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COVID-19 and the socio-cultural life of Kolkata: An empirical study of life management process of the people in Kolkata during the pandemic

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Abstract

Our planet witnessed a severe health hazard for the last two years as the COVID-19 transmitted throughout the world. It has massively shaken the health infrastructure of all the nations. As the vaccines were not available, the whole world was suffering from mass demise and all the nations went for lockdown to control the transmission of the new virus. People's movement and mingle were restricted, all the socio-economic activities were almost shut down. Kolkata was not an exception. As the health infrastructure of India was quite weak, India went for a strict lockdown, which started from March, 2020 to control the first wave. We experimented with a survey from April, 2020 to September, 2020 on online mode to gauge the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the commoners inhabiting Kolkata or very near to Kolkata. We found how the income, savings, borrowings and the expenditure pattern got disrupted at the household level. It is also found from the survey, how the unorganized sector faced a mass deprivation during the period. An age wise analysis of the psychological disturbance was also undertaken. It is also found that people at the micro level tried to join their hands to fight this unexpected hazard.

Keywords: Pandemic, lockdown, socio-economic, cultural, behavioural, psychological

Introduction

The outbreak of the infectious virus for the first time appeared in Wuhan, China, in late December, 2019 and later this pandemic rapidly spread over other cities of China and over 200 countries worldwide by the end of 25th April, 2020. The Indian government officially confirmed the attack of COVID-19 in India on 18th Feb, 2020. As a preventive measure to combat COVID-19 pandemic, India underwent a strict "lockdown" since March 25, 2020. The pandemic and lockdown can impose a psychological impact in the form of fear, anxiety, stress and insomnia etc (Mondal *et al.* 2021) ^[5].

COVID-19 (Corona virus) has affected the everyday life and has also slowed down the global economy. Identification of the disease at an early stage was vital to control the spread of the virus because it very rapidly transmitted from person to person. This pandemic has affected thousands of people, who are either sick or are being killed due to the spread of this disease. The most common symptoms of this viral infection are fever, cold, cough, bone pain and breathing problems, and ultimately leading to pneumonia. This, being a new viral disease affecting humans for the first time, vaccines were not available at the primary phase (Haleem *et al.*, 2020) ^[5]. Thus, the emphasis was on taking extensive precautions such as extensive hygiene protocol (e.g., regularly washing of hands, avoidance of face to face interaction etc.), social distancing, and wearing of masks, and also discouraged certain daily practices (e.g. stay over, hugging and shaking hands) and so on. This virus is spreading exponentially region wise. After severe effect of Corona, lockdown situation was created at home and abroad, due to which all the educational institutions were closed. Lock-down situation prevailed worldwide. The Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to rapid, remarkable changes in the lives of billions of children and adolescents (Sieberer *et al.*, 2022) ^[8]. They faced massive changes in their daily lives, including school closures, home confinement, and social distancing rules, which can burden them substantially. Due to severe effect of COVID - 19, offline education system shifted to online education system which led to severe effects on the minds of children.

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Students no more went to school rather they were engaged in online education at their home through mobile and laptop. Though their education was continuing through online mode as well as new normal life prevent the stoppage of education completely, but most of the students were deprived of this opportunity, because those children coming from very poor family, cannot afford these system full-fledged (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020) ^[1]. It has become difficult for them to study online as they have no mobile or internet connection. Furthermore, violence against children is reported to have increased under home confinement leaving children at risk of abuse and trauma.

Moreover, COVID-19 has rapidly affected our everyday life, businesses, disrupted the world trade and movements. Most of the countries have slowed down their manufacturing. The various industries and sectors which are affected by the cause of this disease include the pharmaceuticals industry, solar power sector, tourism, Information and electronics industry etc. This virus creates significant knock-on effects on the daily life of citizens, as well as about the global economy (Haleem *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. Several governments began extending financial and other forms of support to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and their workers because smaller firms are more vulnerable to negative shocks due to disruption in supply chain, labor supply, and final demand for goods and services than larger firms. Since MSMEs are diverse, however, the severity of the pandemic's impact on them varies considerably depending on their specific characteristics.

The impacts of COVID-19 in daily life are extensive and have far reaching consequences. Healthcare professionals are facing a lot of difficulties in maintaining the quality of healthcare now-a-days. As many parts of the World continue to struggle with the COVID-19 crisis, researchers are continuously working to understand the underlying patterns of the pandemic and shed more light on its unanswered aspects. As more than two years, we have lived with the pandemic, every sphere of the human civilization got disturbed. At the macro level, all the economic parameters like growth, employment, external trade got disturbed and at the micro level, the civilians were suffering from health hazards, mental disorder and severe economic loss. In this study, we have tried to sort out the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown to control it at the household level during and after the first wave in Kolkata city and bigger Kolkata. We tried to gauge how a pandemic disturbs human feelings, socio economic security, and mental status at the micro level.

Methodology and objectives

The survey was conducted from April to September in 2020. We tried to capture the socio-economic distress, mental condition, and the impact of such an abnormal condition on the style of the commoners and their individual bonding at the household and societal level. 100 respondents answered to our structured online questionnaire. So, we could only make a survey of 100 families. The survey was mainly based on Kolkata and the suburbs. Here we depict a statistical representation of the results. The objective of the study is to assess the social, economic, mental and physical impact of the lockdown in the ordinary lives. Here we have tried to interpret the results through charts and different sorts of graphs.

Literature Review

Here we have gone through some research studies which have focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Most of the research studies focused on the health hazards and health infrastructure at the macro level or micro level. We found only a few studies focusing on the socio- economic aspects at the grass root level and tried to make an idea of the spheres which got disturbed at the micro level. Here, we have tried to deal with the socio-economic troubles, mental insecurities of the commoners at the household level during and after the pandemic.

A research paper covered different challenges of COVID-19 pandemic which affected social, economic, political and cultural factors. According to them, economic factors were affected most than any other factors and this was directly correlated with the mental health of individuals (Lebni *et al.*, 2021) ^[3]. Another paper also depicts the impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic urban areas and also how it affects overall life-styles in urban areas during that time span (Sharifi *et al.*, 2020) ^[7]. Moreover, another related paper (Singh *et al.*, 2021) ^[7] aimed at assessing health, psychosocial and economic impacts of the COVID- 19 pandemic on people with chronic conditions in India. An Australian article (Sullivan, 2020) ^[11] describes and discusses the spread of the Corona virus pandemic in Australia and also its impacts on people and the economy on the basis of an Australian's eye. This article summarizes Australia's socio-economic responses to the Pandemic.

Another paper is very significant and appropriate regarding the quality of life and mental health in children and adolescents in Germany during the Pandemic period. Here, author has also given a proper guidance of policy makers, pediatric professions and parents for safeguarding the proper mental health of children (Sieberer *et al.*, 2022) ^[8]. According to one significant article, the 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) reported the impact of COVID-19 on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in 163 countries highlighted that nearly half of the countries reported that patients experienced partial or complete disruption of services for Hypertension, Diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and related complications during the Pandemic (Nicola *et al.*, 2020) ^[6]. Another current study provides evidence towards the negative psychological impact of the pandemic and also reminds us about the importance for widespread psychiatric services during and after pandemic (Mondal *et al.*, 2021) ^[5].

Another interesting paper presents the most comprehensive and large-scale study on how students experienced the severity of the first wave of COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 and how it affected various aspects of their lives on a global level (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020) ^[1].

Data analysis

Here we depict the results which came out from our survey. While reporting, we have tried to focus on the socio-economic variables, which could play dynamic roles in the lives of the people as per research studies and our observance. The result of our survey shows 70% of the respondents were male and 29% were female. Only 1% respondents belonged to transgender community. This sort of result shows a digital discrimination. In our country if we try to organise virtual surveys, there is very chance that a meager number of respondents will be women. It is found that India has the widest gender gap in internet usage in

recent years, likely 40%. In our recent study also, we get a similar picture. Here the result shows that 41% of difference

in accessing online surveys.

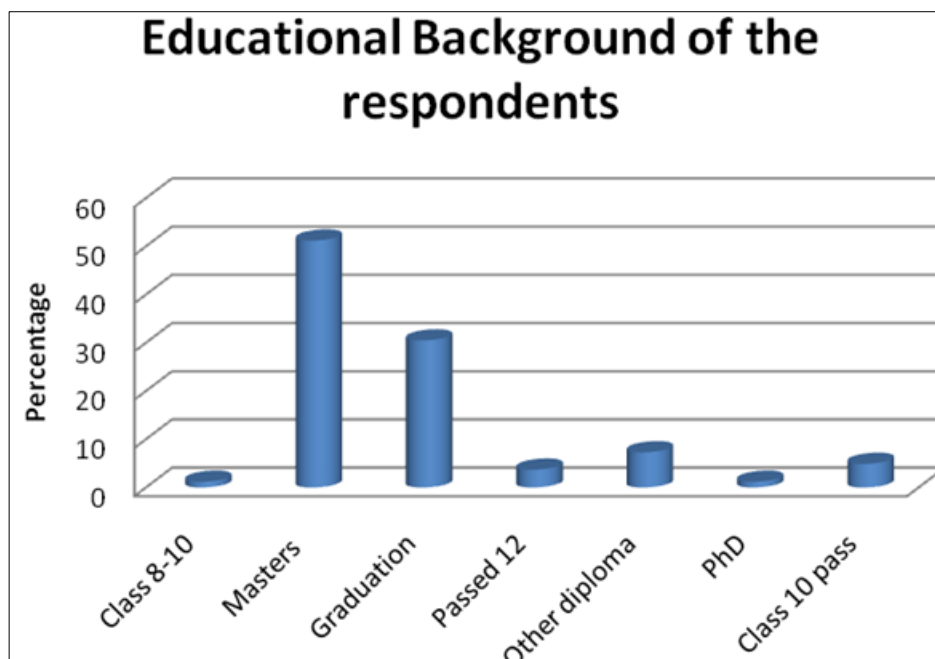


Diagram 1: Educational Background

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April- September, 2020

As per Diagram 1, it can be seen that 81.7% of the respondents have completed their higher education. This also implies that highly educated people have digital literacy low educated people are digitally discriminated also. Data also reveal that 65.8% families have senior citizens in their families. And we have seen that 53.6% of the families have someone hospitalised during lockdown. 63.41% of the families reside in metropolitan city, Kolkata or in the outskirts. Most of the families participated in this online survey are very much part of the urban population. Therefore, respondents mostly belong to nuclear families (59.8%) Most of the families suffered some sort of illness during lockdown. 67.1% have expressed that their work was hampered in one way or another. 51.2% of the studied respondents' income got reduced for the pandemic and the lockdown to control it (refer Diagram 3). When we analysed the employment pattern of the respondents, we can see that only 30% of the respondents have secured jobs in Government sector (Refer Diagram. 2). They did not suffer from income loss also. But the other 10% are from business sector or are self employed. 2% belong to social sector and the 45% do jobs in the private sector. Again from Diagram 3, we can see that 45% of the respondents claimed that there is no decrease in income. But the majority, comprising of 55% have claimed that their income has been reduced for various reasons like drop in business, days of work and in wage rate or the hindrances caused by the lockdown to join the jobs at time (refer Diagram 3).

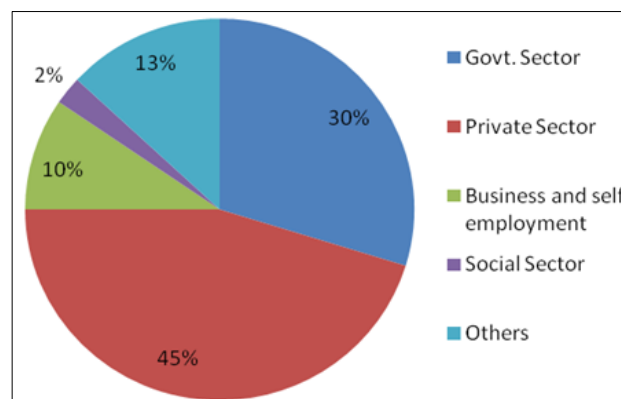


Diagram 2: Job Pattern of the respondents

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April- September, 2020

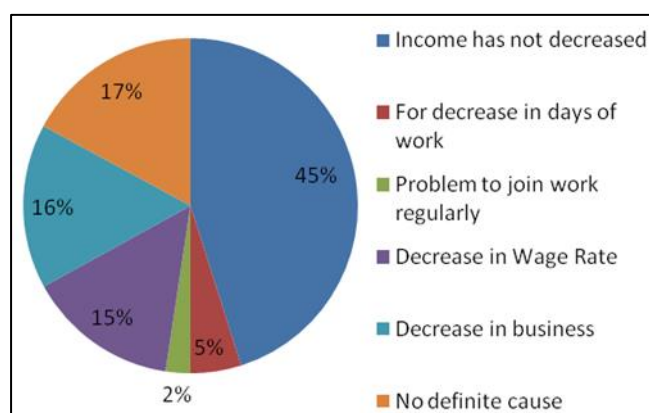


Diagram 3: Cause of decrease in income during the COVID period

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April- September, 2020

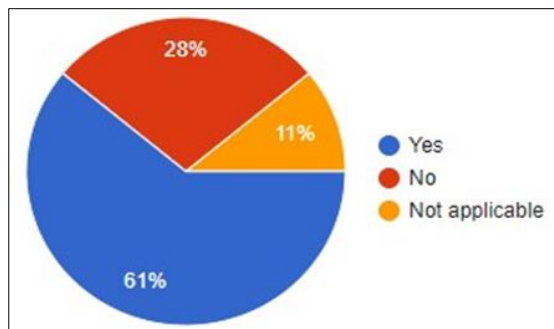


Diagram 4: Need of going to job place during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

It can be seen from Diagram 4, that 61% of the respondents were needed to join their workplace regularly or irregularly. The lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic caused by the Sars- COV-19 virus was very strict. There were no local trains running, and the bus service was very limited. Joining the work place became an arduous job for many. Therefore, consumption expenditure for travelling increased a lot. Joining the work became problematic. For 67% of the respondents, savings decreased (Diagram 5). 87.8% of the respondents took loan for one or the other reasons (refer Diagram 6).

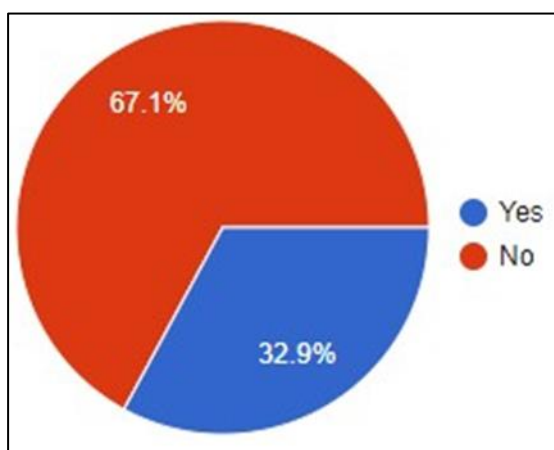


Diagram 5: Decrease in Savings during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

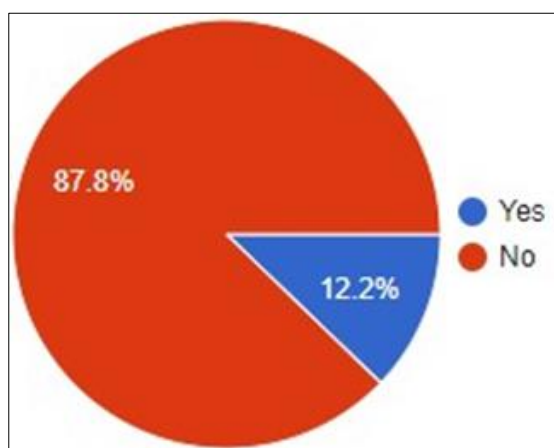


Diagram 6: Borrowing of the respondents during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

Consumption for personal purposes, for medical treatment, new vehicles was the prominent causes for borrowing. From Diagram 7, it can be seen that 55% of the respondents had to make medical expenses. 34% of the medical expenses were made for parents. Again Diagram 9 shows the problems, the senior citizens faced while remaining confined within homes. 57% of the senior citizens in the families of the respondents suffered from depression and isolation as they were strictly advised to remain indoors. Other problems prevailing among the senior citizens were anxiety about the economic vulnerability. Only 9.4% of the elder people were happy and spent quality times with their families.

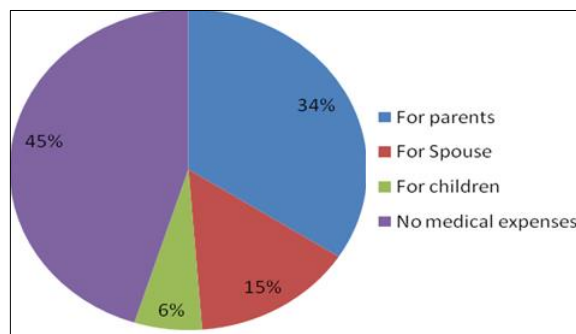


Diagram 7: Causes of Medical Expenses during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

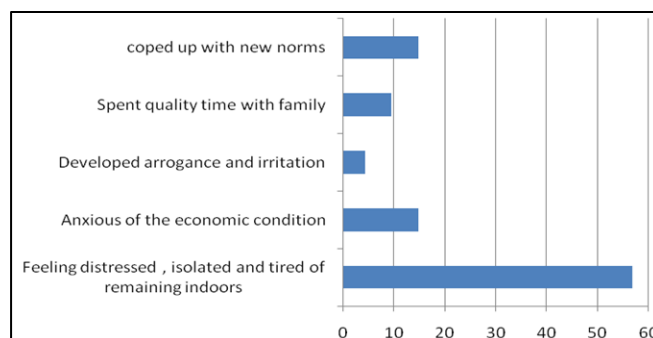


Diagram 8: Problems among the senior citizens in family

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

Again unorganized sector was severely hurt by this sudden break of the pandemic. The domestic workers comprises of nearly 50 million in our country. Women workers account 75% of this sort of workforce. According to 2009-10 data, two third of the domestic workers work in urban areas. They are one of the most vulnerable workers as they do not enjoy any sort basic rights. They are the least educated, unskilled and lack any sort of organization, they lack minimum bargaining power regarding their income, leaves and exploitation. During Covid crisis, helplessness of this community was the largest. Many of them migrate to urban centers for work. During the pandemic, they were forced to return to their villages and suffered from tremendous poverty. Most of the city dwellers were not in a mood to continue with their domestic workers for fear of contamination. Huge proportion of them lost their jobs and couldn't find any employment opportunity in the household sector. In many cases, they were deprived of their wages. 70% of the respondents (refer Diagram 9) did not continue with their domestic helps during the course of pandemic especially during the first wave. The other 10% could not

join their work as they were not able to commute. Again it can be seen from Diagram10, only 52% of these people continued to pay full wages to their domestic workers. But the other 48% either paid partially or not a single penny. 3% of the respondents did not pay their helps. 9% paid only a portion. 3% paid half of the remuneration and 33% did not reply about payment. So, it can be presumed that the population engaged as domestic workers especially in the urban sectors were in a very vulnerable position as most of them were not paid. There is a huge percentage of daily migration in West Bengal and a majority of this section comprises of female domestic workers. These workers suffered a lot because they could not travel to the cities also as local train service was on hold. On one side, income came down for a sect of population especially people engaged in unorganized sector. On the other hand, expenditure at the household level increased. People started to stock food materials. There was a price hike of vegetables, daily usable, food materials and clothes as the supply chain got disturbed. Expenditure on soaps and detergents increased. Newer items like masks, sanitisers, head caps etc were consumed by people to maintain the Covid norms. Story books and toys consumption were increased as the children and the adolescents remained confined within homes. Many of the respondents had to shift to a rented house near job place as daily commute became impossible during the lockdown. Alcohol consumption was also increased to some extent at the domestic level. Diagram 11 depicts the causes behind increase in consumption expenditure at the household level. 83% of the families responded there was a sharp increase in expenditure for medicines. As many of the families were panicked trying to keep a stock of paracetamols, vitamin C tablets and some antibiotics. Again remaining indoors resulted in many mental and physical problems. Diagram12 depicts how access to internet became a very important aspect of daily life. Everyone in the family were accessing internet through mobiles, tablets, laptops and desktops either for studying, office work, and recreation, connecting others through social networks or consuming goods through online shopping. From Diagram 13, we can know that, 55% of the respondents were having online work from home. 36% of the respondents said that online classes go on for the kids, adolescents or the younger ones.

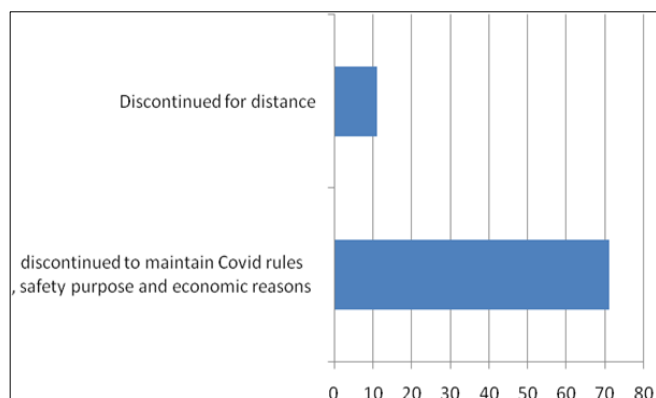


Diagram 9: Discontinuity with domestic help

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

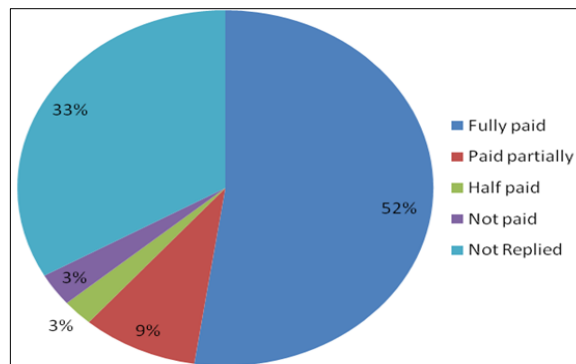


Diagram 10: Payment pattern to the Domestic Workers during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

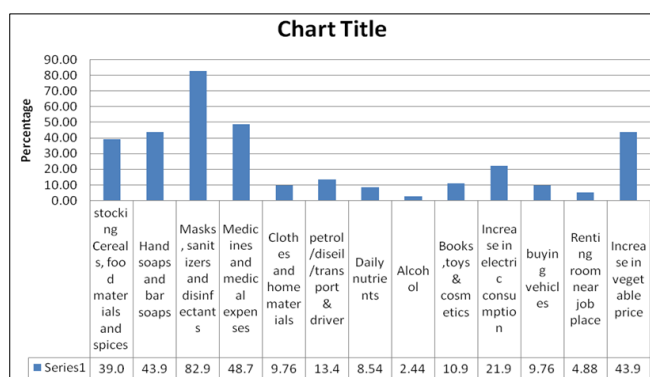


Diagram 11: Causes of increase in domestic expenditure during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

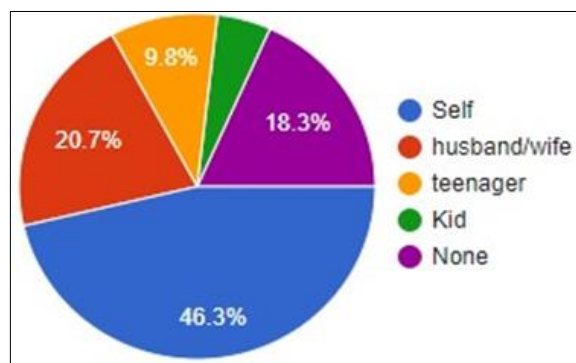


Diagram 12: Necessity of getting engaged with mobile phone

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

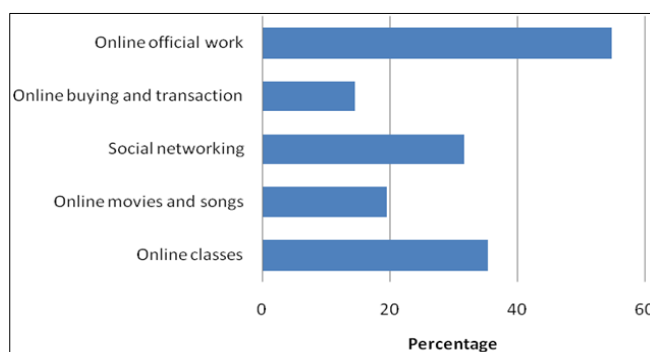


Diagram 13: Online activities during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

Diagram 14 shows the sharing of work at the household level. As most of the families were without domestic help during the lockdown, a common sharing of work load was noticed mostly at the family level. 57% of the respondents answered that the work load was shared by all the family members. In many cases lockdown lessened the gender bias in work division at the family level. Alike many studies, in the recent study also it has been noticed that the severe pandemic has enhanced a sort of social bonding among people (refer Diagram 15). It was seen that this type of natural calamity may increase social capital. As it was human disaster, it has been seen that commoners tried to stand beside their fellow mates in one way or another. 72% of the respondents have disclosed they have financially helped someone in the time of distress. 47% of the respondents donated something to any non Government organization or any social organization.

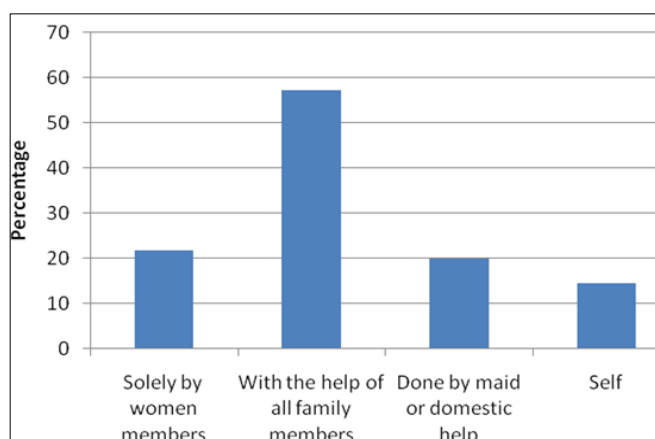


Diagram 14: Sharing of Work Responsibility at the family level
Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

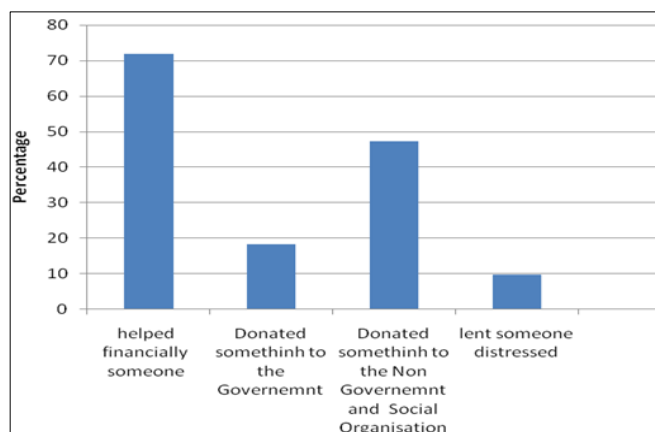


Diagram 15: Philanthropic Attitude of the respondents during lockdown

Source: Primary data collected through online survey from April-September, 2020

Conclusion

As the time span of the survey continued from the first wave and was open till immediate after the first wave, it took the perception of the respondents during the strict lockdown and the gradual unlocking period. Most of the commoners were not accustomed with this virtual form of survey. Many did not know about accessing those applications also. So the survey could not capture perceptions of many. We got limited response. And again, this sort of survey is a snow

ball sampling but it could not capture homogeneous groups. It could capture the groups which were equally well off, had smart phones and were to some extent educated to access these sorts of questionnaire. But it is quite clear from the study that a sort of insecurity prevailed among the mass regarding the economic condition of the nation. Commoners started to hoard cereals, medicines and nonperishable vegetables. At the grass root level this sort of hoarding resulted in scarcity of the things. Breakdown of the supply chains and hoarding of the commoners resulted in price hike of the consumable goods. Demand for four wheelers and two wheelers increased massively. As the local train and bus service got interrupted, many engaged in the social sector, administration and emergency services were forced to buy some vehicles to maintain their jobs. The unorganised sector particularly people engaged in domestic work were tremendously shocked economically and psychologically by the pandemic and the lockdown to control the transmission of the virus. Large proportions of them were forced to leave their jobs or were unable to pursue with the job due to absence of proper communication service. Many of them were not paid fully by their employers. Cases where they were paid by their employers also suffered from unforeseen economic insecurity. The lockdown disturbed the aged population in various terms. But the crisis brought people closer and people tried to stand by others. It can be concluded that a disaster may enhance human bonding in larger scale. Intensive studies are required in this field to know the micro statistics of the impact of the pandemic. Research studies at the domestic level are very limited. Many parameters can be studied and further research works are required at the micro level to assess the socio economic impact of the pandemic at the grass root level.

Acknowledgement: We are greatly thankful to the commoners who participated in the survey without knowing us. Much people were not very much acquainted with the online survey process at the very time of the survey. But then also we acknowledge the support of the people who have relied on the survey process and sincerely spared much time to submit the lengthy Google form. Mostly all of the respondents have sincerely got involved in the survey method during the pandemic. With lots of insecurity, harassment and fear regarding life, many common people living in and around Kolkata got involved with the survey process and we sincerely acknowledge their involvement. We are awfully thankful to our teachers and friends who have given the idea of the online survey method. Especially we need to thank a Faculty Development Programme who has made us aware of the online modes of surveying, teaching and evaluating.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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