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**The Covid effect**

The Covid-19 pandemic which has ravaged the world, has unsurprisingly had an impact on the kinds of lives people live in our country. According to limited research by private researchers using their own resources, from January 2020 to January 2021 as many as 29 people committed suicide in the country.

This figure is based on reports in the media, and of course, the media does not report all suicides since this is a criminal offence under Pakistani law, with many families choosing to cover it up given the social stigma attached to it. Of these suicides, 16 suicides and attempted suicides were linked directly to Covid-19, with 12 people taking their own lives, while four others were saved. The reasons are basically, as most of us would be able to predict, linked to the economic impact of the virus and the devastation caused after the lockdown in terms of the loss of jobs and the resultant poverty that hit households across the country.

While the government did make some attempts to prevent people from facing a situation where they had insufficient food to feed their families, the country has far too many people in need of assistance. Increased depression because of the lockdown is also thought to be a factor according to psychiatrists and other medical experts.

The question we need to ask ourselves is how the government has handled the pandemic and what it has done to spare people the kind of suffering they seem to be going through. There needs to be a further investigation into the suicide rate in Pakistan. Generally, we do not talk about the problem at all. But especially in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, it does need to be discussed.

The deaths tell a tragic story of the situation of people. Many, such as mechanics, tailors, hairdressers, and others have found themselves without any work and without any clients. From homes, people have dismissed domestic help. In most cases, since there is no law and no representation for these workers, there has been no payout or no grant of a stipend for the period during which they are away from work. And of course, in the current situation, it is almost impossible for people who work inside homes to find new jobs.

There is also further impact of the virus. This comes in the form of depression and a lack of knowing what to do about it. The recent news given to the Public Accounts Committee by the National Institute of Health in Islamabad that the government had no plans to buy vaccines (though now it has said it may procure CanSino), does not add any element of cheer to the whole bleak scenario. While a vaccination effort using donated vaccines has begun, effectiveness is hard to estimate at the moment.

Like other countries around the world, Pakistan desperately needs vaccines. In Pakistan, we then have the additional problem of people who do not want to be vaccinated, and concern over the quality of the Chinese vaccine seems to be a factor in this. The government needs to work much harder to persuade people that vaccination is essential and also to follow the SOPs that seem to have been abandoned completely. People had already decided that the pandemic was over. Many of them had not believed in it in the first place.

But for those who do believe there has been months of misery and constant worry. People have lost friends before their eyes. Others have been forced to watch through a window as a parent or other loved one struggles against a disease which is unrelenting in the manner in which it attacks and have been able only to wave goodbye, as a close relative passes away. This is a situation which has had a psychological impact around the world. Higher suicide rates have been reported from many countries.

Pakistan seems to like staying within a fantasy bubble, which is free of Covid-19, free of hunger and free of other factors such as panic and depression, which have an impact on people. For instance, no counselling of any kind is available for those who have lost a loved one to Covid-19 or, in many cases, even for those who have been hit by the disease themselves, except at some of the leading private hospitals in the country, which are of course accessible only to the wealthy.

We need to examine in depth the extent to which Covid-19 has expanded hunger and the factors which come with it. The extent of this hunger is wide. One can see this in every neighbourhood where people complain of inflation and their inability to buy enough food to feed their children. Everywhere poor women speak of hunger because they choose not to eat themselves so that their children and husbands can be fed.

This is a disaster. There is no point pretending that Covid-19 has spared Pakistan miraculously or that we do not need to take measures against it. The question of herd immunity has already been experimented with by countries such as Sweden, and also Brazil. It ended in failure. We need to stop the misery of people, we need to end the suicides, and to do so we need to bring the Covid-19 pandemic to an end by vaccinating all our population, regardless of their income bracket and regardless of their ability to access medical care or the vaccine itself.

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