

Pandemic and its Impact on the Rural Youth: Teaching Resilience through Literature

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Abstract

Writers have responded to contemporary epidemics and diseases in their own unique ways depending on which disease or illness is represented. They have found expression in varied forms of literature. It has been a medium of projecting sympathetic, empathetic, and realistic points of views. On scrutiny, one can find references of the social responses to pandemics available in literature, like interaction among human beings and interface between people and state, and what strategies were followed/adopted to maintain health systems. Further, illness does not necessarily mean only the physical. It can be psychological as well, which the writers often identify and represent in their works. It would, therefore, be fruitful to consider psychoanalytic theory in the context of the effects and consequences of a pandemic. A poem or prose not only mirrors the world around or imparts wisdom or acts as a matter-of-fact project possibility, but is also a reliable source that soothes the mind, body, and soul. It has a therapeutic impact, especially when preserving life is the primary objective and concern. Research has also shown that bibliotherapy is a treatment for various ailments, like depression and mood upliftment, preventing dementia, and cognitive ageing. Considering all these, the paper seeks to identify, while developing an understanding of pandemics, how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the youth, particularly girls aged 17-21 in select rural areas of Haryana, its social, economic, and psychological consequences, and draw certain signposts that can work as a steering to an inclusive and resilient society.

Keywords: Pandemic, Youth, Resilience, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Writers from all over the world, big or small, have responded to contemporary epidemics and diseases, calling for social concern and responsibility; therefore,

representation of disease or illness has found expression in varied forms of literature, which has been a medium of projecting sympathetic, empathetic, and realistic points of views. The authors of pandemic fiction have attempted to understand the context in which these pandemics or epidemics are rooted, looking through the glass of gender, class, race, and geographical locations. There are many questions that have been raised, as well as realistic descriptions taken up by the literary circle, like who died and what was the degree of inequality in mortality rates during the times of crisis. These pandemics further emphasise the social responses available in literature, like interaction among human beings and interaction between people and state, and what strategies were followed/adopted to maintain health systems. Another aspect that can be seen coming up is a glimpse into the history of pandemics with a focus on individual and familial experiences. Furthermore, the literature on pandemics gave a realistic picture of how pandemics led to the ruin of civilisation, thereby making us rethink the problems existing because of pandemics, and the cause, effect, and solutions to prevent the destruction of mankind. Literary works exacerbate a conflict, which is the basis for creating strong emotions that involves the masses, as the description of ensuing pain, discomfort, and unpleasant experiences are witnessed, imagined, and felt. Illness is not necessarily physical. It can be psychological as well, which the writers often identify and represent in their works. It would, therefore, be fruitful to consider psychoanalytic theory in the context of the effects and consequences of a pandemic.

The very thought of disease is stimulating, making the mind think and respond variedly to the very idea of falling ill. The thought makes one experience a tumult

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of responses – discomfort, weakness, insecurity, anger, sadness, depression, and feeling needy – all at once. Thus, they are guided to be honest and direct in their address. As a case in point, Tim Douglas’ poem *My Death* (1982), a four-line confessional poem, is a response of the poet artist, who evidently is to die of AIDS. Wartime tragedies are heroic, but the battle with disease and the battle within are demonic. Being at war and peace at the same time, literary works exacerbate a conflict, which is the basis for creating strong emotions that involve the masses. Representation of the practically inevitable epidemics and illness allows one to understand what is important in life and how one can deal with the disease in real life. Undoubtedly life has got to be preserved at all cost, and the potential of literature is a wide-known fact. A poem or prose not only mirrors the world around or imparts wisdom or acts as a matter-of-fact project possibility, but is also a reliable source that soothes the mind, body, and soul. It has a therapeutic impact, especially when preserving life is the primary objective and concern. Research has also shown that bibliotherapy is a treatment for various ailments, like depression and mood upliftment, preventing dementia, and cognitive ageing.

Aim

The present study intends to identify, while developing an understanding of pandemics, how the pandemic has impacted the youth, particularly girls aged 17-21, and also attempted to provide the solutions and measures that can be taken to strengthen the youth, especially in rural areas of Shahabad (Kurukshetra), Gohana (Sonipat) and Bilaspur, Chhachhrauli (Yamuna Nagar), and the rural belts in the districts of Haryana.

Objectives of Study

- To understand the impact of the pandemic on the youth in rural areas.
- To locate reasons for disruption of education and learning opportunities.
- To identify the psychological impact of the pandemic on the youth particularly girls.
- To identify measures to re-integrate the young into employment.
- To look into the role of the youth as catalysts for creating inclusive and resilient societies during the

time of a crisis, and their ability to respond, recover, and prepare for future shocks.

- To identify the role and impact of literature on the mind of the youth in reference to pandemic literature.

Methodology

The research is based on a theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and the concept of resilience theory. The researchers consulted various newspapers and magazine articles, and have also taken into account online survey method and personal interview method. Narrative review of literature on mental health, psychoanalytical theory, and research on COVID-19 in relation to economy, social, and educational impact, have been adopted.

Discussion

ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said, “The pandemic is inflicting multiple shocks on young people. It is not only destroying their jobs and employment prospects, but also disrupting their education and training and having a serious impact on their mental well-being” (ILO, Youth and COVID-19, 2020). The article reports that almost 70% of the youth have suffered due to closure of schools, universities, and colleges. Since youth are an asset to the nation and its development, there is a need to identify and implement the most effective interventions and social awareness campaigns among the youth. The report, ‘Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being’, observes that 65% of young people stated that they learnt less during the pandemic because of the sudden shift from classroom teaching to online and distance learning (ILO, Global Report, 2020). The condition has been critical for youth living in low-income countries because of less access to the Internet, dearth of equipment, and want of space at home.

There have been multifaceted challenges and shocks on health and economy. Pandemic control demands identification of containment zones and restrictions on movement and assemblage of people. The ensuing isolation directly impacts the economics of the state. The managing director of International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, in her article ‘Beyond the COVID-19 Crisis’, writes, “To protect public health, the global economy may put into statis... No country

has escaped the health, economic and social impacts of COVID-19 crisis...” (Kristalina 2020). Considering GDP growth rate, inflation, unemployment, interest rate, and industrial output as general indicators of impact on economy, there is no doubt the outcomes are alarming. COVID-19 has posed an unprecedented challenge, not only to the Indian economy, but to the world’s economy as well. Barbate, Gade and Raibaghar, in their article, have reported a knee-jerk reaction in global economics. They write, “The size of world economy in 2019 was \$80 trillion... a 3.5% hit to the \$80 trillion world economy means \$2.8 trillion which was the exact size of the entire Indian economy in 2018-19... the vicious circle leading to economic depression has set on a roll. Lower consumption, reduced demand, falling prices, supply cut, job cuts, lower spending...”, stressing on the economy (Barbate, Gade & Raibaghar, 2021). While addressing the question of impact of COVID-19 on the Indian economy, Barbate, Gade and Raibaghar further anticipate a “big impact... on the GDP growth rate at least for the year 2020-21. Same is the finding in case of unemployment. Inflation too is likely to rise in the short term...”. One cannot overlook the devastation that COVID-19 has had on employment (Barbate, Gade & Raibaghar, 2021). The report of CIME (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) says, “...unemployment rate in India jumped to 29% since the country went into lockdown from March 2020” (Akther & Kamraju, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic on the rural youth is found to be more severe, due to non-availability of Internet, lack of a congenial environment for studying, and lack of educational resources. Consequently, the young generation will have to bear the long-term economic and social consequences and their well-being is curbed by short-term economy and equity. To avoid strengthened inequalities in society, and to build resilience among the youth, there is a need to anticipate the impact of the pandemic and induce recovery measures, by applying operative mechanisms and designing policies for the youth in India, as India is the youngest nation with a young population.

An important aftermath of any trauma is its psychological impact. The trauma of the pandemic too has visible psychological repercussions. It would, therefore, be fruitful to consider the psychoanalytic theory in the context of the effects and consequences of the pandemic.

Repression, denial, and dream analysis are the concepts dealt with in psychoanalysis. One vital Freudian concept that formed a part of the discourse was the effect of the unconscious on the mind, feelings, actions, and relationships. Unconscious conflicts can cause anxiety or depressive thoughts in a troubled personality, thus distorting the behaviour of an individual. The study focussed on the inter-linking of education, employment, and its psychological impact on the youth.

Pandemics have invariably caused physiological consequences. They have been associated with adverse mental health. When one delves deep to locate reasons, one finds that unpredictability, uncertainty, seriousness of disease, misinformation through varied media, and fear of social isolation has all contributed to rise in stress and mental morbidity. More dangerous is the social stigma associated with disease that leads to disclosure, which not only results in further spread of disease, but also causes increased anxiety. In one of the studies, Rajkumar observes, “Preliminary evidence suggests that symptoms of anxiety and depression (16-28%) and self-reported stress (08%) are common psychological reactions to COVID-19 pandemic, and may be associated with disturbed sleep”. He further adds, “In the population-based study, female gender, being a student, having symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 and poor perceived health were associated with higher rates of anxiety and depression” (Rajkumar, 2020). Mental health scientists have observed the need for mental health services. They propose an open and unbiased approach to mental health; open because these regions are still not open to psychiatric interventions for curing stress.

Bibliotherapy has been proposed as one of the approaches to the treatment of a pandemic/disease-induced anxiety and mental health problems. As a term, bibliotherapy was coined by Samuel Crothers in 1916. One can locate the use of bibliotherapy as a means of treating mental ailments in ancient times. The library of Rameses II of Egypt was famously known by the motto ‘the house of the healing for the soul’. One can also find references of the Quran being prescribed by physicians in Cairo as early as the 13th century. Such references are indicative of the fact that reading was a possible treatment. “GPs can prescribe books to patients in combination with more conventional treatments,” says Jasmine Walker. She further writes, “The ‘Books on Prescription’ list which

specifically targets young people living with mental health conditions, consists of 35 titles, ranging between self-help books, memoirs, graphic novels and fiction. Each book was carefully chosen by experts in their field and tackles complex issues like anxiety, eating disorders, depression, ADHD and many more” (Walker, 2018). Some of the various books recommended for bibliotherapy include Lesley Farfield’s *Tyranny*, Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Benjamin Zephaniah’s *Face*, and Matthew Jhonstone’s graphic novel *I Had a Black Dog*, to name a few. Dr Paula Byrne, founder and CEO of Charity Relit, the Foundation for Bibliotherapy, in one of her interviews says, “The idea of reading is medicine, it’s the oldest medicine of all...” (Byrne, Interview). A study, ‘Cognitive bibliography for mild depressive symptomatology: Randomized clinical trial of efficacy and mechanisms of change’, by Ramona Moldovan et al., considered 97 young adults with sub-threshold depression and investigated the effects of bibliotherapy on depressive symptoms. The results indicate statistically and clinically significant changes in depressive symptoms and cognition. The study concludes that “bibliography is an effective treatment of sub-threshold depression...” (Ramona, Cobeau & David, 2013). There is no doubt that literature has the capacity not only to heal oneself, but also understand others, which is an essential requirement to sustain, contribute, and maintain social relations. This understanding is supported with the theory of mind, which refers to understanding the mental state of other people, a crucial skill for social relationships that characterises human societies. Kidd and Castano, in their study ‘Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind’, provide relevant evidence that theory of mind is enhanced by literary fiction (Kidd, 2013). It allows one to empathise with others and understand them. This idea is extended when a study establishes the relationship between reading books and longevity. A study by Avni Bavishi, Martin D Slade and Becca R. Levy indicates that book readers experience “a 20% reduction in risk of mortality over the 12 years of follow-up compared to non-book readers” (Bhavishi, Slade & Levy, 2016).

Literature is a kind of rewriting of people’s culture, history, geographical locations, and so on. Stories/narratives/novels/poems are beneficial because they assist us in bringing attention to the challenges that are provided to us. Dr Kenneth Ginsburg (2006), a professor of paediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania, has

written a guide, ‘Resilience in children and teens: Giving kids roots and wings’, which discusses fostering resilience in the teenagers. He emphasised that teaching children the tools to become more resilient is even more important than teaching them the 3 R’s – reading, writing, and arithmetic (phrase was coined by Curtis). Many novelists and philosophers have commented on the theme of the resilience of the human spirit in times of struggle or catastrophe – the collective overcoming of human suffering, the existence of the human spirit in brutalising environments, the resilience by communities and countries in times of war or terrorism, and forms of community self-help and sacrifice when earthquakes, floods or storms strike. The capacity to recover quickly from tragedies, the adaptability, strength and flexibility to overcome vulnerabilities, especially by the weak, the attitude to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis, to cope with pain and discomfort, and ultimately to contemplate and face death, especially one’s own, is a common set of related themes for those who want to highlight the ability of human beings as a species that transcends hardship.

The notion of unconscious is not new in itself and deals with the unconscious behaviour, the ability to know others, and how unconscious becomes the founding factor of our psyche. Ernest Jones’ book *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1948) focused on Hamlet’s indecisive behaviour in killing his uncle, giving an insight into the working of the inner thought process. Freud, in his work ‘Civilization and its discontents’, situates the human psyche within the fabric of social institutions. He situates the production and enjoyment of creative arts and other forms of sublimation within the context of broader questions, such as the purpose of life, the pursuit of human happiness, and the functions of culture and religion. Further, Freud raises the question what is the purpose of human life. He argues that it is the pursuit of happiness (Habib, 2005). Thus, art or literature becomes an important agent that also makes the readers resilient. Luthar defined resilience as the positive adaptation, despite experiencing adversity (qtd in Fleming & Ledogar). In fact, the genre of psychological fiction, while focusing on interior characterisation, explores and brings to the front the emotional lives of the fictional character. Coming to the question on how one can manage crisis and adversity through literature, it can be favourably stated that narratives of literature can build resilience among students. ‘What’s true of all

the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men [sic] to rise above themselves' (Albert Camus'; *The Plague*). This literary definition of resilience acts as a psychological curative during the times of a pandemic. In this context, Albert Camus's *The Plague (La Peste)*, published in 1947, investigates the human condition and responses to the plague epidemic forays in Oran, an Algerian city in the 1940s. Literature depicts human responses and has a purpose, although it is imaginative and fictionalised; however, it also has some realistic elements borrowed from the happenings around and has a hidden message. Why is it that a text written in the 12th century is still read? Obviously it has some innate qualities that are present across space, time, and region. Literature acts as a catalyst in making one resilient. The word 'resilience' was first used in physics or mechanical sciences – it describes the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation, caused especially by compressive stress. It is understood as the ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, bent, and so on, and was later used in the social sciences, meaning the ability to succeed, to live, and to develop in a positive and socially acceptable way, despite stress or adversity. Resilience is connected to psychological theory, which means successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances (trauma, abuse, mental illness, disease), whereas in environmental sciences, it challenges the ability of human beings or the environment to return to equilibrium. Thus, the focus is on the possibility of turning negative outcomes into positive ones. In physics, the term designates a central quality of materials that varies according to the specific characteristics of each material, but when applied to human beings, resilience points to the 'inner strength' that varies according to each individual. Literature thus talks of holistic growth – physical, mental, and spiritual. UNESCO lays emphasis on resilience as well. In fact, the organisation talks of cultural resilience, that is, the capability of systems and individuals to cope with risk, making it more of a psychological phenomenon. Resilient thinking provides a basis for understanding and developing strategies for sustainable transformation in turbulent times. Having a resilience lens can provide a framework, complementing the broader sustainable development agenda, to meet the growing challenges covering 3 characteristics: persistence, adaptability, and transformability.

'Resilience' thus has become a psychological theory and field of wellness research focused on the ability to cope or adapt when confronted with adverse life events, and committed to the idea that individuals can learn techniques to build resilience, i.e., cognitive reframing techniques, character-building, stress management, viewing crises as challenges, learning to accept things one cannot change, sharing feelings, and keeping things in perspective. It can also be defined as a biopsychosocial and spiritual phenomenon which is "the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility" (Luthans, 2006). Thus, literature can give an alternate solution to the problems, not only during a pandemic, but also during other catastrophic times.

Summary of Responses

The questions being subjective in nature allowed the respondents to openly/freely represent issues, problems and concerns in respect of COVID-19 scenario. The respondents claim that while the government laid down guidelines for safety measures to prevent COVID-19, along with restricting movement, it adversely affected the education and mental health of the youth. Of the total respondents (online and offline), 71% indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Learning became secondary to survival, as most of the households reported an economic setback (most of them being daily wagers) and depended on the PDS to meet their food requirements.

As the teachers took to online teaching, more than 60% of the respondents reported that they were unable to attend classes because of unavailability of resources/smart phones. They could not go to their friends' house to share resources due to strict lockdown protocols. They depended on text messages and phone calls for highlights of lectures. They also reported lack of motivation to attend online classes. The respondents claimed that their academic sessions were disturbed as they started late, and the teaching-learning was done online. Poor network connectivity in the villages was an obvious reason for interrupted learning sessions. They further felt that lack of classroom exposure and the absence of teacher-student face-to-face interactions hindered their academic growth. Students were unable to participate in different physical

curricular and extra-curricular activities, hindering their holistic development. The respondents also claimed that while they were assumed as connected during online teaching, in the absence of real-time peer communication they felt a kind of vacuum and experienced anxiety, as if they were all alone, and did not know whether what they understood was right or wrong.

While there was a flooding of e-resources, it only increased the stress levels. For students with uninterrupted Internet facility, it became difficult for them to screen the e-resources, and they ended up spending more time on the Internet skimming through them. For the ones *sans* a dependable Internet source, even regular classes were cumbersome. Moreover, one resource was provided among the siblings and they had to share the same; preference was given to the male counterpart. Interestingly, it was also found that 2 siblings were required to share one mobile for learning/attending classes; if both were girl students, preference and importance to specific courses over others was found. The sibling undertaking commerce was given the resource/mobile over the one taking an arts course.

Since the respondents were expected to learn from home, they were seen as idle and assigned household chores too, which interrupted their learning. Further, the continuous stress of whether they would be able to continue with their studies or not constantly worried them as household income was affected since some of the parents were daily wagers and the lockdown cut their source of income. In such situations, survival is primary over education. In addition, they felt that while technology tried to bridge the gap and give education continuity when apparently everything came to a standstill, exposure to the screen for long durations caused eyesight problems, anxiety, disturbed sleep patterns, and in some cases, even nausea. Extended use of headphones/earplugs affected their auditory sense as well. The coaching centres for competitive exams were shut down as well, which was a setback. Mental health was an important issue for the respondents. They felt that staying indoors impacted their minds as the pandemic took a lot from their lives. While on one hand they felt sick staying at home, on the other, they feared going out.

Findings and Suggestions

- In educational institutions, online learning efforts are being made. However, there is a *digital divide* with respect to connectivity and accessibility to e-

learning resources. To meet this gap, the education institutions need to collaborate with organisations to provide all the required facilities, like Internet facility, by creating Internet zones and hotspots, ample copies of study resources in simplified formatting and listing, and apt training to use new emerging technology for favourable results.

- Pandemic creates stress and distress, thus hampering the mental growth of the youth. There is a need to safeguard mental health. Increase in stress levels requires one to focus on the overall well-being and mental health through counselling and sports activities.
- As different policies were made and implemented in imparting education, the students, the ultimate stakeholders, showed little gain. There is a need to include young people in policy making to articulate their needs and improve the outcomes.
- It is mandatory to provide career opportunities to the youth so that they can gain economic independence, thus causing less frustration.
- Unemployment insurance benefits should be given to the youth.
- There is a need for interdisciplinary research to address and empower the students to face the challenges.
- The psycho-physical recovery can be achieved by becoming resilient. As a suggestion, resilient literature should be made a part of the curriculum so that the youth can have an understanding of coping with any calamities in the future.

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