

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND SOCIALLY DISTANCED WORLD: A STUDY AMONG THE RESEARCH SCHOLARS, KANNUR UNIVERSITY, KERALA

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Abstract

The Covid-19 outbreak has adversely affected all sphere of human life. Like any other aspect of life, the sudden outbreak of the Pandemic disease and closure of schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutes had affected the academic research in many ways. This paper is an attempt to explore the condition of Social research in such a socially distanced world. The paper further addresses larger questions such as the status of higher education in the time of Covid-19 and how it affected teaching, learning and research, especially in the social sciences and humanities. It also examines in detail the impact of Covid-19 among research scholars of Kannur University in Kerala state, with a special attention to the status of social science and humanities research during the pandemic period. Indicating less family support to work from home suggests that stereotypical gender roles in the families reproduces divisions in the mode of allocation of time for the research and learning to female researchers.

Keywords: Covid-19, Social distance, Online education, Social Science Research.

Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The Countries around the world have taken different strategies to prevent the spread and transmission of this pandemic disease. Strategies such as hand-washing, wearing face masks, physical distancing, locking down and staying home have been put in place as the needed action to flatten the curve and control the transmission of the disease (Sintema, 2020).The first case of covid-19 pandemic was officially

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recorded in India on 30 January 2020³ and the country went into full lockdown on March 24 with little warning to the general public. A sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic, strict restrictions endorsed by respective governments all over the world have adversely affected the everyday life of the people.

Like any other sphere of life the impact of covid-19 in educational and academic field could not be ignored. The closure of schools, Colleges, Universities and other learning spaces has impacted more than 94 per cent of the world's student population. It has also created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries (Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021). The Indian education scenario was more troubling during this period, as the country has the world's largest population of individuals under the age of 25—over 600 million.

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic situation has accelerated more scientific enquiries for battling the pandemic crisis in hospitals, medical research laboratories, drug research centers and more, its impact on other kinds of learning and scientific research especially in the field of social sciences and humanities is entirely different. This paper is an attempt to explore larger questions such as the status of higher education in the time of Covid-19 and how it affected teaching, learning and research, especially in the social sciences and humanities. The paper further examines in detail the impact of Covid-19 among research scholars of Kannur University in Kerala state, with a special attention to the status of social science and humanities research during the pandemic period.

The Data and Method

The study is conducted among research scholars of Kannur University. The data was collected during the peak time of Covid-19 outbreak and the sample was selected randomly through Google form questions. The questionnaire form was sent individually through WhatsApp messages and the form remained open from 8-12-2020 to 16-12-2020. This paper is also based on reviews of previous studies and analysis of 54 responses submitted within the given time. The paper is divided into three parts. The first two parts discusses major problems identified in the domain of higher education in literatures on the sociology and anthropology of education. The next part is the discussion on data collected from research scholars of Kannur

³<https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/06/23/default-calendar/un-public-service-day>

University. The status of academic research with special focus on social science and humanities research during the pandemic period is the major theme of the discussion. The new challenges and major issues affecting the research work, working style of Universities and higher education system, efficacy of work from home, gender disparity in pandemic impact, work satisfaction and attitude of family members towards their research activities are discussed as sub-themes.

Higher Education during Pandemic Time

The world itself was going through a pandemic period during 2019-2020. Like any other fields of work and functioning of institutions, the field of educational has witnessed an unprecedented world order of disruption of human activities which resulted in closing of schools, colleges and universities and were compelled to stop face to face offline education. Subsequently, there was a pressing need to innovate and implement alternative modes of educational and assessment strategies.

The Covid-19 pandemic as it has brought new challenges to the traditional educational system; the pandemic has also provided us new opportunity to pave the way for introducing digital learning (Dhawan, 2020). These E-learning tools and online platforms have played a crucial role during this pandemic, helping schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools (Subedi et al., 2020). Even though the pandemic situation has accelerated new opportunities to normalize the possibilities of online education, the sudden shift from traditional face to face offline education to online education was considered as a method of 'education in emergency'. So the education system and educators were compelled to adopt a system that they are not prepared for (Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021).

The online education has provided some benefits to both academicians and the students. But the pros and cons of online education vary according to social position of individuals, learning subjects and research areas. As reported by some studies based on academicians's perspective, the online learning is easy, convenient (Rajhans et al., 2020) and flexible to conduct (Dhawan, 2020). In contrast, there are numerous studies reported that the online education also leads to negative effects on the students' motivation and performance. As Abbasi, Ayoob, Malik and Memon (2020) stated, the students had negative perception towards online learning and they preferred face to face offline education compared to online education. The study conducted in Malaysia by Allam, Hassan, Mohideen, Ramlan and Kamal (2020)

confirmed that the students lack of motivation during online learning. The mental health issues in learners and researchers have increased due to Covid-19, and the introduction of social distance and online education. This has resulted in increased stress, anxiety and depression among student community (Rajab, Gazal and Alkattan (2020).

Social Research during Covid-19 Pandemic

The covid-19 outbreak has posed an unprecedented challenge to our traditional education systems and social enquiries. Even though the pandemic situation has increased more scientific enquiries for battling the pandemic crisis in hospitals, medical research laboratories, drug research centres the milieu of social science research during this socially distanced world order is yet to be studied and evaluated.

The Covid-19 Pandemic affected all kind of scientific researches. The crisis has affected social researchers, sociologists and social anthropologists in myriad ways (Ghosh, Banhishikha 2020). The social research using qualitative methods like ethnography--‘the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution’ (Simpson & Coleman, 2017) was considered as a sin in such a socially distanced world order. So the problem was even more intense for early career stage researchers situated within this ‘political economy of knowledge’ (Nagar, 2014) who engages in time-bound research with limited funding.

Though the unprecedented challenges of Covid-19 outbreak, sudden lockdowns and social distance strategies have created academic and physical restrictions for researchers, the pandemic situation has compelled them to adopt new ways of research methods and techniques to do scientific researches. Unlike the conventional, new methods like digital ethnography which involves analysing social constructions of cultural life through online virtual worlds (Boellstor, 2012) became popular and a necessity.

Results and Discussion

This study was conducted among research scholars of Kannur University in the state of Kerala, at a time when the world was struggling with prevention of the pandemic disease. The respondents were in situation where the unprecedented outbreak of

Covid-19 affected their daily life. The sudden lockdown and unexpected closure of educational institutes have created new challenges and new way of life in front of them. Hence the data reflects such a particular condition of respondents and the realities of such an uncertain pandemic situation. The data collected from the participants would be presented under the following themes below:

Covid-19 Impact and Work Satisfaction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has affected academic researchers in all disciplines. The sudden closure of universities and research institutions has affected the research scholars negatively. Even though such unprecedented pandemic prevention strategies have affected all sorts of academic research, the impacts of such pandemic situation and health care strategies vary according to the field and subject of the research.

Among the 54 respondents participated in the survey, 32 research scholars were from social sciences and humanities background and the rest from science background. While analysing the data with regard to the impact of Covid-19 on their research activities, it shows that the research activities in social and humanities are negatively affected than that of science field. At the same time more respondents from the science field have selected the option of 'partially affected' than 'badly affected'. The data of impact of Covid-19 on research scholars can be seen in the table below. Only 6 percentage of the researches responded that the current pandemic has no impact on their research.

Table.1: Impact of Covid-19 on research

Research Fields	Not Affected	Partially Affected	Badly Affected
Social Sciences and Humanities	6.2%	43.8%	50%
Science Subjects	6.2%	50%	43.8%

Source: Primary data

The current pandemic situation has affected the academic research works at multiple levels which varies according to character, stages and subjects of research. So the work-satisfaction of researchers at this time also differs according to the range of

difficulties they face in research work due the pandemic situation. Among the respondents, 37 percent researchers from social science and humanities are satisfied with their current work but huge number of participants opted as 'Average satisfaction'. This high number of average satisfaction indicates uncertainties and unhappy mentality of the research scholars whose research activities are almost stand still in the waves of the Pandemic as shown in the Table.1. 43% of research scholars from science subjects expressed 'Not satisfactory' for the question on their work satisfaction.

Table.2 Work-satisfaction among research scholars

Research Field	Satisfactory	Average satisfaction	Not Satisfactory
Social Sciences and Humanities	37.5%	43.8%	18.7%
Science Subjects	31%	25%	43%

Source: Primary data

Work from Home as a Way Out

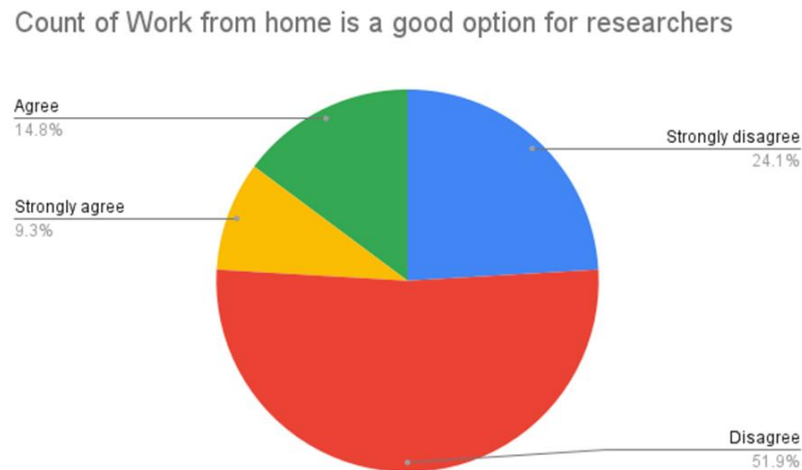
Work from home is considered as a new solution to stop the spreading of virus and overcome the limitation of the lock down restrictions. Such a way of working is not adequate in all types of works. Academic research activities require multiple kinds of activities such as data collection, experiment and intensive fieldwork. So, it is not suitable to adopt completely work from home kind of research. Among the respondents (Fig.1), 51.9 percent disagree with the idea of work from home as good for researchers, 24 percent of them strongly disagree with the idea. The remaining 14.8 percent and 9.3 of respondents agree and disagree with the statement respectively.

Gender Divisions and Work from Home

Even though the pandemic situation has affected entire academic community, the gender disparity of Covid-19 impact among researchers needs to be addressed. The unexpected outbursts of the pandemic disease and sudden shutdown of public institutions have compelled the research community to adopt new ways of working modes as a method of research in uncertainty. This sudden and unprepared shift from

normal way of research to new methods of work has affected each gender categories of researchers in different ways.

Fig.1: Research scholar's opinion on work from home.



Source: Primary data

The pandemic induced-lock down has made 'work from home' (WFH) as a new normal. This new way of working was considered as a way out from such a social stagnation and isolation. The enhancement of technology and online mediums has facilitated this working mode. But the mental, physical and productivity of this the WFH also depended on the social status of the researchers. While responding to WFH, more than 80 per cent of the female researchers have disagreed on the statement that 'Work from home is a good option for researchers'. This shows the fact that female researchers have been affected with the socially isolated pandemic situation than male researches whom the WFH option was comparatively good as 35 percent of them agreed with the statement. Conversations on these issues with the female students have open up with the overburdened domestic work in the mode of working from home. It means that they need to spend time for the work in home and work from home simultaneously.

The attitude of family towards the researchers is very important in a time where the whole research activities were confined to private spaces and new normality of Work from Home. While replying to the question of support from their families most of the researchers have responded that their family was so supportive.

While 75 of the male researchers replied that their family was supportive, 70 percent of the female researchers responded positively.

Table.4: Gender disparity in Work from Home

Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	15%	20%	45%	20%
Female	5.9%	11.8%	55.9%	26.5%

Source: Primary data

25 percent of male and 23.5 female researchers opted that they got moderate support from family. The option regarding less supportive attitude of family members is worth analysing. The fact that when no male researchers from the respondents have chosen have opted that they got less support from family members, around 6 percent of female researchers have clearly stated that they were getting very less support from their family indicates that family structure make them to do domestic work while they are in home. A stereotypical gender role reproduces divisions in the mode of allocation of time for the research and learning.

Table.5: Opinion on Family support for researchers

Gender	Less Supportive	Moderate	Very Supportive
Male	NIL	25%	75%
Female	5.9%	23.5%	70.6%

Source: Primary data

From Lockdown to New Modes of Working

The Covid-19 pandemic situation has affected all variety of human life. The works of research scholars were not exempt from the challenges of the pandemic world as institutions of higher education have limited scholarly activities; research and training have been disrupted. Many graduate students and research scholars have

faced new barriers as a result of social distancing (Chenneville and Schwartz-Mette, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

People around the world were collectively thinking to find out new ways to overcome the challenges of such a new world order. The researchers were not in safe zone. They have to face multiple challenges in their course of work due to the covid-19 virus and the social distanced world order. There can be a number of issues to be listed as the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic which have directly affected the academic research community. Such challenges also vary according to the stages, subjects and area of research works.

Table.6: Major Issues faced by research scholars

Research Areas	Field work	Mental stress	Availability of sources	Lab facility	Network problem	Financial stringency
Social sciences and humanities	35%	11%	18%	5.4	11%	2.7
Science Subjects	26.7 %	20%	6.7%	33%	13%	12.5%

Source: Primary data

The major issue affect the research works indicates the issues related to fieldwork. 35 percentages of respondents have opted fieldwork as the major issue affecting their research directly. The social science researchers who planned to collect primary data as the main source of data faced challenges during this period. To comment on the ethnographic fieldwork, one of the respondents stated:

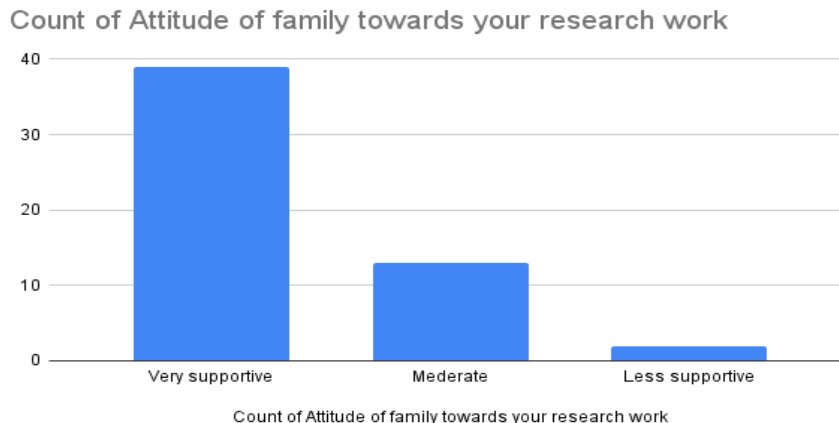
“It was very much difficult to do ethnographic fieldwork during the pandemic period. I have to depend more on secondary data instead of extensive fieldwork which is necessary for me to do ethnography of tribal life and I have reduced all my plans for doing fieldwork due to the pandemic restrictions”

He was about to visit his field of enquiry as part of the ethnographic research among Kadar of south India. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 and strict lockdowns especially in tribal settings made the traditional way of ethnography illegal and punishable offence. The vulnerability of both researcher and the respondents to the

pandemic disease was became the major concern than academic research. The restrictions issued by Government bodies for entry and any kind of data collection in tribal areas still continue (The Hindu- May 30, 2022).

The researchers in secondary stage who were ready to collect the data directly from the field faced more problems than others. There are other issues like unavailability of research materials, lack of lab facilities, financial stringencies due to untimely distribution of fellowships, and uncertainty induced psychological stresses etc. Even though the UGC has given much relax regarding the submission of PhD and MPhil dissertations, the University and higher education system were not working as a helping hand. It was revealed as 40 percent of the respondents do not agree with the statement that the university system works as helpful. The support from family members and relatives were very important in this period when most of the researchers compelled to work from home. So, it is worth noting that above 70 percent of the respondents stated that attitude of their family towards the research work was so supportive.

Fig.2 Attitude of family towards research



Source: Primary data

The Covid-19 Pandemic has brought not only mere challenges but also the situation that triggered new opportunities. The sudden boom in shifting human interactions from physical to virtual space is one of the major transformations that the world witnessed during this period. The easy accessibility of virtual space is more helpful for enhancing academic activities. This helped the researchers to conduct and involved in more academic webinars. As the data shows 37 per cent of the

respondents could participated in more than three webinars. This will definitely ease the future academic activities from onsite to online and from difficulty of offline activities to transparency of online events. Online reading was another major source of research in this period. More than 50 per cent of the scholars were mainly depending on online reading. The accessibility of online journals and libraries were so helpful in such a situation where the university and departmental libraries closed for an uncertain period.

Conclusion

Covid-19 Pandemic situation has affected the entire world on many levels and the whole world was passed through a time of locked down which has no precedent in our hyper connected world. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated huge researches and more scientific enquiries for battling the pandemic crisis, made major transformation in our traditional system of learning and research and it has created new ways of working out. But the unprecedented outbreak of the pandemic disease and sudden closure of educational institutes as part of strategies to prevent the epidemic disease have negatively impacted the research activities, especially the social researches in such a socially distanced world. Indicating less family support to female researchers to work from home suggests us a stereotypical gender role in the families reproduces gender divisions in the mode of allocation of time for the research and learning.

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