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**Prejudice and Projudice: "Witch-Hunting" During the Covid-19
Pandemic**

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Abstract

COVID-19 has thrown the world off course. While governments, healthcare workers, and others bend over backward to stem the tide of COVID-19, hidden wedges of prejudice drive people apart. It distorts social realities and results in acts of violence and exclusion. Yet locals shower flowers on their neighbour healthcare workers, and communities unite to organise food for the stranded migrants in some countries. These acts sustain, include, and nurture people in the midst of the pandemic and connote the opposite of prejudice. A perusal of the dictionary reveals there is no word that is the exclusive opposite of prejudice, hence we propose the word projudice. There are many forms of prejudice and projudice. We have chosen witch-hunting to illustrate prejudice as it has found mention through history and currently in the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as night is understood better in the context of day, prejudice would be better understood in the presence of projudice. Hence, we propose a symmetric and systematic ontology to view the pathways of prejudice and projudice during COVID-19. Evidence-based solutions can emerge from the prevalence of different pathways in this conceptual map. These solutions must positively reinforce the prejudicial acts of sustenance, inclusion, and nurturance and negatively reinforce the prejudicial acts of violence and exclusion.

Key Words: Witch-hunting, Prejudice, Projudice, Covid-19, India

Introduction

Opinion without evidence is a colloquial definition of prejudice. Preconceived notions, distortion of social realities, judging (Saenger, 1953) (Dixon et al., 2012), and personal motive (Borah & Das, 2019) form the bases of prejudice. Life presents dilemmas between - equality and authority, freedom and necessity, individuality and collectivity (Billig et al., 1988). Underpinned by the economic, political, legal, and religious diktats of the time, these dilemmas give birth to prejudice and projudice (Das, 2017) (Tartakovsky, 2001) (Cade, 1952). Further the notion of power or the lack of it (Shmakov & Petrov, 2018) aligns more to prejudice than projudice. Significantly, prejudice heightens activity in the amygdala, of the brain associated with the fear response when we face people or events that we judge as threatening (Fiske, 2008) (Phelps & Anderson, 1997).

Prejudice also serves to target groups and gave rise to witch-hunting since the 15th century. It was used to threaten women who were perceived as upsetting the social balance. It has changed form and target in the global COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include (a) shunning foreign nationals studying in the country, subjected them to violence, and sometimes rendering them homeless on the suspicion of carrying the contagion (Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020) (Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020), (b) violence against health workers and (c) exclusion of physicians and nurses from their homes based on unwarranted fear of COVID-19 infection. Newspapers and other media label as witch-hunting. However, a smaller number of projudice based acts occur governments instituting and enforcing laws against excluding healthcare workers from their homes, and stranded migrants nurtured with free food by the community. Elimination of acts of prejudice and encouraging acts of projudice can effectively address the problem for the health of the people and institutions, of the country.

Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world off course. Deep-seated prejudices are taking new forms of violence and exclusion in the pandemic (Agarwal & Sunitha, 2020) (Anthonj et al., 2020) (Hathi & Srivastav, 2020). Like the Semmelweis reflex of rejecting something unfamiliar or new (Gupta et al., 2020) embedded in humans, prejudice runs deep in society (Ditonto, 2020) (Hjerm et al., 2020) (Zhao et al., 2020).

Significantly, society has evolved on the rules of belonging and the familiar. The unfamiliar is not encouraged in keeping with a sense of loyalty to the familiar (Allport, 1954). Historically, social distance (lexico.com, 2020) based on social boundaries, has stoked prejudice and kept it alive. This social distance amplifies in the presence of infectious diseases and strengthens prejudice against all perceived as not belonging to the local groups (O'Shea et al., 2019). Further, the social distance and hence prejudice intensifies due to imposed physical distance in the COVID-19 pandemic (Vedantam, 2020). While this not unexpected with parallels traced to the persecution of Jews during the Black Plague, or the Pharmakos tradition of the Greeks, it also points to how fear and misinformation amplify prejudice. South Korea, China, USA, India is some of the countries in which media has given prominent coverage to prejudicial acts during COVID-19 (Mantas, 2020).

Further, the economic, political, legal, and religious underpinnings strengthen the prejudice (Bohrer, 2020) and add personal motive (Borah & Das, 2019) (Alam & Raj, 2017) (Mallick, 2008) to it. A double whammy of prejudice and higher risk of the contagion is faced by many groups currently across the world (mckinsey.com, 2020). Typically, these groups are also economically challenged and live in areas that force a greater exposure to COVID-19.

Additionally, amorphous prejudices gain strength and shape in the face of political motivation (Candil, 2020). Significantly, unfamiliar physical characteristics and the fear of COVID-19 combine to create prejudices that endanger sections of the populace (Kipgen, 2020).

Additionally, the prejudices spill over to the workplace. Business as usual is attenuated because of fake news, microaggressions and grievances as a result of prejudices being manifested during COVID-19 (communitybusiness.org, 2020). This has led to violence and exclusion against people perceived through the eyes of prejudice.

Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic is also a time for transformation (Ahmad et al., 2020). For the strength of community acts weakens prejudice during COVID-19 (Lowe et al., 2010). Several smaller crises can emerge during the larger crisis of COVID-19. Acts of sustenance like a doctor volunteering to drive a pregnant woman to a hospital, and essential services being supplied by government staff in containment areas are not uncommon. During a lockdown nurturing stranded people with food and shelter both by the government and community stand out in the pandemic. Communities celebrating the services of people generally seen with a prejudiced eye have been widely covered by media. The voluntary offer by people who have recovered from COVID-19 to participate in research for a cure is another significant example of inclusion. The prejudices of sustenance, inclusion, and nurturance glimmer infrequently while being dominated by prejudice (Pescosolido et al., 2020).

Newspaper and other media across the world have panned the acts of prejudice during COVID-19 as witch-hunting. Historically, this act of prejudice was used in the early modern period of Europe to consolidate political power (Shmakov & Petrov, 2018) (Mitschele, 2014). This prejudice also reflects the political and social anxieties of the time (Gould, 2013) (Niehaus, 2013). In Asia, witch-hunting and other prejudices rose from a combination of superstition (Moran & Rabha, 2020), politics (Agarwal, 2015), and the lack of education and resources for a decent living (Baruah & Thakur, 2019) (Nath, 2014) (Srivastava, 2015) (Raj, 2016).

Prejudice impacts individuals, families, groups, and communities. Institutions for healthcare, education, religion, law & order, politics, and transportation also bear the brunt. To effectively address the problem, the acts of prejudice must be eliminated while encouraging the acts of prejudice.

Objectives

Propose an ontology

- To systematically review the manifestation and prevalence of prejudicial and prejudicial acts in the COVID-19 pandemic
- To reveal the: (a) frequent prejudices and prejudices and their effects, (b) the infrequent ones, and (c) the absent ones, in response to COVID-19

Method

The acts of prejudice happening during COVID-19 can be understood better with a systematic and symmetric ontology (Figure 1) that includes prejudice. The ontology is the theory of the construct. It is an explicit, structured natural language specification of the boundary of the prejudicial and prejudicial acts, its constituent dimensions, elements, and connotations. It deconstructs the complexity of the acts of prejudice and prejudice and encapsulates its combinatorial connotations. The ontology is a parsimonious, systemic, and systematic, and symmetric frame of prejudicial and prejudicial acts during COVID-19.

The Act dimension (column) enumerates prejudicial (violence, exclusion), neutral (sustenance), and prejudicial (inclusion, nurturance) acts. The Type dimension lists the bases of the act – economic, physical, psychological, or social. The Factor dimension lists the possible factors – caste, ethnicity, gender, occupation, race, region, religion, and ideology. The acts of prejudice and prejudice have 160 potential pathways by concatenating the elements in the Factor, Type, and Act dimensions with the interleaved phrases. Examples include (a) ethnicity-based economic act of violence, (b) race-based social act of exclusion, and (c)

religion-based physical act of inclusion. The actor of and the acted on are enumerated in the Actor and Acted dimensions. People include individuals, families, groups, and communities. Institutions include those for healthcare, education, religion, law & order, politics, and transportation. The Impact (leftmost dimension) could be economic, moral, physical, psychological, social, and political. Together with the 160 acts of prejudice and projudice, the ontology encapsulates 96,000 pathways by which these acts can affect the health of the people and the institutions of the country. The constructive pathways must be emphasized, and the destructive ones eliminated.

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Impact	Prejudice & Projudice			Actor	Acted
	Factor	Type	Act		
Economic	Caste	Economic	Violence	People	People
Moral	Ethnicity	Physical	Exclusion	Individual	Individual
Physical	Gender	Psychological	Sustenance	Family	Family
Psychological	Occupation	Social	Inclusion	Group	Group
Social	Race		Nurturance	Community	Community
Political	Region			Institution	Institution
	Religion			Healthcare	Healthcare
	Ideology			Education	Education
				Religious	Religious
				Law & Order	Law & Order
				Political	Political
				Transportation	Transportation

Figure 1: Ontology of Prejudice and Projudice: “Witch-Hunting” During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Source: Authors, 2020)

The health of the people and the institutions of the country can be affected by acts embedded in these pathways. For example:

- Social impact of ethnicity-based economic act of violence by people-community on institution-religious.
- Psychological impact of race-based social act of exclusion by institution-law & order on people-community.
- Economic impact of religion-based physical act of inclusion by institution-healthcare on people-individual.

Discussion

The ontology will reveal the pockets of prejudice, distorted social realities, and misinformation that exist in society and interfere with access to health facilities during COVID-19. The barriers to overcoming this could be economic, social, physical, and psychological. For example, one community may not have physical access to health facilities, crucial especially during COVID-19. Another may be facing social or economic barriers to access available services. Even with access, psychological barriers due to inadequate information, and existing social mores may bar people from the health facilities. Policy can be specified to include these scenarios so that any rising prejudice can be smoothened with information on and access to health facilities for all the people and institutions of the country. Further with evidence policy can be made to dynamically respond to prejudices as in the example of laws being passed by the government criminalising any the act of excluding health care workers from their homes due to an unfounded fear of COVID-19 infection.

We illustrate using the example of India. Increasing prejudicial behaviour is critical to bending the COVID-19 curve because of India’s dense population where it can spread much faster than

in other countries. The population of deduplicated English newspaper reports from major Indian newspapers like The Hindu, The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, and The Statesman could be the database. The covered acts of violence, exclusion, sustenance, exclusion, and nurturance during the COVID-19 pandemic (samples in Table 1) could then be mapped on to the ontology. This would reveal the (a) frequently, (b) infrequently, and (c) never-occurring acts of prejudice and projudice, and their effects in the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings, validated by academicians, practitioners, and policymakers will help direct solutions for the health of the people, and institutions, of the country.

Table 1: Prejudice & Projudice Type and Act Reported in The Hindu

Date	Article Title	Type	Act
13/04/2020	Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India.	Physical, Social	Violence, Exclusion
14/04/2020	Doctors come under attack in India as Coronavirus Stigma Grows.	Physical, Social	Violence
18/04/2020	How the coronavirus outbreak in India was blamed on Muslims. <i>The COVID-19 pandemic has been turned into yet another Islamophobic conspiracy theory.</i>	Social	Exclusion
22/04/2020	In Covid-19 front line, Doctors welcome ordinance to protect them.	Economic, Social	Sustenance, Inclusion
23/04/2020	Lockdown in India has impacted 40 million internal migrants: World Bank	Economic	Exclusion
26/04/2020	Ready to donate plasma for therapy: Tablighi Jamaat	Social	Inclusion
28/04/2020	Coronavirus Recovered Tablighis donate plasma	Social	Sustenance
03/05/2020	UAE sends aid for health workers	Economic	Nurturance

Source: Authors, 2020

Societies across the world are in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indian society is multi-cultural and has varied ethnic practices and mores. Information about COVID-19 and access to health facilities may not be evenly distributed and understood. This strengthens old prejudices and gives rise to new ones. The social aspect of policy can extend into the pockets of prejudice and misinformation and dissolve them with evidences that will come from this study. Continuing with the example of India where COVID-19 spread is amplified by dense population, the ontology will provide a conceptual map of prejudicial and projudicial acts that are occurring in society. Processes and systems related to containing COVID-19 can be redeployed to include this information leading to smoother execution across geographies. Potentially, it may permanently alter existing prejudices and pave the way for more projudicial behaviour in societies across the world.

Conclusion

The formulation of the problem of prejudice and projudice during the COVID-19 pandemic in a chosen country / across countries as an ontology is the innovation in this paper. The ontology will serve as a cognitive map to systematically and symmetrically analyse the problem based on newspaper reports from across the country. Further, findings about the prevalence of different pathways will help drive evidence-based solutions. Also, the blank spots – paths not

previously explored for reducing prejudice, and the blind spots – paths which increase prejudice and not seen earlier would be revealed. These findings could be validated by academicians, practitioners, and policymakers through a Structured Focus Group Discussion. The solutions that emerge will positively reinforce the acts of sustenance, inclusion, and nurturance and negatively reinforce the acts of violence and exclusion. Recommendations can be taken forward for policy making in the country/ countries.

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