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## CONCRETIZING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY DURING THE COVID – 19 PANDEMIC: AN EXPLORATION FOR DURKHEIMIAN MECHANICAL SOLIDARITY

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### Abstract

During uncertainty and unpredictable situation like Covid -19 the intensity and degree of solidarity in a society is essential and fundamentally important to hold its human dimension intact and collective. The proposed article views that social solidarity particularly ‘mechanical solidarity’ put forward by Emile Durkheim holds relevance even in today’s modern society during the pandemic among newly “incarnated social facts” and adopted behaviors. Social distancing, physical distancing, community containment, isolation and individualism are the notions that have been dominating the scene during the pandemic, but social solidarity is still manifesting as existential possibility among the members of the society inviting and permitting only physical and social – ‘distancing’ not ‘social difference’. Priority of the social over the individual has been critically analyzed in the proposed article as social distancing and suspension of various human activities during the pandemic bear witness of it. Solidarity is the cementing force that binds individuals and keeps them intact in this highly cluttered upheaval. Collectivity propels social solidarity and in order to mollify, nullify and water down the effect and effect of Covid pandemic, the societies have to remain intact and uniformed. Though Durkheim was strongly hypothetical on the natural replacement of “mechanical solidarity” by “organic solidarity” down the road, as societies mature into modern morphological alteration possibilities, they would rather adapt and adopt organic solidarity which shall be a typical morphological feature of a modern society. The proposed article holds the view that mechanical solidarity strongly exists even during the Covid disaster and has played crucial role in uniting and concretizing people in the societies to battle against the pandemic. Global untouchability has made its way successfully into the human society. Keep a distance, don’t touch him, don’t touch her, having come in contact with others wash your hands and your body, wear a mask on your face; look, we all have become profane, a culture of untouchability resumes back, the pandemic has made all of us untouchables and point to be noted here, this time it is worldwide.

The first case of Covid-19 was reported in India on 30<sup>th</sup> January. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic and a Public Health Emergency (WHO, 2020). India started its battle against Covid – 19 in a grand and historical way applying ‘Historical Movement Based Approach’ (HMBA), further elucidating on this unique approach – here in India culture is different, and people have different temperaments, internalizing capacities and possibilities. A method or strategy which works in a developed country may not help here in India, for an example, as in many developed countries if social and collectives’ changes have to be caused into effect, then instructions can be placed on notice boards by the authorities and people would just simply read and follow them and – that is it. But Indian context is diametrically opposites and varies. In India if a social and collective change is to be called upon then, it has to be made, converted and translated into a movement, ‘got to make a movement out of it’. India entered the lockdown in the last week of March 2020 with a call for a day of people’s curfew and people were requested by the Indian government to come out on their balconies, and ring bells and bang their pots and pans. The air reverberated with the melody of sound on Sunday evening as people across the country rang bells, blew conches and clapped to express appreciation for medical and other staffs who are on the frontline battle against the coronavirus. (The Economic Times, 2020) However, there were pot banging marches, community dances and processions too. How could ringing bells, banging pots and pans, and simply coming out on balconies, clapping hands have helped India to prepare and launch itself fight against the nasty Covid – 19?

This unique approach was soon subject to public fun and collective mockery around the world by many intellectuals and people who claim to have high brains, it just defeated logic for many across the globe the way India behaved when it formally pitched itself against the heinous pandemic. Having learnt the fact that entire India was either on their balconies, or at their door steps, ringing bells, pans, pots – the people of India turned collective, manifested collective solidarity and consciousness and were unified and well-coordinated against the battle with Covid – 19 pandemics. Janata curfew: people across the nation clap, ring bells, blew the conch shells and beat metal plates in solidarity with the health workers on frontline fighting the novel coronavirus, (The Times of India, 2020) A resonance of “We, The People of India” from the very Preamble of India was experienced across the nation. It practically defeats all human logic to mobilize such a huge number of people on a single day, at a specific given time, for a common unified purpose, but it worked well and happened, the entire nation become unified, collective and coordinated. Why? – because India made a movement out of it in order to indulge the entire nation into this battle, India launched itself against the pandemic as a nation and fought as a nation. Who did not come together? Seemed everyone did. Women, men, third genders, poor, rich, middle class, sick, every religion, every caste, tribe, black, fair, village, city, hills and plains of India become one spirit and soul, very possible section of Indian society participated in this collective call against the pandemic.



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Priority of the social over the individual has been the mainstay and real task of Durkheimian sociological contribution – analyzing this in the context of existentialism v/s essentialism, a tremendous number of collective actions and behaviors have been adapted and adopted during the pandemic with nomothetic connotation, which essentially reflects “priority of the social over the individual”, examples – social distancing, social isolation, quarantine, lockdown, community containment, avoiding social and public gatherings, ceased economic activities, even suspension of various death ceremonial procedures and customs and in many cases where the dead person was infected with Covid, the bodies were not given to the family members but disposed by the authorities; all these bundles of newly surfaced activities happened because the priority was being addressed to the social (collective gain) over the individual. Many of our changed behaviors and the way we now socialize during the pandemic have given birth to various new social facts, and these social facts are “incarnated social facts” which have come into existence only in the pandemic.

However, they appear absolutely illogical and irrelevant before and beyond the Covid pandemic. Durkheim (1895/1982) proposed that the distinctive subject matter of sociology should be the study of social facts (see M. Gane, 1988; Gilbert, 1994; Nielsen, 2005a, 2007a; and the special edition of Sociological Perspectives 1995). Social facts are to be treated as “things” (S. Jones, 1996). Therefore, it becomes inevitable to peep into the incarnated, evolved sets of social facts particularly and specifically in the Covid – 19 contexts. A sociological commentary to justify the importance, relevance and appropriateness of these social facts in the context of the pandemic is much desired and appreciated while making an empirical sociological attempt to comment on this catastrophe. A social fact is “every way of acting”, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations. (Durkheim, 1895/1982:13)

Legal codes, rules and our moral and social obligations – “way of acting” - wearing masks, maintaining a physical distance, social distancing, and isolation, individualism, not forming social and public gatherings, putting a cap on a number people can travel in public or private transport, limiting on a number of people can attend marriage ceremony are all new sets of social facts which have evolved during the Covid pandemic. So, until vaccines are ready, social and public health strategies like isolation, quarantine, social distancing, lockdown, and community containment are used (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Simultaneously, these newly evolved social facts bear the characteristics of sui generis – “unique” as these practices would be subject to an erroneous collective verdict when compared to the pre or post Covid era. Human interaction in the pandemic has undergone a massive, dramatic, drastic change; it has not only been narrowed down and slowed down but has also been exposed to a sudden morphological alteration to a greater extent.

The society is made up of individuals but can be understood and interpreted through learning and studying the interactions not the individuals, human interactions have their own level of reality. This has been called “relational realism” (Alpert, 1939). While, understanding human interaction ‘altered’ and ‘changed’ in the pandemic, we need to apply scientific and sociological interpretation of human interaction to contextualize it in the pandemic. Thus Dan Sperber (1982) has argued; there is only one-way to describe social phenomena and that is by interpretation. Widely advocated and propagated practice of “social distancing” is a categorical manifestation of mechanical solidarity type which has turned indomitable relegating and mitigation tool against Covid pandemic. Social distancing surely decreases human interaction, but remember the call was “social distancing” not “social difference”, therefore, it manifests a dynamic, purposeful and meaningful social interaction also keeping the human dimension intact in a squeezed, a micro interaction. Social distancing reduces interaction between people. According to epidemiologists, social distancing refers to a conscious effort to reduce close contact between people and suspected cases that may be capable of transmitting the disease (Tiffany, 2020). Only a handful scholars like Scheimer (2014) have theoretically argued the existential possibility of mechanical solidarity in modern society. The proposed article backs this rare view up.

Social solidarity is a much-celebrated idea in sociological discourse. Solidarity is the cementing force that binds individuals based on normative obligations that facilitate collective action and social order (Hechter, 2001). The understanding and interpretation of solidarity has not been philosophical but empirical, with its roots deeply connected and interpenetrated with human possibility; collectivism (uniformed and coordinated social actions) and social order (harmony based existential possibility) are the fissiparous possibilities of social solidarity.

**Pain and the mighty blame game: sometimes a human and sometimes a demon.**

When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes: and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. (Lukes, 1972:345) Let us examine the social pariahs of India. A religious organization titled the Tablighi Jamaat, which happened to held its gathering in the Capital of India shortly before the lockdown was



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pronounced, “mega transmitter” a “super spreader” of the Covid – 19 virus. Simultaneously, there was a communal portrayal of the national public socio-health crisis, when India practically indulged into the lockdown March 2020. The non-compliance of law and negligence by some members of Tablighi Jamaat, a fringe Islamist group were labeled against the entire Muslim community (Razzack & Alvi, 2020; Trivedi, 2020). There were incidents documented where Muslim Gujjars (a community) faced difficulties in selling milk and some of their families were attacked by the people from the adjoining village (Singh, 2020).

Fruits and vegetable vendors from the Muslim community were socially out casted and boycotted after the dissemination of fake news that they are intentionally spreading the virus through their products (The New Indian Express, Vendors”, 2020). This terribly exaggerated the historically existing “social distance and difference” between the Muslim community and rest of the people in India. It was happening only to stigmatize and dehumanize Muslims, overall notion strongly suggesting that Muslims were deliberately indulging in spreading the virus in India as a call of Jihad. However, the Indian media wasted no time to convert it into an anti – Muslim campaign. A blame game in the Covid – 19 pandemic – the Muslims were held responsible in India for its suffering against the pandemic. Not a weak immune system but – a weak religious belief system ameliorates the disastrous effect of Corona virus by manifolds. An entrenched resistance to change coupled with culturally learnt mechanism is observed in India on such issues even during the pandemic.

The pandemic has been racialised. Asians are being targeted as scapegoats and physically and socially humiliated, for spreading the virus (Tavernise and Opiel Jr, 2020), Research has concluded that there is a correlation and interconnectivity between communicable disease rate and explicit racial prejudices (O’Shea, Watson, Brown, & Fincher, 2020). As Covid – 19 originated in and transmitted from China, the Chinese nationals were exposed to global hatred and xenophobic treatment (Mallikarjun, 2020). The racial profiling of the Northeastern Indians led to stigmatization and discrimination against them (Haokip, 2020). In Australia, the impact of Covid-19 on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is underscored by a traumatic history of post-invasion epidemics, ‘years of neglect and a failure to address social determinants of health’ (Rallah-Baker, 2000). As Paula Braverman (2020) wrote for the UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab: ‘Inequality is our pre-existing condition.’ The pandemic tightens the noose around the neck of the humans by weak racial system – not just by weak immune system.

The pandemic v/s gender and vulnerability. Women in India are in majority involved in professional nursing, providing care to sick person at home, and are also on the frontline of corona virus. The majority of the global healthcare and social care workers are female. The WHO puts the figure at 70% (Boniol et al., 2019). And this statistic only considers paid care – the bulk of health care is actually unpaid and performed by women in the home (Battyany, 2020). Women perform over 75% of all of the world’s unpaid work (International Labor Organization, 2018: xxix). Writing in The Guardian, Moira Donegan (2020) voiced fears that the pandemic will undo generations of feminist progress. She concluded: ‘It is still not clear what life will look like after the pandemic, but it seems increasingly likely that much more of it will be confined to that place that women have been striving for decades to get out of: the house.’ However, this journey of discrimination against women and making them vulnerable to various social and natural tragedies is not new in India, but has been traditional and historical and vulnerability continues from “womb to tomb”. A weak gender system fires up the vulnerability of women in the pandemic, not merely – a weak immune system.

**A hope in the bleakest possibility: Amid the clutter of the pandemic.**

Disasters are inevitably social phenomena. Challenges, crisis, restart – up, hectors, learning and experience out of these heinous disasters, which are collectively shared and socially responded spell out one verdict to humanity: - “The show must go on”. Ever since Émile Durkheim’s (2002 [1897]) pioneering work it is strongly known that catastrophe and misfortune is socially patterned. The isolated, weak, minorities and the less wealthy consistently fare worse in disaster situations (Matthewman, 2015: 20–1). It is not only a weak immune system which makes people vulnerable in India, but a weak race, gender, caste, class, section all enhancing the deeper and greater possible dimensions to vulnerability. Larry Brilliant, one of the World Health Organization (WHO) figures central to the eradication of smallpox, observed that ‘Outbreaks are inevitable. Pandemics are optional’ (quoted in Matthewman, 2015: 27).

A Kudos Organizational Dynamics survey of 1000 people found that 81% of respondents thought that the corona virus pandemic will leave behind a society that has learned good lessons about ‘being in it together and being kind,’ while 88% of those surveyed believed that this sense of community would either continue or grow post-lockdown (Lourens, 2020: 2–3). As George Monbiot (2020) notes, we are also seeing the rise of people power the world over, from the young volunteers in Hyderabad who are provisioning the city’s precarious workers with food packages, Rebecca Solnit (2009: 305–6) is of the view that we are resilient and generous, committed to the possibility of doing things differently, desiring of human connection and purpose. In disasters, then, a peculiar social energy emerges. Rendering assistance of all types gives new definition to life – a reason for being – which is being for



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others. Arundhati Roy (2020) whatever it is, Corona virus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

### Conclusion

The focus of this proposed article has been to explore sociological tools and possibilities, as we rethink our world amid the social impacts of Covid – 19. I would not hold back even a little to conclude that Durkheim’s theory of social solidarity, particularly mechanical solidarity stands relevant and essentially deserves to be discussed during the Covid – 19 pandemics. An attempt of mechanical solidarity being present in the pandemic has been made successfully. Social distancing needs to be backed up by social solidarity, as the call is for “social distance” not for “social difference”, not disintegration but purposeful and mindful integration. However, social distancing, individualism, community containment, isolation should be addressed by practicing collective consciousness among the members of the society. Newly “incarnated social” facts have been observed during the pandemic like social distancing, individualism, inclusion and their purpose is to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and reduce the rate of transmission among the members, they are not antithetical to social solidarity and collective consciousness. The pandemic has triggered a global untouchability – we are all longing to become touchable again. The proposed article holds the view that social solidarity is the cementing force that binds the individuals in any given society, and this view is of utmost importance even in today’s pandemic inflicted scenario. Collectivism (uniformed and coordinated social actions) and social order (harmony based existential possibility) are the fissiparous possibilities of social solidarity. The Covid pandemic is not only a microbiological issue but a macro-sociological, in other words, the pandemic is not merely a medical and public health emergency but a categorical sociological emergency. Who doesn’t remember the videos and pictorials of “patient dumping” as a social reality during the pandemic? Hence, requiring a multidimensional sociological intervention. Now it is all over to you.

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