# 'Social Distancing' or Distancing from Eternal Human Values? A Psychosocial Analysis in Post COVID-19 Era in Context of Indian Dharmic Traditions

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**Abstract**

'Social Distancing' as a measure of mitigating infection of Coronavirus among the mass people was largely applied in the pandemic period. Apparently, it seemed effective in the short run, but it was conflicting with the eternal human value system and led to a secluded individual entity some extent. The connotative significance of this distancing is so deep-rooted and has a long consequential impact that is beyond expectation. The term 'social distancing' had been used instead of physical distancing which was a matter of reconsideration. Was it propagated consciously or unconsciously? What can be its behavioral and psychological impact in a new world order where the dharmic spirit of human nature has been challenged through imposing this myopic idea? Considering the stated issues, the article aims to critically approach the human psychosocial attributes of changing time and the long-run implications on the social sphere. It will also reconsider the approach of social distancing in the context of Indian dharmic traditions. Moreover, the article will critically focus on the conscious capitalistic approach of influencing the psychology of the masses by disregarding eternal human values. By reviewing the original texts, published articles, recently developed ideas, and observing the changing patterns of behavioral attributes, the article reconsiders the conflicting spirit of social distancing with the core values of Indian religions in the context of contemporary psychosocial transformation.

**Keywords:** Social distancing, Eternal human values, Psychosocial analysis, Post COVID -19 era, Indian dharmic traditions

## I

The entire journey of human civilization is the journey of the gradual progress of social association and connectivity. Moreover, the eternal thirst of the human entity is to be connected with other fellows physically, mentally, and spiritually. The core teaching of all the Indian religious traditions is to set an eternal value of human relation and social cooperation. Whereas COVID-19 evoked a largely applied term 'social distancing' in our lives and imposed as obvious, and secluded entity which seems contrasting with the classic human values. Consequently, the human being and society are heading to a new set of psychological and social order and bringing social fragility.

The 21st century is considered as the era of the emerging pandemic of mental illnesses.[1] The unexpected emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic propagated several layers of questions about its deeper impacts on our lives and the consequences in our greater future. To understand and measure it, the scientific approach is indispensable but not enough as subtle changes are mushrooming. Simultaneously, it needs a philosophical and social approach to explore its deep-rooted consequences in the long run. After the outbreak of COVID-19, to mitigate the infection, behavioral, clinical, and state interventions were undertaken so that the persistence of the virus in human populations can be prevented. These unprecedented interventions through social distancing, travel restrictions, using masks were effective to some extent but were equally challenging to execute as people were not habituated and were contrasting to their innate nature.

In human progressive journey, human capital, institution, and social capital play pivotal roles aggregately and positively.[2] Accordingly, the dharmic traditions also nurture and patronize all these significant factors for collective and continuous progress even in worldly life. Inversely, enforcing 'social distancing' strictly for a longer period and disseminating the subsequent information was challenging to maintain the natural life. Moreover, through overflowing the voluminous data repeatedly and continuously, the perception

and understanding of common people about social existence had been reformulated. As a result, their mental consistency has been disrupted undesirably. Likewise, Waldron[3] raised the moral and philosophical question of social distancing where he predicted the unexpected outcome of social and mental barriers in human life.

## II

In the pandemic period, 'social distancing' had been largely effective as a tool. Historically it was applied to make people biologically and socially segregated to prevent the virus. The term was initially coined by Edward Hall, a cultural anthropologist in 1963 to indicate the avoidance of human proximities. Moreover, in social interaction, among the communities, people automatically and consciously maintain the distance for their existential purpose.[4] Whereas, American sociologist Eric Kleinberg termed it as a new social pain. He has also expressed his concern for not regarding the sufferings related to isolation and the cost of social distancing. Contrasting views are always there but missing point are the distinctive features of human entity where innate nature is psychological affiliation.

When authorities made 'home quarantine' mandatory for 'homeless people' was an irony. Accordingly, in many lower-income families, several members living in a single congested room, were impossible to maintain even physical distancing. This type of acute proximity is very much challenging for natural human existence. Therefore, rather than forced quarantine, it may be advised to self-segregate in the home settings to evade contact with others to avert the spread of the infection. Otherwise, despite its short-run effectiveness, it may generate some acute psychological crises in the long run as society comprises few more essential issues of life.

Correspondingly, some scholars and thinkers have viewed the issue from different perspectives. Horton[5] has referred to the view of Slavoj Zizek, a leading Marxist philosopher, who thinks that this crisis will bring global solidarity through trust in people and science. Moreover, he predicted that because of this pandemic, a new economically marginalized migrant class would be emerged which he termed as "geo-social class".[6] Consequently, the greater portion of the informal sector of the emerging economy would be more economically and socially vulnerable as well as excluded. This economically pauperized group creates psychologically destitute community.

As the nature of Coronavirus is homogenous and instantaneous where the whole world is severely affected though the rate of severity and casualties is uneven. The question naturally comes why the developed country like America was affected severely and the number of casualties is the highest despite its advance and developed healthcare system. On the other hand, in South Asian countries despite its large population and its proximity, the casualty was significantly lower. Was it because of the social connectivity and innate cooperative lifestyle of common people? Earlier experience and data of pandemics, and some of the empirical evidence in the

scientific study show that the social isolation and panic atmosphere reduce the human immune system.[7]

Mandatory mass quarantine without proper logistic support and arrangement yielded an acute mental suffering and feeling of loneliness. Apart from physical sufferings, the consequences of this quarantine and continuous nationwide lockdown were mass hysteria, anxiety, and distress. Therefore, the sense of getting cornered and loss of control may induce a gross sense of insecurity and meaninglessness of life. This sense of meaninglessness should be addressed by adopting the measures of mental and social wellbeing by creating a congenial public sphere and social connectivity.[8] Consequently, a significant portion of society is directly and indirectly affected by these types of state of mind.

In different phases of the pandemic, the overflow of information was some extent misleading and was like a systematic chaos. One of the major challenges was that there was no central authority who was responsible for disseminating reliable information. Therefore, the flow of information and its diverse source was challenging to receive and implement the guidelines at the initial stage. Thus, this systematic chaos accelerated the panic, and the situation was challenging gradually.

## III

As a social being, human needs continuous social interaction for their existential purpose. But the Coronavirus and its containment initiatives have set a challenge in interpersonal and community interactions. As a result, the absence of these connections is leading to a stressful state of loneliness, depression, and some other physical and mental disorders. Moreover, this might produce some chronic psychosocial challenges individually and collectively in the coming days. That is why Jandrić focuses on critical awareness regarding the measures to address the upcoming challenges; it can be mental as well as social.[9]

The psychosocial impact of social distancing needs to consider and review from diverse perspectives. As it was an unprecedented situation in recent human history, therefore, measuring and assessing the psychological impact of this social isolation was challenging but inevitable. To understand the magnitude of the pandemic and the number of people affected by lockdown and its short-run and long-run consequences, it was mandatory to conduct a comprehensive study so that the essential policy can be adopted.[10] Meanwhile, a large number of studies in different contexts and volumes had been conducted but have yet to focus on psychosocial implications in the context of dharmic tradition.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented and ongoing crisis that may continue even longer period and seems like an integral part of ongoing life. So, the social isolation imposed by the government can bring chronic social pain which may incur a huge cost in the macro aspect of life. In this regard, the role of media was some extent questionable. Repeatedly broadcasting the news and

information of infected cases, death and other related issues was psychologically hammering for mass people especially for children and young adults.

The severity and death casualty of COVID-19 in some developed countries like America was astonishing despite its advanced healthcare system and advanced research in medical science. Among other factors, Wei[11] finds living conditions and atmosphere as significant factors in COVID19-related mental health symptoms and casualty. Living with family and friends and living alone or socially secluded is closely associated with experiencing more cognitive impairments and anxiety as a function of COVID19-related circumstantial changes. Furthermore, Matiza thinks that critical issues like health, psychological, social risk will be the most pertinent in tourists traveling in the post COVID-19 period. These negative outcomes are reflected in different forms.[12]

Institutionalizing emotions is a costly measure in the long run as forceful social distancing is against natural human emotions. Controlling human emotion and innate nature is detrimental to natural human progress. In the turmoil situation, the active role of state and government were inevitable. Correspondingly, the mismanagement and lack of coordination among the states and larger international agencies and corporations were very much remarkable. There is no central authority and a single source of valid information which people can accept for their crucial decision.

The stigma associated with the pandemic, cultural and religious propaganda related to this disease, and governmental policy might have influenced the international trade and finance, and interrelation among the countries. So, psychological, and social preparedness should get the highest global priority. All the stakeholders must consider the psychosocial morbidities of this pandemic to assess fatalities and long-run consequences by reducing the gap between policymakers and ground-level operators.[1]

Some major challenges might have addressed in the coming days. Because of longer period lockdown and mandatory quarantine, the small and informal sector of the economy had been devastated, and a great number of lower and lower-middle-class people had lost their jobs and last resort. This financial distress has also a huge psychological impact.[7] Further, after the disaster, infected people face more severe psychological crises and secondary trauma.[13] To minimize the risk, in the epidemic situation, one-to-one psychological counseling service is highly required.

Implementation of social distancing measures had changed the web of human relationships. From the human existential point of view, the absence of deep meaningful connections among the people and society leads to stressful physical and mental anxiety.[14] Additionally, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) forecasted some negative consequences of COVID-19 like fear and anxiety about disease can be a cause of strong emotional disorder in children and adults.[15] They also have suggested that coping with this stress will make the people and community stronger through it is challenging.

In a comprehensive study, Lopez Leon[13] have predicted the possibilities of some other effects that have not yet been identified. Their study has identified 55 long-term effects associated with COVID-19 which main clinical symptoms are fatigue, headache, joint pain, anosmia, ageusia, etc. Moreover, the study has identified few most common symptoms and the most common 5 effects are fatigue, headache, attention disorder, hair loss, and dyspnea. Furthermore, because of the volatile psychological state, inconsistencies are observed in decision-making behavior which has multiple adverse effects in personal and social life.

Several initiatives like forced quarantine, nationwide long durable lockdowns may produce some major psychological issues like acute panic, anxiety, obsessive behaviors, hoarding, paranoia, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run.[8] Besides, they have also observed an 'infodemic' spread via different platforms of social media which also creates confusion and panic geometrically. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the panic in social media and other media was characterized by negatively skewed misleading information even faster than the coronavirus itself.[16] Meanwhile, some social problems like outbursts of racism, stigmatization, and xenophobia against some communities are observed. Likewise, frontline healthcare workers are also at higher risk despite getting some high incentives.

Human behavioral traits are very significant to observe the psychological changes in a pandemic situation. Most of the young learners are learning emotionally and physically detached and challenging environments over a longer period through zoom and other online mechanisms. A significant level of behavioral changes has been observed among these young learners. According to the Center for Disease Prevention (CDC) report, anxiety disorder and depressive disorder have increased significantly in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.[17] In human communication progress, the largest portion is non-verbal communication. Because of huge online involvement and communication, a large number of communication barriers and interruptions are occurred. As a result, inter and intra relations are severely affected. This lack of proper communication is yielding some mental and social conflicts.

## IV

The human journey from the nomadic stage to a modern social structure is largely influenced by the dharmic tradition. Especially Indian dharmic tradition is highly entangled with nature and society. Typically, these social conventions influence human behavior, ideas, and emotions to a greater extent. In this tradition, dharma is considered as the natural tendency of a person, moreover, performing one's duty.[18] Whereas, the importance of the meaning of dharma in the order of society which was said to be eternal is changing in course of time and said as new dharma expressive of

Hindu ideals.[19] According to Sanātana(eternal) tradition, dharma is developed in the Vedic period of Hinduism and constructed social structures, and individuals were conditioned. But this conditioning and connectivity were for collective progress. So, the deviation from dharma makes the human entity fragile and disconnected.

The ultimate goal of Indian dharmic tradition is attaining moksa; reaching finite to infinite through practicing ancient values with its focus on law, duty, and obligation. Furthermore, Creel highlighted the innate law of individual and society in temporal and eternal perspective in value context for social integration and social welfare.[19] According to Indian wisdom, eternal dharmic values are very much integrated into individual and social life. It is reflected: dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ tasmād dharmo na hantavyo mā no dharmo hato'vadhīt (Manusmriti 8.15). Which explains Justice, blighted, blights; and justice preserved preserves; hence justice should not be blighted, lest blighted justice blights us. It reflects that people, society, and their dharmic duties are interlinked and dharma is the ultimate savior.

Thus, eternal dharmic traditions especially the subcontinental values always inspire to be socially and ecologically aligned where all the elements are closely interconnected. In the commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi narrates the core teaching of this holy text that it is a science of life and the art of living. He further clarifies,[20] "It teaches how to be, how to think and how to do. These teaching glorify every aspect of life through contact with inner Being is like watering the root and making the whole tree green. It surpasses any practical wisdom of life ever cherished by human society". These innate social values are reflected in other traditions too. Accordingly, in the words of Radhakrishnan, "The rules of dharma are the mortal flesh of immortal ideas, and so are mutable"[21] where it has been emphasizing immortality or eternal values.

One of the leading authorities of the Indian dharmic tradition is Lord Buddha. According to his teaching 'sangha' is very significant and has its distinctive features. Emphasizing the collective social values and spreading the teaching of Buddha the term 'bahujanna' is used in the early canonical text which means 'the community as a whole.[22] In addition, Jaimini in his Mīmāmsā aphorisms (1.1.2),[23] explains dharma as Vedic injunctions to act in a particular manner. Considering the Indian dharmic values it seems society and people are an inseparable entity. As the human entity has been cherishing the sense of belonging with family and society since the inception of their journey and dharma is also teaching to practice those values of connection, so, disregarding the social affiliation is contrasting to dharmic tradition.

## V

'Social Distancing' which is conflicting with eternal dharmic values has degraded human existential values. Recovering from this mental and social decay, some institutional initiatives are needed which will address the psychosocial challenges in the coming days. Accordingly, it needs to reconsider it as a tool to come out from this collective complex state of psychology as it is contrasting with human eternal values. Therefore, encouraging self-isolation and voluntary quarantine through an altruistic approach and mass communication could be a reasonable alternative to minimize the long-term complications.[7] Based on the stated discussion, it needs to rethink the conventional approach of addressing the crisis in coming days.

It needs a combined and comprehensive approach to minimize the consequences of this pandemic in long run. Considering the complexity of COVID-19, some pragmatic initiatives were needed for mental and spiritual wellbeing. A life with the right alignment with nature through meditation and yoga is very much essential. The ancient wisdom of India nurtures the core values of her dharmic tradition. Whereas, the global and the state-level authority approached the pandemic situation superficially not enough prudently as per consistent with human values. That is why initially mass people were cooperative with governmental policy but gradually they were reluctant regarding following the protocols and guidelines as it was existentially challenging and contrasting to their inherent values.

Lastly, it can be concluded by stating that among the approaches social distancing was mostly applied and to some extent effective. But authorities could not avail to understand the deep-rooted consequences and prove their wisdom to predict the impact on human psychology and social interaction in long run. As described, it is high time to initiate some pragmatic measures to recover the psychosocial decay through nurturing the dharmic teaching more comprehensively and can be aligned with the spirit of nature.

## Conflicts of Interest

Regarding the publication of this article, the author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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