



**INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF PEOPLE
DURING EPIDEMICS**

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Received 8th May 2020; Revised 4th June 2020; Accepted 9th July 2020; Available online 1st March 2021

<https://doi.org/10.31032/IJBPAS/2021/10.3.5379>

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to trace the influence of culture on physical and mental health of the people during various epidemics. The epidemics include Plague, Small Pox, Cholera and COVID-19. Both physical health and mental health are interrelated and spoiling one may have effect on another. During various epidemics people had various issues both physically and mentally. So people's culture had a great impact on the health of the people. Because culture decides the way in which the people considers a particular event. Culture had both positive and negative impact on various epidemics including the recent Corona. From the past centuries the influence of culture on novel virus cannot be neglected.

Key words: epidemics, health, culture, religion, impact

INTRODUCTION:

There are large numbers of factors which influence the health of the people and this paper tries to identify the cultural impact on health and disease of the people. Culture has

a great influence on the health of the people. It affects people's perception on health, illness, disease, pain and how people experience pain [1]. There are many factors

which impact health of the people that includes individual's personal characteristics, gene, social and physical behaviour. Culture influences not only the lives of the people but also their health because individual's activity is decided by his culture.

People from certain society believe that the cause for the disease might be some microorganism and they immediately seek medical care whereas some people think that it might be because of supernatural power and they started to approach spiritual power and believe only pleasing god will solve their problem. Thus the way people see a particular disease, how they treat it and solution for the disease majorly deals with the culture of the people. So the culture has effect on physical and mental health of the people.

The influence of culture may have both positive and negative effect on the people and in history one could find that culture influenced disease and disease influenced culture. Many researchers say that the risk of disease may sometimes rely on the culture of the people.

Considering the present pandemic state, many people feel that culture has strong influence on the epidemic disease. One could find the return of traditions everywhere. Because of this Pandemic people from all

over the country stopped shaking hands with each other and they started to say Indian traditional "Namaste" [2]. This kind of cultural return and cultural influence occurred not only in the case of Corona but in all epidemic period people could find the power of culture over the spread of virus in both positive and in negative ways. The world history has seen lot of pandemics which include: Great Plague, Smallpox, Cholera, etc. thus religion and culture had deep impact on all those periods.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Cultural influences behind cholera transmission in the Far North Region, Republic of Cameroon: a field experience and implications for operational level planning of interventions [3] talks how culture influences people during the outbreak of cholera. In the beginning the doctors were not able to predict the reason for the cause of cholera so people started to believe that worshipping god will give solution to the problem. So the author talks about the practices which people did during cholera outbreak. The author listed some of the cultural practices like communal water usage, group eating, funeral, cemetery on mountains are the major reasons for the spread of disease.

This article deals only with cholera; but not with any other epidemic disease and most probably talks only the negative effects of culture.

Juran et al. 2007, [4] dealt with vaccines for smallpox and how culture influences even vaccination. The author says that the people's view on vaccines is based on their culture because they considered smallpox is caused because of anger of god and they believed vaccination increases anger of god. However, at last Public Health Organization approached religious people in order to advise people to have vaccination.

Though the paper mentions the topic vaccination, it deals only with smallpox which was a recent disease during that period.

BLACK DEATH

Black Death started from central Asia which was caused because of black rats and started to spread in Europe by the merchants who travelled from Asia to Europe. Already people were weak and their immunity was low because of Great Famine, so it was very hard for the people to sustain their life in this Black Death. Apart from this, doctors were not able to find the reason for this disease and they thought that it might be because of improperly buried dead- bodies. Since the medicine and doctors do not give solution to

the problem people started to run at the back of religion and they strongly believed that religion could solve all the problems. It took nearly 150 years for Europe to recover from this deadly disease which brought lot of changes in the society and its culture.

Culture, religion and economy started to influence Black Death. More than anything religion had a great influence on Plague because people struggled with the failure of religion. The condition pushed the people to question their belief. During this period, people started to believe that Jews was the major reason for spreading plague in the country because most of the Jews were merchants and disease was caused by infected rats which was usually carried by merchants. More than disease it became a religious problem and people started to attack this particular group of Jewish.

The people of 14th Century struggled not only with Black Death/ Plague but also with the failure of religion. Since the Doctors was not able to predict the origin of the disease people started to believe that it might be because of some supernatural power which came to punish human for their mistakes. So people started to punish themselves by whipping and considered Plague as Divine Punishment. However giving punishment to oneself would not solve the problem which

leads to the failure of Church and belief of people. At last, people came to the conclusion that there might be something wrong in the church which must be rectified. This is how people's belief on religion affects their minds during epidemic period.

This Black Death also affects the people psychologically. People, who believe in God, had a strong belief that one should do good to expect a better output but because of uncertainty of survival, people had the general mood "live for the moment". People had started to think that religion cannot stop the spread of disease and in some countries even priests died because of plague which ceased church services in many areas. This Black Death had impact even on art and Literature.

SMALLPOX

It is believed that the outbreak of smallpox was in 18th century Europe and nearly 400,000 people died per- year because of smallpox and one- third of the cases resulted in blindness. The disease seems to extend till 20th century which affected nearly 500 million people. The culture and religious belief, people had during this particular period been, they worshipped various gods and goddesses especially in China and in India. In China, the small pox goddess was T'ou- ShenNiang- Niang and in India the

goddess being worshipped for small pox was Shitala. The people believed God and prayed for their mercy and they also referred smallpox as heaven flower. These kinds of believes exist not only in China and India but also extended to other places like Japan, Europe and Africa.

Even after the invention of vaccination for smallpox people from some countries were not ready to accept this because of their cultural and religious belief. By witnessing this incident Public Health organization which always seeks for the public health came to know that it is not easy to be welcomed by everyone and it is essential to have moral, ethical, religious and spiritual understanding. WHO faced lot of problems in certain countries especially in India that follow a system of social stratification which is called caste system. So Hindus the dominant people in India argued that they should be vaccinated only by the men from their group.

Though it seems like negative in the point of culture since the people were against vaccination because of their religious belief but finally the people consented to vaccinate by the appeal of religious head. In World Health Organisation official text it has been mentioned that many tribal and minority group people agreed to have vaccination only

because of their religious leaders. In order to popularise the vaccination even WHO used slogan like “Worship the goddess, but to please her take vaccination” [4]. Through these points one can understand the role and influence of culture on smallpox and even on its vaccination.

CHOLERA:

Cholera is caused by dirt linked with water and food. As seen during all other pandemics, even in this period people believed that it has been caused as a punishment by God and people started to offer goats which results in delay of treatment. People also blame patients believing that they were not good to please god. While referring articles on Cholera, most of the papers talk about group eating; it is a culture that a group of people sit together and eat using their hands dipped in the same bowl thinking that it improves their bond. This highly influences cholera and gave much chance for the spread of disease [3].

The risk of exposure was high during funeral. Large crowd visited death and had food together and some people had culture of burying dead- bodies in mountain which becomes the major reason for the spread of disease. In all gatherings the spread was mainly because of food. There is common saying among the people, “Yes, I will eat in a

wedding if someone in that family was recently cured of cholera. However, if the patient died, in order not to upset the bride, groom and their family members, I will at least taste the food” [5]. Moreover people believed that their traditional medicine was superior to allopathic and they were not ready to consume tablets. This shows that people do not have any awareness about the disease

COVID-19 CORONA:

As discussed earlier, culture always has impact on health and epidemic diseases which now extends its influence even on Corona. Corona is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered virus. There is no medicine or vaccination for this virus; however government advises that quarantine is the best way to avoid this disease. It was identified in China in December 2019 and it spreads throughout the world in the year 2020. The cultural factor which affects this pandemic and the culture which has been affected by Corona are discussed here.

People all over the world stopped shaking hands with each other and they followed Indian traditional way of saying “Namaste” [2]. In other pandemics one could find the influence of religion; even in this epidemic most of the people strongly believe that this problem is given as a divine punishment

since humans are harming nature and animals and they trust that only God can heal this. But shockingly, because of Corona all the religious places like temples, mosques and churches have been closed and people were not allowed to have any religious gatherings. In all those epidemics, holy places give mind relief to the people making them to have confidence that they have somebody to solve their issues and save them [6].

Next to religious belief, this article talks about hospitality. Most of the countries in Asia, especially Indian people give much priority to hospitality because it is one of the major part of their culture. But during this epidemic, government advises people not to welcome guests, since it may become the reason for spread of Corona. So hospitality disappeared in the society temporarily. This also reminds the Indian system of quarantine during the period of chickenpox. When a person gets affected to chickenpox the family members will not allow anybody else to enter their home. Thus this is also a part of culture. Indian people always believe that neem and turmeric has holy power and they trust the anti- bacterial effect of those two things. Since it is religious, people do not hesitate to use those items. Then people follow Indian traditional way of washing hands before eating meal or before touching anything

which remains our belief of “Cleanliness in Godliness”. In these ways culture influence the disease; however one could also find how this disease affects the culture of the people. The major thing is cremation because people are not allowed to do any rituals to the dead body because there might be a high chance of disease spread. Then people are restricted to celebrate any kind of festivals and are prohibited to take pilgrimage (any kind of travel).

This also had social influence because in India, marriage ceremony is considered as an important celebration and people spent a large amount of money to show their status but because of corona large gathering was prohibited, so people of different status had simple marriage. Corona not only influence culture and social happenings but also saved nature. People had an understanding that this world is not only for humans but also for birds, animals and for other creatures [7-11].

CONCLUSION

Culture decides the knowledge of the people to some extent, mainly his behaviour and it also guides people in a specific situation. In various stages of epidemics, socio- culture influence disease and people’s reaction for the disease in different ways. Culture controls behaviour and activity of a man

which in turn controls the health and illness of a person.

Diseases take various turns in different countries in which the culture affect its position to some extent because the way the people see the disease, its precautions and vaccination is based on their culture.

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