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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGION AND FAITH IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 IN INDIA

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Abstract

India is a country of faith and has followers of various religions. Religion has always served the mankind and played a significant role of ointment for the soul and has demonstrated to be positively associated with better emotional health. Along with all other aspects of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected faith, religion and spirituality in different ways. Due to fast spread of virus, numerous restrictions on religious activities have been implemented. The same has impacted religion in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services of various faiths, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals etc. In this brief review, we have studied the relief works and role of religious institutions, congregations, and individuals in this pandemic. Present study also studied the strategically and innovative approaches for revealing ongoing changes to religion, along with the changes in people mindset towards ways of worship, God, religion, humanity and physical gathering etc. The outcomes of this study revealed that pandemic made most people shocked and physical gathering in worship places is restricted. Presently, all over the world, worship is offering through online /livestream, by churches, synagogues, mosques, gurudwara, and temples on virtual platform. In this period, a great collaboration was seen among government, non-governmental organizations, wealthy persons, and common public in relief work. Though, this pandemic has put drastic loss in term of life, health, economy etc but optimistic are seeing grace of God here too.

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Introduction:-

In past few months the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world. Almost all aspects of life have been revolutionarily changed. Social distancing, sanitization, masks etc., have become essential parts of life in all over the world[1]. People are often seen to avoid traditional greetings like handshakes, kissing and hugging and these are seen to be replaced with physical distance. Sanitizers have become an essential household commodity[2]. Schools, colleges, universities, and coaching classes are almost closed since a long period. The classrooms are replaced by

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virtual platforms. In most of places general promotion to the next levels or open book exam system has replaced the usual examinations[3-5]. Thus, the impact this present pandemic has brought about unprecedented and difficult to gauge. Due to lockdown many new online businesses have come into existence. COVID-19 has influenced all areas of life including education, economy, living pattern, businesses, politics, tours and travels etc[4,5]. The same has seen to make a tremendous impact on religious life[6].

From long ago, the concept of realization of God as source of life, protector of whole all and as controller of everything has been taken into account. Generally, God is conceived of as being omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omni-benevolent over and above having an eternal and necessary existence[7]. God is thought to be most often held to be incorporeal, with said characteristic being related to conceptions of transcendence or immanence[6,7]. This may crush a sense of pride and self-sufficiency as well as may help to cultivate an attitude of surrender to some supernatural power. Although, according to many philosophers 'God' is not an existential phenomena it is just an idea. But in various ways it is seen to be positively associated with hope, love, fear to committing sin, and spending some time in prayer[8].

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted religion in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services of various faiths, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals[8,9]. All over the world have worship was offered through online /livestream, as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples were closed completely for long period. In this study, we have put together different factual aspects of life and its correlation with faith, believe and religion[9]. Though, Concept of God, religion and spirituality is still under controversy but a number of studies have already been revealed its positive impact on human mind[7-9]. So, in the present work we have mentioned the role of the same in crisis for mental peace[9,10]. Here, the functions of spiritual leaders, religious institutions, etc towards their people to fight against COVID-19 have also been summarized specially in context to India.

Faith And Belife In Pandemic

At present, in whole world COVID-19 disease is making a big crisis. A huge number of people have been infected and died in past one year and few months[4]. Though, strict awareness to follow preventive measures like regular sanitization, wearing mask, lockdown, social distancing, closure of schools, colleges, institutions, religious gatherings, family functions etc. have been spread by various governmental and non-governmental organizations to reduce cases of the same[1,3,4]. Though, these COVID- 19 preventive activities are unavoidable and need to be followed but in long term the same has brought a huge number of drawbacks to the society. For example, in developing country like India about 96% population comes into lower and middle class income[1,5]. This pandemic has affected these people badly and they are struggling for their own and family's health, food, essential commodities and life of their family members etc. The feelings of loneliness, isolation, insecurity for careers, lost of jobs, economic burden, stayed away from family have made people so much helpless[3-5].

In addition to this, the fear of infection, fear of lose of family member due to COVID-19, fear of unavailability of health care, fear of isolation, and at utmost the fear of death etc have made life worse[11]. The lockdown has affected adversely the poor, especially women, physically disabled persons, migrants and refugees. A number of recent studies revealed the rapid expansion of mass hysteria and panic regarding COVID-19 in public[4,8]. In such adverse situation people need some moral, emotional and psychological support. Although, science and technologies are at boom and has made things easy and under the approach of human but at the same time it has a boundary[4,8]. The limitations of science, the powerlessness of states and the feebleness of humans have brought man to God[9]. It has been found that faith gives lot of trust and mental support when one is unable to see any other way.

Religious Attitude Of People In Pandemic

Many religious organizations, wealthy people and social trusts etc reached out to the needy, remembering that God is the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged, and feelings that we are all interconnected and need help of each other[6,8]. Here, a number of cases were reported where people helping each other beyond selflessness. For the sake of God, many donations to unknown people and supply of foods, clothing, shelter etc have been provided. The hope that God is savor of all of us fills us with new hope, calls us to action, with new opportunities to serve and to witness very practically[9].

Since human has born with immense capabilities of adaptation, here also he is learning and adapting a new way of living and coping with the crisis. It is seen all over that people and religious organizations have risen to the occasion

and come ahead to the streets to help with various outreach programs to the needy[12]. They are providing all possible help to the poor, stranded migrants, labor class, neighbors etc. present data showed that in India religious orders have provided provisions to over 5,50,000 families and food to over 800,000 persons and nearly 360,000 families[13]. Free sanitizers, food packets, foot wears, were given to migrants. Along with the free masks to 640,000 people, sanitizers to nearly 350,000 people as per the statistics a few months ago. Due to insufficient spaces in public hospitals several religious orders have placed their school or college buildings at the disposal of the government for isolation purposes or quarantine[7,10-12].

Religious leaders also order their people to serve their own community across the nation. For example, In all over India during entire lock down period Bohra Community were provided grain, flour, pulse, oil, ghee, fruits, vegetables, spices and all other required food items with safety from head of each city, town and villages. Moreover, the main beneficiaries have been slum-dwellers and the jobless poor, the rickshaw-drivers, construction workers, scavengers, domestic workers, street children and those who are mentally or physically challenged, as well as police personnel, doctors, nurses and paramedics. Counseling has been a powerful way of reaching out to those in distress and to the ailing[10,13-15].

It has seen that Churches have offered free COVID-19 testing to the public and have dispatched disinfection supplies, powered air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, and food to large number of affected areas[13]. At many places many religions have gathered together on virtual platform to pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, for those affected by it, for wellness of world, as well as for wisdom for physicians and scientists to combat the disease[8,14,15].

Celebration Of Festivals In Pandemic

In light of pandemic of COVID-19, most people are much more open to faith as well as prayer. The virus is going to be spreading rapidly and causing enormous crisis in all societies[3,7]. In the current pandemic, engagement with religious practices gives us control over the situation, helps to make it understandable and what is most important gives us hope[4].



Figure 1:- Haridwar Kumbh mela- April, 2021.

The festival of Panguni Uthiram, which is generally associated with processions, was canceled both years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To control COVID-19 spreading Nepal government has permitted to only 25 pilgrims at once

in the holy Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal[12]. Although, many guidelines were given to stop disease spreading but many places limitless crowd was seen where people gathered without maintaining social distancing, for example, despite the "high alert" issued by the state government in India, On 9 March 2020, thousands of devotees participated in Attukal pongala, a festival where offerings are made to a Hindu goddess[16,17]. Similarly, On 2 April 2020, thousands of devotees gathered in temples in various parts of West Bengal, on the occasion of Ram Navami ignoring social distancing norms during the ongoing nationwide lockdown period. Despite the announcement of possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 in the country, the spring festival of Holi on 29 March 2021 was met with large crowds, with many of them breaking health and safety guidelines[18].

Recently, in maha kumbh mela at Haridwar, Uttarkhand, India more than 35,00,000 people took shahi bath in April 2021(Fig. 1). These are proved that many people blindly follow rituals and hence many policies to control pandemic are failed[19,20].

In these two years from March 2020 to till now almost all Hindu festivals such as Holi, Navaratri, Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti, and various regional Hindu new year days such as Vaisakhi, Nyepi, Ugadi, Gudi Padwa, Bohag Bihu, Vishu, Pahela Baishakh, Jude Sheetal, Pana Sankranti, Navreh, Cheti Chand, Puthandu, Aluth Avurudda, Sajibu Nongma Panba, Bwisagu, Ganesh Chaturthi and Makar Sankranti have to all be celebrated at home[8,12]. Prayer services have been live-streamed for viewers to watch at home[14].

Like other festivals, the the major festival of Jains, Mahavir Jyanti, associated with the birth of Lord Mahavira that falls on 6 April 2020 is typically celebrated by taking out large Procession has been cancelled[10]. Similarly, the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board recommended their people especially elderly Sikhs to stay at homes, and the Nagar Kirtans associated with 'Vaisakhi' have also been suspended[13]. As a powerful religious group, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee provided a helping hand to treat coronavirus-positive patients at its hospitals and their rooms to hospital staff. In the same way, on the day of Vesak, several Buddhist temples and centers kicked off the online celebrations – hosting morning puja, guided meditation and talks[11,15]. In Islam also, religious leaders declared that the virus may be hard to control during the travel and gatherings around Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr. In-person congregations for Taraweeh prayers during Ramadan were cancelled and were replaced by online broadcast[16,18,21].

Many Christians traditionally observe the Christian penitential season of Lent through the abstinence from meat on Fridays, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which partially coincided with Lent in 2020[22]. The liturgies normally held during Holy Week, the last week of Lent, were canceled by many churches belonging to mainstream Christian denominations, including the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Moravian, and Reformed Churches. The celebration of Saint Patrick's Day, a feast day celebrating the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, on 17 March 2020 was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, though services were still held in some churches and some parades still commenced. On the occasion of Good Friday, 2021, at many places priest encourage the Christian to move to online formats for the common good[13,15]. People were encouraged for the practice of Spiritual Communion amidst the pandemic, which has been used by Christians during times of plagues, as well as during times of persecution, both of which have prevented Christians from gathering on the Lord's Day to celebrate the Eucharist. In addition to this many churches canceled Easter services to comply with social-distancing guidelines, at some places where COVID - 19 is not that much prominent it was planned to continue normally. To conduct religious activities church services have turned to digital church[11,18,22].

COVID-19 Has Transformed The Way Of Worship

According to some spiritual leaders, this is the time of grace, introspection, transformation and conversion. It is an alarming time that push our mechanical way of life, to live a more meaningful and purposeful life[16]. According to, God lovers and optimistic this worldwide change has made us resilient to cope with hardships and uncertainties with a stronger faith[6]. This seem to be a call for all of us to slow down, to stop, to reflect, to interpret reality from God's point of view. It was an opportunity to revisit and to reorient our life and mission from God's standpoint[12]. For people those are hopeful and know the use of any situation has converted this bad time into opportunity. Some responded to the pandemic through studies, writing and online training programs, making the best use of the time for updating and spiritual revival[6,8,12].

Few Research reports from March 2020 reported a change in respondents' religious habits due to the pandemic, they said that they have "prayed for an end to the spread of coronavirus," "attended services in person less often," and "watched religious services online or on TV instead of in person." (Fig 2)



Fig 2:- Worship and prayer in temples during pandemic.

Morning Arties, worship, namaz etc were conducted online following social distancing[12,16,23]. It was seen that many Episcopal and Catholic dioceses recommended Christians to stay at home rather to come church on Sundays, which was generally required. Many Christian denominations have made church services available via radio, online livestreaming or television while others have offered drive-in services in their church parking lots[23]. Since March 2020 some Christians are still using online apps, which contain prayers and daily devotionals, to remain engaged with their religious activities and faith[7,23].

Discussion:-

This pandemic, however, has caused fear, anxiety, obsessive behaviors, domestic abuse, hoarding, depression, food insecurity and misbelieve among people. That result to create mental unhealthy environment and misbelieve[3]. As mentioned above, in such situations, spiritual masters, religious leaders etc have worked lot for relieved.

A spiritual master argued, however, God will be happy if we stay at home as that way, we are not only saving ourselves but the entire community as well[5]. Somewhere, faith leaders were seen to create fear and misbelieve that are making situation more harsh, in contrast to this some were observed to try to overcome the crisis and have appealed to their followers to practice social distancing and other preventive measures and also to use this time within the home for self-development[12,13]. For example, the Char Dham shrines – which come out for six months in each summer – attract millions of pilgrims and tourists to the state of Uttarakhand from across the world, in this period the priests at these sites have opted for digital worship[19,20].

Studies in digital theology have highlighted an increased interest in watching and participating in online religious services under lockdown than normal face to face participation. Religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities are playing a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19[21].

They are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organizations and communities of faith have been sharing health information to protect their own members and wider communities, which may be more likely to be accepted than from other sources[8,13,17]. By all mean, they are providing pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and can advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations[24]. By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19, religious-inspired institutions are reported to promoting helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide hope to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices[16]. Religious leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need[25]. Religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities[26,27].

Conclusion:-

From this study, it can be concluded that sense of faith, believe and religion has made people helpful for others as seen in this pandemic. As demonstrated above, during lockdowns, great collaborations were seen among common public, government agencies and non-governmental organizations in relief work. People were seen to help each other in term of food, cloth, money, medicine, shelter etc. A great relief was seen to be provided by religious organization to their community. In the same time, to handle with this new era people are learning and adapting themselves for innovative approaches of prayer and worship. From spiritual point of view, this pandemic has brought transformation of religious practices and spirituality among people and these are becoming religiously mature.

Conflict Of Interest

No conflict.

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