

# The Collective-affirmation in Action: Understanding the Success of Lockdown in India after the Outbreak of COVID-19

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## Abstract

This study explored the nature, dynamics and role of collective-affirmation in attracting mass cooperation and support to check further spreading and to motivate people to observe preventive measures to reduce the casualties of COVID-19. A Narrative Thematic Analysis Design was employed in which a heterogeneous sample (N= 32, Age range = 36-61 years) was chosen through a purposive sampling method. The participants were interviewed about their experiences of lockdown. The novelty, suddenness and incurability of COVID-19 caused a set of perceived psychological distress and danger to individual and collective life. The Janata (public) curfew was perceived as a curfew of the people, by the people and for the people. The lockdown denoted a strong faith of the Indian government in the positive virtues of Indian People and *vice versa*. The mass support and adherence to the suggested preventive government measures were facilitated by collective-affirmation in the well-known positive Bhartiya (Indian) cultural and moral values. Collective-affirmation inherent in the Bhartiya collective cultural values catalyzed mass behaviours change in the form of adherence to the essential restrictions and recommendations. Collective-affirmation may have occurred due to the faith of the government in the virtues of the Indians and their perceived administrative capability of the government. A culture-specific collective-affirmation seems to emerge which initiated mass behavioural changes. The findings may have implications for changing people to face difficult situations, to accept social policies aimed at eradicating poverty, illiteracy, corruption and violence, and to adopt a healthy lifestyle to enhance their well-being.

## Keywords

Bhartiya cultural heritage; Collective-affirmation; COVID-19; lockdown; mass behaviour change.

## Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) is one of the world's worst pandemic. This deadly disease came to light when China informed the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019, about the outbreak of pneumonia of an unknown reason first seen in Wuhan City in Hubei Province. In a very short period, the disease spread to the entire world which compelled the World Health Organization to declare it a pandemic. The new virus named SARS-CoV-2 causes a respiratory disease characterized by flu-like symptoms such as

cough, fever and difficulty in breathing. Due to its easy and fast infectious nature, the pandemic has caused a very large number of people to get affected in a very short period. It has affected more than 213 countries and caused more than 18, 48, 439 confirmed cases of infection and 1, 17, 217 cases of deaths as on April 15, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020).

There are many negative consequences of a pandemic. It has been reported that pandemic may lead people to face a variety of psychological stress (Brooks et al., 2020), physical health problems (Zhang et al., 2020) and decreased social support (Reblin & Uchino, 2008). In the case of COVID-19, the negative consequences may be much bigger and serious due to its fast infectious nature, and incurability and unavoidable interdependency of human beings. The World Health Organization (2020) has reported that there is no vaccine or medication for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and the only way to fight against this pandemic is to adopt preventive measures and to observe quarantine. Social distancing, frequent hands washing, avoiding the frequent touch of eyes, nose and mouth, practising respiratory hygiene and staying informed about the latest information on the COVID-19 outbreak are some of the preventive measures suggested by World Health Organization (2020). The prevention and checking the spreading of the disease are only possible through quarantine and social distancing which demand a mass behaviour change.

Owing to the situation created by the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government of India declared to observe a symbolic lockdown for March 22, 2020, in the selected parts of Indian territories. Later, to break the cycle of infection a complete lockdown of the three weeks was declared on March 24, 2020 (The Economic Times, 2020). The Government and its officials adopted various strategies to motivate Indian citizens to make the lockdown a success. The diversity in cultural practices, beliefs and ideologies of the Indian society made the lockdown a big challenge. Barring few exceptions, the lockdown in India has been successful and caused the stretching of COVID-19 phase II and delaying the spread in phase III. We believe that the success of a complete lockdown could become possible due to the collective-affirmation of Indian people in their cultural and religious values through a set of planned and well-thought-out strategies of the Indian Prime Minister. The outbreak of COVID-19 increased the dependency of people on media which repeatedly made them reminding about their strengths and identity with their great cultural heritage. The success of lockdown can be measured in terms of relatively a lesser number recorded either of confirmed or death cases (India: 14, 250 reported cases, 11, 848 active cases and 493 deaths) (The Hindu, 2020b) compared to the other countries. For example, a total of 7, 07, 121 confirmed and 30, 245 death cases have been reported in the American region by the World Health Organization (2020) on April 17, 2020.

As a member of society, all human beings face threats in their day-to-day life ranging from their health, professional, interpersonal, academic and social dimensions to public relations. Self-affirmation is one way to cope up with these threats (Alexander, 2014; Steele, 1988). According to the self-affirmation theory, all human beings carry a universal and basic motivation to maintain their self-integrity and self-worth as well as perceive themselves as good, virtuous, and able to predict and control their significant life outcomes (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). *Self-Affirmation theory assumes that the integrity of the self is maintained in the face of damage to its one aspect by affirming values from other non-threatened aspects of the self* (Steele, 1988). The effectiveness of self-affirmation has extended its popularity in the major fields of psychology such as health, clinical and social psychology (G. L. Cohen et al., 2009; MCQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). It has been argued that self-integrity and self-worth are socially shared conceptions and originate from socio-cultural and historical processes (Alexander, 2014). It has been suggested that self-affirmation helps individuals maintain their self-integrity in the face of perceived threats. The researchers have reported self-affirmation to be positively linked with cognitive flexibility (Geoffrey L. Cohen et al., 2007), positive social comparisons in times of failure (Pettit & Lount, 2010), collective identity (Binning et al., 2010), reduction of prejudice (Sherman & Kim, 2005) and positive health (Sherman et al., 2000) and negatively with stress and psychopathological symptoms of individuals (J. D. Creswell et al., 2005).

The researchers have posited that self-affirmation and collective-affirmation may have some similarities and the later may help to deal with threats arising out of larger groups and maintain collective-integrity (Derks et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2007). Collective-affirmation has been argued to be similar to self-

affirmation that helps people to restore, guard and augment integrity and worth of a particular nation (Turner et al., 1994). Thus, the study of self-affirmation has presented a more robust reason behind the behaviour change of people. The benefits of self-affirmation, that is effective at an individual level, may be applied to understand the behaviour change at a collective level during the lockdown and quarantine after the outbreak of COVID-19 in India. Collective-affirmation has been less studied phenomenon despite the suggestion that affirming values at a collective level may have similar benefits (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016). Borrowing the arguments from self-affirmation, some researchers have argued that when one aspect of collective-self is threatened (life and existence in the present case), the affirming in the other aspects of collective identity or values may reduce the threat, maintain the collective-integrity, bolster psychological resources and reduce defensive responses of people (Derks et al., 2006; Sherman et al., 2007). The protective strengths of using alternative aspects of the collective-self have been studied in small groups such as gender stereotype (Derks et al., 2011), mixed-gender performance situation (Derks et al., 2006) and academic class (Rydell et al., 2009). Thus, the earlier studies have mostly demonstrated the protective and buffering effects of group-affirmation to the small groups like family, class, age and gender (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016). It may be argued that the earlier studies have not addressed the nature and dynamics of collective-affirmation for a larger group like a nation. Conversely, some other researchers have argued that self-affirmation and collective-affirmation may differ significantly (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011; Ehrlich & Gramzow, 2015). Self-affirmation has been suggested to reduce bias in the face of threat whereas collective-affirmation may accentuate biases and may lead to attitudes, stereotypes and norm relevant cognitive, affective and behavioural response repertoires (Ehrlich, 2017). But, these findings have been carried out in small intergroup situations. Here in the case of COVID-19, the threat is non-social and uniformly harmful to the whole group that is a nation. So here, the collective affirmation may produce positive outcomes and induce mass change.

Borrowing from self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), we argue that the adherence to the lockdown and quarantine by Indian people after the outbreak of the current pandemic may be guided by collective-affirmation in positive cultural values to face threat to life and very existence challenged by the outbreak of COVID-19. This will be the first study, as far as our knowledge is concerned, that attempted to understand behaviour change at a collective level (nation) through a collective-affirmation paradigm. This study is novel in the sense that previous studies have always manipulated threat and affirmation (self or group) artificially while the occurrence of threat and manipulation of collective-affirmation in the present study is natural and objective which are occurring at a national collective through government, society, and family. In the present case, the threat is strong, unknown and fatal to the life equally to all people and thus, it has created unparallel threat and uncertainty before the whole collective (nation) and has also challenged the identity, existence and affiliation of all the people simultaneously. Very little research has addressed the role of collective-affirmation in mass behaviour change in the epidemic situation like this which will hardly repeat itself.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused a severe threat to the self-integrity of Indian people by posing a challenge before their existence, security, health and well-being. Thus, it may be argued that other positive cultural values relevant for catalyzing the collective-affirmation may be active. The Government of India in its announcements from time-to-time has adopted measures to induce and activate collective-affirmation of Indian people in the face of threat created by COVID-19. For example, Prime Minister in his speech to the Nation on March 24, 2020, expressed that “Indian people always win when truth wins. . . . . Indian people are brave and they can fight with this menace. . . . . the restrictions of lockdown will also apply similarly to Narendra Modi (indicating himself). . . . . you (Indian people) can face this pandemic as you have enough self-control, ability to sacrifice for the nation and society. . . . . our cultural heritage belongs to sacrifice. . . We have faced innumerable attack by foreign invaders. . . . .” (The Hindu, 2020a).” On April 14, 2020, Prime Minister Mr. Modi has announced the second lockdown of 19 days for Indian to prevent spreading of COVID-19 and has expected to observe Saptapadi (seven mantras). The Sapatapadi provides for care for the older people and poor, observing Indian health practices (yoga, Ayurvedic medicines etc.), connecting and remain aware about people through Aarogya Setu (a mobile application), showing leniency to subordinates and respect to service providers (Jagran Josh, 2020). These steps and comments made by the

supreme leader of the nation on whose leadership the people of the nation, by and large, have unquestionable faith may be argued to have enhanced collective-affirmation (a set of protective and strengthening values for the nation) of Indian people. It may have resulted in the unanimous support to the lockdown. Besides, the joint family system has also been reported to promote a collectivistic mindset that may have eased the observance of adopting restrictions and observing of preventive measures. Indian society promotes collective values and nurtures an interdependent self-construal which is motivated to resolve the threat through a collective process of self-identity (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Triandis, 1989). Besides, social distancing has been a well-established norm in the Bhartiya way of lifestyle. For example, a person affected with measles is quarantined by the society for its entire duration. Likewise, the greeting is expressed by saying *Namaste* instead of handshaking or touching.

The present study employed a Narrative Thematic Research Design to explore the dynamics of collective-affirmation of Indian people during the lockdown and quarantine after the outbreak of COVID-19. Previous studies have suggested that qualitative methods are best suited when a concrete theory or guiding framework is lacking (J. W. Creswell, 2004, 2014). It was also difficult to collect face-to-face data amid the restrictions of lockdown for the quantitative study. In this backdrop, the study explored the dynamics of activation of collective-affirmation and its role in attracting mass support for the nationwide lockdown, and the adherence to the preventive measures and quarantine after the outbreak of COVID-19 in India.

## Methods

### Research Design

A qualitative research design was used that involved a telephonic semi-structured interview protocol to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of COVID-19 and the role of government and collective values of the Indian society to catalyze collective-affirmation that facilitated the success of lockdown and quarantine after the outbreak of COVID-19. The constructivist approach of inquiry was used that refers to a dialogical exchange with the participants to arrive at the meanings held by them through an inductive and deductive process for interpreting and making inferences (Levitt et al., 2017, 2018). The qualitative design provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding and exploration of new constructs like collective-affirmation.

### Research Team

The research team was diverse in their educational backgrounds and demographic features such as disciplines, experiences, age and roles which enriched the quality of the study. One was Vice-Chancellor with an in-depth knowledge of Indian society, culture and educational system with an engineering background and the other senior had a strong inclination in qualitative research in psychology. Two were young researchers with a good background in psychology, management and qualitative research. The last was a female doctoral student working on self-affirmation. All contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, analysis and writing the final manuscript. Except fourth, all authors were well-familiar with the qualitative research in psychology and the construct itself. The prior background of all the authors, however, in understanding the dynamics of Indian society, the construct and methodology made this work illuminating and trans-disciplinary. We discussed the basic construct, methods and the whole process of carrying out the study.

### Participants

A heterogeneous sample of 32 participants with age spanning between 36 to 61 years was chosen. The participants belong to Bhopal, Delhi, Prayagraj, Sagar and Varanasi cities of India. In the beginning, 54 individuals were consulted on their mobile phones. Out of these, only 32 (age range = 36-61 years, Mean = 46.88, SD = 8.61) came under inclusion criteria and given their consent. The sample comprised of 22

males (age range = 36-61 years, Mean = 46.82, SD = 8.36) and 10 females (age range = 36-60 years, Mean = 47.00, SD = 9.59). The detailed demographic information has been displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants (N = 32)

Demographic Features		Frequency	Percentage
Age (Years)			
	31-40	11	34.38
	41-50	10	31.25
	51-60	10	31.25
	60-70	1	3.13
Gender			
	Males	22	68.75
	Females	10	31.25
Political Preference			
	Bhratiya Janta Party	16	50
	Congress	5	15.63
	Samajwadi Party	9	28.13
	Indifferent	2	6.25
Religion			
	Hindu	23	71.88
	Jain	5	15.63
	Muslim	4	12.50
Domicile			
	Rural	3	9.38
	Urban	29	90.63
Educational Levels			
	Postgraduate	10	31.25
	Doctoral	22	68.75
Profession			
	Faculty	18	56.25
	Government Servant	9	28.13
	Self-employed	5	15.63

Figure 1: Biographic information of the participants

## Participant Recruitment

The participants were known to the researchers prior to the study was conducted. This relationship facilitated their full cooperation and in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of interest. The participants were called on their mobile phones and an in-depth discussion was done. No compensation was provided to them for their participation. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee [BLINDED FOR REVIEW]. Telephonic consent was taken. A purposive sampling method was used as it is appropriate when the goal is to gather experiences more relevant to the phenomenon of interest (J. W. Creswell, 2014). It also helps to choose the information-rich cases who can draw upon their knowledge and experiences to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The sample size was determined following the recommendations of Guest et al. (2006) who suggested a sample size 12 to be sufficient for studies which use purposive sampling. The participants belonged to the middle-class families with dissimilar religious orientations. Two inclusion criteria were adopted: participants with higher education (postgraduation or above) and the presence of national or humane concerns as the most preferred value (expressed before the study started). The participants were debriefed slightly in a different manner about the goals of the study. Saturation was reached with the completion of 27 interviews when no new themes and codes generated from further interviews consistent with the research questions (Saunders et al., 2018). A preliminary discussion among the authors was held to develop a preliminary interview protocol.

## Data Collection

Telephonic semi-structured interviews were held to collect data. The protocol was developed as per the goals that remained constant throughout the study. The interview started with some preliminary queries about the causes and impacts of COVID-19 on human life. The interviews were collected over the telephone in a single attempt when they were staying at their home due to lockdown. The average length of the interview was 49.88 minutes (range 45-55 minutes). Five major open-ended questions were asked to the participants that comprised of the causes and perceived impacts of the pandemic on individuals' life; the impacts of the pandemic on the life of Indians as a whole; the causes and significant impacts of Janta Curfew on Indians, and the reasons behind the success of nationwide lockdown and quarantine in India. The last question was about the socio-cultural facilitators of the success of mass restrictions. The contents of the interviews were transcribed simultaneously during the call by the authors.

## Data-Analytic Strategies

The Narrative Thematic Method was used to analyze data that consists of organization and preparation of the data, obtaining a general sense of the information, coding, generating categories or themes and interpreting the data (J. W. Creswell, 2014). Each participant was allotted codes to ascertain confidentiality while checking and rechecking of the codes assured the reliability. The transcriptions were read many times to increase familiarity with the inherent meaning, insights and descriptions (Barbour, 2001). A priori criteria were adopted for generating codes: perception of the epidemic, its impacts on national interest and human existence, the importance of Janata curfew and the role of the Indian government and Indian socio-cultural values. The transcriptions of each participant were coded for multiple times, reviewed and discussed in conferences of the authors to enhance reliability (Barbour, 2001). Initially, the first four transcripts were assessed independently by the authors to check the appropriateness of the coding criteria to finalize the coding framework considering the goals of the study. These efforts resulted in the inclusions and exclusions of the codes in a specific criterion of codes that culminated in reorganization, merger and re-categorization of codes for further refinement and choosing the relevant codes (Guest et al., 2012; Weller & Romney, 1988). The records of the codes (their origin, coder etc.) were maintained through a handwritten codebook and the coding framework was assessed and reviewed regularly to insert needed modifications. This revision of the coding framework helped to generate and drop irrelevant codes.

To enhance the quality of coding, an iterative approach was adopted that helped in the inclusion

and review of relevant codes. This process was carried on until the complete analysis was done. Finally, all transcripts were scrutinized, checked and reviewed after a gap with a fresh look to decrease the distortions as a result of over-involvement in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Guest et al., 2012). The inductive method and constructionist approach helped to generate more structured codes from less structured narratives as per the research questions. These efforts resulted in generating the final themes. Methodological integrity was maintained through the assessment of the adequacy of the data relevant to the research goals and approach of inquiry, regular discussion among the researchers, focusing on the evidence, insight and meaning, coherency, consistent analysis process and maintain a codebook to achieve a high ethical standard.

## Results

The Narrative Thematic Analysis generated five major themes regarding the perceived impacts of COVID19 on the individual and mass life in India, the perception of Janata Curfew, the role of governmental efforts and the nature of some socio-cultural factors involved in inducing collective-affirmation that may be agued to working behind the success of lockdown, prevention measures and adherence towards quarantine in the face of the outbreak of the pandemic.

### **Theme 1: The outbreak of COVID-19 was perceived as a novel, sudden and incurable disease which caused unbearable psychological distress and discomfort.**

The participants perceived the outbreak of the pandemic as a novel, sudden and incurable which posed a danger and unforeseen challenges to the life of people. A male participant shared his experiences of the outbreak:

I had never heard or read about coronavirus. I knew it as a disease only (did not know its name) that has been affecting life in some parts of China. The word coronavirus captured my attention when I read about many people getting infected and dying of this pandemic in Spain and Italy . . . . Only in few days. . . . I became very afraid when I got to know that its rate of infection is beyond imagination. . . the mode of infection is not known. . . it's very fatal and there is no vaccine or medicine to protect people from this disease. . . I didn't believe initially in its incurability before I read news which was based on a WHO report. . . . Suddenly, I read that it has entered in America and many other countries. . . they are developed. . . I didn't believe it. . . infected many people in a very short interval of time. . . oh. . . Its symptoms are very serious. . . it badly affects lungs. . . fever, dry cough. . . some more are symptoms of this disease as I know. It never happened in human society before. . . I have heard of disease which affected only some small parts of the world at one time. . . but this one is. . . oh.

Majority of the participants reported that they underwent in extreme anxiety and experienced extreme panic. They reported experiences of fear, apprehension, distress, helplessness, phobia and panic. A female participant expressed her experiences of pain and uncertainty in a very unusual manner:

. . . It was unbelievable for me that there is no treatment of COVID-19. I have never been familiar with this disease. It got very fearful as I knew that it may kill many people. . . . I started thinking of my children who are in Delhi for their studies. I asked them to come back immediately. Next day, the complete lockdown for three weeks was announced. . . I heard of people getting infected. . . dying of this pandemic in just a few days. . . . My mind stopped working. . . I felt helplessness never before in my life. . . I didn't believe it. . . I used to think again and again about the ill-consequences people may face in future. . . . I didn't know what will happen. . . . it may ruin the whole human society. . . how life will come in an order. . . uncertainty. . . I am very afraid and getting more day by day. . . I feel pain never before. . . It's an unusual feeling. . . . I feel very uncomfortable when I think of it and its consequences. . . what will happen if there is no cure of corona. . . many will die before an effective treatment comes. . . . I feel the unforeseen risk to

the life of people, my family members... Its mode of infection is not well-known... Some say it infects through touch... It may live for a week or more... some reports say it may infect people through air... ..I become restless... what will happen... thousands of people have died and many more may die... even from developed countries like America, Spain, Italy... It will cause severe loss... all will be affected...

The participants perceived the outbreak as a severe threat to well-being. Its impacts were reported to be multifarious and that will affect the whole human society. One male shared his experiences:

The disease is very dangerous... I could not understand the way it infects a person... I was very anxious to hear that a lot of people are getting infected; dying of this disease, even the whole family. .. I become helpless when I think that there is no cure for this disease... I have never heard of such disease that has caused pain and fear on a mass scale like this one. .. I didn't enjoy the food. The newspapers are full of the news of coronavirus... I have not taken a single sound sleep after I have heard about its outbreak...

## **Theme 2: The outbreak of COVID-19 was taken as a threat posing a serious challenge to the national interest and human existence.**

The participants verbalized that this disease is very fatal and it may cause multiple losses to our country and its people. Most of the participants expressed their view that the outbreak of the disease may cause harm to our country that may be beyond imagination. Its effect may be diverse and it may affect economy and education, health, relationships and many more. The participants reported the pandemic to be very dangerous, harmful to the mass, lower opportunities and stumbling to all walks of life. One female reflected her experiences of perceived loss to human society and nation in a very scared way:

Its consequences may be very frightening and beyond imagination, painful... The way it gets infected and affecting people... I have read that there is no medicines and ventilators needed to support people infected with coronavirus... poor people may not get proper treatment... it may lead to the death of many... it may be uncountable... What will happen if the chief earner of a family will die of it... The members will suffer... How the government will support people in such a large number... in a mass scale... It will be impossible for it... It will seriously cause harm to education... employment... trade... and even I should say all human activities... It will result in massive unemployment... it will seriously lower opportunities in all walks of life... It may cause a shortage of food and medical facilities... How children will attend schools and complete their studies... How people will work alone... Production of all goods and services will go down... alarmingly... very seriously...

Other participants perceived the similar deleterious effects of COVID-19 on the people and the nation as a whole. They argued that the pandemic may ruin the country and the whole world if not checked immediately. A male participant expressed himself:

The pandemic will affect all human interactions and relationships without which nothing may happen... It will create impossible goals before human society... Loss of communication may destroy the business, ruin trade and... and... everything. It will need a new start everywhere... It may delay the progress of the nation in all matters... It will delay government schemes, policies and plans... it will result in severe loss of every kind... It will leave a permanent mark of pain on the whole nation or I should say the whole human society...

### **Theme 3: The Janata curfew declared by the government symbolized a positive faith in the abilities of self-control, patriotism and affection of Indian citizens towards their country.**

The participants reported that the lockdown of March 22, 2020, was not imposed by the Government but it was left to the Indian citizens who had to show their respect and responsibility towards the service providers, officials and administrators who were devoting their services to save the life of people and nation in this odd situation.

The message behind the first symbolic lockdown was communicated as a curfew of the people, by the people and for the people. This positive faith of the government in the abilities of the Indians was perceived by the majority of the participants. They reflected positive emotions and said that it was a message that Indian people are matured, self-controlled and love their country and countrymen. The Janata curfew symbolized the moral ability of the Indian people to be grateful and to show their respect to those who are serving pandemic affected people. One male participant verbalized his experiences and understanding of the Janata curfew:

The Janta curfew was declared by the government on the premise that Indians are self-controlled, responsible and grateful and possess great affection to their country and countrymen. . . Indians did show it. . . . . People decided that they will also abide by the restrictions imposed on us to fight with this pandemic in future also. . . . . it was a sign of the love of the Indian people towards their nation, its security, existence and respect. . . . .”

Some other participants expressed their perception of the Janata Curfew in a different way but with similar meanings. These participants perceived the Janata curfew as a symbol of national unity, a positive faith towards the nation and its people, care for others in an odd situation and patriotism and deep love. A male expressed his experiences carrying these meanings:

The Janata curfew was a very good decision as there is no medicine or vaccine of coronavirus. . . It was a symbol of preparation of the part of people and the government both. . . It has to be held to show our unity and prepare us to face the odds created by a disease with no history and no probability to occur in future. . . It evinced our ability as a nation that how we will do it in this unforeseen situation. . . The Janata curfew may not be said to be imposed by the government. . . It was in the hands of people. . . and their single-mindedness. . . The Indian people observed it and communicated a message that we are ready to fight, face and win this menace. . . we observed it honestly. . . we showed our solidarity and sacrifice. . . It showed that we are matured enough. . . we have self-control. . . we love country. . . we support our government. . . we care for service providers. . . we respect these people. . . . . it showed people’s love towards country. . . it showed our strength to do anything. . . we can forward our hands for the existence of our country.

### **Theme 4: The lockdown reflected a strong faith of the government in the unshakable supportive, cooperative, committed and other personal virtues of the countrymen in the face of adversity.**

The participants reported that the previous symbolic people’s lockdown (Janata curfew) showed that Indian people are ready to cooperate with the government if any further precautionary measures need to be taken to prevent people from the pandemic. The lockdown of three weeks was based on the assumption of the government that Indians are dutiful, supportive and cooperative and thus, declaring lockdown will be successful and the Government will not face mass resistance. Therefore, the government expressed their positive beliefs in the personal and moral virtues of the Indians which were proved to be an important factor behind the success of the nationwide lockdown, adherence to the preventive measures and quarantine. A male participant reflected his understanding:

The three-week lockdown showed our (Indian people) self-control and sacrifice... It was a positive remark on our attributes, self-control and moral strength... It gave me immense pleasure and pride... We are doing that... no one opposed the lockdown... It was based on scientific and medical advice... so we all have to follow it... we have to support the lockdown...

The majority of the participants reflected that the government was well-familiar that the Indian people carry positive beliefs, dutifulness, cooperative and supportive attitudes and capability of sacrifice, and have unflinching faith in the decisive and committed leadership of the Prime Minister for the interest of the nation. A female participant expressed her experiences in similar words:

The Indians can work well in odd situations like this one ... They can cooperate with the nation and its demands in emergency... Indians are capable of sacrificing their luxury and interest for the national cause... They can sacrifice their interest... This is true to all countrymen... irrespective of caste, creed... The Indians are able to bear the pains caused by lockdown and have enough patience... They also possess sufficient self-control to bear the difficulties during our fight with the present threat... The Indians are supportive in spirit and letter... may observe precautions honestly as there is no other way to save life... They will not show serious opposition of lockdown... They will take it as an essential... only less-known people will oppose who are negligible... opportunists are lesser in number and say... political parties will also support... people are ready to sacrifice... People will donate... serve nation and humanity... The Indians are capable of bearing pains... Lockdown was based on the advice of scientists, researchers and doctors... The lockdown was well-planned.

### **Theme 5: Indians possess a strong affinity with and pride in belonging to a nation with an unparallel ancient cultural heritage.**

The participants believed that India is a country which has a long past with an adorable ancient cultural heritage. It has assimilated a multitude of cultural diversity. Most of the participants also believed that India is the country of most ancient knowledge of science even more advanced than today. The participants expressed their pride in being the citizen of a nation which has been a land of well-developed philosophy unknown to the world even today. The Indians have all those virtues that can help sustain them in all ages forever. A male participant similarly expressed his understanding:

Indians believe in "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam*" (the whole world is our family)... and "*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah*" (we wish that every person in the world should be happy) and we helped America and other countries by supplying medicines... we represent most ancient cultural heritage... our heritage has been a blend of science and spirituality... This treasure of knowledge has always helped to keep our existence alive and unruffled... Our faith has been more inclined to the betterment of the whole of humanity, plants and even non-living entities of the entire *Cosmos*... This makes us invincible in the period when most of the human societies get perturbed... Our cultural richness and value system is our strength...

The participants believed that the Indian cultural system has a strong affinity with a set of collectivistic values that regulate the very conceptualization of an Indian nation. A female similarly expressed her pride:

Indians have pride in having the oldest cultural heritage of the world... Indian are excellent in virtues... Indians are good by nature... They have higher moral values... Indians are helping by nature... They are also empathetic to the problems of others... They possess good self-control... They have love towards others and humanity... They are also compassionate... we believe in "*vasudhaiva kutumbkam*" (the whole world is our family)... It will be sad if some dies of the disease... We pray that everyone remains healthy... Our behaviours are regulated through "*Sanskars*" (a set of purification process)... The history of Indians is a glorious one... We have a well-developed philosophy of life... We have been an advanced society of the world... We think for all... We believe in the service of others.

## Discussion

It may be argued that the threats created after the outbreak of coronavirus may have significantly challenged the collective integrity and worth of the Indian people. The unavailability of medicine or vaccine to deal with its effects made the situation worst. Thus, the failure of the current values motivated Indians to look for other values having usefulness to protect their integrity and life at the individual and collective levels. At this point, the governmental efforts and repeated reminding of positive Indian cultural values facilitated the emergence of collective-affirmation that, in turn, initiated a set of positive behaviours leading to full support to the lockdown, practising preventive measures and quarantine by the Indian people. It has been suggested that the occurrence of affirmation is also regulated by spending sufficient time with family members, close relatives and friends (Ehret & Sherman, 2014). The participants were living full-time with their families due to lockdown which may have helped them to affirm in their collective values and facilitated the occurrence of collective-affirmation and consequent adherence as desired.

The findings showed that strong psychological distress was perceived by the participants after the outbreak of the pandemic that led them to face fear, apprehension, panic experiences and helplessness. These negative consequences were not reportedly limited to the individual level only but the menace of the epidemic also created a strong apprehension among the participants that it may equally prove to be harmful to their nation and its people in many ways. These findings have been mirrored in many studies which assessed the psychological outcomes resulting from an epidemic. For example, anxiety (Sprang & Silman, 2013), emotional problems (Yoon et al., 2016) and panic experiences (Tiwari et al., 2020) have been reported to be caused by an epidemic in earlier studies as a result of an epidemic. These negative psychological outcomes are proportionate to the suddenness, novelty and fatality of the epidemic (Strong, 1990).

The first lockdown was perceived as a faith of the Indian government in the moral and personal strengths of countrymen and *vice versa*. It showed the capability of Indians to take self-decision and to be in self-control. This outbreak was perceived as a National threat which might harm to most of the Indian citizens. Thus, it was perceived as a mass threat and motivated the Government to take the necessary steps. The participants perceived that Janata curfew was indicative of the strong faith of the government in the self-control, patriotism and affection of Indian people. Besides, the three-week lockdown was nurtured and strengthened by this positive faith of the Indian government in the positive and moral virtues of the Indians. It was also perceived as their moral duty not confined only to their country but to the whole of humanity. With Janata curfew, the government gave messages of individual freedom (voluntary distancing), national purpose and direction to people for further fighting. In doing so, the government may have intentionally avoided the use of forewarning of the imposition of curfew and other restrictions to prevent disease as these may have resulted in resistance and lowered self-esteem of the Indians and may have resulted in opposition as has been suggested by Wood and Quinn (2003). Conversely, outcome-based participation may lead to more public support, favourable decision-making and persuasion for a larger cause (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Lee et al., 2017).

The strategies of the Indian Government appear to successfully induce collective-affirmation in the Indian people that in turn, made them observe a peaceful and cooperative social distancing and quarantine. The perceived positive faith of the Government in the morality and strength of the Indian people may have culminated in the collective-affirmation which made the nationwide lockdown a success almost with no resistance. The collective-affirmation may have occurred due to the activation of dutifulness, loyalty, identification with the collectivistic values, perceived decision-making ability and goodness of the Indian people. The existence of collective-affirmation can also be seen in the adherence to the quarantine observed by most of the Indian people. The induced collective-affirmation resulted in a relatively lesser spreading of the disease as compared to even developed countries of the world. Moreover, the participants also perceived that success was also caused by scientific and medical advice with systematic planning and administration.

The positive faith in people facilitated the conversion of individual identity into a national identity. Moreover, for attracting the support of people, the government used candle lightening, praying and ringing

bells amid lockdown and quarantine. In his address to the nation on March 24, 2020, the Prime Minister of India started his speech with “My Dear Countrymen”. The use of this and other similar words denoting faith in the abilities of Indian people that may have created a national affiliation that replaced personal values with collective values and may have eased the activation of collective-affirmation. Countrymen responded to their strong and committed leadership with huge applause and followed him in verbatim. These group rituals may have created and preserved collective identity and thus, may have facilitated collective-affirmation in mass as has been suggested by Hermanowicz and Morgan (1999). Besides, it has been argued that enhancing self-esteem may facilitate easy affirmation in most preferred values (van Dijk et al., 2011).

The formation of collective-affirmation may have facilitated by the perception of India as a treasurer of unparallel Indian cultural heritage. These were expressed in the verbalizations of the participants as humanism, collective values, interdependent self-construal, coexistence and spirituality. Identity with these cultural facts may have made them inclined to affirm easily with the collective values of India. The nature of self-construal has been suggested as an important ingredient in affirming people in their most preferred values. Some previous studies have shown that the individuals brought up in individualistic and collectivistic societies exhibit dissimilarities in individual affirmation of values and their benefits due to the structural differences in their self-construal. People born in individualistic societies develop independent self-construal which is more guided by their personal achievements, competence, efficacy and personal worries (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Conversely, collectivists carry interdependent self-construal whose behaviours are regulated more by the social expectations and norms and thus, for them losing approval, acceptance and commitment may be more threatening (Morling et al., 2002; Triandis, 1989). A cross-cultural study showed that self-affirmation had its effects on the behavioural intention of the American participants but not Koreans (Choi & So, 2019). Thus, it may be argued that individualists may be directed to protect their self-integrity whereas collectivists may be driven to protect their self-identity having its genesis in collectivistic values (Heine & Lehman, 1997). In a recent survey on 1009 participants in Delhi, the collectivistic concern was expressed for the current plight of Indian poor people due to the restrictions of lockdown (Times of India, 2020).

The collective mindset has been argued to facilitate entitativity which has been suggested to influence significantly the cognitive representation and potency of an agency that may guide further behaviours of members of a group (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Entitativity of a group refers to the perceived bonding of members of a group (Campbell, 2007). The individualism-collectivism and contextual factors have also been argued to perpetuate entitativity. This may be another reason for the activation of collective-affirmation in Indian society (Triandis, 1995; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in improved similarity, collective interaction, common outcomes and importance of the nation which have also been suggested to enhance entitativity (Lickel et al., 2000). The nature of threat and self-construal (interdependent) of Indian people may have culminated in their enhanced collective-affirmation leading to adorable adherence to lockdown, practising preventive measures and quarantine.

The findings of the study may also be explained in part with the help of some previous findings. The researchers have suggested that if one component of collective-affirmation (threat to life in the present case) is threatened the other positive components (honest observance to essential preventive measures such as practising quarantine and social distancing) may get activated to protect self-integrity (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016). Besides, these findings also lend some support from earlier studies which argued collective mindset to be characterized by a decreased psychological flexibility leading to think, feel, and behave more in a conforming manner and an increased adherent to useful social norms (Alexander, 2014; Ehrlich, 2017; Higgins, 1997). Likewise, Regulatory Focus Theory views human beings to be directed to attain pleasure and avoid pain (Higgins, 1997). According to Higgins (1997), regulatory systems theory has two components: striving for positive outcomes and avoidance of negative outcomes. Generally, individuals are inclined to focus the presence of desirable goals that are characterized by a presence of promotion focus and reflect a dissimilar set of goals, behavioural means and emotional experiences as compared to the avoidance focus (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). It may be argued that the collective-affirmation in the present case may have been guided by a promotion-focus that predisposed individuals towards concrete actions, positive cognitions

and goals. This novelty of the focus in the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions increased their adherence to socially desirable norms and expectations of lockdown in the present case (Alexander, 2014; Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 1994). The study presents an intricate nature and dynamics of collective-affirmation erupted after the outbreak of COVID-19 and, to some extent, eased the essential observance of restrictions and practice.

## Conclusions

The novel and fatal threat, personal attributes, collective cultural values, skill-fully planned governmental policies and unflinching faith of the Government in the people and *vice versa* may be argued to have facilitated the timely activation of the collective-affirmation which eased the observance of restrictions and practising of preventive measures with the least opposition. The findings proved the contention that the threats to life and identity created by the outbreak of COVID-19 badly affected the integrity and worth of the collective-self of Indian people. The failure of the modern scientific system may have left no way but to affirm in ancient cultural values that carry humanism and collective existence. The resultant collective-affirmation may have nullified small differences in ideologies and affinities of Indian people. Besides, collective-affirmation may have been working due to the explicit recognition and praise of India by America, other countries and the World Health Organization for attracting full support of Indian people to make the lockdown, the use of preventive measures and quarantine a success.

## Implications and Future Directions

Due to the strong and uniform pervasiveness of COVID-19, the whole world has become a laboratory that has caused systematic variance to occur with the highest precision and full control of extraneous variance. The novel and ubiquitous nature of the present situation may facilitate the argument that even the qualitative study may yield an objective, reliable and valid results. The findings of the study may not be replicated after this situation is over as it may not be supposed to occur again at least in one's life course. The study of collective-affirmation is in its infancy. There is much scope to contribute in this area. Future research may unearth the culture-specific nature and mechanisms of collective-affirmation and its role in initiating positive behavioural change in larger groups. Collective-affirmation may also have implications for changing people to adopt new social policies and face difficult situations. It may help move people to accept social policies aimed at eradicating poverty, illiteracy, corruption and violence. It may help motivate people to adopt a healthy lifestyle to enhance their quality of life and well-being. More community and political participation may be attracted with the help of these findings. Understanding the dynamics of collective-affirmation may ease the development of positive national character and intergroup harmony on one hand and it may help reduce local, regional, national and international conflicts on the other.

The present study is based on the assumption that the Indian cultural values and governmental efforts may have induced collective-affirmation in Indian people to protect their collective integrity and worth. The study has chosen information-rich participants who were well-qualified and were capable of discussing their experiences of the perceived causes and impacts of COVID-19, and assess the role of governmental efforts and cultural factors that regulated the desired change at the mass level in India. The generalization of the findings will require precaution as collective-affirmation in other cultures may be guided by dissimilar values.

The second issue is the longevity of the effects of collective-affirmation on which the systematic studies are limited. Literature reports two causes affecting its duration. One has been explained through the Self-Verification Theory that suggests that people carry a strong desire to be known and understood by others in consonance with their self-views such as self-concept (Swann, 2012). As people differ greatly in their individual self-concepts even a single culture, the durability of collective-affirmation may face reduced collective taste in the long run. If collective-self could be regulated through positive media, positive collective

messages and governmental commitments, then the durability can be enlarged. The deprivation has been linked with delay discounting that facilitates preference for smaller value immediately in place of delayed larger value (Moeini-Jazani et al., 2019). The longer duration of lockdown and restrictions may increase delay discounting due to decreased supply of essentials required for subsistence. Thus, ensuring proper supply of the essentials may strengthen affirmation in collective values with the consequent success of the protective and preventive measures.

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