



## Research Paper

# From Hand Shake To 'Namaste': Journey From Human Culture To A Humanitarian Culture During Covid-19 In Sikkim

Dr. Chunku Bhutia

Assistant Professor

Department Of Political Science  
Sikkim Government College, Burtuk

### ABSTRACT

The paper would aim to look at the impact of COVID-19 in the cultural aspects of India as a whole and one of the north-eastern state Sikkim. India is known for its huge cultural diversity and is applauded for "Unity in Diversity" but on the others side, it has also been observed that often the diverse culture and identity breeds conflict in the country due to its "othering" attitude. However, it is with the outbreak of COVID-19 that several changes began to be noticed world wide and one of the major change has been witnessed in the cultural aspect with the imposition of lockdown and other COVID-19 related restrictions and also the following of Standard Operating Procedures (SoP). This paper would attempt to highlight few of such changes in the culture in India as a whole and Sikkim in specific. The paper highlights the need for a more Humanitarian approach rather than merely a Human approach to understanding such cultural changes during the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, India, Sikkim, Culture, Lockdown, SoP, Humanitarian and Pandemic.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the deadly Corona virus or COVID-19 since 2020 in India and across the globe has made almost everyone realise the significance of life, time, relationships and much more, which otherwise were taken for granted. It is with the pandemic phase seeping in the country and across that compelled people to think on new modules of working, eating habits, social lifestyle, imparting education, conducting the final rites, celebrating festivals so on and so forth. As often said "change is the only thing constant" yet with the outbreak of the virus, daily life across the world seemed stagnant and everything around life seemed to have changed.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based majorly on qualitative secondary data which has been analysed from a sociological perspective. Reference has been made to Government notifications and other related articles on the theme.

### NAMASTE: A SAFE AND HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE DURING COVID-19

The term Namaste is drawn from Sanskrit implying- "Nama means bow/salutation; as means I; and te means you." So, 'namaste' literally means 'bow me you' or 'I bow to you' / "salutation to you." (Geno 2021). Furthermore, the spiritual meaning of namaste indicated that "When a person greets another with the feeling that I am paying obeisance to the soul in the other, then a ring of spiritual emotion is created within him. Namaste as such is believed to create vibrations to the one receiving the gesture. Namaste creates a loop of bliss to pass positive energy on to the one receiving the gesture. Heart centers and chakras are said to connect during the divine saying."

'Namaste' is the common greeting in yoga. It is a gesture to send a message of peaceful spirituality to the universe in the hopes of receiving a positive message back.<sup>1</sup> The significance of this hand gesture 'namaste' increased with the outbreak of the deadly Corona virus with the World Health Organisation publishing its directives of social distancing, regular hand washing, wearing masks. Such directives led to people resorting to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-29229/what-does-namaste-actually-mean.html> visited on 25th June, 2021.

folding their hands 'namaste' to greet each other rather than shaking hands. This hand gesture 'namaste' got the needed attention when US then President Mr. Donald Trump and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar greeted each other with the 'namaste' when they met at the White House recently. Even a video of Prince Charles went viral on Twitter where he can be seen retracting his hand from a handshake to a folded 'namaste' at the Prince's Trust Awards at the London Palladium.

This gradually gained its momentum across the world: like for instance Emmanuel Macron the President of France also stood with his hands folded with a slight bow while welcoming King Felipe of Spain to the Elysee Palace, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu urged all Israelis to resort to the Indian 'namaste' rather than a handshake to protect themselves from being infected with the virus. Infact, even the Prime Minister of India said "that the world is shifting to the Namaste and if any of us have forgotten to use the Namaste, now is the time to remember it."

Times of India in one of the reports stated that considering the pandemic 'namaste' is "The most hygienic greeting in the world. There is no physical contact between two people and so the chances of passing infections are minimal. The virus is spread through the respiratory droplets which can infect another person if you shake hands. Kissing on the cheeks and hugging are a popular form of greeting in many countries. People have been advised not to use forms of greeting that involve any close contact with people to contain the spread of the disease."

### **OUTBREAK OF CORONA VIRUS AND THE SOP: KNOWING THE KNOWN**

With the outbreak of the virus several Standard Operating Procedures (SoP) were expected to be followed worldwide in order to contain the spread of the virus. One of the SoP was social distancing, which implied reducing social interaction between people based on touch or physical proximity. This included 'remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining distance (approximately 6 feet or 2 meters) from others when possible' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a) This measure was considered very important since it was found that without social distancing, a COVID-19 positive person could possibly infect 406 persons in 30 days as compared to while maintaining social distancing a COVID-19 positive person could infect 2.5 more persons in one month (Hindustan Times, 20 May, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

While implementing this safety procedure almost all countries including India announced for the shutting down of all educational institutions considering a huge number of gathering in such institutions. Besides these even other platforms where gathering of people could be expected like for instance gyms, swimming pools, movie theatres, offices etc. were also shut down. Thereafter, the government also encouraged for the new way of working "work from home" and also discouraged any form of social gathering like marriages or any other form of celebration. Infact, the Delhi government initially restricted the number of people to 50 in any religious, social, cultural and political gatherings, protests until 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2020.

The Indian government strategized its response to the outbreak of COVID-19 by declaring a "Janata Curfew" on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020 and thereafter extended the lockdown for 21 days on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 which later got extended further till 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2020. The nature of the lockdown was such that only limited emergency activities were allowed in the country like for instance specific essential services were permitted which included medical services, fire services, medicine shops, ration shops. No movement was allowed and the country went for complete lockdown to the extent that even religious places were shut down. Funerals could be attended by a maximum of 20 people.

Gradually the norms were altered as per the health situation of the country. With the decrease in the number of COVID-19 positive cases the government allowed for standalone shops to be open if the respective state governments deemed fit, however all SoPs were to be followed like wearing of masks, hand sanitising, social distancing. But it was added that the shops in the COVID-19 hotspots and containment zones are to remain shut.

The individual state COVID-19 norms as such underwent changes as per the situation. However, the common guidelines of WHO is still being followed worldwide and even in the small state of Sikkim.

### **CULTURAL CHANGES IN INDIA: SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO SIKKIM**

India majorly being a patriarchal society has well defined gender roles in both private and public space. Men are considered as the head of the family and women being confined to doing household chores but of course with time some changes in this gender role have been witnessed with women also choosing to have a career. With such a set up in the family, often we find every family having a helping hand to do the household chores. But still it is observed that women overall supervise the maid in the chores.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/406-can-be-infected-in-a-month-if-centre-on-covid-appropriate-behaviour-101621515431132.html> accessed on 23rd July, 2021.

Such gendered set up was compelled to undergo certain changes with the imposition of lockdown across the country and Sikkim too. Sikkim declared complete restriction of entry of tourists in the state and also the shut down of educational institutions, gym, movie halls in the state w.e.f 17<sup>th</sup> March to 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2020. State of Sikkim announced for complete lockdown on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020 with active emergency services only (Government of Sikkim, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Thereafter, Government of India announced complete lockdown on the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 which compelled people to stay within their homes. This meant that families were deprived of their house help and so executing the household chores fell on the family members. With the extension of the lockdown, it was observed that the household chores including child care began to be shared between the family members rather than being confined only to the female counterparts in the family. This was one of the cultural changes witnessed with the spread of COVID-19 (Ruppanner et al., 2018).

It is known that India's rich culture including the funerary rituals has its roots in the Hindu religious scriptures- Rig Veda. In the Rig Veda, a hymn is traditionally recited by a priest or an adult male, who urges Agni, the Vedic god of fire, to "carry this man to the world of those who have done good deeds." Infact, besides Hindu culture even in the Jain and Sikh rituals the funeral rites includes bathing of the deceased body and then wrapped in white cloth at home. Thereafter, the body is carried ceremonially, in a procession, by the local community to the cremation grounds. The eldest son of the deceased is adorned with the responsibility of lighting the funeral pyre and often it is observed that women are not to attend the last rites at the cremation ground.

With the outbreak of the virus, such deeply embedded rituals underwent changes. The COVID-19 related deaths had to be dealt in a different way in order to avoid the spreading of the disease among the family members of the deceased and other people as well. As such the state governments established "makeshift crematoriums" i.e. temporary crematorium to carry out the final rituals of the deceased. The families being the primary contact in most cases are bound to quarantine themselves and in such a case the last respect and prayers to the COVID-19 infected deceased is paid through virtual mode by the family members while the last rites is carried out by designated people like in case of Sikkim some Gangtok Municipal workers were given the responsibility of carrying out the funeral rites of the COVID-19 positive deceased.

One of the major change that triggers a lot of thought process is the fact that as per the Hindu culture, it is the Brahmin priest or people from high caste who are to recite the prayers but with the COVID-19 deaths, the crematorium workers were endowed with the responsibility of reading the prayers. Such changes in the rituals which are so religiously followed by almost every individual is reflective of the fact that the rigid caste system and the roles attached to each caste is not higher than the values and emotions of humanity.

The changes in the rituals were witnessed even in the small Himalayan state Sikkim with the government being compelled to issue several notifications restricting any kind of gathering in any social occasions including funeral rites. Sikkim witnessed its first Covid death on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2020 and as per the Centre norms, the body of the deceased was not allowed to be taken home to the family instead the body was handed over to the Gangtok Municipal Corporation (GMC) for the final rites. It was informed by the Municipal Commissioner that "A GMC team dedicated to collection and disposal of bio-medical wastes from the containment areas was engaged for transportation and funeral of the deceased. They have been doing their duties wearing PPE kits and same was followed for the funeral" (Sikkim Express, 27 July, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. The final rites in Sikkim is being carried out in Jalipool crematorium by a Hindu pandit under the guidance of Gangtok Municipal Corporation.

As per the National Directives for COVID-19 management it was spelled out that in the funeral/ last rites related gatherings shall ensure social distancing, and the maximum numbers allowed shall not be more than 20. Furthermore, even in the marriages the number of guests was limited to 50 only. Such were the changes that were adopted to contain the spread of COVID-19 and these changes affected every individual since two major occasions like marriage and last rites are such occasions out of many where families, friends and well wishers come together to celebrate, rejoice or to share the sorrow. But with COVID-19 families were seen mourning in seclusion since the COVID-19 norms specify that the primary contacts are to be put to isolation and in most cases the family members are identified as the primary contacts of the deceased. Similarly, even in marriages the number of guests has been limited as per the norms of the Government of India and so the marriages are being celebrated as mere a family affair rather than a social affair in the presence of only the core family members. It is as such evident that due to the pandemic, the rituals are being altered for the common good. Such changes

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.covid19sikkim.org/Uploads/Documents/901d532c-e7e2-4c48-bdf2-b6ee5c92a3fa.jpg> accessed on 17th March, 2020.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.sikkimexpress.com/news-details/first-covid-death-in-sikkim-last-rites-performed-as-per-norms> accessed on 25th July, 2020.

seems to raise questions regarding the significance of cultures and rituals which often creates the categorisation and biasness between “us” and “others.”

Even in Sikkim irrespective of the caste, colour, religion all the funeral rites were carried out in Jalipool crematorium. Hence, despite the significance of religious rituals, social affairs the situation in COVID-19 triggers a realisation that, anything that truly matters is the culture and religion of Humanity. In addition to these, it needs to be mentioned here, that in Sikkim it is with the outbreak of Covid-19 that since the 1800's the Buddhist monasteries for the first time in the year 2020, did not organise annual masks dance known as Khagyad Chaam during Losoong (Bhutia New year) (The Indian Express, 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2020)<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the pandemic has brought about several changes in the world in the form of economy, environment and cultural changes. People seem to have changed their approach towards life by engaging into Humanitarian culture to fight the pandemic for the whole of humanity rather than narrowing it to mere Human culture which in the larger context has been observed as leading to the “othering” of the people like for instance caste based biasness.

### III. CONCLUSION

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 the momentum of fast growing world has slowed down. Everything around the world seemed to undergo change, be it the work culture (work from home), religious ceremonies, rituals. However, on the brighter side it also came forth that the world with Covid-19 grappling every life, began to rely more on the moral values of humanity. An active civil society is an example of such humanitarian values wherein the government along with the civil society began to make more concerted efforts towards reaching out to the most affected by providing essential food items and also medicine supplies. The women self-help groups began to make face masks, provided food to the quarantined people and also were involved in creating awareness on the COVID-19.

Infact, in Sikkim the state government provided for free treatment of the COVID-19 patients and also facilitated the door to door delivery of COVID-19 treatment medications for the home isolated Covid-19 asymptomatic patients. Besides, the door to door supply of medicines, the state government also provided for the supply of food items to the COVID-19 positive patients in the state. Such humanitarian approach of the state government enhanced the hopes of people for a better tomorrow.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/dec/14/for-first-time-since-1800s-no-khagyad-chaam-in-sikkim-monasteries-due-to-covid-19-2236102.html> accessed on 5th January, 2020.