

A Tragedy with an Opportunity

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The last two years are living proof of the devastating effects of the Covid-19 induced pandemic in India as well as the whole world. While the series is titled 'Beyond Crisis: Ways of Reconstructing Lives', as Professor RachnaJohri mentioned, it is important to understand and recognise that the pandemic and the problems are not yet over. They are very much a part of the present reality and require immediate attention. The experience of the pandemic has been different for everyone. Children and adolescents are often neglected on the pretext that they are not directly or immediately affected by the disease. However, it is important to consider the issue in the context of nationwide economic and social crisis. Recent research also indicates that their sensitive and impressionable minds are considerably affected by everything that is happening around them.

Challenges

The multidimensional effect of the pandemic was evident from the presentations. Dr. Bhargava brought forward a number of issues that continue to shape and change family life and kinship relations during this global health crisis. *(Sudden) Loss of jobs, death in family, forced but essential social confinement, lack of physical interaction etc. have all had detrimental consequences on the emotional, physical and mental well-being of both parents and their children.* For some, the social distancing measures and the resultant work from home regime has brought family members closer together due to the increase in time spent at home. However, for many, the situation has not been so positive. Due to countrywide shutdown, loss of livelihood and a decrease in family income, many families have been struggling to make ends meet. Apart from financial difficulties, instances of domestic violence, sexual violence, verbal as well as physical abuse, child labour, and child marriage has increased considerably.

The state of the family directly affects the state of the child/children. As primary agents of socialisation, families have a strong on young children. Due to the restrictions imposed by the lockdowns, the complete shut-down of educational institutions and public spaces, socialisation of children was limited to their families and some online interactions. These gaps may lead to a decline in opportunities for early learning, language development and may contribute to lifestyle disorders. *Children living in economically weak, abusive, less interactive families are more vulnerable to*

emotional, physical and mental problems. A recent study also linked the increased stress and work pressure among women in nuclear families to adverse effects on children and their relationships with their parents.

Death is a complicated and painful experience for any family. *Parental loss can have devastating effects on children leading to many mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, separation issues, toxic stress etc.* It also interferes with a child's education, cognitive development and ability to form relationships with others. The COVID-19 pandemic, especially the second wave which peaked in the months of April and May 2021 in India, reported more than 250,000 deaths in the country. For most, the loss was sudden and unexpected. Many children were orphaned, surrendered or abandoned as Dr. Bhargava mentioned in her presentation. Due to the contagious nature of the disease, several could not even bid their last goodbyes.

Birth, marriage and death are three significant events in people's lives where we observe great involvement and importance of kin. The pandemic robbed people of performing the last rites of their family members with peace and dignity. Due to severe transportation restrictions, many had to attend such rituals on video calls and meetings.

In addition to parents, numerous caregivers in adoption institutes lost their lives too as Dr. Bhargava described, creating a shortage of institutional care for children who were in need of immediate attention. The adoption laws could not accommodate the sudden surge of cases and many loopholes came into open light. Though a couple of reforms were made, they were devised keeping in mind the best interest of parents and not children.

Opportunities

Community solidarity played a major role in helping people deal with the crisis. Strangers going out of their way to help others were almost like 'extended kin' bringing people closer together. Professor Johri and Professor Meenai pointed out the helpful role community members can play, especially when there are problems in family functioning and if there is abuse or negligence. However, in addition to this, there is urgency for more structured and institutional ways to handle the current situation.

The concept of Risk Society theorised by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck provides and gives an analysis of the late modernity period which is characterised by how a society organises and responds to risks. *Global catastrophes such as the Covid-19 pandemic expose the neglect and unpreparedness towards these unanticipated hazards which cause great damage. According to Beck, the response to these disasters*