

What Does the Covid19 Pandemic Teach Us?

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Key – Coronavirus, Spirituality, Covid19, Empathy, uncertainty

Snap

Article looks at impact- social, economic and psychological.

It outlines 3 principles which can help us deal with present uncertainty.

We can distil the complex impact of the pandemic on the entire world in a single word: uncertainty. An uncertain future is looming large over the entire world. Even after the number of newly affected cases reduces, the virus will still leave indelible evil marks on the peoples' psyche. Many articles in reputed journals point out to the dreadful impact, the pandemic will make, on society, economy, lifestyle, and the very thinking pattern of the individuals. The one central theme in these studies is uncertainty, the fear of the unknown.

Society and Individual

The relationship between individuals and society is organic. Society is a concept while an individual is an actual entity. Individuals are bound by the regularities, customs, and values of a society, which is but a group of people. The individual depends upon society, even though society does not rely on any particular individual.

In the Indian tradition, we have two words to indicate them: *vyashti* and *samashti* - the individual and the collective.

The present crisis is detrimental to both individuals and society. Migrant workers illustrate this point. It shattered their individual lives, jeopardising even the social fabric. For instance, a state government in India delayed permission to the migrants to travel to their states. The reason is that the state did not have enough workforce to replace them in important sectors. It counted on the migrants for the labour force. This instance shows how the adversity among many people reflects on the entire society.

Social Impact

Coronavirus has opened deep wounds in the social structures of several countries including India, usa, UK, and uae. The social disparity deep-rooted among the Indians has been exposed in the form of unrest among the migrant workers. The usa saw more deaths among backward minority groups than the affluent majority. In the UK, more deaths were reported among immigrants who live in deprived conditions. In the uae, the migrant workers from India and Pakistan suffered from the pandemic more than the local people.

The educational system has taken a severe beating because of the pandemic, as over 1.725 billion students in around 172 countries are affected by the closure of the educational institutions, impacting 98.5 per cent of the student population. This is according to the official data released by the UNCESCO on 7 June 2020.¹

Social distance norms imposed by governments worldwide affected the poor people living in crowded shanties. Privileged people avoided the spread of the virus by adhering to social distancing, while millions of unfortunate souls suffered to the extent unheard of in recent times. The virus brutally exposed the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Economic Impact

Global share markets have taken a hit, spreading fear among investors. The unemployment rate is mounting even in rich countries like U.S.A. The closure of several industries has resulted in a massive loss of revenue for the public and private enterprises. The travel industry is on the brink of a disaster as nations after nations have enforced travel restrictions. The oil prices have reached their bottom because of the sudden drop in demand.

The economy is shrinking, affecting millions of poor and vulnerable people. The International Monetary Fund (imf) declared that this crisis is the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It also predicted that the global economy will decline by three per cent in this year itself with a loss of over nine trillion dollars.²

Psychological Impact

According to David Robson, a science journalist, the pandemic has changed our psychological responses to ordinary situations.

We are exhibiting tribal traits and **becoming more conformists**. He says: 'Our moral judgments become harsher and our social attitudes more conservative.' The constant bombardment of information through media has resulted, according to Robson, 'heightened anxiety, with immediate effects on our mental health'.³

A study by David J Ley, a clinical psychologist, published in the Psychology Today says that the concern of people regarding the pandemic is leading to growing reports of xenophobia and racism towards Asian immigrants in the US and other Western countries. There is an overwhelming growth in the 'fear of others who are different from us', which is 'heavily influenced by the local risk of parasitic infections'.⁴

The bottom line in all these psychological maladies is **uncertainty** in every aspect of life. In Western countries, people thronged supermarkets to buy

essential things in bulk as they were uncertain about their availability. This panic buying brought out signs of mental stress even among normal people. There were quarrels and even physical skirmishes among persons for things of daily use. The reason was an overwhelming public response to mostly unverified information streaming through electronic media. People wanted to take control of the situation and hence started doing things like hoarding the supplies, which are not common in normal circumstances.

People were forced to remain indoors for several weeks or months together. This caused [loneliness syndrome](#), another mental health issue. The researchers have found out that an interminable period of isolation would cause an increased rate of anxiety, stress, and chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension.

Crisis Management

The effects of the coronavirus are beyond our worst imaginations. The problems are not only varied but very complex.

The teachings of different spiritual traditions offer a pragmatic and everlasting solution to the calamity we are facing today.

Spiritual principles look beyond the present scenario and fathom the depths of inherent divine nature of the humans. One's spiritual potential is truly effective in finding a lasting solution to adversities, both social and individual. In this way, the ancient sacred wisdom becomes the guiding light for crisis management in the present situation.

Now, we shall learn three important spiritual principles that will give us inner strength to manage this crisis.

Transitory World

The first spiritual principle is that every situation we face is inevitable, transitory, and is an illusion.

These three ideas are complementary to each other. Some experiences like birth, old age, and death are unavoidable. The best way to tackle them, according to Bhagavadgita, is to accept them as inevitable fleeting happenings. The Gita preaches *titiksha* or forbearance in such cases. As we all know, it is very painful to forbear.

However, it will be possible for us to endure when we understand *anityatva*, the transitory nature of the world. The world is changing constantly because it is *mithya*, an illusory appearance on the Reality called Brahman.

Maya is the cause of such an illusion. It is, according to Swami Vivekananda, ‘a simple statement of facts - what we are and what we see around us’.⁵ The Buddhist tradition has a similar concept called *Duhkha*. As we normally understand, it is not just suffering. According to Buddhist teachings, *Duhkha* is the true nature of all worldly existence. Ignorance of this fact of life pushes us into more and more misery.

Equanimity of Mind

The second principle is equanimity, mental calmness, and evenness of temper, especially in a tough situation. If we remain calm, the mind will remain still and focused. The Gita extolls *samatva*, equanimity as yoga,⁶ the way to the Divine. In modern terms, it can be construed as the ‘maturity to understand and accept things as they come up in life’.

Modern psychology suggests various ways to reach equanimity.

However, spiritual traditions like Vedanta and Buddhism advocate knowledge of the impermanency of the world as the only royal way to achieve this. The logic behind it is simple. If we understand the world to be transient, we don’t get too much involved in it. We develop *asakti*, dispassion, which makes our mind undisturbed. We become mature enough to witness the happenings in our life in a proper perspective.

Vedanta, the spiritual and philosophical tradition of the Upanishads, says that the world we see around us is but an appearance on Brahman, the true reality. The appearance is myriad, but the reality is the same. The misery is due to the non-recognition of the Reality as the essence of multiplicity. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that Brahman is the state of fearlessness,⁷ as there is nothing second to be scared. The bottom line is that the spiritual journey towards the attainment of oneness destroys all inhibitions, phobias, and misery, which are only products of ignorance.

Empathy

The third spiritual principle that helps us to tide over the present crisis is empathy in its genuine form. Most of the spiritual traditions say that pure love of God and realisation of one’s spiritual nature raise this noble sentiment in our mind. Real empathy is the natural progression of a deep understanding of the divinity within one’s heart.

The [difference between ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ is relevant](#) in this context. Empathy means ‘the ability to understand and share the feelings of another’ whereas sympathy means ‘feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune’.

One may develop sympathy instinctively, but real empathy can arise in one's mind only through spiritual education. We shall now explore the meaning and significance of empathy in different spiritual traditions that act as a beacon light in this hour of distress and confusion.

Empathy in the Buddhist Tradition

There are two words associated with empathy in the Buddhist tradition. They are '*metta*' or '*maitri*' and '*karuna*', translated as 'loving-kindness' and 'compassion' respectively.

According to Buddhism, one should cultivate these virtues by prolonged meditation on them. One type of meditation is associating ourselves with others as equal and the same. This is akin to 'similarity', an idea mooted in social psychology, which refers to personality, attitudes, values, interests, and attraction shared among individuals. This meditation helps us see the 'similarity' with others.

Another type of meditation is a mental exchange of oneself with others, that is, putting ourselves in the place of a suffering person.

In psychology, it is termed as 'perspective taking', an act of perceiving a situation or understanding a concept from an alternative [point of view](#), such as that of another individual. It is the ability to go beyond our point of view to understand clearly how others are thinking and feeling.⁸

Empathy in the Christian Tradition

According to Christianity, empathy is the outreach of God's love and is centred around the personality of Jesus, who is the embodiment of empathy.

The suffering he endured is the expression of his empathy towards the whole of humanity. The New Testament says: 'Seeing the people, he felt compassion for them because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.'⁹

In Christian tradition, we are asked to emulate Jesus by sharing the sufferings of our brothers and sisters as St Paul says: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.'¹⁰ St Peter emphasises mutual love and compassion when he says: 'All of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous.'¹¹ The art of empathy is to be learned from God himself, as it is he who comforts us in every way.

Empathy in Islamic Tradition

Empathy is very much encouraged in Islam. This is evident in several quotations from the Quran.

In one place, it is said: ‘The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever.’ There is an instance of prophet Muhammad’s empathy for a mother, when he says: ‘I start prayer and I want to make it long, but then I hear an infant crying, so I make my prayer short, because I know the distress caused to the mother by his crying.’¹²

According to Islamic tradition, empathy is ‘the mark of a true believer’, the one who would put oneself in the position of the other and think what one would do if one is in that position. Also, a true believer feels ‘special love for other believers’.¹³

Empathy in Vedantic Tradition

The teaching of empathy found in the Upanishads is established on the oneness of existence.

Seeing ‘all beings in the Self itself, and the Self in all beings’¹⁴ is the core teaching of the Upanishads.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad describes the state of oneness when one becomes everything. In that state, one identifies oneself with the essence of whole existence, which the Upanishad terms as Atman or Brahman. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says in this regard: ‘Aham brahmaasmi iti, tasmaat tat sarvam abhavat; realising one’s true self as Brahman, one becomes everything.’¹⁵

This is the highest goal of a human being. How is this to be practised in our daily life? The Gita shows us the way. ‘**Atmaupamyena sarvatra samam pashyati yo’rjuna, sukham vaa yadi vaa dukham sa yogi paramo matah**; O Arjuna, that yogi is considered the best who judges what is happiness and sorrow in all beings by the same standard as he would apply to himself.’¹⁶

Acharya Shankara in his commentary explains that a yogi, who looks upon happiness and sorrow as pleasant and unpleasant to all beings by the same standard as she or he would apply to oneself, is considered as the best among the yogis.¹⁷

The Gita teaches that an aspirant should practise what becomes natural for an adept yogi. Hence, practising same-sightedness is an effective technique for crisis management.

Bhakti schools of Vedanta give prominence to the love of God. The intense loving devotion is called bhakti. Bhagavata shows how we can make use of this divine love for the good of all. Kapila Muni, considered to be an incarnation of God, instructs Devahuti, his mother, as follows:

My presence in all beings should be recognised. ... men in distress should be shown sympathy and kindness. ... I abide by all beings as their innermost soul. Disregarding My presence within them, men make a show of worshipping Me through images. If one disregards Me present in all as their soul and Lord but ignorantly offers worship is as ineffective as sacrificial offerings made in ashes. A man who persecutes Me living in others, who is proud and haughty, who looks upon God as the other-such a person will never attain peace of mind. If a man disregards and persecutes fellow beings, but worships Me in images with many rituals and rich offerings, I am not at all pleased with him for offering such worship. A man should, however, worship Me in images, side by side with discharging his duties, which include the love of all beings, until he actually realises My presence in himself and in all beings.¹⁸

The Bhakti traditions say that one can [develop empathy with others by seeing God in them](#). The love of God transforms into the love for all beings for it is the same God who resides in the hearts of all.

Thus, the empathy, a human emotion, elevates itself into recognising divinity in all. Seeing God in all is real empathy.

Seeing God in All

The traditional Vedanta was confined to individual spiritual pursuits.

There are wonderful sayings in the Upanishads and the Gita suggestive of the social dimension of Vedanta. Isha Upanishad says that one should cover everything on this earth with isha, the consciousness of God.¹⁹ Chhandogya Upanishad declares: ‘**Sarvam khalu idam brahma**; all this is Brahman.’²⁰

The Gita presents a concept of universal sacrifice, yajna, in which everyone sacrifices for the benefit of society. However, the utility of these sayings in the modern times was not realised by common people until the advent of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna is a supreme lover of God as well as a great lover of human beings. He saw God in all, but more so in a human being. He says: ‘Men are like pillow-cases. The colour of one may be red, that of another blue, and that of the third black; but all contain the same cotton within. So

it is with man; one is beautiful, another is ugly, a third holy, and a fourth wicked; but the Divine Being dwells in them all.’²¹

Sri Ramakrishna’s love for humans is intense and genuine because he saw in and through them the God himself. He says: ‘God no doubt dwells in all, but He manifests more through man than through other beings. Is man an insignificant thing? ... God exists in other living beings — animals, plants, nay, in all beings, but He manifests Himself more through man than through these others.’²²

True empathy is loving God in a human being. Love in one’s mind takes external expression in the service of God. When we see God in all, we serve God in all. Sri Ramakrishna gives expression to this beautiful idea in his famous teaching, ‘*Shivajnane jeeva seva*; serve all beings knowing well that they are divine’.

Service and Renunciation

The ideals of renunciation and service preached by Swamiji are rooted in the Upanishad teaching: ‘*Tena tyaktena bhunjeeta*; one should protect oneself by renunciation.’²³

Renunciation is the primary requisite for selfless service. They are inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. One cannot truly serve hiding a selfish motive within. Giving up the ego-centric attitude is called renunciation. Service is a natural expression of love and unselfishness. It is in these twin ideals that we find the pragmatic and rational articulation of genuine empathy.

Conclusion

As countries worldwide are putting endless effort to come out of the clutches of coronavirus, what we can do in the least is to spread the message of empathy and understanding among one and all. The real empathy is serving others identifying oneself with them. The eternal values found in spiritual traditions will guide us in this direction. Sri Ramakrishna is the embodiment of these values.

Author is Editor Prabuddha Bharata.

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This article was first published in the August 2020 issue of Prabuddha Bharata, monthly journal of The Ramakrishna Order started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896. This article is courtesy and copyright Prabuddha Bharata. I have been reading the Prabuddha Bharata for years and found it enlightening. Cost is Rs 180/ for one year, Rs 475/ for three years, Rs 2100/ for twenty years. To subscribe <https://shop.advaitaashrama.org/subscribe/>