

Expert Opinion

Sociocultural and Religious Factors Associated with Varied Response in General Public in Pakistan Regarding COVID-19

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Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) causing havoc in different parts of the world, is haunting Pakistan also. 101,468 confirmed corona cases have been registered in Pakistan till morning 8th June. Pakistan has gone through tough times let it be terrorism, after effects of 9/11, involvement in proxy wars etc. Fellow citizens of this country are very resilient and indomitable. So the battle to deal with the current crisis of Corona continues, but there are certain factors which are associated with wide range of responses from the general population regarding COVID-19.

Pakistan's health infrastructure requires substantial advancements, the actual accomplishment of dealing with this current pandemic depends on addressing certain other social as well as cultural factors that pass far away from the fundamental foundation of health-care and isolation facilities, dedication and expertise of medical personnel, and availability of drugs. An array of heterogeneous factors like social practices, public attitudes, obstinate behaviours and religious beliefs that have a major impact on the expansion of this corona virus require substantial awareness in defining strategic actions to address the exigency.

1. Hand shake and body hug It is our cultural practice to shake hands and hug each other. Despite recommendation to avoid body contact, in order to intercept the spread of Corona virus,² there is a section of society which regards this practice harmless on religious grounds.
2. Prayer in mosque Congregational prayers are essential part of our religion. Recently, the government recommended people to offer prayers at home so to disrupt the spread of Corona virus. However, this suggestion was strongly opposed by religious scholars who considered closure of mosques as part of a conspiracy against Islam.
3. Tablighi Jamaat Ijtema The Tablighi Jamaat held a congregation on 11th March despite Government's plea to postpone it. The organizers obviously did not consider holding the gathering a health risk on religious grounds. Later, it was eventually called off due to health risks. It is reported that two Palestinian nationals who attended the congregation tested Corona positive when they went back home.
4. Azaab-e-Ilahi on China (because they oppressed Muslims in the Uighur province) Recently, the Chinese Muslims have been under strict watch and control of Chinese Government. A number of Muslims feel offended by Chinese policies towards Uighur Muslims, and consider outbreak of Corona virus a direct retribution and wrath sent by God to punish them.
5. American CIA launched to destroy Chinese economy A section of society considers Corona virus outbreak a planned conspiracy hatched and implemented by American CIA in order to destroy Chinese economy. They point out that virus outbreak is limited to certain countries

(particularly Iran) and USA has already prepared a vaccine of this disease.

7. Kashmir lockdown, so its Allah's Azaab on the whole world to get locked down Kashmiri Muslims are facing months long lockdown and crackdown by Indian Army after change in the citizenship laws of India. A number of people have equated the Indian lockdown of Kashmiris with the God's punishment on 1.3 billion Indians due to forced lockdown on account of Corona virus.
8. Medicines There was misinformation regarding use of medicines for the prophylaxis and treatment of this virus at the time when COVID-19 patients were speedily surging in different areas of the world.³ Certain reports claimed the potential of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin in combating the virus-related morbidity. No rigorous scientific evidence exists to corroborate such claims.
9. Gizzard of Pigeons Video of a local Pir/Sufi went viral on social media wherein he claimed that internal lining of pigeon gizzard had medicinal properties due to spiritual reasons associated with pigeons residing in and around Sufi shrines/ places of worship. He claimed with strong conviction that by using pigeon stomach, the Corona virus disease can be treated.
10. Herbal panacea (onions) Different home medicaments and uncertain advisories which rapidly spread through whatsapp, facebook and other social network tools delayed and enfeeble the determination for pre-emptive behaviour.
11. Social gatherings Traditional social gatherings in Pakistan with family members, friends etc in context of celebrating different events pose significant challenges in combating this viral disease. Similarly religious gatherings can additionally expose the people to the highly infective pathogen and activate further spread in the community.
12. Only 5% casualty rate, majority recover Health misinformation regarding cure and mortality due to this virus is rapidly circulating across various social media platforms globally.⁴ In Pakistan also there are certain misconceptions and misinfor-

mation whether culturally related or domestically-driven is adding fuel to the fire. Different public figures and certain government agencies are also spreading the misinformation.

13. Allah is angry with us so it is a punishment and wake up call to rectify ourselves and ask for repentance.
14. This havoc is one of the signs of day of judgement.

Moving Onwards

In order to deal with this pandemic most important thing is to make sure that right form of information and awareness should spread and all the approaches which are without scientific foundations must be eliminated. Behavioral changes are need of the hour in addition to health-related information, as alone it may not help. It is vital to bring changes in the behavior to obtain maximum gain from public health interventions. As the pandemic is expected to stay so the changes in the sociocultural and religious factors may play an important role in reducing the spread.

There is need to teach about preventive measures such as social distancing, home quarantine, avoid shaking hands etc to the general public and for this different mediums such as social media platforms, electronic media, print media, conducting different activities on community level, increasing interpersonal communication can play an important part. Sociocultural and behavioral changes communication may be utilized as a possible plan of action to enhance recognition of the efficacy and the prerequisite of preventive course of action.. Such fact-based transmission programs can aid in increasing awareness, modify people's point of view and behaviors of the general public. Preventive practices such as home isolation and social distancing should be merged with attempts in eliminating false reports and misleading informations and also with efforts in diminishing panic and anxiety.

For confronting the COVID-19 pandemic a comprehensive perspective is required that adequately combines the social, infrastructural, behavioural and emotional attributes to make us ready for these kind of crisis. With the daily emerging situation, this infectious disease is going to be an extensive struggle

with an emerging and possible reappearing, micro-organism. It has to be adressed with latest scientific knowledge and proper health protection facilities. In the distant future, Pakistan should build a strong and powerful health facility system and deal efficaciously with social beliefs, important religious thoughts and cultural practices to amplify and strengthen the scientific disposition of the people.

References

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