Societal Transformations Aftermath COVID-19: An Overdue Exploration of Positive and Negative Impacts

Yashoda Bhatta Joshi

Department of Sociology, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus, TU, Kathmandu, Nepal
Email: *ybhattajoshi@gmail.com*

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has showcased profound changes across human society, altering various facets of social life. Beyond its immediate health implications, the pandemic has brought about powerful social transformations reshaping interpersonal dynamics, work patterns, and community adaptability. This research article examines multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on societies globally, considering its both positive and negative implications. Through a comprehensive review of literature and analysis of real-life scenarios, the study explores how the pandemic has reshaped social structures, behaviors, and attitudes. The paper concludes suggesting that the pandemic has deeply and diversely impacted the lives of people in general across the geographical boundaries by a complex interplay of consequences, highlighting the need to continuously navigate the post-pandemic social landscape.

Introduction

Human dynamism and how it stays tuned with the ever-evolving society has continued to be a major sociological issue all the times. There is a relatively long history of sociological studies on the notions of 'uncertainty', 'culture of anxiety', and 'existential insecurity'. The uncertainty has direct links with the idea of 'risk' that articulates fear as 'prevailing subjectivity' in a risk society causing 'horror of ambiguity' (Beck, 2009:5). The debate is how society responded to COVID-19 consequences. And this paper examines how an unexpectedly fatal situation creates uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity among people across geography.

COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, had emerged as one of the most significant global crises in recent history. Since its outbreak in late 2019, the virus had spread rapidly across continents, challenging healthcare systems, disrupting economies, and fundamentally altering the fabric of human societies. Global lockdown, curfew, or stay-at-home restrictions had meaning and reasons, but social distancing disrupted the basic sociological theory of functionalism and absence of this social contact had worsened the condition leading to hysteria. We, as functioning members of the society, were confined from following our roles, hence, causing an uneven society (Nepal, 2020, p. 1). On the other hand, the labor migrants, who send money and bring home acquired

skills, suddenly found themselves in an insecure situation. Governments barred all international flights, keeping job-seekers home, and stranding migrant workers in their destination countries even as work visas expired (Rimal, 2020, p. 1).

COVID-19 was a test of the ability of globalism and its impact on the global economy was to be felt even in Nepal, especially affecting remittances, tourism, foreign investments, and availability of jobs (Khanal, 2020, p. 1). The global phenomenon well showed how difficult it was to undertake corrective measures (Thapa, 2020, p. 1). There were worrying signs that Nepal was ill-prepared to take effective measures against the pandemic. Poudel and Subedi (2020:748) had favored lockdown as effective measure in slowing the spread of coronavirus as many countries continued to be in different forms of lockdown. In the light of risk looming over Nepal, it was imperative that people cared for themselves, their families, and their communities. We had to have social isolation, stop going out of home unnecessarily, and support each other throughout (Chand, 2020, p. 1).

In the above backdrop, this paper attempts to explore COVID-19 pandemic effects on people's subjective well-being from a sociological perspective and offer a comprehensive explanation about the societal impact of pandemic with its both positive and negative implications across various domains.

Objectives of Paper
This paper is guided by the issue of transformational impacts upon the contemporary society after COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to meet two main objectives: (a) To identify the positive and negative impacts of pandemic upon people; and (b) To explain the societal transformations resulted from the consequences of pandemic.

Methodology of Paper
In essence, this paper is analytical and descriptive in nature. It attempts to examine the effect of COVID-19 pandemic upon societies across the world. The discussion contained in the paper is purely based on the experiential reflection of the author apart from the related literature from the secondary source.

Emergence of COVID-19
COVID-19 virus was first identified in Wuhan of China in December, 2019 before rapidly spreading to other parts of the world. The subsequent declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March, 2020 explained the severity and urgency of the situation. Efforts to contain the virus through measures, such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing highlighted the interconnectedness of global societies and the challenges posed by such outbreaks. With the unimaginable extent of COVID-19 havoc, cruelty of social inequalities appeared clear in the matters of preparedness against virus spread, staying alive, and coping with its dramatic consequences (Belser, 2020, p. 1).

Inequalities turned cruel when people got infected by diseases. For some, it was staying on leave or playing safer under 'isolation or quarantine' compensation package. But for those with the least

income, it was catastrophic. Many did not have advantageous access to health services and may even not covered by insurance putting them to a higher risk of mortality. Even if they ultimately recovered, the absence of income replacement benefits made them even poorer. At theoretical level, it was an interesting thing to discover the link between risk, catastrophe, and panic in relation to COVID-19 (Ward, 2020:729).

Globally, the eastern world had to largely sacrifice doing away with its cultural rituals of gatherings, collective deity worship, birth to death services, etc. However, people's positive sentiments stood out even though there was negativity, fear, disgust, and sadness about the lockdown in India (Barkar, Vibha, & Kamath, 2020:1). In Japan, many companies drastically introduced digital technologies to facilitate telework among their employees. Consequently, individuals shifting to the use of new digital technologies could perform more flexibly and realize work-family balance more easily compared to the period before COVID-19 pandemic. This way, the new work style improved their subjective well-being. On the other hand, essential workers, lower white-collar workers, or non-regular employees could not enjoy the benefits derived from the new work style (Sudo, 2022).

Talking of the western world, people reluctantly avoided their greeting culture of handshakes, hugs, and kisses on the pretext of health protocol. Several cases of divorce came to light because of isolation or physical separation for long. The study in Germany and Austria by Schnell and Krampe (2020:2) revealed that general mental distress was high that time.

Societal Response to COVID-19

The global response to COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by a mix of containment measures, healthcare interventions, and socio-economic policies aimed at mitigating its impact. However, the uneven distribution of resources and the varying capacities of healthcare systems did lead to disparities in the effectiveness of these responses, worsening already-existing inequalities within and between countries. Specifically, the following were the major impacts observed:

1. Strained healthcare systems:

Hospitals and Clinics worldwide were stretched to their limits by the demands of treating COVID-19 patients, leading to shortages of medical supplies, personnel, and critical care capacity. The strain on healthcare infrastructure exposed the weaknesses in public health preparedness and highlighted the need for robust, strong systems capable of responding effectively to future health crises.

2. Disruption of economic lifeline:

The pandemic disrupted the supply chains, trade flows, and labor markets, leading to widespread economic dislocation and uncertainty. Businesses across sectors faced closures, layoffs, and financial strain, with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) threatened by the economic fallout. This economic repercussion of COVID-19 was felt acutely by vulnerable populations, like low-income laborers, informal sector workers, and marginalized communities. Job losses, income reductions, and

food insecurity became widespread, further deepening the pre-existing socio-economic disparities and widening the gap between 'haves and have-nots'.

3. Crisis of education:

The shift to online education and remote learning posed challenges for students, teachers, and parents alike, introducing new challenges in easy access to compulsory education due to short supply of digital resources. The digital divide, caused by unequal access to technology and internet connectivity, did widen the educational inequities, with marginalized students facing barriers to academic achievement.

Positive Transformations

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic, it has catalyzed positive transformations in various aspects of society, fostering innovation, adaptation, and solidarity in the face of adversity, in the following ways.

1. Technological engagements:

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across sectors, driving innovations in telemedicine, remote work, and e-commerce. Virtual platforms and digital solutions have enabled continuity of essential services, facilitated remote learning, and transformed the delivery of healthcare, education, and other services.

2. Workplace adjustments:

The widespread shift to remote work and telecommuting has revolutionized traditional work patterns, leading to increased flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance for many employees. Organizations have embraced remote collaboration tools, virtual meetings, and digital communication platforms to maintain productivity and connectivity in a distributed work environment.

3. Welcoming community:

In the face of unprecedented challenges, communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience and solidarity, mobilizing resources, and support networks to assist vulnerable members and frontline workers. Grassroots initiatives, mutual aid networks, and community-led responses have emerged as vital sources of support, highlighting the importance of social cohesion and collective action in times of crisis.

Negative Consequences

While COVID-19 has pushed forward positive transformations and adaptive responses, it has also magnified the pre-existing discriminations, vulnerabilities, and social tensions, intensifying disparities within and between communities, as under.

1. Deteriorating inequalities:

The pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalized populations, including low-income individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and undocumented migrants, who face heightened risks of infection, mortality, and economic hardship. Structural inequalities in access to healthcare, housing, and

social services have been laid bare by the pandemic, exacerbating existing disparities and deepening social divisions.

2. <u>Mental health issues</u>:

The prolonged duration of the pandemic, coupled with the stressors of social isolation, economic uncertainty, and loss of loved ones, has taken a toll on mental health and well-being. Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation have surged during the pandemic, with marginalized groups and frontline workers facing heightened risks of psychological distress and trauma.

3. <u>Social isolation and prejudices</u>:

Different measures, such as lockdowns, quarantine, and social distancing resulted into the increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection among individuals and communities. Moreover, the pandemic has fueled racism, and biases against certain groups, including minorities and immigrants.

COVID-19 and Its Effect on Nepal

Nepal had witnessed the most abrupt halt of economic activities on the pandemic outbreak hitting almost every sector of the national economy. Later, the impact surfaced in various sectors, like health, trade, and production and supply. Mainly, the service industries including tourism, transportation, aviation, and hospitality were hit hard. With the launch of visit Nepal 2020 campaign in January, the country was in hope to attract two million visitors. But due to virus outbreak the campaign got cancelled shattering tourism and hospitality sectors. The tourist arrival rate declined to below 10 percent from 70 percent before the pandemic. Likewise, cancellation of mountaineering expeditions resulted job loss of around 13,000 tour guides.

COVID-19 affected general life both in private and public sectors. Banks suffered losses of their investments in hospitality and aviation due to tour cancellations. In manufacturing sector, supply of different raw materials decreased drastically as most of the same used to come from China. In the situation of limited imports from abroad, local demands went on rise and products became more costly. The crisis impacted remittance inflow and government revenue collection as majority of the destination countries attractive for the outbound workers announced a lockdown. The resultant downturn in remittance created severe impact on overall consumption in the country. The overall alarming situation created the threat of 'uncertain future' with people living desperately in the disturbed society.

According to Frey (2023), Nepalese people's smoking habits were reduced by about one-tenth and alcohol intake decreased by 12 percent compared to pre and post COVID-19. Regarding mental health, 15 percent had repeated disturbing and unwanted thoughts about COVID-19, 16 percent tried to avoid pandemic news, and 7 .7 percent people had unfavorable ideas or sentiments about themselves. Also, more than 16 percent reported feeling some level of stress related to the workplace and home.

Summary

The analysis of real-life scenarios around the world and empirical evidences underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the societal impact of COVID-19. While the pandemic has spurred positive transformations, such as technological innovation, community resilience, and adaptive

responses, it has also magnified pre-existing inequalities, vulnerabilities, and social tensions dividing communities. Moreover, the long-term consequences of the pandemic on mental health, education, and social cohesion remain areas of concern that require sustained attention and intervention.

The diverse and complex social consequences across different regions and contexts have been experienced as follows.

1. Global despairs:

In low and middle-income countries, the impact of COVID-19 has been particularly severe with the limited healthcare infrastructure, inadequate access to medical supplies, and socio-economic gap hindering the pandemic response in many countries, leading to widespread suffering and hardship among vulnerable populations.

2. Rural miseries:

Rural communities faced unique challenges during the pandemic, including limited access to medical facilities, internet connectivity, and essential services. Closure of schools, businesses, and community facilities had compounded the isolation and economic vulnerability of rural residents, highlighting the need for targeted support and resources to address the specific needs of rural communities.

3. Urban sufferings:

In urban areas, densely populated neighborhoods were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, facing higher rates of infection, mortality, and economic hardship. This added-to the pre-existing inequalities in access to healthcare, housing, and social services, deepening socio-economic disparities and widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

Conclusion

This study finds that COVID-19 pandemic affected individual subjective well-being negatively as well as positively. Notably, only advantaged individuals could enjoy positive effect which might widen social inequality of subjective well-being. It is imperative that governments need to develop not only policies for pandemic control, but also long-term support for socially disadvantaged individuals to adapt to social changes caused by pandemics. Without such support, increased social inequality will be the 'situated reality' of a society even after the end of pandemics.

In a nutshell, COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on human society worldwide, reshaping social structures, behaviors, and attitudes in profound ways. While it has prompted positive changes and welcoming transformations, it has also exposed and fueled existing vulnerabilities and inequities. As societies navigate the post-pandemic landscape, it is necessary to adopt a holistically inclusive approach that addresses diverse needs and challenges stemming from similar crises. By promoting empathy and cohesion, societies can emerge stronger and more united in future.

As Boitano (2020:1) puts it, our planet must reformulate its way of operating to survive pandemics.

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