

PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION, EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING IN NORTH INDIA DURING COVID-19: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the most unpredicted virus- COVID-19 is affecting every aspect of life of an individual as well as of society as a whole. Social Distancing is one such intervention in the social environment that has been advised by the Ministry of Home affairs in India ever since the outbreak of the pandemic. It is a deliberately imposed restriction to prevent the spread of virus infection. Although, social distancing is very much required non-pharmaceutical measure to control the spread of infectious disease but it has some other related social dimensions also. It has resulted into a feeling of self-isolation and loneliness in some while the other might be happily following the social distancing guidelines. The present paper is a modest attempt to delve into the practice, perceptions and experiences of social distancing by the people of India.

Keywords: Social distancing; COVID-19; Pandemic; Social behavior; Non-pharmaceutical; Corona; Mental Health

Introduction

Worldwide efforts are being done to minimize the spread of COVID-19. As there is no particular vaccine or medicine of the Novel Corona virus available till date, the importance of non pharmaceutical measures is of paramount concern to check the spread of this deadly disease. Social distancing is one such non pharmaceutical measure to prevent the spread of disease or slow down it. It requires some changes in our daily routines in order to minimize the close contact with others such as avoiding crowded places and gatherings, avoiding handshakes and hugs as greetings, limiting the contact with people who are at higher risk, to remain at a distance of at least 6 feet from others and like. It is required to maintain social distance at markets, public places, offices, establishments, schools, colleges, hospitals and similar places where it is likely to catch the disease from any infected person or pathogen.

In the wake of COVID-19, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India issued advisory on social distancing measures. According to it, "Social distancing is a non-pharmaceutical infection prevention

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and control intervention implemented to avoid/decrease contact between those who are infected with a disease causing pathogen and those who are not, so as to stop or slow down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community.” Social distancing eventually leads to decrease in spread, morbidity and mortality due to the disease according to these guidelines.

According to Santa Clara County, Public Health Department, US “Social distancing is a term applied to certain actions that are taken by Public Health officials to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease.” These measures are taken to restrict when and where people can gather. These include limiting large groups of people coming together, closing buildings and canceling events. According to Australian government, “Social distancing includes ways to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. It means less contact between you and other people.” There is no doubt that social distancing measures reduces the spread of pandemic, slows down its expansion rate and provide the vital time to tune in the medical preparations for combating the disease but it some other repercussions also. This paper is an attempt to examine people’s experiences while following social distancing measures and their perception regarding it.

Review of Literature

There are a few studies on social distancing and its effects during COVID-19 though various studies on effects of social distancing during other communicable diseases are available. Non pharmaceutical interventions include both personal and community measures. Frequent hand washing; wearing masks when going out; self isolation if came into contact of any infected person; sanitize the things and objects of routine usage etc. are the personal measures while cancellation of events of mass gatherings; shutting down of crowded places; closure of schools, colleges, places of worships and workplaces etc. are the community measures which are taken with the objective of promoting social distancing. These are effective ways of combating spread of disease (Ferretti L et al. 2020; Jafferson T et al. 2008; Ahmed F et al. 2018). Government of India, Ministry of health & Family Welfare in its advisory on Social Distancing Measures in View of Spread of COVID-19 disease (March 2020) prescribed various measures and subsequently all educational institutions were closed, examinations were postponed, places of mass gatherings were closed; gatherings in marriages and cremations were restricted; work from home was promoted, commercial activities were halted, travels were banned and the like measure

were taken in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Further vide its notification dated 4th June, 2020 Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on preventive measures to contain spread of COVID-19 in offices has been issued. In this notification general preventive measures which are to be followed all times, offices specific measures, measures to be taken on occurrence of infection cases and the disinfection procedure to be followed in case of occurrence of suspected or confirmed case has been given which proved to be very beneficial in this fight against COVID-19.

There are many studies concluding that there is an association between the application of personal and community-wide non pharmaceutical measures and reduction in overall mortality, fatal viral cases and delayed peak-case timing. All these effects are helpful in flattening the curve (**Galea S. et al., 2020**). Cities those enforced these measures earlier successfully reduced the effect and delayed the spread of the disease. In a recent study in Wuhan (China), it is estimated that had the Wuhan travel ban and national emergency response not been done there would have been more than 700,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases outside of Wuhan by 19th Feb 2020 (50th day of pandemic) instead of 30000 cases in Wuhan by that date (**Tian H, Liu Y, Li Y et al. 2020**). The cities or countries which did not follow or timely implemented non pharmaceutical measures and social distancing had to face serious repercussions. For instance, in Italy, there was a campaign like 'Hug a Chinese' on the instance of Mayor of Florence in order to curb the racism. People, ignorant about the pandemic and necessity of Physical Distancing, hugged the Chinese and posted the pictures with them on social media. It resulted in spreading of virus rapidly and consequently the country which is known for its best health services and facilities was on its toes (**Outlook, The News Scroll**). So there is no doubt that social distancing is an effective way in the fight against Corona.

In past also when Spanish Flu erupted (1918) worldwide the cities, which followed non pharmaceutical measures, were in controlled position unlike the cities which delayed it or did not follow it. For example, town of Gunnison, Colorado isolated itself for two months to prevent the spread of flu and took all necessary community wide social distancing measures during the pandemic resulting in zero deaths in town due to pandemic (**Gunnison: Case Study**). Several other cities also followed the same preventive measures (**Merkel Howard et al, 2006**). In St. Louis administration took the measures like closure of schools, ban on public gatherings etc. immediately after the first case of Spanish Flu in the city in 1918. Consequently there were very less cases in St. Louis while Philadelphia, which did not follow the social distancing measures until more than two weeks after its first case and even, allowed a mass parade to

continue after 10 days of the first reported case of US (17 September 1918) attended by 200000 people resulting in highest deaths in the country due to flu (**Ryan J. 2008**).

COVID-19 disease caused by the novel corona virus, SARS-CoV-2, has infected over 10 million people in 185 countries within six months i.e. up to June 30, 2020. Worldwide social distancing measures are now in place. These measures like isolation, home quarantine, lockdowns, and the closure of all places where people congregate, are aimed at preventing the virus from spreading from one person to another. It is expressed that social distancing measures are necessary but these have repercussions also. A study quotes, "While these steps may be critical to mitigate the spread of this disease, they will undoubtedly have consequences for mental health and well-being in both the short and long term." (**Galea S et al., 2020**). Many studies have expressed concerns over the mental health of the people due to social distancing.

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in major economic losses, reduced physical interaction and significant psychological distress (**Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020**). In China depression and anxiety in people were observed during pandemic (**Qiu et al., 2020**). Not only in China but people worldwide had to cope up with stress and anxiety and still facing it. In a study impacts of social isolation on mental health during previous pandemics have been discussed (**Torales et al. 2020**). Various studies could not conclude convincingly about the impact of social distancing during lockdown due to Corona, though these expressed that there are evidences about psychological impact of social distancing in previous pandemics (**Brooks et al, 2020; Venkatesh and Edirappuli, 2020**). The social distancing measures are being followed by the people willingly as a preventive measure but they cannot be forced to adhere to these measures for longer periods. In Italy when given the hypothetical situation to respondents that the lockdown if lasts longer than their expectations they were less willing to follow the social distancing measures (**Briscese G et al., 2020**).The impact of social distancing in persons who were in low paid or precarious jobs resulted in negative effect on mental health like de-motivation, loss of purpose and decreased self worth (**Williams et al., 2020**).

Objectives of the study: The primary objective is to analyze the impact of social distancing measures on the individuals. The paper aims to:

- Delve into level of awareness and the practices of social distancing norms by the respondents
- To analyze peoples experiences of distancing from society.

- To gauge into the respondents perceptions regarding social distancing norms in future.

Data base and Research Methodology: The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary source of information includes the websites maintained by Ministry of Home affairs, India, newspapers, periodicals and media reports. Primary data has been collected through 120 respondents from Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh. The respondents were selected randomly and a questionnaire having both close ended and open ended questions was administered to them through online channels like emails, whatsapp, face book and twitter to fill their responses. Information was also gathered through telephonic interview. It is important to mention here that the unequal distribution of the participants across the different categories is present as questionnaire was administrated through the online mode. Even though efforts were made to get the responses from all categories but people were reluctant to participate in the survey, as a large number of surveys on Covid-19 are in progress. The analysis of data is done with the help of frequency tables, percentages and pie charts.

Elaborations:

Profile of the respondents: The respondents were having diverse demographic features (**Table 1**). They included 55% females and 45% male respondents. About 50% respondents were from the age group of 20-40 years. Majority respondents (71.3%) were graduate while 11.8% were under graduate. The respondents included 56% salaried person and 22.6% were self-employed. Maximum respondents (63%) were from urban areas while 22.4% from semi-urban and rest from rural areas. Around 69% respondents belonged to nuclear families whereas 27.6% were living in joint families and few in extended families (2.6%).

Table-1: Sample distribution and profile of respondents

States Particulars		Punjab	Haryana	Chandigarh	Himachal Pradesh	Total (%)
Gender	Male	15	14	16	9	54(45%)
	Female	17	16	20	13	66(55%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120
Age group	Less than 30	7	9	10	6	32 (27%)
	30-40	16	14	19	12	61 (50%)
	40-50	6	5	4	3	18 (15%)
	50 & above	3	2	3	1	9 (8%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120
Education	Undergraduate	3	5	2	2	12 (10%)
	Graduate	26	19	24	16	85 (71%)
	Post graduate	3	6	10	4	23 (19%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120
Employment	Salaried	18	19	21	9	67 (56%)
	Self-employed	9	6	7	5	27 (23%)
	House makers	4	3	6	4	17 (14%)
	Students	1	2	2	4	9 (7%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120
Locality	Urban	23	17	21	14	75 (63%)
	Rural	8	6	2	3	19 (15%)
	Semi-urban	1	7	13	5	26 (22%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120
Family type	Joint	12	8	11	3	34 (28%)
	Nuclear	20	22	25	17	84 (70%)
	Extended	-	-	-	2	2 (2%)
	Total	32	30	36	22	120

Practice of Social Distancing by respondents : Though social distancing is being assumed to be followed by every responsible citizen still the effort have been made to examine the level of awareness of the respondents regarding social distancing advisory issued by Ministry of health and family welfare in India. It has been found that majority of the respondents (83.4%) claimed that they are aware of the social distancing guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in India. When enquired about following social distancing norms in practice, 88.3% respondents said that are completely following the norms whereas 15.5% are following it to the maximum possible extent while the rest are

either not following it or following it a little. Although 93.2% respondents believe that following social distancing norms is very much essential to stop the virus infection from spreading in communities, 17% respondents accepts that every member of their family is not following the social distancing norms. This is particularly in the cases where respondents are living in joint or extended families. In these families they have some senior or super senior family members for whom it is very difficult to make them understand the importance and need of this non-pharma measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The old age people, especially in rural areas, are very inclined to have social groups where they can talk and share their contemporary experiences. They find more solace in social circle than being at distance from their peer groups. Around 21 % respondents stated that it is very difficult to teach their children the need of practicing social distancing, especially to toddlers. Few respondents who are highly religious and superstitious don't care about the infections as they believe that it is a matter of fate and don't believe much in social distancing. These people need to be guided about importance of social distancing at this time of pandemic.

Respondent's experience of social distancing practices: Although 83.2% respondents are happily following the social distancing guidelines but they have different experiences of distancing from their loved ones. The respondent's feedback on various *statements* to express their experience regarding social distancing on a 3 point Likert scale has been tabulated below: **(Table 2).**

Table 2: Statements and the responses showing experience of social distancing

Sr. No	Statements	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed
1	You are missing the social gatherings at parks with neighbors and friends	56	24	40
2	You are missing the family get-together at family functions	61	16	43
3	Social distancing is spoiling social relations	20	36	64
4	Social distancing is affecting mental health of people and creating strangers anxiety	59	20	41
5	Social Distancing gives a feeling of self-isolation and loneliness	50	24	46
6	Social distancing at work place results into depression and ultimately loss of productivity	66	16	38
7	Social distancing arouse more anxiety about impact of	52	25	43

	COVID-19 on the lives of individuals			
8	Social distancing at workspace has resulted into loss of job	63	19	38
9	Social distancing has resulted into loss of income	53	19	48
10	Social distancing has resulted into reduction in employment opportunities in various sectors	62	14	44

The experiences of practicing social distancing by the respondents have further been analyzed under three categories which are as follows:

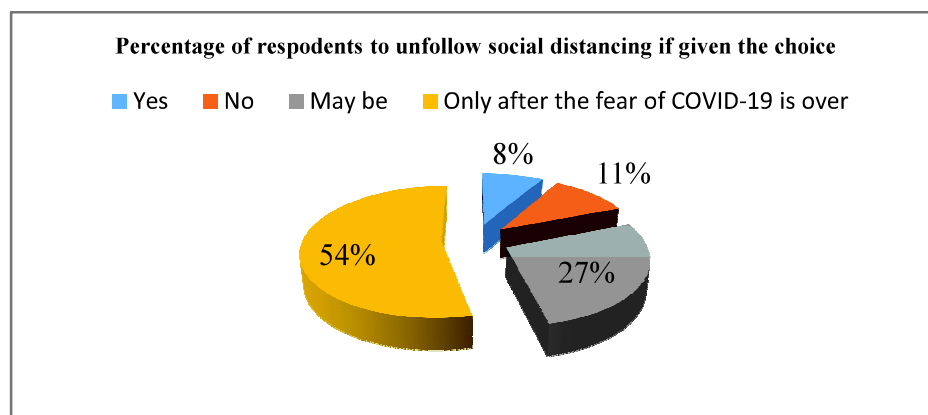
- Social experiences:** Despite knowing the urgency of social distancing to be followed, it has taken a toll on social behavior, culture and relationships. Majority respondents (51%) stated that they feel very bad as for a long period they could not be a part of any social gatherings and even not sure how long it will take to get back to such gatherings. They miss the social functions, family get together at marriages, birthdays and festivals. Around 47% respondents stated that they miss going to parks and gardens for their leisure time with friends, children and neighbors. Majority of the respondents (53%) do not think that social distancing is spoiling their social relations because every individual is presumed to know the need and benefit of being socially at distance. Still 17% respondents stated that they are feeling like being alienated in the society and it is having a negative impact on their relation, especially in the neighborhood. People are looking at each other with suspicious eyes and afraid of talking to even from a safe distance.
- Psychological experiences:** Social distancing is definitely going to affect mental health of an individual. Due to lack of social interaction, respondents (42%) are feeling self-isolation and loneliness. Nearly 43% respondents agree to the feeling of strange anxiety has aroused due to social distancing. Lack of tea and lunch breaks with colleagues have been causing depression and that ultimately may affect the employees' efficiency and productivity at work place.
- Economical Experiences:** Several people have become unemployed due to lockdown. All the non-essential businesses were not allowed to operate during lockdown. About 52% respondents asserts to loss of job due to social distancing at workplace. This has consequently resulted in decrease or loss of income in various families. This is especially true for the people engaged in unorganized sectors. Majority respondents (44%) are not sure about getting back to the economic track even after the lockdown is lifted up fully. They are pessimistic to some extent about their

future as they do not expect enough customers at early stage of unlocking due to fear of being getting infected. It has been observed that the people working in unorganized sector like street vendors and road side dwellers, domestic help, professions demanding personal interaction like beauty parlor and salons, tailors etc. are experiencing fall in income and decreased customer base. 52% of the respondents feel that there is going to be the dearth of employment opportunities in near future.

Respondent’s perceptions about social distancing in future: About 58% respondents strongly agreed/agreed with the statement that social distancing will be the new social etiquette in the future social behavior while 12% respondents disagreed and 31 % respondents are neutral as they are not sure about future social behavior. Around 34% respondents believed that handshakes and hugs are going to disappear forever as greeting gestures in Indian society whereas 43% respondents are feeling optimistic about future social behavior. They believe that such greeting gestures will return back once the things get normal.

The respondents were asked that if given the option not to follow social distancing in near future, would they like to do so. Majority 53.6% stated that they would un-follow the social distancing practices only after getting sure that the risk of COVID-19 is not there in near future otherwise they will continue with these norms. 11% of the respondents straight forward denied to un-follow the social distancing as they would like to make it a habit in future to avoid risk of any virus infection in future. There are respondents (8%) who are eagerly waiting to shun off such distancing measures with people they love to be in close association (**Figure 1**).

Figure-1



Thus, the above analysis shows that the respondents differ in their experiences and perceptions of social distancing measures. On the basis of the responses analyzed in the above text, respondents have been classified into three categories (Table 3). This will give a summary of the respondents practice, experiences in present times and perceptions of social distancing in future.

Table 3: Thumbnail sketch of the respondents practice, experience and perceptions regarding social distancing

Happily at distance	Helpless followers	Stubborn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of the urgency and importance of social distancing. • More health conscious. • Employed in organized sector. • Have regular source of income. • Willing to maintain social distance in near future. • Optimistic about normal situation post pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of the risk of infection and need of social distancing. • Working in private and unorganized sector. • Suffering loss of employment and loss of income. • Ready to un-follow social distancing once the restrictions are lifted. • very social in nature and enjoy social gatherings in neighborhoods. • Pessimistic about future after lockdown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't acknowledge the importance of social distancing. • Living in rural areas. • Having multiple source of income. • More religious and believe in superstitions. • Pose much threat to the others. • Neutral about future conditions.

Furthermore, the respondents' opinion, comments and suggestions about social distancing have been listed below:

- Housewives have to play a key role in especially, in making the children aware of the situation and make them understand to practice social distancing from their friends, relatives and strangers also.
- Precaution is better than cure. So besides following the social distancing guidelines, people must work upon building and strengthening their immunity level. They should be health conscious and take healthy diet.
- Social distancing in a country like India is very essential. There is a problem of over-population, poverty and poor health, hygiene and sanitations. Due to lack of awareness and literacy amongst the lower communities, objectives of social distancing could only be achieved through strict measures by the government.

- People should not take the social distancing in negative terms. They should understand that at present social distancing is the need of hour to protect not only themselves but also their loved ones from the virus infection that have already taken thousands of lives world over.
- Social distancing is a confusing term. It should rather be understood and practiced more as physical distancing rather than emotional distancing.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that there have been mixed experiences by the respondents when it comes to follow social distancing norms. Though majority is aware and maintain social distance to the maximum possible extent, the fact cannot be denied that there are few respondents who are either not following the social distancing norms or following it out of compulsion. The most critical category of the people is that belonging to helpless followers and the stubborn. These are the people who will come out like a blast once the social distancing restrictions are lifted up. This may further exaggerate the pandemic risk of spreading in communities as already been witnessed 100 years ago. We should not make history repeat. People should only maintain physical distance not the emotional distance from each other. They should keep in touch with their loved ones through other mediums like social media. They should engage themselves in the various activities or things they wanted to do in life but were not able to do due to busy schedule. For people, it is the time to get back to all those indoor games (Ludo, Carom board, Chess to name just a few) that are being replaced by virtual games now a days. Quality time should be spent with the family members. This time should be taken as an opportunity to do new and creative things. Let us rethink, redefine, and recreate our society.

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