

A JOURNEY THROUGH CRISES: AN ETHNOGRAPHER'S NOTE ON COVID19 AND ITS DYNAMICS IN A SUB-URBAN SETTING OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Pinaki Dey Mullick¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Haldia Government College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India

Abstract

This ethnographic note is an outcome of just fourteen days fieldwork, in maximum from staying at home at the emergency situation and act is effective during this period. The findings of the study majorly highlighted the issues like-the perception of awareness about lock down, social distancing, the negative emotional experiences, the black marketing, the role of media and popular culture, and the alteration of meaning of livelihood in the period of emergency of COVID-19. The note further suggests to microscopic ethnographic study of such kind of epidemic and endemic disaster, so the strategies of resilience under the vulnerabilities can be managed through long term policy and action.

Keywords: *Social Awareness, Epidemic Disaster, Media, Resilience, Ethnography*

Introduction

In accordance to the bulletin of Health and Family Welfare Department of Government of West Bengal on 17.03.2020, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) has declared an emergence of newly formed infectious virus, namely Corona Virus as-“the recent Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) epidemic affecting 125 countries and territories as International Public Health Emergency of International concern (Source: www.wbhealth.gov.in).”

In this connection the Government of West Bengal has had already been taken the rapid measures to control the spreading of the dangerous infection of the Corona Virus among the state territories, such as- the high alert and warnings from the side of the state rapidly communicated to its populous with the detailing of the preventive measures through print media, electronic media, social networking sites, Governmental networking sites and oral communication.

The immediate notification from the Government of West Bengal has been published to suspend all the classes in schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions till 31st March, 2020 that further extended to 15th April, 2020. The spaces with high public interaction in intra and interstate level is under strict surveillances of the Government of West Bengal, like-international airports, railway stations, shopping malls and other concerned areas where public contacts are frequent. Till date the emergency is going when the author is writing this short communication and at the same time he himself making the journey with the crisis from the standpoint of the local resident and at the same time as an ethnographer who is continuing his research on public places, interacting people through direct contact of public sphere and other popular mass medias, and the research is under a continuing process to understand and explore the social and interactive matrix and dynamics of the locale under this phase of disaster and vulnerabilities.

The Objective

The fundamental objective of this effort is to understand the changing scenario of social dynamics and the perception of the local people in this emergency period in a sub-urban setting of the state of West Bengal, India

Methodology

The area of study is the different parts of the district of Howrah is been purposively selected that also facilitates the researcher's 'native' place to frequent moves to the participants for interaction and communication, and the paths and spheres through which the author regularly moves on. The nature of the study is purely qualitative and the principal method is-ethnography. The data have been collected by using semi-structured interviews, in-depth case studies, focus group interviews, the authors own journey and observation and chatting in social networking sites. The sampling method of the study is convenient sampling. The collected data have been transcribed verbatim and the interpretation of the transcriptions follows themes of concern in the form of findings that are as follows.

The Findings

To begin with the findings from the data collected from 130 individuals, it is noteworthy to state that till 27.03.2020 India is going through the process of 'lock-down' till 14th April, 2020 midnight to prevent the chain of COVID-19. All the states under the country and its citizens are strictly instructed to follow the rules of lock down and simplistically 'to stay safe.. stay home' under this international emergency. The people are also instructed not to go outside of the home except emergency and to avoid the crowd drastically because we

are going through a tough period of endemic emergency. In this context, the above mentioned phase now I am to describe the detail of the socially contested reality, public response, the rumor and the values, some significant dimensions of the area under study. To describe the findings, I would like to present the scenario in contrast to the Government (both Central and the State) persuasion of the guidelines to be followed in this COVID-19 emergency.

Is the 'Lock-Down' Okay?-The Public Opinion

This is the question of dollars. People vary drastically with the step of 'lock-down' by state. I am just quoting some of their versions for convenience of understanding.

Sri Subhomoy chatterjee, a 45 years local social activist is of opinion that-*it is urgently needed..better to say it was needed very earlier...the people should fight against Corona..you may call the lock down process as the primary one for isolation that can only prevent that contamination but the ultimate is to discover medicine to prevent the disease.*

Sri Uma Prasad Yadav, a 57 years old tea owner shop opined that-*the decision is good no doubt.but it may affect the economic condition of the 'poor' very soon. People with daily earning will face a lot as the shortage of cash in their hand and with the high demand over low supply of the market.*

Sri Amit Chakraborty, a 39 years old Medical Representative share his horrible experience- He said-*we are the man with highly emergency work related to medicine. But the after the announcement of the 'lock-down' by the central and state Government, I have faced many difficulties while distributing the medicine. The Police men was strict heavily even after the exemption of the emergency medicine. They heckled me a lot...when I have shown their my identity card and opened my bag to show the vaccine and medicine under it...they allowed me...after that event I am using a logo of 'emergency medicine' in my motor bike and then starts my journey towards the medical shop and doctor visit.*

Smt. Tuli Mondal, a 49 years old leady vegetable vendor is now been under trauma. She said that-*the memories of lathi-charge by the police men was so cruel that I felt am a criminal. The exemption of the regular vegetables from the Government guideline made me sure to sale mu commodities in the street market. The crowed was heavy as the public was panic to store more and more vegetables. I requested them to please maintain a line. But they did not. after a few seconds the police came to the area...drastically charged their stick over the buyer and the sellers as well. I felt very uneasy that there was no leady police. I was afraid and stop my shop till 14th of April, 2020 after the further Government Order of 'legalized selling'.*

The mentioned experiences instigate us to think and rethink of public awareness and its implementations into the social milieu. We have to think peoples' pulse and sensitivity first according to their economic and social living and then an awareness camp and communicative measures should be taken with the orders of Governmental Sectors. People face unnecessary fear and anxiety that they do not deserve. They should be trained properly what are the actual guidelines and safety measures and the administration of the

state have to act accordingly, otherwise the whole system will 'shut-down' instead of less understanding of the term-'lock-down'.

The Issues of Social Distancing

To start with discussing the issue, first we have to know what actually the term 'Social Distancing' means. According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control- Social Distancing is an action taken to minimize physical contact with other individuals as a non pharmaceutical countermeasure that in one hand reduces the transmission of the diseases and reducing pressure on the health services on the other. In case of COVID-19 this action also promotes a reflection of social solidarity.

Perusing the scenario of social distancing in the area under study I have explored the issues from multiple socio-economic and emotive directions that are as follows-

At the very first phase of Corona contamination the general public did not take the social distancing as a very serious issue, but the repetitive awareness campaign from the state Government and print media, the people became very serious to assimilate the social distancing with their rapidly changing habitus.

Under the lock-down situation the general public became feared and so furious that they created an huge gathering on different grocery shops to not only collect items for their emergency need, but also started to store it for future situation. This humbling scenario challenged the capacity to the grocers that they could not serve properly, they cannot reject anyone, and more significantly they cannot able to serve their regular consumers as well.

Sri Mrinmoy Nandy, a 40 years old owner of a locally popular grocery shop stated that-It is beyond our expectation. The emergency made us restlessness to serve the people..even we were confused and puzzled to serve our customers. The immediacy and impatience of the consumers makes an extended alteration to the total structuring and functioning of our system to serve our customers. The even after the repetitive request from us did not maintain a queue for proper distribution of the necessary items. We were under an immense pressure that we have not experienced before..after some time I requested the local police station to manage the situation in the name of social distancing is not maintained at all in our shop..the police came to the spot and took just 190 seconds approx. to manage the crowd in a sequence...after all we all are human being..the fear of death is common to us...and the situation we faced last a few days is beyond beyond my expectations.

Being a participant of this situation, I also went to the market on 26th March, 2020 to buy some grocery items, from a local market distant almost 3 k.m. to my residence. The circumstances in that market were horrible. People were furious to collect and store the needful for a long period with huge quantity. The concept of distancing was far apart, rather they were in very close contact to each other having no masks and not maintaining

any queue that is dangerous for safety measures. The author was able to collect only four items with waiting for three hours approximately.

Sri Ramesh Manna, a 76 years old business man was of opinion that- this condition he have had never experienced in the district of Howrah. The public are behaving like 'mad' without having any sympathetic ground. The police men tried their best to convey public senses active, but they failed..as because the maximum consumers were female and they had no women police men or civic guard to distancing the crowd.

Keeping in mind and observation of this public fear the West Bengal Chief Minister Smt. Mamata Banerjee immediately called for an interactive session with administrative stakeholders and she draw and made a demo to the persons present in the meeting that how to maintain the queue with circles after each individuals having at least 1-1.5 meter distance. At the same time she requested the general public of her state to please maintain peace, patience and strong nerve to fight against corona contamination. She further request to the general public not to be worried and anxious, avoid any rumor and false panic communication, just to be safe at home under the situation of 'lock-down' and cooperate the Government as well.

From the next day the situation improve in the sub urban enclave of Howrah, but the crowd was there and maintained the Chief Minister's request. Not everyone but a lion portion under the author's observation were maintain the circle queue and cooperated the owner of medicine shop, the owner of grocery shop and vegetables, and ration dealers.

The Negative Emotional Experiences: The Role of Print and Electronic Media

The role of print and electronic media in this endemic period of corona epidemic disaster is very significant role performed and performing. The print media like newspaper and electronic media like television- regularly flash the corona updates of death and affected with a very little highlight of cure one cases. This creates panic among the residents of the locale, specially the middle aged and the older genre.

Sri Bappa Bag a 67 years old retired health serviceman is of opinion that- I in my daily life routinely go thoroughly through the Bengali newspaper...but now a days to make the first touch to the paper make myself under a palpitation unknown.. The first page when I open it is simply a statistics of the corona infection worldwide with the measures of central and state Government has been taken and in a changing phase...I am puzzled...last three days I left to read newspapers in the fear of..within some seconds the virus will affect me and my family members as well.

Smt. Soma Chakraborty is a 62 years old housewife left to look at the television last one week. Her logic is- what television provides me under the phase of lock-down...just the old T.V. serials that I have already been seen...the rests are the news of corona infections...at first it was very interesting to me...but now I have left it..the fear of death gradually grasping me with temporary insomnia at night. Even the advertisement is with the tag of corona awareness...I am board of it. The time do not passes...I feel I am in a Jail with home amenities.

Sri Gopal Maity, a 49 years old businessman is a very serious viewer and audience of the Television news. He opined that- *now it is a very frustrating life in home stay under the lock down for a long period. In my regular habits before this epidemic phase...I returned home at around 6 p.m. evening. After having a light Tiffin...I accustomed to listen news in television. Now it's all about corona, corona, and corona.....Disgusting..God knows when I can lead life as I leaded before this endemic.*

Smt. Ava Das, a 48 years home maker is of opinion that-*The 21 days of lock down bored me too much, specially at the evening time..I am a fond of Viewer of Television serials..but since these days the serials of my favuorite channels stopped to caste the new episodes of the concerned serials due to home isolations of the actors, actresses, and Television technical staffs...they are continuing the older episodes that I had been watched before...so nothing new in life...the different days appear to me as the same one.*

The situation and its embedded negative emotive shades overshadowed specially the older and middle aged person, who generally spend and solely depends on different television shows. Sometimes these experiences instigate them to out of their house to their residential lanes and streets to make interaction for time-pass with the neighbours that automatically go against of the safety measure of home isolation.

The Black Marketing

This is another significant perspective of long term 'lock-down' safety measures taken by the Government to fight against Corona contamination. People are generally afraid of their unknown, unexpected and taken to be dangerous phase in their everyday livelihood that they never faced before. Quite naturally they started to store enough raw food stuffs from the local markets of the district under study. It is regularly observed by the author that people are creating a long queue to collect raw food stuffs and grocery items that are non-judgmentally may be taken as an attitude of fear to the unknown.

At the very primary phase the grocers and the vegetable sellers overvalued the items to earn more in the period of crises tended the circumstances named as 'black marketing'.

The author being a participant also made a journey to research and to fit himself into the situation. People spending more and more money to the grocery items even the items are not necessary in emergency period. The needy people could not be able to touch the items they need in a quantity for regular life for the money as the market then reshaped in its own structure on the basis of demand and supply calculation. The frequent cases of arrest of the owners of the grocery shop by the local policemen on the basis of the complaint against them by the local consumers.

After the strict steps of the state Government the rate of market price of basic livelihood items came down to the standard one, but the scenario of the crowd remain same as it was before the announcement of the administration.

The Social Networking Sites: The Reality Contested

One of the fundamental and major role of the social networking sites lie-facebook, and whatsapp creating and recreating the influences over the local people and more generally speaking the people across the globe. The multidimensional posts in the mentioned social networking sites trigger people to move emotively and perceptually towards the awareness of the COVID-19 emergencies guideline of the state and central Government.

Sri Prasanta Bag, a 35 years old labour in a private machinery company is now in home isolation due to 'lock-down' is of opinion that-*I am always online in facebook and whatsapp to keep a deep watch what my friends and the others are posting in the virtual space. sometimes I became fool through the messages in the whatsapp group in 1st of April..when my friends in whatsapp circulate the note that the 'lock-down' will be withdraw on 5th of April, 2020...I was seriously amused...but over the phone to the owner of my company I felt that I have been made fool in the context of 1st of April, the day we commonly utter as 'April Fool'.*

The individuals and the group members of the whatsapp cheering the moments as any vacation has been came out.

Smt. Ritu Barui, a 24 years old college student and regular active visitor of facebook commented that-*the videos and photographs of birthday celebration in the space of facebook makes me very frustrated. How can we?...the facebook users under lock down situation is behaving like simply not working, non supportive and freckled mentality. The funny videos and links are being shared regarding the issue of COVID-19....likely to be unstoppable. Some of my friends in facebook and whatsapp also shares minute to minute update of Corona updates of the world and about the deaths...sometimes I feel that I will be mad totally or I have to leave these sites. Once the use of this sites and app was one of my passion..but now a day..I just can't bother anymore.*

Contrastingly, day by day we are habituating with whatsapp specifically in the context of sharing important official messages within a short duration of time. Personally being a teacher of the Government College of Haldia, I feel-

the immediacy of using whatsapp for these information. In the group of our college whatsapp that is usually unofficial..but the different Governmental orders, educational and examination related matters is presented here..due to this reason we the teachers are quickly been aware about the Governmental Orders about how to take classes of the students in this period of emergency where all the educational institutions remain closed for a long time till unknown. The circulation of university announcements to postpone the examination, the process of making online classes successful known to us very easily through whatsapp rather email or other ways like telephonic conversation. The students can interact with video call and or video conference with the teachers concerned for the learning that should not be delayed and affected under the choice based credit system at the college and university level.

Thus came, the use and miss-use of the social networking sites depend on the tendencies, perception, immediacy, and action based strategies under this emergency

situation. The reality of the users of social networking sites and the message they want to convey to the mass is important and that is really under a contest of the needs and habits of its users.

The Alteration of Livelihood: A Brief Overview

Under the 'lock-down' situation for 21 days in India impacted a huge alteration among its citizens. Now I am coming to discuss the issue in very micro level better to say a very local level in a district of the state of West Bengal. Howrah is an industrial district of the state where socio-economic livelihood varies at a large range and the gaze of cultural matrix and mosaic reflects a mini India. The process of lock down and the slowly but spreading tendency of the contamination of Novel Corona Virus contamination make the large industries to the path of immediate shut down effecting the economic living of thousands of people whose income is depended on the daily basis working in the small and large scale industries.

Those who were busy with their work for a whole day outside their home are now under the home feels they are in a cage for an unexpected period of time. This situation prompts a tendency to irritability and frustrating attitude to their family members. The so called hierarchical labour and responsibility divisions at family level are in the face of rapid alteration.

Concluding Observation

There is nothing to conclude, because this short communication is written when the 'lock-down' rule is effective in Indian sub-continent. The author has had a very limited chance to conduct an in-depth ethnographic fieldwork due to the ethnographer himself is a law abiding citizen of the concerned country and the state. Thereafter it is a humble request to all the readers of this not that not to come to the immediate conclusion or being judgmental over the situation. The scenario will be more vivid and can change the glances of the researches if an ethnographer properly merges him/her with the reality. The note further includes personal biases and experimental mental conditions that surely affected the outcome of this writing.

Last but not the least; the author is in of no doubt about the fact that 'proper' economic, social, mental, and technological vulnerabilities are there across India and the globe as well, that still could not be able to make resilient of its citizens from such kind of virus contamination, and this is the cause the situation and its threat is appearing to us as 'disasters'.

Bibliography

1. Fritz, C. E. 1961. Disasters. In R. K. Merton and R. A. Nisbet (Eds.), *Contemporary social problems: An introduction to the sociology of deviant behavior and social disorganization*, 651–694. Riverside: CA: University of California Press.
2. Greene, R. R. 2003. Resilience theory: Theoretical and professional conceptualizations. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 8(4), 75-91.
3. Harrington, B. 2003. The Social Psychology of Access in Ethnographic Research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32, 592-625.
4. Modh, S. 2010. *Introduction to Disaster Management*. India: Macmillan Publishers.

Important Web-links

1. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277327554> accessed on 25th March, 2020 on 4.45 p.m.
2. www.wbhealth.gov.in accessed on 18th March, 2020 on 11.55 p.m.