

Religion and COVID 19 pandemic in India: Risks and Opportunities

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Opinion

As of May 8th, 2020, in India, more than fifty thousand positive cases have been reported. India, with the second largest population in the world will have difficulty in controlling the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 among its population. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of India has raised serious issue about the recent outbreak and continuously taking necessary actions to check the rapid ongoing spread of COVID-19. Being a federal nation, both the central as well as state governments are taking many positive measures towards formulating several protocols to achieve this much required goal. In India first SARS-CoV-2 case was reported in state of Kerala on January 30th, 2020 followed by a drastic increase in number of cases. India is now facing double as well as triple mutation of the virus in few cases in second wave of pandemic. Between October 2020 and September 2021, over 5,00,000 deaths are projected by various studies in India. It means that India must need serious additional mitigation measures to prevent huge number of additional deaths [1]

A mass meeting, according to the WHO, is a “concentration of people at a given venue for a particular reason for a fixed period of time that has the capacity to strain the country’s or community’s preparation and reaction capabilities.” Every year, millions of tourists flock to religious pilgrimages such as the Lourdes in Catholicism, Hajj in Islam and Hindu holy pilgrimage Hindu holy pilgrimage festival Kumbh Mela, which takes place every three years, will attract up to 120 million people over the course of two months. In certain situations, ensuring the protection and welfare of marginalized people is very difficult [2]. Several researchers have become interested in the effect of faith and its practice on well-being. Religion and spirituality can be beneficial to one’s well-being [3]. There are clear signs that they can have a beneficial effect on physical and mental health. Although religion and spirituality cultivate hope and shared affection, certain practices and faith-based decisions which unwittingly aid the spread

of pandemics. COVID-19 outbreaks have been linked to religious congregations. One of the worst-affected countries has been India [4]. In response to COVID-2019, governments must coordinate resources, including access to COVID-19 testing kits, medical materials, and facilities, provide reliable and timely communication and preserve public confidence in their government. However, it is the responsibility of the host nation to teach its citizens about best practices of prevention from infection, such as consistent hand washing, social distancing, respiratory hygiene, monitoring, and the usage of quarantine [5].

Governments have a short window to minimize the spread of the novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), optimize their healthcare infrastructure, and preserve the public’s confidence in their government, if they follow the current WHO mass gathering guidelines [6]. It’s likely that the Hajj pilgrimage, which is set to take place from July 28 to August 2, will be cancelled this year. Although such a move will be disappointing to the approximately three million Muslims who had expected to travel this year. For the first time in modern history, Holy Week festivities such as the Palm Sunday mass and Good Friday procession at the Vatican would be conducted without the press, while they may be live streamed like regular masses. Due to social distancing laws, Easter, Passover and Ramadan all fell within same week in April, would be severely disrupted. Pilgrims planning to visit the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, for example, should expect to be subjected to the two-week quarantine that Israel imposes on those entering the region, as travel restrictions are likely to remain in effect. During Ramadan, when Muslims fast, communal iftar meals are likely to be cancelled. At this period, Islamic traditions such as Wudhu, which stress body integrity, can be useful in reinforcing the value of hygienic practices, such as the usage of soap or hand sanitizer, in reducing one’s susceptibility to the virus. Authorities advised Muslims to wash their hands often with soap, avoid rubbing their faces, and maintain social distance. Similarly, Sikhs are assisting

citizens affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways, including supplying food and other assistance. Any faith is a blessing, and those who practice it want to improvise it in whatever form they can.

Risks

Kumbh and other mass gatherings are religious celebrations of God at the holy river, involving mass bathing, aarti, and other rituals. It is assumed that the river becomes holy during the well-awaited and celebrated 'Snan', which is why people participate in this auspicious festival. There is an increased health risk compounded in the Kumbh Mela culture. It has been shown that bathing in communities raises the water's bacterial levels and such bacterial and microbial contamination can be a problem [7]. MGEs, such as the Kumbh Mela, have the potential to adversely impact public health and social-related problems that could overwhelm the healthcare system. Since infected individuals are capable of spreading the virus, a transnational rise in Covid19 may occur. It has recently been shown that mass gathering can spread the virus widely [8]. India reported 43,846 new coronavirus cases in the past 24 hours, with its richest state Maharashtra again accounting for about 60% of the infections. India's COVID-19 deaths are above 166,000, although its fatality rate is one of the lowest in the world, partly because of its relatively young population. Other celebratory practices occurred on Holi. Additional orders for Rain dances, free dance programs, and other public activities in Lucknow have been issued, due to the Covid-19 incident [9]. This prior authorization was also terminated. However, Vrindavan and Gorakhpur show vast crowds at the festival. Several elderly people took part in the celebrations, according to the media over the last couple of weeks. 68,000 fresh infections were reported just the next day after Holi [10].

Opportunities

Religion and faith can be allowed greater thought when looking at societal conditions. All healthcare providers are encouraged to be culturally and religiously responsive with their outreach, particularly to a specific demographic target [11]. It might sound like trivial advice, but being respectful of others is vital in respecting their perception of the universe [12]. As a consequence, Ayurveda medicinal findings are applicable to the COVID pandemic. Using a regular ashwagandha extract will help protect our bodies from viral infection and strengthen our immune systems. Both ashwagandha and turmeric from your kitchen can be helpful for your well-being [13]. This helps the body to withstand the virus, in turn. Human immunity is strongly connected to mental well-being and equilibrium. As a consequence, it contributes to emotional well-being and thus global health researchers are rushing to provide a solution for the virus [14]. Nonetheless, in India, Ayurveda is a venerable medicinal knowledge that helps the human body with various functions. "Pranayama" integrates various breathing techniques and operations. These would improve the human body's fitness and aeration. As the pandemic spreads, so does its influence on human culture, anxiety, moodiness, and mental illness. Stress and depression may decrease the respiratory system's capacity [15]. The presence of faith leaders will help communities combat both shame and racism. Compassion and cooperation are essential to fight the novel corona virus. Religious organizations, including small churches and mosques, might be important in combating the effects of the COVID virus [16].

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