Covid-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity to Redress the Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Humans learnt valuable lessons from the historical episodes of medical emergencies. Studies show that a well thought, collective effort to control disease spread can be very effective in societies. In developing countries such as Pakistan, a lot of time is wasted in propaganda about the diseases and deciding how to control disease spread because there is a lack of confidence among the masses upon governments' narrative, mainly due to extreme religious sentiments and room for conspiracy theory that put people in a state of confusion that caused unnecessary delay in handling pandemic situation. To explore the reasons behind people's delayed response in Covid-19 situation; the present study was carried out. The participants were also asked why, they think, people were reluctant to get vaccinated for Covid-19. Twenty professors from four public sector universities of Punjab were conveniently selected to be interviewed. This study surfaced interesting findings that highlighted the reasons, perceived by the participants, behind conspiracy theories and inaccurate understanding of religious teaching among the people and role of insufficient commitment from the religious personals and government authorities. The study also explored the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in COVID-19 perspective.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Pandemic, SOPs during COVID-19 Pandemic, COVID-19 vaccination*

Introduction:

Since the appearance of first case of COVID-19 in last couple of months of year 2019, the whole world gradually went into a state of emergency.[1] Keeping humans away from one another was understood essential to avoid the disease spread.[2] It looked normal time to understand and respond to COVID-19 pandemic but time proved that we needed to respond more quickly.[3] Majority of governments in developed, developing and under developed countries took measures to avoid the spread of the disease as the emergency situation required. Some even imposed heavy fines on masses if someone is found not following SOPs and getting vaccinated.[4] Initially, the SOPs regarding COVID-19 were imposed and followed in most of developed countries and the restrictions such as wearing masks and keeping social distance was followed either due to better understanding of the disease or due to heavy fines imposed by the governments. Whereas, developing and under developed countries faced various challenges due to low sensibility by the masses and compromised

[1]. Wagner, D. M., Klunk, J., Harbeck, M., Devault, A., Waglechner, N., Sahl, J. W., ... & Poinar, H. (2014). Yersinia pestis and the Plague of Justinian 541–543 AD: a genomic analysis. *The Lancet infectious diseases*, *14*(4), 319-326.

[2].Tabish, S. A. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: Emerging perspectives and future trends. *Journal of public health research*, *9*(1).

[3]. Littman, R. J. (2009). The plague of Athens: epidemiology and paleopathology. *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine: A Journal of Translational and Personalized Medicine: A Journal of Translational and Personalized Medicine*, *76*(5), 456-467.

[4]. Chaudhary, N. (2021). The Sense of a Pandemic: Test, Trials, and Turbulence in the Indian Subcontinent. In *The Psychology of Global Crises and Crisis Politics* (pp. 91-127). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

implementation of COVID-19 SOPs.[5] It is a moment of relief to some extent that even in developing countries such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the level of realization has increased after facing really challenging situation of pandemic and loss of countless human lives reported on social and main stream media.[6] However, the appropriate response time taken to gain a better understanding of the disease and taking emergency measures to avoid the disease was still a matter of concerns for countries with high religious sensitivity and lower education profiles.[7] There may be other factors responsible for delay to respond to rapid increase in disease spread, this research was focused on religious perspective. For the developed countries with better ways of communication for awareness, it was observed comparatively easier for the people to listen to their governments and follow instructions issued by the government. However, societies with religious sensitivities and low education profiles faced various issues that stopped them to understand the urgency of the situation causing useless delay in responding to the disease effectively that resulted in high number of casualties.[8] Such societies often

[5]. Kruglanski, A. W., Gunaratna, R., Ellenberg, M., & Speckhard, A. (2020). Terrorism in time of the pandemic: exploiting mayhem. *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy*, *5*(1), 121-132.

[6]. Khanna, R. C., Cicinelli, M. V., Gilbert, S. S., Honavar, S. G., & Murthy, G. V. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned and future directions. *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology*, *68*(5), 703.

[7]. Halimi, M. B. H., & Sudiman, M. S. A. S. B. (2021). Religious Extremism. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, *13*(1), 112-117.

[8]. Chaudhary, N. (2021). The Sense of a Pandemic: Test, Trials, and Turbulence in the Indian Subcontinent. In *The Psychology of Global Crises and Crisis Politics* (pp. 91-127). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

fall victim to ignorance and conspiracy theories that waste the valuable time allowing the disease to spread.[9]

Research objectives:

- To explore reasons of people's delayed response to COVID-19 pandemic.
- To know the causes of flawed understanding of people about COVID-19 Pandemic.
- To know respondents' opinion about disbelief regarding need of vaccination and following SOPs issued by the government.
- To explore religious point of view of Muslim professors during pandemic situation

Research questions:

- What are the reasons behind delayed response of people in the wake of medical emergencies such as COVID-19?
- What are the reasons of people's flawed understanding about the CORONA virus disease and its spread?
- Why people believe that vaccination and SOPs are not as important as they are projected?

Methodology:

[9]. Mari, L., Bertuzzo, E., Righetto, L., Casagrandi, R., Gatto, M., Rodriguez-Iturbe, I., & Rinaldo, A. (2012). On the role of human mobility in the spread of cholera epidemics: towards an epidemiological movement ecology. *Ecohydrology, 5*(5), 531-540.

Present study adopted a qualitative research method to explore the opinions of University Professors. A semi structured interview was used as research tool for data collection. For this, a sample of twenty public sector university professors was conveniently selected. The university professors were considered relevant respondents with a presumption that they are highly educated people who have a better understanding of the social and psychological mindset of the society. In addition, it was considered that being a region of relatively high sensitivity of religious mindset, a large number of people in Pakistan have been reported to misinterpret religious standing on certain aspects such as spread of diseases. Therefore, it was considered essential to include Professors of Islamic Studies from selected universities to obtain the most relevant religious ruling in the medical emergencies such as pandemic situation. The data obtained from interviews were analyzed by using a qualitative analysis technique called thematic analysis. The respondents of the study presented varied responses which were coded and categorized. The emerging patterns from the data were further processed to highlight the emerging themes from the responses.

Findings of the study:

Findings of the study consisted of interesting and relevant point of views of respondents. The main findings were related with people's flawed understanding of religious teachings and government's poor commitment to deal with pandemic effectively.[10] In this section, findings of the study

[10]. Czeisler, M. É., Tynan, M. A., Howard, M. E., Honeycutt, S., Fulmer, E. B., Kidder, D. P., ... & Czeisler, C. A. (2020). Public attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs related to COVID-19, stay-at-home orders, nonessential business closures, and public health guidance—United States, New York City, and Los Angeles, May 5–12, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, *69*(24), 751.

have been presented along with selected comments from some of the respondents.

A large majority of university professors from departments of Islamic studies agreed that people had a flawed understanding of teaching of Islam in the wake of medical emergencies. The respondents explained in their responses that Islamic teachings emphasis on social distancing during any disease spread. Respondent 3 commented,

> *"According to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), people are not allowed to go to the areas where there is a risk of catching fatal disease. Similarly, no one is allowed to leave the area of disease spread until it is clear from the disease. The commandment is clear, however, people do not bother to follow the directions mindfully."*[11]

Similarly, Respondent 7 reiterated,

> "*If we seek guidance from our religion, we would be able to control any disease spread effectively and timely. For example, in view of the sayings of the Prophet, if people limit their movement, the chances of disease spread will automatically vanish, but, in majority cases, people, having limited knowledge, do not try to seek guidance from the Ulema and end up in wastage of time indulging themselves in rumors and conspiracy theories."*[12]

Similarly, majority of respondents shared their view about role of conspiracy theories in Pakistani society. They reported that under misunderstood explanation of faith, majority of people in Pakistani society remain undecided and the disease kept on spreading. They believe that some external elements are involved to create false propaganda about the

[11]. Respondent 3
[12]. Respondent 7

disease spread to scare people and to gain their political gains. For example, Respondent 3 explained:

> *"….it is very easy to spread false propaganda in Pakistani society. The popular prospect is that we, the Pakistanis, are keen to hear that every negative incident is a result of external conspiracy. Now, it has worse results as people fall an easy prey to such conspiracy, losing confidence in state institutions and wasting a lot of time that could be utilized in understanding of diseases and finding ways to find solutions".*[13]

The conspiracy theories, according to the respondents, penetrate so quickly in the society that people start to believe that there is no disease spread and it is only some false propaganda to scare people due to involvement of certain countries who have ganged up against Pakistan and Islam. Same was the case with Pakistani society. First, a large number of people believed that there is no disease such as COVID-19 pandemic. Such disbelief lead the nation to face serious threats of human deaths and spread of disease. Moreover, the conspiracy theory about the vaccination caused even more delay and even more challenging situation for layman. Respondent 17 commented:

> *"…it is a harsh reality of our society that every intervention from outside the country is seen as a conspiracy. Particularly, vaccination that comes from outside i.e. from international organizations, is seen as to control population and making male members impotent.*

[13]. Respondent 3

> *This looks ridiculous but true that people easily believe this narrative. We have examples of polio vaccination that is still a matter of concern, although polio has eradicated from most part of the world. One way or the other, a considerable number of families still avoid giving polio vaccination to their children. Same was the case with COVID-19 vaccination. People believed that it is part of some wicked plans of international organizations".*[14]

The emerging pattern from the data also highlighted the relatively irresponsible attitude from religious leaders with huge followings which was also considered an undeniable factor for indecisiveness of people. As a result, people with low educational profiles fell a prey to misinterpretations of the situation. In fact, the respondents reported, religious misinterpretations played a negative role for awareness among people. Respondent 13 commented,

> *".....the religious leaders (PEER) and Imams have greater responsibility in situations such as COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, majority of religious leaders and Imams are only educated on old syllabus of religious books which is not regularly updated in accordance with Science and ever-changing trends in all aspects of life. Under the influence of these Imams, their followers blindly follow them and ignore the severity of the situation".*[15]

The study also found that respondents believed that the government did not enforce the preventive measures with due commitment. From the

[14]. Respondent 17
[15]. Respondent 13

very beginning, there should have been strict implementation of SOPs and people should have been heavily fined to highlight the severity of the situation. The respondents believed that government of Pakistan took initiative to establish National Command Operation Center (NCOC). This center, under the direct supervision of the government, kept informing the masses on daily basis about the indigenous as well as international status of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 16 viewed:

> *"….there is a serious problem in the developing countries which is linked with financial conditions. Due to low budget for dealing with emergency situations, the governments have to take time to arrange and manage finances to deal with emergency situations. Most of the time, governments in developing countries wait for some foreign agency to sponsor the expenditures that are inevitable in situations like COVID-19. As a result, governments delay in responding where a lot of finances are involved. Moreover, as the governments cannot spend with liberty, many aspects are ignored such as sustainable planning, skillful human resource, and appropriate and efficient equipment".*[16]

The respondents believed that the government looked lethargic in the beginning and a large majority of people criticized the governments' strategies to tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19 Pandemic. The number of deaths reported in major developed countries remained higher for a long time, but surprisingly, the ratio of death remained low in Pakistan. The respondents agreed that the current government took some

[16]. Respondent 16

time and took actions wisely to save people from horrific effects of the disease. As a result, the masses' awareness about the disease grew day by day and a large number of people got vaccinated gradually.

Discussion:

The findings of the study may be discussed in various directions. First of all, this study is useful to understand the public opinion about the covid-19 pandemic which seems flawed. The data suggest that similar to situation in neighbouring countries, people in Pakistan, in majority, had an irresponsible attitude towards COVID-19 pandemic. It can be generally seen that false assumptions often lead to wastage of time. The time to react is wasted into making of public opinion. The findings also highlighted the religious understanding of people. In a country where people easily fall prey to conspiracy theories, it is really challenging to make people believe in time that the disease is fatal and unavoidable. The responses about authentication of vaccination process also highlighted that the conspiracy theories badly affect welfare of the people. The news channels across the globe reported the damage caused by the disease on daily basis. However, due to lack of understanding and false propaganda, the vaccination process did not work as quick as it was demanding in view of emergency of the situation. The data highlighted some serious concerns about the role of religious leaders and imams who, in majority, undermined the need to respond to the disease spread wisely. In view of the experience Pakistan has gone through, and in the light of international reports of damage in the form of human deaths COVID-19 spread, it is urgent need of the situation that the narrative of people about covid-19 spread which is inaccurate and

flawed, must be changed. This is time to change how we think and how we react to the situation such as COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations:

In the light of analysis of data collected, this study presents the following recommendations:

- Islamic scholars and leaders must play their proactive role to sensitize the masses during medical emergency situations such as COVID-19.
- The implementation gap on the part of government must be filled with strict system of fines and accountability.
- There is a dire need of campaigns to educate people about how to respond during medical emergencies.
- There is a dire need to conduct more research to add strength to the existing knowledge about COVID-19.