

Pandemics and common man's psychology

Published on: June 10th, 2020

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“When the chips are down these...these civilized people they'll eat each other. See, I am not a monster, I am just ahead of the curve.” This line from the movie ‘dark knight’ perfectly summarizes the current situation in the country. The COVID-19 crisis has hit the peak in all parts of the world, and the human race is showing their true colors now. People are hoarding everything they see, leaving little for the low-income group who can only buy a limited number of items at a time due to the shortage of savings. The governments have advised people only to take what they need and not to store essential items like grains, milk and medicines. Some countries have even ordered the super markets to allow people only to take a limited amount of supplies at a time, leaving the public even into more doubt and despair. The type of atmosphere we are living in seems quite unusual and new, but it has always been like this. Whenever a country or a part of the world witnesses any type of pandemic and natural disaster, the common human psychology is to out stretch one's buying capacity and buy everything they can. The sense of despondency forces the human brain to act in accordance with the extreme situations that may arise in the future.

‘The wheel of history always repeats’, that's what we say whenever we ponder our past experiences over the years.

The world has witnessed some of the biggest pandemics killing millions of people at a time when the population was not even half of what it is now. From Europe's Black Death, during the Middle Ages to the Spanish flu around the time of the First World War, pandemics can change the course of society for many years to come.

The current pandemic, COVID-19, is causing disruption across the entire world. The corona virus has caused concern due to their potential to lead to pandemics in recent years. Examples of coronavirus infections, in addition to SARS-CoV-2, include SARS and MERS. In March 2020, SARS-CoV-2 was the first coronavirus to reach a pandemic level, by causing COVID-19.

Previously, health agencies and the government bodies managed to prevent coronavirus infections from becoming more than localized epidemics. MERS is still active, but outbreaks occur on a much smaller scale and less frequently.

COVID-19, on the other hand, has reached every continent except Antarctica. There are also other pandemics in the past which has caused severe mass deaths. The largest Ebola epidemic took place in Liberia, and the surrounding West African nations from 2014 to 2015. Significant efforts to contain the spread prevented Ebola from turning into a pandemic, even though some people developed the infection overseas. Ebola has recently resurfaced in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the WHO are monitoring the situation.

Another major pandemic the world has witnessed is the influenza. Wild birds are natural hosts for a variety of influenza strains. Rarely, these influenza strains pass from birds to humans, sparking epidemics with the potential to become pandemics without active surveillance and containment measures. Avian flu (H5N1) is an example of this. Authorities first identified the strain in Vietnam in 2004. It never progressed beyond epidemic levels, but the virus's potential ability to combine with human flu viruses is a concern to scientists. Another one, 'The plague of Justinian' is the pandemic that still haunts the historians all around the world, a pandemic that killed 50 million people. The Plague of Justinian was the first and the best known outbreak of the first plague pandemic, which continued to recur until the middle of the 8th century.[1] Some historians believe the first plague pandemic was one of the deadliest pandemics in history, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 25–100 million people during two centuries of recurrence, a death toll equivalent to as much as half of Europe's population at the time of the first outbreak. The plague's social, and cultural impact has been compared to that of the Black Death that devastated Eurasia in the fourteenth century.

Research has shown that different threats push different psychological buttons. Novel, exotic threats like Ebola or avian flu raise anxiety levels higher than more familiar threats do. And, at the same time, people often under-react to familiar threats. For example, influenza sickens as much as 20 percent of the population a year, and kills thousands. Yet because most people have had the flu and survived, or know someone who has, people may feel less urgency toward getting a seasonal flu vaccine.

The medical facility has advanced rapidly all over the world in recent years, but it is unlikely ever to offer full protection from a possible pandemic because of the novel nature of the diseases involved.

The bottom line here is, 'how to get out of the situation of panic and uncertainty in time like these. Psychologists say that 'Brave behaviour is the norm.' Brave behaviour tends to the internal fears of death and forlornness.

Media can be an ally when it spreads precise and useful information. During the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, for example, Australian and Swedish media both accurately framed the risk of contracting the illness. Swedish outlets, however, were even more effective because they reported ways viewers could protect their health and openly admitted the uncertainties about the epidemic, while Australian media reported more negatively on public agency missteps (Scandinavian Journal of Public Health, 2013). Despite having a similar vaccination rates overall before the pandemic, during the outbreak of H1N1, the vaccine rate in Sweden was 60 percent, versus 18 percent in Australia.

Focusing, as Swedish media did, on what people can do to protect themselves is particularly important for people who are vulnerable to stress and anxiety, research suggests. In a survey conducted during the H1N1 pandemic, researchers from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, found those people who were least able to tolerate uncertainty overall experienced the most anxiety during the pandemic and were less likely to believe they could do anything to protect themselves. Experts agree that giving people concrete, detailed actions to take can help reduce panic and overreaction when a new threat emerges. Whatever be the case, the world has seen bigger outbreaks than COVID-19 and has still grown leaps and bounds. This is just a phase that will just be a memory for the rest of our lives, just like the other pandemics across the world. What matters is that we face this crisis bravely and care for the needy as those are the bottom of the chain suffer the most. This has always been the way the world functions and it will take another phase of centuries to phase out. Excerpt by 'Gaurav Arora'(Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa College, Delhi University)

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