PANDEMIC, GLOBALIZATION, AND MULTICULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT: The passage of time has brought many cultures and national boundaries together and the wave of globalization has not just resulted in exchange of products but interchange of life values and ethnic practices too. But sadly, the horror of COVID-19 pandemic has resulted into making humanity think twice about the relevance of globalization and cross-cultural exchange. The virus has resulted into a pandemic due to international swapping of people and services and the imposed lockdown and the sealing of national boundaries has put forth the question of rethinking about the extent to which globalization and multiculturalism should occur. The quarantine period has put to test the physical and mental strength of people and put the whole humankind at the pedestal of existential chaos. This paper analyses the role of globalization and multiculturalism in making a disease a pandemic and will seek to find a balancing ground for this problematic scenario.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic, COVID-19, Globalization, Multiculturalism

Humanity has been always in a flux. The movement of people from agrarian-based community to industrialization and finally to a high-tech world has resulted into crossing of national boundaries and intermixing of capitalist practices and cultural values. While globalization has brought immense opportunities to humankind, it is a historically proven fact that when services are shared across borders, the plague and disease finds its way too! Prevailing COVID-19 pandemic is the resultant of the global exchange of people and services, an echo of which we can find in the Black Death (1346-1353) that affected the entire Europe, causing death of millions of people. The plague was caused by the transfer of the infection from the explorers to the natives. This was the most shocking incident that made people think about the scope and limits of the universalist culture. The COVID-19 pandemic could result into similar thought process, which can further write a new history for the parameters of multicultural exchange.

The hesitance to accept anything foreign has swept across the whole world following the wave of the coronavirus. People are reluctant to buy imported products due to the fear of infestation. Especially, Chinese products and services are witnessing a boycott as the country was the ground zero for the deadly virus. On the positive side of the scenario, in-house production of the countries has seen a boost, and we can also see the wave of *Swadeshi* sweeping across India. But to consider the other side of the equation, jingoistic nationalism may limit people to specific constraints and the notion of being a citizen of world may see a regressive turn. Since hundreds of years, humanity strived to make the world a global village. But now, it seems that all the efforts made in the direction of unifying cultures and services may be pushed back to many years. The problem is that the vision of a globalized human did not take the risks of the venture into consideration.

History has been witness to the fact that the pandemics occurred due to the contamination of the natives due to being in contact with explorers, immigrants, or foreign troops. In other cases, an individual finds him/herself getting the disease by travelling abroad. Due to the lack of immunity towards a novel contagion, the infection wreaks havoc across multiple spaces and time zones. Apart from Black Death that broke out due to ship travellers, Measles, Typhus, Syphilis, Smallpox, Leprosy, Malaria, Tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Influenza are horrible pandemics that gobbled the lives of millions of people due to travelling of people from one place to another and taking the virus along with them to non-immune places (*Wikipedia*: "Globalization and Disease").To cite a literary example, in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers, a Christian missionary, sails to India and finds himself unable to battle with a novel kind of infection and ultimately succumbs to death.In addition to that, the blurring of the boundaries of the human and the animal kingdom has also caused in the outbreak of these terrible diseases, with COVID-19 being one of them. The coronavirus is regarded as a zoonotic disease by the scientists, which means that the virus mutated from the animals to the humans. Thus, the pandemic is a reminder to the humanity to respect some boundaries whether they may be between human and animal, or between fellow humans. The blocking of international travel and compulsory

maintenance of social distancing has taught humanity to develop a space to breathe not just for yourself but for Mother Earth too.

The Black Death turned the prosperous 14th century into the Dark Ages and gave birth to loss of art, culture, and rationality; and forced people to believe in superstition and xenophobia. Currently, the disruption of the worldwide supply chain has affected the whole humanity and countries with lesser manpower are struggling to make ends meet for their countrymen. Moreover, some imported products were earlier specially produced in a particular country, and now, individual countries are trying their best to compensate for the block in the trade process. Immigrant population who travelled overseas for career or tourism ventures has suffered a great deal due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their multiculturalism provided them a nightmare due to problem with their visas and travel tickets. With lockdown imposed across the whole world, many people were shipped and flown across the borders and special arrangement are still being made to rescue the people stuck in foreign lands with no resources or family. Frustrated with the unprecedented shocking experience, many people have sworn to put limits on their international travel and the natives who were excited to travel or study abroad pre-lockdown are reconsidering their decisions. This will result in a break in the sharing process of culture, education, and services across the borders, along with leading to permanent disillusionment in some cases.

With the world superpower being unable to deal with this turbulent time, people who were earlier seen fascinated with the charm of the United States of America are experiencing the lowering of their passion and praise for the country's policies and services for the citizens. As a result, nationalism has been on rise continuously since the onset of the pandemic across the globe. Due to being disenchanted with the foreign lands and spending more time in their home in their country, people have somewhat become aversive to the thought of multicultural exchange after observing the havoc wreaked by this practice. Consequently, the tightening of culture in nations across the world has also resulted into making people revolutionary toward the nation's policies, as seen in the case of the United States of America, where lockdown period was accompanied by violent issues related to racism, capitalism, and political status of the country. Thus, we can say that nationalism is good, but the reach of humanity to global culture is essential to impart a sense of tolerance, equity, and social order in the population. Therefore, a judicious blend of individual and collective interests is required to collectively face this horrible pandemic and achieve harmony at not just country but at global level too.

Globalization becomes crucial in a sense that it offers a sense of recognition to people who find themselves marginalized or unrecognized in their own homeland. This problem can exist at gender, religious, professional, or ethnic levels. This may ultimately lead to threats and clash of various social or cultural groups. In a globalized world, an individual is subjected to polyculture, and shifting boundaries provide a sense of recognition and harmony with both the self and the world. But if we take this equation in the context of the current tempestuousperiod of contagion, people may experience mental breakdown due to being cut from the global world, and may find themselves unable to adjust to the nationalistic fervor. Hence, finding a middle ground between the pandemic restrictions and global consciousness becomes quintessential to serve both personal and social needs of people. So, the entire situation sums down to dealing with the idea of connectivity in a sustainable manner. A UNESCO World Report (2009) titled "Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue" states the following defining the parameters of connectivity in a global world:

Connectivity refers to the growing interdependence between the networks and global flows associated with new communications technologies — email, the Internet, mobile phones — and the (increasingly urban) environments in which people live. Connectivity influences the way people across the globe earn their living, the sort of food they eat, the music, cinema and television they choose as entertainment, as well as their mobility. It also refers to the range of new anxieties and perplexities in contemporary life: from worries over climate change and fears of global influenza pandemics, to concerns about how fluctuations in the global economy may affect job security or interest payments locally. The dramatic increase in media connectivity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries embodies a dual potential for increased cultural interaction and greater cultural uniformity. (UNESCO 136)

Accordingly, the global connectivity has its both positive and negative effects which need to be addressed responsibly. Though current pandemic has been the subsequent effect of unbridled globalization and multiculturalism, humanity has also observed many hopeful instances of international community collaboration. India has emerged as a friend in need to the United States of America by supplying hydroxychloroquine medication to treat the people affected by the coronavirus. In addition, countries are helping each other with PPE kits and mask supplies to support each other in best possible way. Hence, at the end of the day we are a part of this planet together and threats such as pandemics, plagues, and wars are tests put by time to urge the global humanity to make some fundamental changes in itsbehavior and thought process. In an article titled "Literature, Pandemic and Globalization," Ravindra Kumar describes globalization as a double-edged sword:

… [I]t has both sides - sunny as well as seamy. It has gifted to the mankind unique creativity almost in all the fields. Most importantly, it has brought unreachable things to the reach of common people and has made life easier to them. But at the same time it has given to the world the most devastating threat in the form of the Corona Virus. But to blame globalization for it will be a bit harsh and unjustified too. It is up to we people how to use the globalized world for the safety and welfare of the mankind. (Kumar 6)

The pattern of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the situation could have been alleviated if the world was informed about the severity of the disease as soon as the first case of coronavirus was reported in Wuhan City of China in December 2019. As the world has become a global village, it also becomes the responsibility of the every nation to take this rapid multicultural exchange as a duty to mitigate the effects of any calamity that may catapult from being a native problem into a global problem in the blink of an eye, just like a forest fire.Collective efforts by global leaders of their respective nations must ensure"that pandemics can be contained through early measures of temporary inter-country distancing that focuses on human mobility. This is not an argument against globalization however, which makes countries wealthier, more competitive, and more able to invest in health infrastructures and through international collaborations" (Zimmermann et al. 7).

Every calamity brings with itself the reasons that urge the humanity to work at the levels where it has been lacking whether it is private sphere or public. Literature is filled with numerous instances of plague where an interchange between the cultures brought with itself not just the fruitful opportunities but life-threatening challenges too. This makes us wonder about putting a limit on the extremity of certain expeditions and also letting nature some time to breathe. The globalization spree of people was at its peak recently and the abrupt global spread of COVID-19 pandemic should not come as a shock to people across the world considering the pace at which the goods and services are exchanged between the countries in this hugely globalized world. Some people view this contagion as a punishment unleashed on the humanity by the Mother Earth so as to make a breathing space for herself and let people know the transience of this materialistic rat race. After all, this haphazard exchange of people across boundaries is majorly centered upon monetary assets rather than any bartering of spiritual accomplishments.

In conclusion, globalization and multiculturalism result in enriching the ethnic, creative, social, economic, and personal aspects of humanity, but at the same time, evils such as pandemics emerge out of this cultural exchange process. In such a turbulent period, it becomes important for humankind and the world leaders to deal with this global crisis judiciously to ensure health and harmony across the borders. Such periods are a reality check for the human condition to rectify the unseen errors in the foundation of the civilization and refresh the working process to rejuvenate the essence of life on this planet.

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