COVID-19: Triggers fear psychosis among private sector employees

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Abstract
The sudden outbreak of COVID-19-driven pandemic has ravaged the economy of the world in the form of toll on health and loss of employment. The unprecedented devastation has left the economies in a nose-diven state, with job losses for paid employees and self-employed and labor market disruption in the nature of reduced earnings and working hours, compounded through prolonged closure of different ongoing projects, which restricted mobility, reduced manpower in order to contain the deadly pandemic. Witnesses of layoffs, retrenchment, pay cuts, delayed promotions with increments are quite apparent adverse outcomes of the crisis. According to a survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the rate of unemployment has been amplified to 24% in mid-May 2020. The monstrous pandemic has wreaked havoc on the job landscape of the nation resulting in economic contraction and shrinking job opportunities wrapped with a sense of fear and uncertainty is palpable among professionals. The present study is an endeavor to quantify the actual impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the private sector employees of West Bengal, India. With sample respondents of 681, the study reveals that a significant segment of employees are...
severely challenged by the life-threatening virus especially the employees absorbed in private commercial establishments or factories where the sector of employment, nature of industry, or job profile denies the concept of “work from home.” The global outbreak has changed the job market almost overnight and seems to have long-lasting, game-changing ramifications with a number of sectors experiencing massive hit where jobs will be savagely cut.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the alarming severity, the novel infectious Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was declared as pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. India with large population and workforce imposed the stringent nationwide lockdown measures from the latter half of March thereby adhering to the social distancing norm as prescribed precautionary principle to curb and control the monstrous virus. The global crisis has resulted in scarring effects with its long-term impact on agriculture, industry, foreign market investment, human health and mental well-being of individuals. The quarantined, self-distancing and self-isolation measures so proposed have adversely affected the normal life and livelihood leading to depression, anxiety, monotony, stress, loneliness, insomnia, self-inflicted harm, suicidal ideation, mood swings, insomnia, boredom, bereavement, frustration, anger, fear, stigmatization, increased use of alcohol, and drugs. Individuals are craving for compassion, companionship and co-operation, which would contribute to their confidence to enhance productivity and capacity building through technological mode.

The sudden outbreak has spelled in multiple severe immediate challenges on the economy of the nation. Employment being one of the facets where the economic growth of individual concerned will get severely affected with the rise in inequality across all the levels. The employer–employee relationship seems to have been indifferent as the business gets affected by the prolonged phase-wise lockdown. The immense uncertainty wherein the job market will begin with layoffs thereby freezing hiring, limiting spending ability amid pay cuts which can mount to an aggravated form too. The psychophobia kept a hold on the reins of minds of employees in respect of termination and reduction of wages, which grasped the peace of mind thereby affecting their behavioral patterns in turn. Guy Ryder, the Director General, International Labor Organization (ILO) observed that in developed and developing economies the workers and businesses are facing catastrophe. The devastating effect seems magnifying, which would leave behind footprints in the critical lanes and by-lanes of the economy as a whole.

Government through circulars have issued various advisories to all the employers of public/private establishments to protect the rights of employees and extend co-ordination with regard to salary, leave, termination during this critical period when employers may cite the reason of slump in revenue. But all in vain, reality distortions cite that major global giant corporations too are very much involved in downsizing their employee strength, and thereby disobeying Government orders, leaving numerous thousands of families in a state of helplessness and haplessness.
This study promotes an empirical research attempt on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic as an epicenter of psychological trauma that ripples out and percolates through the societal dimensions with the organized private sector employees as the subject of analysis. A significant segment of the society is dreading toward an uncertain unprecedented future. The current crisis witnesses high level of stress coupled with heightened anxiety among employees as well as employers too. Organizations today are fighting tooth and nail to be able to survive in the market to keep playing the game of business.

A leading industry association, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), surveyed 200 CEOs, assessing an impact resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, inferred that majority of them bearing the fear of fall in their revenues likely to affect the profits of the current year (2020–2021). Eighty percent claimed of inventory lying idle while 52% were foreseeing job losses in their respective sectors. The Federation of Association in Indian Tourism and Hospitality in a collaborative effort with the CII expects the potential job loss in travel and tourism value chain (hotels, restaurants, airlines, tour operators, transport providers, and other allied business) of around 38–50 million (Chaturvedi, 2020). According to the ILO report, the pandemic crisis would leave scars of global catastrophic effect on the working hours and earnings. A recent survey conducted by Loiwal (2020) reveals that since the outbreak of coronavirus in India the mental illnesses has scaled up to 20%. Even extremely subtle reminders of illness can mold the attitude and behavior of an individual. Psychiatrists and mental wellness therapists have speculated that the constant feeling of threat of disease can result in psychological distress and mental illness with the spike in cases of depression, grief, suicide, and self-harm apart from other symptoms globally reported due to COVID-19 (Moukaddam & Shah, 2020).

The inestimable hazards caused by COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on business of corporate houses across the globe as a result of which major industry leaders have resorted to decrease in hiring, downsizing, reviewing salary, knocking off bonuses, and so on. Downsizing will become more pervasive as cost cutting becomes inescapable in the current scenario. Most of the small and midsize business houses do not hold financial buffer to support their employees for long during this crisis phase as one cannot only have all expenses without revenue generation. The imposition of stringent measures to keep people apart by restricting the movement of human resources through lockdown to contain coronavirus pandemic (Gupta, 2020) has significant implication on various aspects of the society. The ongoing lockdown coupled with emotional challenges has left employees anxious and worried about their future stability in the new environment. Heightened suspicion and distrust that arise from fears shape the responses to people in interaction. Though many organizations across sectors permitting “Work from Home” provision to employees find the productivity average. The reasons so cited are inadequate infrastructure at home, absence of office ambiance, denial of motivational perks, and perquisites with delayed promotions frame the list. Many employees are confronted with the fear of job loss, salary reductions, delayed appraisals, and all. Burdened with family commitments as children’s education, aged ailing parents medical expenses, repayment of loan dues or equated monthly installment if any has triggered the mindset of the workforce. Potential performers are worried about their plans that were based on the appraisal, get postponed. Fear exists but it is differently scary for different segment of people in the society as their anxieties and perspectives on life are different.

Undoubtedly, the workforces from private sector organizations are all in mental and physical turmoil due to the closure of factories, offices, and so on. With the pandemic continuing to
rage, the economic fallout would be enormous in terms of loss in production, income, and employment. Moreover, the impact of a life-threatening pandemic on behavioral aspect is the area that has been already studied upon. But an empirical study on the psychological trauma arising out of the COVID-19 crisis affecting behavioral aspects may not have been studied earlier.

2.1 Objective and hypothesis of the study

In view of the on-going COVID-19 epidemic, the Indian Government has imposed rigorous lockdown regulations that have an impact on all the aspects of the economy. This rigorous lockdown affected the employers and employees of the private and commercial establishments as production or manufacturing got hampered, no movement of stocks, no monetary transactions for the purchase of materials or sale of goods. In this circumstance, there is a monetary crisis to pay salaries/wages to staffs and workers. Also in many sectors, there is no scope for working from home or infrastructure facilities are unavailable at home. The present study is an investigation of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employees of the private sector. Based on the previous discussion and research objective, the null hypothesis (H₀) is that the current lockdown situation has no significant impact on the employees of the private sector.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample design

The entire study is exclusively based on primary data. The primary data are collected over phone and through email, from the respondents (employees working in private organizations like offices of the different service sector, manufacturing unit of factories and office, educational institutes, etc.) all over West Bengal, India, in the form of structured questionnaire by maintaining proper social distancing norm, during April 2020 and May 2020.

So far as the sample size is concerned, the larger is the sample size, the greater is the representativeness of the sample, and thus, more is the reliability of the results (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). However, the study uses Cochran’s formula for determining the sample size. According to Cochran (2007) formula under an infinite population, the calculation for getting a representative sample is as follows:

\[
n_0 = \frac{(z)^2(p)(q)}{(e)^2}.
\]

Here, \(n_0\) is the sample size, \(z\) is the selected critical value of desired confidence level, \(p\) is the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population, \(q = 1 - p\), and \(e\) is the desired level of precision. To determine the optimum number of sample sizes obtained from a large population where the degree of variability is unknown, the study considers maximum variability equals to 50%, that is, \(p = 0.5\). Again, with 99% confidence level with ±5% precision, the calculation for representative sample size would be as below:
\[ n_0 = \frac{(2.58)^2(0.5)(0.5)}{(0.05)^2} = 665.64 = 666, \]

where \( p = 0.5 \) and hence \( q = 1 - 0.5 = 0.5; \ e = 0.05, \) and \( z = 2.58. \)

So, for this infinite population (more than 10,000) Cochran’s formula suggests 666 as the standard sample size. However, to get a robust result the study intends to collect data primarily from approximately 800 respondents, out of which 681 usable questionnaires were returned and suitable for analysis (85% response rate). The final analysis has been conducted based on responses included in the questionnaires \( (n = 681). \)

### 3.2 Variables used in the study

Question Numbers 1–5 are demographic in nature and related to personal information, answers of which are open-ended. These are gender, age, education, type of employment, and income. Question Numbers 6–11 are related to the hypothesis that “COVID-19 pandemic has no impact on the private sector employees.” The six individual questions in terms of challenges of working in private sector employment due to COVID-19 pandemic are as under:

- **Question No. 6:** Management is not co-operating to support lockdown norms and to stay at home to adhere to the safety measures for a longer period.
- **Question No. 7:** There is no provision of work from home in the job profile.
- **Question No. 8:** There is no adequate infrastructure at home to discharge the duties properly.
- **Question No. 9:** There is disparity with the date of salary received, prior to and during the pandemic situation.
- **Question No. 10:** There is disparity with the amount of salary received, prior to and during the pandemic situation.
- **Question No. 11:** There is a chance of retrenchment from employment as a consequence of the pandemic situation.

### 3.3 Research methodology

The respondents are advised to answer with their opinion against each statement in terms of Likert scale. A four-point Likert scale has been used with the forced-choice method. The assigned values are \((-2), (-1), (+1), \) and \((+2)\) for “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree,” respectively. As the intention is to know the degree of agreement or disagreement, the forced-choice method has been used. Applying this method, the respondents are not given the option of “Not known.” It forces the respondents either to give an opinion for agreement or disagreement. For a specific statement, if the value of the answer is greater than zero, the statement is agreed and, if the value of the answer is less than zero, the statement is disagreed. Now, if the mean score of all responses for a specific question is greater than 0 and upto \((+1)\), it can be stated that the statement is agreed. Similarly, if the mean score of all responses for a specific question is greater than \(+1\), it can be stated that the statement is strongly agreed. Contrary, if the mean score of all responses for a specific question is less than 0 and upto \((-1)\), it can be stated that the statement is disagreed and, if
the mean score of all responses for a specific question is less than \((-1\)) it can be stated that the statement is strongly disagreed.

The study has also used ratio, mean and standard deviation. Before analyzing the data, its reliability has been verified with the help of Cronbach’s co-efficient alpha.

4 | ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In the first phase, the study reports the demographic profile of the respondents. According to the respondents’ profile of the selected 681 respondents (presented in Table 1), 85% are male; most of them are graduate and belong within 45 years of age. Among the total respondents 47.8% are permanent employees, mostly earn within ₹2,00,000 to ₹5,00,000 per annum.

In all the questions, the focus of the research is to study whether the employees in the private organizations are suffering from different challenges due to COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown norms all over the world. Before analyzing the data, its reliability has been verified with the help of Cronbach’s co-efficient alpha. Its value worked out to 0.693, clearly establishing the reliability of the constructs (George & Mallery, 2003). According to the different theories of reliability value above 0.5 is appropriate, low value below 0.5 implies that reliability may not be appropriate.

Researchers have quantified the results given under the Likert scale and calculated the mean score and \(SD\) for different questionnaire (Q6–Q11). These are shown in Tables 2–7. All the answers individually signify strong agreement or agreement with respective mean scores of 1.05, 1.10, 1.14, 1.01, 0.93, and 0.99. Mean scores have been calculated based on the assigned values of 2, 1, \(-1\), and \(-2\) for a strong agreement, agreement, disagreement, and strong disagreement, respectively. It means, the agreement zone lies between >0 and 1; strong agreement zone is >1, disagreement zone is \(-1\) to <0, strong disagreement zone lies between \(-2\) and < \(-1\). Hence, a strong agreement is exhibited in the case of Q6, Q7, Q8, and Q9 and agreement is exhibited in the case of Q10 and Q11.

While we consider the agreement scenario for all the six grouped questions Q6–Q11, we have a mean score as 1.04, which signifies strong agreement for impact on the employees of private sector organizations. The total number of respondents in the agreement zone has been calculated by adding the total number of respondents with strongly agree and agree options. The total

| TABLE 1 | Profile of the respondents (n = 681) |
|----------|-----------------------------------|
| Gender   | (%) |
| Male     | 85.0 |
| Female   | 15.0 |
| Educational qualification | (%) |
| Postgraduate and other professional qualification | 29.5 |
| Graduate | 44.8 |
| Age (in years) | |
| 12th standard | 25.7 |
| Up to 45 years | 74.0 |
| Types of employment | |
| Permanent | 47.8 |
| Annual income | |
| Probationary | 4.0 |
| Below ₹ 0.2 million | 29.5 |
| Contractual | 37.5 |
| ₹ 0.2–0.5 million | 51.6 |
| Daily wage worker | 10.7 |
| Above ₹ 0.5 million | 18.9 |

Source: Prepared by Researchers.
TABLE 2  Strength of agreement by respondents of Q6

| Answer options     | Response count | Response (%) | Total score | Mean score | SD   |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|------------|------|
| Strongly agree      | 354            | 52.0         | 717         | 1.05       | 1.33 |
| Agree               | 204            | 30.0         |             |            |      |
| Disagree            | 51             | 7.5          |             |            |      |
| Strongly disagree   | 111            | 16.3         |             |            |      |

Note: Q: There is disparity with the date of salary received, prior to, and during the pandemic.
Source: Calculated by researchers.

TABLE 3  Strength of agreement by respondents of Q7

| Answer options     | Response count | Response (%) | Total score | Mean score | SD   |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|------------|------|
| Strongly agree      | 399            | 58.6         | 750         | 1.10       | 1.31 |
| Agree               | 135            | 19.8         |             |            |      |
| Disagree            | 111            | 16.3         |             |            |      |
| Strongly disagree   | 36             | 5.3          |             |            |      |

Note: Q: Management is not co-operating to support lockdown norms and to stay at home to adhere to the safety measures for a longer period.
Source: Calculated by researchers.

TABLE 4  Strength of agreement by respondents of Q8

| Answer options     | Response count | Response (%) | Total score | Mean score | SD   |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|------------|------|
| Strongly agree      | 417            | 61.2         | 774         | 1.14       | 1.38 |
| Agree               | 141            | 20.7         |             |            |      |
| Disagree            | 45             | 6.6          |             |            |      |
| Strongly disagree   | 78             | 11.5         |             |            |      |

Note: Q: There is no adequate infrastructure at home to discharge the duties properly.
Source: Calculated by researchers.

TABLE 5  Strength of agreement by respondents of Q9

| Answer options     | Response count | Response (%) | Total score | Mean score | SD   |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|------------|------|
| Strongly agree      | 408            | 59.9         | 690         | 1.01       | 1.51 |
| Agree               | 129            | 18.9         |             |            |      |
| Disagree            | 33             | 4.9          |             |            |      |
| Strongly disagree   | 111            | 16.3         |             |            |      |

Note: Q: There is disparity with the date of salary received, prior to, and during the pandemic.
Source: Calculated by researchers.

The number of respondents in the disagreement zone has been calculated by adding total number of respondents with strongly disagree and disagree options. The count happens to be 3,381 and 705, which signifies an agreement zone of 82.7% and a disagreement zone of 17.3%. It proves the
H₁ to be true. Another analysis has been performed to justify the rejection of H₀ result. The assigned values aggregating all six questions for a respondent ranges between −12 and +12. This range may be classified in five zones, viz, strong agreement zone (7–12), agreement zone (1–6), indifferent zone (equal to 0), disagreement zone (−6 to −1), and strong disagreement zone (−12 to −7). Based on the total score, 396 respondents have the total score between 7 and 12, 162 respondents have the total score between 1 and 6, 33 respondents have scored equal to 0, 90 respondents have the score between −6 and −1, and no respondent between the score of −12 to −7 (Table 8). In the broader dimension, 81.9% (i.e., 396 + 162 = 558) respondents belong to agreement zone,
4.9% belong to indifferent zone, and 13.2% (i.e., 90 + 0 = 90) respondents belong to disagreement zone. It reconfirms that $H_0$ is rejected and $H_1$ is accepted.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Though the Government has directed organizations, to pay full salaries and wages to staffs and workers during this lockdown phase, and advised not to go for any retrenchment or lay off especially targeting ones who operate on wafer-thin profit margin. But, however, the flip side reality varies. According to The Economic Times dated May 11, 2020, Labor Offices have circulated notices to renowned companies for pay cuts. And some organizations have also asked their employees to apply for leave for the lockdown period, which is quite illegal. Some Unions alleged that employees have been asked to leave (Sangani, 2020). This macro-level statistics reveal the reality of the hardest hit in the employment prospects thereby resulting in employment crisis.

The present study investigates the impact of lockdown, on the employees of private sectors, caused due to COVID-19 pandemic. To analyze the results, researchers have set six variables in questionnaire form other than the demographic data. These variables include employer–employee relationship, work from home provision, availability of infrastructure at home to discharge the assigned work, disparity with the date and amount of salaries disbursed prior, and during the pandemic phase and the probable chance of retrenchment. The study finds that Q6–Q9 are strongly agreed with score +1 and Q10 and Q11 are agreed with score >0 to 1. The study further reveals that the overall result is strongly agreed (average score is 1.04) of all the six questionnaires relating to the challenges witnessed by the private sector employees in the wake of the pandemic. Thus, undoubtedly the employees of private sector organizations are globally posed to severe immediate challenges of retrenchment, layoffs, pay cuts, delayed salary, prolonged promotions to mention a few. These, amplified the country’s unemployment rate, to 27% in urban India compared to 23% in rural India for the weekend of May 17, from somewhere below 7% during the precrisis phase in mid-March, 2020 (CMIE, 2020). The pandemic has put world economies at stake, with jobs and production plummeting by day. The plight of private sector salaried employees has worsened since the lockdown began. Employees in operational roles are majorly affected by layoffs in Indian start-ups and find difficult to retrieve (Sanghamitra, 2020). However, no companies can survive without any stimulus and simply paying salaries to the employees sitting at home without contributing to the productivity of the organization. People should understand that if they stay at home for long, no company in the world can continue to pay wages or salaries (John, 2020). Many industries for at least 3 months are operating at zero revenue. Not many businesses can withstand zero revenue for months (Chaturvedi, 2020). This employment crisis seems to have worse impact on India’s already beleaguered economy.

6 | TASK AHEAD

To find the silver lining behind the dark deadly cloud, the immediate points to be addressed:

- Permit work from home to employees by their respective organizations, who do not hold such policy provisions, would be effective to reduce the stress factor of anxiety among employees and thereby ensure smooth functioning of business.
• Conduct motivational stress buster sessions with focused career prospects of the employees during such difficult times.
• Regular communication with the employees and staffs with regard to the business-oriented issues and updates would make employees feel closely knitted with the organization.
• Learning and development initiatives can be undertaken as productive and enriching during these tough days.

The prolonged extension of lockdown implies that the economy would take a long time to revive. The returnee migrants are much likely to complicate the restructuring of the economy after easing the lockdown phasewise (CMIE, 2020). With multidimensional issues on the societal mosaic, this seems to be a battle of lifetime with test of our responsibilities and strength of our compassion for other individuals during this crucial juncture.

Amidst the lethal coronavirus pandemic, waving way to the new normal, makes us remind of the words of Tagore “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake” has a positive impetus for a new normal digitized economy completely free from the shackles of the unseen deadly enemy. Let’s maintain physical social distancing, keeping aside the traumatic aspects, hard enough. The quench of human touch would soon be met. We can. We will.

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