THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 IN TRANSFORMING PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR: BANGLADESH CONTEXT

Mohammad Rezaul KARIM[1]
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Abstract: *COVID-19 has greatly impacted on people and transformed their behaviour from traditional to a new order. People's behaviour in Bangladesh has got different dimensions in myriad ways in terms of adoption and responses during this pandemic. The article aims at identifying the areas and dimension of behavioural transformation of Bangladeshi people and analyzing how COVID-19 and its effects influence them. The study analysed following a qualitative approach based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from ten informants based on checklist, while secondary data were collected from journal articles, various reports, books, and newspapers. The study found that this behavioural change took place at different levels such as personal, organizational, societal, and state level because of fear, unknown effects of coronavirus, mental insecurity, uncertainty of proximity, chances of infections, family frailty etc. People acted to respond to the needs of people and reacted to the rapid changes as well. They extended hands to the vulnerable community and initiated steps to aware them about the effects of coronavirus. On the contrary, they emphasized their own safety, avoided people's gathering, imposed restriction on community movement and denied attending social programmes including funeral, which contradicts the traditional culture practiced in Bangladesh.*

Keywords*: COVID-19, community engagement, social distancing, personal safety, social programme, alienation*

Introduction

Bangladesh is regarded as an extended village where the principle of mutually shared values and all-work-together norms are widely practiced for enhancing people's well-being (Karim, 2020a). Although people's engagement in helping others has got much noteworthy attention during the coronavirus outbreak, it is a big blow to the culture of mutual sharing (Sakib and Rahman, 2020), because the entire humanity has been suffering from an unprecedented attack of the Coronavirus. The government has

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[1] Deputy Director, Department of International Programme, Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Email: reza@bpatc.org.bd, rezapatc@gmail.com

stretched its full resources and energy to use for grappling COVID-19. The country is experiencing new order with the contradictory analogy. It is found that the environment has relatively pure air but wearing musk is mandatory; roads are empty where going on a long drive is impossible; people have clean hands with a banning of shaking hands; ample time people have but no chance of getting together; new dishes are being cooked while no guest invited to lunch or dine; students and working people lust for weekends but weekend does not seem to end; people having money have no way to spend much; people have enough time, but cannot fulfill dreams; and awareness is that much money need does not lead a good life, rather a lot for showing life style (Ahmed 2020; Karim, 2020a). The entire community and people's behaviour are severely affected and influenced. Impacts are enormous from individual to state level.

Extreme Individualism

Organising social gathering and helping each other is generally practiced culture in Bangladesh that contradicts with the newly emerged individual behavour as a result of coronavirus outbreak. COVID-19 has increased the level of personal health and safety, which seems to continue further with a possibility of greater intensity. It is widely observed that people do not want to trust others. Distrust on people raised significantly and they are forced to maintain health protocol strictly. Newly formed individualistic culture compels people to stay at home that force them to be busy with social medias. It is reported that internet use increased 50 percent at personal level during the pandemic (UNB, 2020). The use of social media has brought psychological illnesses, mental insecurity, and social alienation (Karim, 2020a). COVID-19 induced new phenomenon of social alienation transforms individuals and affects their behaviour. Individuals are more cautious in eating out, moving out, doing office, and organizing social programmes to avoid social gathering.

Organizational Culture

Because of restrictions of social gathering, offices have already got the new culture. Distanced sitting arrangement, paperless working procedures, home working and teleworking or online office have been introduced. Only emergency services are open. Those who are working at office, are maintaining personal hygiene, making availability of hand sanitizer and masks. The popular entertaining culture of invitation of having tea at office in Bangladesh is stopped or limited. It is evident that running an organization does not necessarily need too many people, and this notion results in firing employees. The government circulated to continue office with twenty-five percent employees after the coronavirus outbreak. Pregnant women and people with COVID-19 symptoms are dismayed (TBS, 2020c). There is a possibility of being self-motivated to continue online office from home. Working from home brings some problems as well. It keeps people fulltime busy and does not create real office environment (Karim, 2020b). Criticized bureaucracy as sluggish, old-fashioned, and resistant to change seems most active with its talented workforce where health professionals serve COVID patients, police officials maintain law and order and force maintaining social distancing; local government officials provide food and relief to the poor. Apparently, they are stand-alone active force to combat COVID-19.

Social Behaviour

Bangladesh is defined as the big village of kinship. Staying together, sharing things with everyone, giving hand to other and universal simplicity in behaviour are common features. Society is an extended family and having a culture of addressing other unknown people as brother, sister, uncle, or aunty as if they are family members. Exchanging day-to-day items, inviting guests to home, attending social programmes together are common. Social programme such as performing funeral, arranging wedding ceremony, outing as picnic, religious congregation, organizing sports competition or local games and sports, organizing *mela* (a big social gathering for buying and selling local products and staging social programmes)*,* celebrating *Pahela Baishakh* (the eve of Bengali New Year, celebrated on 14 April each year) are collectively and very ceremoniously performed (FE, 2020a). There is a big setback of pandemic to these programmes. Community people did not arrange any social programme or very restricted programme were arranged just to follow the cultural norm. People have already started to deny attending funeral, stop visiting family members, even very few go for shopping and mosque, even after relaxing the conditions (Jahan, 2020). It is reported that family members left elderly with coronavirus symptoms and denied attending funeral (Jahan, 2020). Women with hijab have dramatically increased and using mask with various designs has become a fashion instead of mandatory protocol (Karim, 2020a).

Pandemic has produced contradictory behaviour, too. It was a recent notion that Bangladesh, particularly urban people are very individualistic, pandemic proved wrong. Helping distressed people-which was widely practiced in rural area- was seen as regular phenomenon. Pandemic teaches that surrender to the uncertainty is the main solution until people are widely vaccinated. Living with all and being for all is meaningful philosophy, which will become stronger in future. Because of coronavirus outbreak, people started feeding vulnerable people, providing masks and hand sanitizer (Sakib and Rahman, 2020).

In Bangladesh, hugging and kissing a kid of nearest family members symbolizes love and a long-practiced tradition. This culture is stopped and if it happens, parents would not accept happily any more, rather it may create problem and deteriorate personal relationship. Friends, who were used to embrace after meeting for a long time hesitate or will not hug passionately or shake hands and would not sit close too (Karim, 2020a).

The most vulnerable community is the people who live below poverty line. This is a vast portion of the country, comprised of more than 24 percent of the total population (CIA, 2020). The health protocol is difficult to maintain because they need to move out for their livelihood. They need support of food and cash money. The government's one of key agendas is to help this community for their survival. Individual people forming a social activist group and philanthropic organizations have come forward to work for humanity (Sakib and Rahman, 2020). Individualist urban society dramatically turns to humanity; the capitalist democratic country turns to social welfare country at large.

Compulsory staying at home compels family members to spend time with them, increases communication with extended family members, as they have now enough

time to spend. COVID-19 teaches people to love human beings, where family members and neighbours come first. Due to closure of schools, children get more time from parents that makes bonding stronger.

It is a practice that parents allow university students to teach their children for private tutoring. By doing so, university students (especially poor but meritorious students) could earn money to manage their tuition and living. The spreading of coronavirus has threatened this short-term earning scope and intensified the vulnerability of poor students (Karim, 2020a).

Effects of Government Initiatives at Community Level

COVID-19 has taught us that the state is a place for everything to be fulfilled and government is the vehicle to provide. The unseen eerie virus cannot be grappled by a single person where prevention is better and public health sector does a lot. Although private hospitals, diagnostic centers and medical colleges comprise of a significant number, public healthcare system is the prime place. Thus, public health expenditure has been raised in the budget passed during the COVID-19 and will be continued. Healthcare professionals are the frontline fighters who need to be boost up with various stimulus packages (TBS, 2020a). During the pandemic, the general patients, disabled people, pregnant women, elderly people, critical patients were the most sufferers because of full concentration for COVID-19 patients. This situation expedited tele-medicine system that will continue after pandemic.

Pandemic proves that state is the last resort for all services including assistance for private organizations. Renowned profit-making companies like readymade garment factories could not pay salary even a month without the government's financial assistance. This means private sector either wants to cash out money from government or did not institutionalize the system (TBS, 2020a). In addition, country started to announce bailout package for a number of companies to sustain. Employees working in this sector who faced difficulties with their livelihood, were supported by the community by easing the conditions and settling late payment.

In South Asia, as politics nourishes culture of big gathering to attract voters– opposite to current culture of social gathering- democracy may adopt a new different genre. Close contact with general people particularly during the election would be replaced with IT based strategies. Poor turnout was observed in the last few elections happened during the COVID-19 (DS, 2020). Political stability may also be stronger and sustainable.

IT-induced People's Behaviour

People have totally changed their behaviour because of COVID-19 and adopted IT dominated culture at all levels. Online shopping was a fashion for only a section of community, which is extended to large portion and will be necessary trendy in the society of Bangladesh, particularly among those who are accustomed to using internet. Utilizing the benefits of IT and internet, new schooling mood has already started (Alamgir, 2020; FE, 2020b). This may continue to avoid social contact and a Google

classroom or zoom class or new form of online based classroom will be introduced. Keeping close contact with teacher-student in a traditional classroom may be endangered. Loving to friends, sharing mentality, feeling of others would not be developed among the students. New type of generation may emerge in the society. Difference between haves and have-nots is intended to widen as the IT infrastructure and devices are unequally distributed. Further, government has already revised the law so that traditional court can be somehow replaced with the technology-based system, for example, virtual court system to benefit the community (TBS, 2020b). Although some people accepted it, people having no access to IT may be discriminated and this will widen the inequality.

Issues beyond the Boundary and Effect on Community

The directives of World Health Organization, thoughts & guides of international scholars on pandemic are the mandatory guidelines forced by the government to follow at all levels. People are highly influenced by their research findings which shaped people's behaviour. The information about COVID-19 such as number of infected people with the virus, number of death cases, more importantly analysis on other countries are circulated by the community people, in order to aware all about the virus and its effects. This sharing has got two benefits, which are enhancing personal safety as well as stopping community transmission. The issues and strategies from the most affected nations are greatest learning for the later affected country, like Bangladesh.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed the behaviour of Bangladesh people. All economic activities are shut; restriction of social gathering is imposed; health protocols are mandatorily maintained. Thus, the coronavirus outbreak has posed a threat to the entire humanity. The situation brings huge transformation in people's behaviour both positively and negatively. People extended hands for need of others forming philanthropic social groups. Health hygiene situation has improved. On the other hand, individualistic culture emerged significantly; social programmes are denied; new working culture is introduced; human interaction is replaced with IT dominated practices. The new behaviour emerged and practiced because of COVID-19 is the contraction to the traditional behaviour of Bangladesh people. If the situation continues for the long period of time, the fundamental change in people's behaviour influenced by individualism and social alienation will be a new normal.

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Conflict of Interest

The author hereby confirms that he has no conflict of interest with this publication.

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