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## **Redefining 'isolation' in the wake of Covid-19: a discussion from Indian context**

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### **Abstract:**

Community forms a crux of human living. In the wake of pandemic like Covid-19 to avoid community transmission what is most required of a responsible community member is to follow physical distancing to curb the spread of the infectious disease and this may lead to a feeling of isolation and loneliness. But this essay speaks of isolation with a positive connotation. It talks of isolation as solitude as the Indian philosophy also speaks extensively about this sense of self-contemplation and reflection to understand others as we need to know our own selves. The say speaks of isolation as understood in Sāṃkhya philosophy. This essay talks of isolated consciousness and the three gunas particularly of the sattvic predicaments that enables positive mental development in human beings which is much needed in these tested times as the present pandemic.

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**Introduction:**

*“One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn’t as individuals” --- Jean Vanier<sup>2</sup>*

In the wake of pandemic like Covid-19 to avoid community transmission what is most required of a responsible community member is to follow physical distancing. In the wake of the outbreak of any contagious disease, state as well as local officials may exercise measures and may also require the public to adopt measures to curb the spread of the infectious disease. Now, what is physical/social distancing? Physical/social distancing is every single reduction in the number of having physical contacts with both known and unknown people and this definitely impact the contaminations and the ability of the virus to spread and affect population.

This physical distancing leads to isolation. Imposed quarantine or self-isolation is an unpleasant experience. Despite the public health benefit of physical distancing in curbing

community transmission of disease, the implemented measures have yielded a storm of social disruptions jeopardizing the health and well-being of aged people, adolescents and even adult people. Loneliness leads to increased depression rates and suicide. Loneliness perpetuated by prolonged lockdown and isolation not only segregate human into his own ‘constricted’ space but also deny human of their dignity, but how? For those, who are denied of basic amenities of life this self-isolation and distancing are putting them from their origins, their families and denying them of basic human rights and self-dignity. Such situations expresses negative connotation of the word ‘isolation.’

When we talk of isolation or separateness we always tend to focus on its association with deleterious psychophysical effects. ‘Isolation’ and ‘separation’ are adjacent to each other and integration of these notions is linked to the notion of solitude. Isolation has also been studied as a structural position potentially capable

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<sup>2</sup> (Vanier, 1989)

of delivering positive returns. Social isolation is an important factor in the religious ferment that may produce several monastic orders. Isolation enables a chance for self-reflection. Choosing to be alone and enjoying that experience is not loneliness rather this is isolation that has a positive connotation.

When we make a conscious choice to remain in isolation and this enhances a sense of good feelings, then that does not result in loneliness or despair, this is a chosen solitude. When spending time in solitude we are constantly in confrontation with our own selves. In this alone time, when we are aloof in a positive sense we have our own thoughts, doubts, emotions to contemplate and understand ourselves better. In fact, Indian philosophy talks extensively about this sense of self-contemplation and reflection to understand others as we need to know our own selves.

Religious traditions have often been laid by the virtues of solitude. From the various meditative practices of Buddhism to the contemplative spirituality of Samkhya, Yoga and

Vedas, isolation in the sense of solitude forms a significant component of practice and reflection. In fact Jiddu Krishnamurti while reflecting on the essence of isolation as solitude claimed, "It's beautiful to be alone. To be alone does not mean to be lonely. It means the mind is not influenced and contaminated by society."<sup>3</sup> To delve deep and understand the polymorphic influence of the solitude upon the inner life of the soul it is required to understand the significance of self in the Indian philosophical thought.

### **Self in Indian Philosophy**

Self-forms an important crux in Indian thought which is essential to understand consciousness, self-reflection and its relation to the concept of isolation. Self-contemplation or perusal of the knowledge of self fills the gap between knowledge of inner self to the knowledge of outer self. According to the Bṛhadavanyaka Upaniṣad, self or atman that makes a seat within one's being is the same atman that is considered as the light of the sun. As a learned scholar interpreted, "Man thus becomes the meeting point of the gods

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<sup>3</sup> (Krishnamurti, 1995)

of the universe or its controlling forces. The highest controlling force was the Atman, the source of light, both internal and external... In any case the Upanishads accept the idea that God is the inner most spirit within man. The philosophical thoughts of the Upanishads once and for all become inward-looking in its effect to find explanations."<sup>4</sup>

Sāṃkhya philosophical thought engages in a highly complex understanding of the nature of man as a spiritual and psycho-physical entity. Sāṃkhya view of philosophy holds the inner realm of man (antahkaraṇa) is consisted in mind (manas), ego (ahamkara), and reason (buddhi). Sāṃkhya in one or two aspect differs from the Upanishads. According to the Upanishads, the vital principle is a variant of the mind whereas according to the Sāṃkhya, the vital or the life principle is the common functionality of the three forms of the inner instrument or "antahkarana". And each of these three realms has its own reason but in combination they perform the function of biological

activity<sup>5</sup>. The centrality of the Sāṃkhya idea of psyche conceives of man as being instantaneously "active" ("kartar") and "receptive" ("bhoktar"). He remains "active" through the five "organs of action" and "receptive" through the five "organs of perception". Sāṃkhya comes very close to Upanishad when it opines that 'ego' which is central to the psyche is the 'prime motivating force of illusion' (abhimān). But drawing a contrast to the monism of Upanishad Sāṃkhya philosophy accepts a dualistic view of reality. It makes a categorical differentiation between the primeval matter called Prakṛti and the collectivity of irradiant but inactive life-monads called Puruṣa. The Prakṛti embracing the three gunas of tamas, rajas and sattva are all aspects of who Brahman or greater Self is. These gunas is pervasive of everything, not just the greater Self but also morality, character traits and food. In Sāṃkhya there is neither a personal God nor an impersonal one, neither monotheism nor monism.

<sup>4</sup> (Radhakrishnan & Raju, 1960, p. 217)

<sup>5</sup> (Radhakrishnan & Raju, 1960, p. 288)

In the Sāṃkhya context, prakṛti is related to the manifestation of subjective and psychological dimensions which gets activated and gains visibility in the presence of consciousness. The 'producer element' or prakṛti under which may be categorized the mental phenomena is unconscious or acetanam and fails to discern (aviveka). And when consciousness succeeds in isolating itself thoroughly from cognitive-sensory experience, the latter would be lost again from perception and thus the manifested categories would disappear. It may be noted in this regard; the puruṣa encompasses and recognizes the presence of an unalterable consciousness, absolved from the fluctuating contents of prakṛti that is unsusceptible to the mental afflictions and to its functions. The Sāṃkhyakārikā speaks of an isolated or kaivalya puruṣa, who acts an observer (draṣṭṛ), who is impartial (mādhyastha) and remains inactive or akartṛ and is witness (sākṣin) to the unfolding of events (SK 19)<sup>6</sup> (SK: *Sāṃkhyakārika*). The moment consciousness isolate itself from cognitive-sensory occurrence

person becomes liberated usually called *kaivalya*.

To Sāṃkhya, perpetual and onlooker's awareness reflects the true identity of an individual, even if we fail to recognize the differentiation between our mental waves (cittavṛttis) or thoughts cluttering the mind and the impassive that which remains as an isolated observer and that which is operative.

Sāṃkhya's metaphysics opens our door to continue our self-research towards the final subsistence that endures and supports and give way to all possible mental contents. Thus the mental life seems to be a protraction of us.

### **Isolated consciousnesses and trigunas of Sāṃkhya in human health**

Sāṃkhya is a pre-scientific analysis of mind that takes into account the lived experience and delineates consciousness as an island with the potential to transcend experience. In the ambit of Sāṃkhya studies, this 'isolated consciousness' is not only a mere distinct traits of mental realms

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<sup>6</sup> (Villegas, 2016)

but also has a definite aspect as it is the determining reason for cognition. We have earlier spoke of three guṇas--sattva, rajas and tamas. The mind is the mixture of the three guṇas.

If the sattva (purify) elements is strong in a person one is expected to have a positive and meaningful attitude towards the world and others and can train himself to remain calm, relaxed and resistant to high stress. This kind of attitude is highly recommendable in the present stressful pandemic situation. Contrastingly, if there is high level of rajas, tamas they would be highly detrimental to human health for people with these attributes tend to remain stressed. 'Isolated consciousness' though bereft of attributes or qualities of its own but underlies all our being and knowing.

Sattvik bhāvas helps to enrich life and make it fuller. Emotions closely associated with sattva are precluded in happiness, joy, love, freedom, friendliness, creativity, fulfillment and inspiration. Our life is an experience of all three guṇas of rajas, tamas and

sattva. These triguna are connected well with our quality of life.

Quality of life (QOL) is a dynamic synergy between the external factors comprising an individual's life and the internal perceptions and this forms a significant component in healthcare setting<sup>7</sup> (Sharma, Salvi & Sharma 2012, p-389). The traits that define life are responsiveness to environment, growth and change, arena of health care, encompassing emotional, physical, material and social well being. WHO defines QOL as an individual's perspective of life in the context of the culture and value systems in which one sustain in relation with their aims, standards, expectations and concerns (WHO, 2020)<sup>8</sup>.

Now, rajasic predicament concerns passion, alertness, self-centeredness, anxiety, restlessness, anger and worry. Tamasic disposition is the densest of all character traits and include laziness, hurt, apathy and ignorance. It is said people with tamasic disposition tend to suffer depression. With rajasic

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<sup>7</sup> (Sharma, Salvi, & Sharma, 2012, p. 389)

<sup>8</sup> (WHO, 2020)

disposition people become agitated and end up in with other. Rajasic and tamasic factors were closely related with impaired QOL in human experience.

Researchers have found more rajasic and tamasic qualities in persons with anxiety disorders in contrast to normal subjects as well as the prevalence of sattvic predisposition in the latter. The pre-eminence of rajas or tamas is concerned with ill health. QOL indicates rajas and tamas qualities are related with illness and this negative QOL is connected with mental disorders. These psychological investigative unearthing in consonance with Vedic postulation determines that verbal aggressiveness would be positively associated with rajas and negatively connected with sattva and that life satisfaction would dovetail in consonance with sattva and negatively with tamas<sup>9</sup> (Dasgupta 1961).

So a mind developed to have 'isolated consciousness' or pure consciousness can inculcate in himself the sattvic predicaments which are necessary for

the better development of life. The Yogic practice including *asanas*, *prāṇāyāmas*, *kriyās*, *mudras* and meditation enable to bring about a transformation within the entire persona. Thus, this is about not involving only academic pursuit or philosophical discourse rather this is philosophy put to 'practice'. It is like delving deep into the subjective experiential level.

### Conclusion

With the positive bhāva leads to blossoming of wisdom and strengthening of mind and this would increase sattva within the entire personality thus diminishing the influence of rajas and tamas to an iota that merely transgress into sattvic predicaments. Such an approach leads to holistic development that takes into cognizance the multidimensional physical, mental, social and spiritual health of communities at large.

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<sup>9</sup> (Dasgupta, 1961)

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