separate authors by the name of "Patañjali." Accessed on Wikipedia on 24th March, 2020

avoid contamination, "If I use separate duster for each room, I would not be carrying around the virus". She moved freely from one room to the other, as at every entry and exit points in our University sanitizers were placed, doors as far as possible were kept open, minimizing contact points.

On entering the office, Manju would hold out her hands and ask me to spray some sanitizer on them. After thoroughly rubbing her hands together (as demonstrated in some of the widely circulated videos) she would touch the kettle. Once when I was about to receive some office dak (post), she stopped me and indicated the person to just drop the papers on the edge of the table. Jamming one foot she held the door open for him, which prevented him from touching the door knob. In earlier times, it would have been sacrilege to use the tip of the toes to open, shut or stop the door. It would have been considered as highly inappropriate behaviour. But now it is becoming an accepted norm, as it minimizes direct contact with hand, a source that could lead to touching the face and being infected, if contaminated. Social distancing in our everyday lives was slowly creeping in, what was earlier opposed as abnormal (social distancing as in a caste-based practice) was now becoming the new normal behaviour. As soon as the dak person left, Manju was concerned about the contamination of the papers and she asked if the papers ought to be sanitized? She entreated me not to touch the papers for a few hours. This information came from the videos that were circulating on hygiene and fomites. These videos presented information on how groceries or anything that came from outside needs to be left aside and not touched for 24 hours, the speculated lifespan of the virus. Some WhatsApp messages were also providing a list of items and the duration that the virus would remain active on various surfaces. Sunlight has been promoted as the destructor of the virus and how with the rise in temperature, the virus would meet its natural death. These are however, mere assumptions yet to be proven. Authentic sources are still missing on such information. However, as precautionary measures, these videos doing the rounds in the social media circuits, significantly created awareness among the masses in terms of hygiene.

Using soap and water to wash hands was being advised in most videos. However, the question of contamination via the use of soap and water was raised by my friend's house help. Misti came in fuming the day, soap and water was provided at the entry gate of

the residential complex. She stated, "They have kept soap and water, but no sense of hygiene. When I went to wash my hands there was foam on the soap left by the previous user, wouldn't using that same soiled soap lead to contamination? I have asked them to provide liquid soap, else am not washing my hands tomorrow". Misti's point on the existing lather on the soap and leading to contamination, expressed how deeply and with reason everyone is thinking and not just blindly following the social media communications. The seriousness of the crisis was making everyone alert. While at my place Vijaya, was strictly following the protocol of washing the milk packet that was being delivered at the door step every morning, with detergent and water. She would pick up the packet from the delivery basket using the tip of her fingers, the catch was minimal contact. The vegetables also met the same fate of being washed, though not with soap water. She emphasized that these were the contact sources that could lead to contamination and the spread of the virus. It was basically about fomites, surfaces, objects or materials which are likely to carry infection, such as clothes, utensils, plastic packets, furniture etc. The day before lockdown was announced Vijaya wore disposable gloves while going about her daily chores and came to work wearing a mask. She stated that the mask was bought at a very high price as the local chemists stated the unavailability of mask. Mask, sanitizers and gloves have become one of the hottest selling products. By this time there was a rise in Corona cases in Delhi and reports were coming in that India would soon reach the second stage, and there were high speculations of the virus spreading in the community. There were many videos on social media proposing theories of how the virus would spread in the community and the only solution to that was 'Social Distancing'.

Lockdown of Italy was also in place during this time. Social media was flooded with the everyday life of the Italians from their balconies. By this time videos of people recovering or in the process of recovering sending out a message to the masses to stay safe was also emerging. One such video that was circulated showed the Canadian Prime Minister's wife addressing the people from her hospital bed. While she spoke the dry cough, which kept interrupting her speech, made her breathless. Later it was clarified that the video was not of the Canadian Prime Minister's wife but of some other lady

suffering from COVID 19. Vijaya even though she couldn't follow the language, said that the video gave her goosebumps when she saw how the lady was suffering.

It's our time to reach out to the masses: Generating Social Messages through Social Media

Most of the local TikTok videos, memes started doing the rounds when the virus was detected in India. Initially, the videos were on social distancing. Among the many videos on social distancing the one which showed a scene outside a local liquor shop hit a mark with a punch. The area for queuing up was clearly demarcated with white square boxes, the people waiting in the queue patiently moved from one box to the other without touching each other. This video seemed more like a sequence to an earlier video. In that video, shot after a dry day⁵ showed an early morning scene, people patiently waiting for the liquor shop to open. But as soon as the bar was raised, people toppled over each other to reach the counter. The mayhem of the first video was replaced by the systematized wait in white square boxes in a queue, the norm being social distancing under the present circumstances. The videos on liquor sale were of much prominence as it was reckoned as the saviour of the country's staggering economy in later times after the first lockdown was relaxed.

With the Prime Minister of India addressing the nation via television on 19th March, 2020, it saw the social media sites flooding with authentically made in India videos. In his speech he had reached out to the people of the nation to spread the message to stay indoors from 7am to 9 pm on 22nd March, 2020 and observe Janata Curfew⁶. He had appealed to the masses to stay inside their houses and only come out on to their balcony or a window at 5 pm, and as a mark of appreciation clap, ring a bell, or use any source/medium to create sound for the health care providers and sanitation department who are working tirelessly on a war footing to fight the virus. The Prime Minister had urged everyone to reach out via social media platforms, and widely circulate for the

the restriction is only on the sale of liquor.

anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The consumption of liquor though is not prohibited on this day;

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Dry Day in the Indian context is the day on which the sale of liquor is prohibited. These are the days observed as national holidays, like 2^{nd} October is a dry day, when the nation observes the birth

Janata (public) Curfew is imposing a curfew on the self, restricting movements and not going out of the house. The Prime Minister of India urged the nation to self- impose restrictions from moving out of the house on 22nd March, 2020 as a measure to combat the rise of Coronavirus.

compliance of the Janata Curfew, to make it a success and win the battle against Coronavirus. Within a short span of time many local messages and videos (mostly TikTok) were in circulation. One of my colleagues described the TikTok video that her domestic help had created. The domestic help posted the video as her WhatsApp status and thus, was easily accessible to all her WhatsApp contacts.

The lady (domestic help) in the TikTok video with folded hands was requesting everyone to stay indoors and make the Janata Curfew a success. She even updated on how to clap hands and show appreciation to the health care workers and the people working in the sanitation department. In her video the backdrop had the Indian flag. This video is of much significance as it was not a forwarded one; the lady had created her own video to reach out to the masses. It was her contribution to the cause and spreading awareness. There were many such videos created locally which became much popular in social media sites.

3. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The Janata Curfew extended and rolled out to a lockdown of Delhi. On 24th March, 2020 midnight India was under complete lockdown for 21 days, followed by a series of days when the lockdown was partially relaxed. Overall, in many states the lockdown continues to be in place as per the directives given by each state government.

The lockdown has created new mediums of social communication and interactions. As an example; a game of tambola being played from the balconies in a residential complex in India is worth mentioning here. A lady using a loud speaker rolls out the housie numbers and anyone who gets the rows or corners are seen flashing their number card. Balcony interactions came up as a much-desired way of communicating with neighbours which earlier in a metropolitan city was rarely heard of.

For long, social media and the virtual world has been blamed for enslaving the younger generation. A topic widely debated and discussed in the academia. However, it is social media in India with its easy accessibility, which has helped the cause of creating awareness among the masses during the pandemic. Had it not been for social media it would have been impossible to reach out to the Indian population that is around 1.3 billion. The short videos, were effective as it retained the concentration span, were self-

explanatory in nature, and the humour component added the needed punch. No doubt social media platforms have time and again been the root cause of much fake news, leading to religious unrest, violence and protest, the misinterpretation of the Janata Curfew even led to mass gathering in many places. However, at this crucial time when reaching out to the community is of utmost priority, these platforms have turned out to be major forces that are bringing about changes in terms of social behaviour.

Social change is reckoned to be a slow and gradual process. In anthropological discourses, processes of acculturation, assimilation and also socialization emphasize on social contact largely depending on one to one interaction as the harbinger of social change. During the COVID 19 pandemic, social distancing has become the norm and social contact in terms of physical one to one interaction has been minimized. Yet this phase has seen social and cultural changes across cultures via virtual social media platforms. The incorporation of hygiene regime in everyday life that includes hand washing, sanitizing, wearing face masks and gloves as part of precautionary and preventive measures is the 'new normal' that has been imbibed across cultures and societies. This change owes much to the spread of messages via social media platforms. Even today, society is grappling with age old customs of dowry, gender discrimination, domestic violence etc. During this pandemic however, the virtual world as a medium of social interaction has been able to bring about rapid cultural changes. Social media communications have been a reckoning force in terms of ringing in the 'new normal' of wearing masks, gloves and the use of sanitizers while addressing issues of how to maintain social distancing to ward off COVID 19.

Although this article has provided a thumbnail view of the larger complex issue of social distancing that is happening in our society owing to COVID 19, yet it reflects on the changes that are rapidly being accepted as the 'new normal'. Instances of etiquette like how to open and close a door which is part of socialization, today is not questioned when the door is being pushed opened with the tip of the toe, as it helps in reducing contact. Social distancing is adherently followed today and it does not take into account religion, ethnicity, race, caste, creed or gender. Social distance is universally being adhered to and maintained. Mead (1953) had worked on studying cultures at a distance wherein the focus was to understand cultures that were inaccessible due to

Wars (Second World War) through the study of material (secondary data) --books, newspapers, periodicals, films, works of popular and fine art, diaries, letters. However, today the cultures are learning from a distance, as we maintain social distance in society the virtual world comes closer. The uncertainty of going back to 'normal' in the future looms large, as the virus keeps mutating, thus making it difficult to find a cure or vaccine. In such times the socialization process has been taken over by the social communication platforms, during these dark hours of self- quarantining and isolation, when social distancing has become the 'new normal'.

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